

Translated excerpt

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**Jenny Erpenbeck**  
***The End of Days***

Translated by Susan Bernofsky



Until recently, she'd shared her husband's view that it was crucial to examine their own ranks meticulously to keep the core stable. She'd reclined on the sofa as he sat in an armchair, reading to her from the thick volume containing the latest report on the court proceedings. After Radek, Zinoviev, Kamenev—the original revolutionaries, once lauded as *Lenin's stalwart brothers-in-arms*—Bukharin too had now made a public confession, declaring himself guilty of conspiracy and treason, and had been condemned to death and shot. In his last plea, he'd said: *When you ask yourself: "If you die, what are you dying for?" – suddenly a pitch black void appears before you with shocking clarity. There is nothing one should have to die for if one wants to die without repenting.* He'd taken this final opportunity to declare his loyalty to the Soviet Union once more.

She and her husband had met Bukharin right at the beginning of their time in Moscow. The very first day they got there, he had telephoned the hotel of the Austrian and German comrades who'd just escaped from their own countries, where they'd been in hiding, and personally delivered a piece of bread and bacon to each of their rooms.

Would she still have a chance to describe the sound the pages of the thick book made as they turned? Page after page, she heard in the voice of her own husband how living beings were slowly transformed into their own ghosts.

Truly we are coming to know one another in the course of these exchanges, we see each other quite clearly.

This is my profound insight, what I understand here as a Bolshevik, what I experience: Bolshevism's power, its intellectual power, is so strong that it forces us to speak the truth.

As Communists we should show our faces, in other words show the entire person.

You can't just say that you didn't have time to be watchful because you had to bring money to your wife at your dacha.

When we have been successful in creating a clean atmosphere, we will certainly be able to work cleanly and productively.

Only now that she is alone has she begun to ask herself if it really is necessary to radically cut away everything that is weak or gravitates to the fringes. The core of a sphere, her little sister would probably say, the one who was always so good at math, is basically just a point, one whose size approaches infinity on the negative axis. But what was the core? An idea or an individual? Could it be Stalin? Or the utterly disembodied, utterly pure belief in a better world? But whose head was this belief supposed to inhabit if the day came when not a single head remained? An individual could lose his head, she'd still thought two years ago, but not an entire party. Now it was looking as if an entire party really could lose all its heads, as if the sphere itself were spinning all its points away from it, becoming smaller and smaller, just to reassure itself that its center held firm.

Approaches infinity on the negative axis.

In Vienna her husband used to laugh whenever a theater critic wrote: *He wasn't playing Othello—he was Othello. Old-fashioned* was his word for this mania for perfect illusions. He interpreted the flawless melding of actor and mask as the pinnacle of bourgeois deceit, and now, in the Land of the Future, where the labor of all for all had supposedly been stripped of deception, where individual gain resulted in profit for all, such that egotism and tactical maneuvering could be eliminated before they arose, he himself stood accused of duplicity? Had they changed their names so often on the run that their own comrades had lost all memory of what lay behind these names? Why else was there so much talk now of costumes and masks? Or had they, locked in battle with an external enemy, actually begun to turn into this enemy without realizing it? Would this new thing hatching out of them bear them ill-will? Had their own growing gone over to the other side unbeknownst to them?

The head of every human being who functions dialectically contains all thoughts. The question is only which of them I let out. Obviously man is guilty. Yet the thought also arises that man is innocent. I cannot escape this dilemma by constantly trotting out the young poet D., who is innocent. It keeps coming down to the same thing: on one hand innocent D., and on the other a random arrest. The man is innocent, and I see that he is innocent, and I

help prove his innocence, and then he is arrested, and this means that the arrest was random. But since an arrest is not random, it is therefore proven, on the other hand, that the man is not innocent. Therefore I am willing to concede the point to you. In a case where you are in the wrong.

On this bit of steppe, 45.61404 degrees North latitude, 70.751954 degrees East longitude, there are only three months a year without frost. In only a few weeks, the grass will lose this green tint it still displays, it will turn brown, and when the wind blows one of its stalks against the other, it will rustle faintly. Before the first snow falls, tiny ice crystals will cover the blades, and even the little stones on the surface of the steppe will without exception be covered with hoarfrost and freeze together. Once the frost sets in, it will no longer be possible for the wind to blow them about.

The weekend before his arrest, her husband had gone to a meeting and, upon his return, in distinct contrast to his usual manner, had said nothing at all about what had been discussed there. It was nearly dawn when he got home, and he did not laugh off her fears, baring his teeth and flicking a few strands of his hair back; she had seen him this tight-lipped only once before, that time two years previous when he learned that his application to be accepted into the CPSU had been approved but hers had not.

Now that her husband has been taken away, she knows that when she sits here putting her life to paper, she is playing not just with her own life, but with his as well, and not just with her own death, but also with his, or is she playing against death, or does all this pro and contra make no difference at all? She knows that with every word she writes or does not write she is playing with the lives of her friends, just as her friends in turn, when they are asked about her, are forced to play with hers.

I understand that Comrade H. has been living for approximately 3 years with his wife, Comrade H., in Moscow. He met her before this, but 3 years ago is when they entered into matrimony. Has Comrade H. questioned other comrades with regard to her earlier biography, or is she his only source of information?

My wife, Comrade H., as many of you know, has been a member of the Communist Party of Austria since 1920.

Immediately before her departure to Moscow, she had contact in Prague with the Trotskyist A.

I can't respond to that, I was still in Berlin at the time.

We have not only the right but also the duty to speak about everything we know.

Only in his later work did A. develop Trotskyist tendencies. I can assure you that Comrade H. did not identify with him and, above all where his assessment of the Soviet Union was concerned, vehemently disagreed.

It seems to me her relationship with A. went beyond mere friendship. In any case, the two of them embraced when they parted on the evening in question, according to the report of Comrade Sch.

I can't respond to that.

Answer this question: Could semi-Trotskyist, Trotskyist or oppositional leanings be observed in her?

No, not at that time.

What does *not at that time* mean? I have to say that I do not have the impression that this testimony is completely truthful.

What's hiding behind it? Why does Comrade H. not speak freely about the case of his wife Comrade H. in this context? Why does he have to be prompted by additional questions to speak of it?

There was no question of any opposition on her part in the sense in which we use this term in the Party.

I hope that it is clear to all our comrades how crucial it is for us to spare no effort in critical situations. These bandits who have been torturing our comrades in Germany and sending us their spies must be met with wave after wave of destruction. What if these malfeasants or counterrevolutionaries like A. had managed to point a gun at Comrade Stalin? Comrades, we are faced with the question: peace or war?

Would her motherly friend O., with whom they shared their dacha summer after summer, even staying on into September, conceal or admit

under interrogation that they had conversed about their doubts regarding the guilt of the young poet D. after his arrest? Might the wife of the author V. (recently condemned to death on charges of engaging in Trotskyist activities and shot) who was now supporting herself as a seamstress and had come to her room for a fitting, really have dug around in her papers when she stepped out to the toilet? Why had R., with whom she and her husband had enjoyed so many excellent conversations about literature early in their Moscow days, been sent off to a post in the German Volga Republic exactly one week before her husband's arrest? Who was responsible for cutting the final sentence of the review she had written in July for the *Deutsche Zentralzeitung* so that her critique of the book by mustachioed K. was transformed into its opposite? And was that good fortune or misfortune? She's long since stopped getting together with the friends she used to play cards with sometimes in those early years, the literary working groups were dissolved two years ago already, and even the assemblies of the German Party members have been discontinued. Her friend C., who used to cry her eyes out in front of her all the time over her inability to have children, recently refused to as much as nod in greeting when she walked passed *Café Krasni Mak* and saw her, the *wife of H., who has been arrested*, sitting at the window.

And she herself?

During the rehearsals for the last play her husband wrote before his arrest, five of the eight actors were arrested over a period of several days, after which the rehearsals were canceled until further notice. Comrade Fr.,



the wife of one of these actors, had come up to her yesterday at the café, holding Sasha, her nine-year-old boy, by the hand and had entreated her to take the two of them in for at least a single night. I can't, she had responded. Without another word, the woman turned and went out again, holding her child by the hand. I can't. Only a few weeks before, her husband had folded paper airplanes for Sasha during breaks in the rehearsal.

So have things really now come so far that all she can do is hope that the secret service agents who seized her husband and took him away are merely traitors, *enemies of the people operating under the alibi of political watchfulness*, that they are—possibly even in their highest ranks—Hitler's people? For not only her husband but indeed each of the others whose arrest she has heard of to date was a comrade she had long been close to. She is almost fully convinced now that only if Hitler himself proves to be her adversary, only if this is the case can the antifascists' hope for a better world to come survive their own mistreatment and death. Or is it perhaps that Stalin himself—disguised as Hitler, who in turn is disguised as Stalin, doubly masked, doubly veiled and thus genuinely duplicitous—is acting as his own agent and, out of fear that in a good world hopes for a better one might be lost forever, out of a fear of stagnation, trying to murder the Communist movement back into hopefulness? Perhaps all of them together are dreaming a nightmare from which there will never be an awakening, and in this nightmare Stalin is the

good father who creeps into the bedrooms where his children are sleeping with a knife in his hands.

*Land of ours that blooms and blossoms,  
Listen, darling, listen,  
Was given to us for time eternal.  
Hear me, darling, listen.*

*Child, thy land is well preserved,  
Sleep, my angel, slumber.  
Red Army men watch over us.  
Sleep, my darling, slumber.*

5

When she gets up again to fetch more hot water from the samovar in the common kitchen for her tea, she runs into Indian comrade Al in the hallway. He greets her but today he doesn't initiate a conversation. No doubt he too has now heard about her husband's arrest. Last month, when he was still new in Moscow, she and her husband had gotten into conversation with him while they were cooking, first he had leaned up against the kitchen table, still on his feet, then at some point he sat down on the edge of the table, his legs dangling, and finally he'd drawn his legs beneath him, still talking, like a very much alive Buddha sitting there cross-legged on this worn-out tabletop, upon which the Russians no doubt cut their *pelmeni* in the age of the Czars, and later Chinese comrades rolled hard-boiled duck eggs in ashes, and Frenchmen dipped meat in a marinade of garlic and oil. She herself, on the occasion of the seventh World Congress two years before, had used this table to make apple

strudel for her Danish, Polish and American friends. This congress had been like a powerful amorous coupling, all of them melting into one another, conjoined in their common battle for a humanity finally coming to its senses. After these meetings, she and her husband would often go on deliberating deep into the night, lying in bed, discussing what this new world order should look like, whether it was still an order at all, and what new bonds should replace the old bonds of coercion.

Then L. shoved his way in and started shouting at me. I told him to shut up. Then he pushed me over to one side and started touching the front of my shirt.

M. says I grabbed hold of him by the shirt. Everyone knows this is untrue. I've never grabbed anyone's shirt, what an idea!

There were 8 comrades standing around. I said to L., don't touch me. L. shouted: Don't touch me. So then I repeated: Take your paws off me.

All of a sudden Comrade M. said: Get your stinking paws off me.

Then L started in: You'll be sorry you did that, I'm going to report it to a Party cell.

Then M. shouted: Maybe they'll wash your stinking paws in innocence for you!

Comrade L. has a booming voice, and he really let rip: Just you wait and see what I do with people like you!

Ridiculous!

In the room she inhabited together with her husband for the past three years, in whose emptiness she is now setting foot once more, the yellow tapestry with the embroidered sun from their first Soviet vacation is still hanging on the wall. Every morning she leaves the house before dawn and gets in line in front of Ljubjanka 14, the headquarters of the secret police, to ask about her husband, and after this she goes to Butyrki Prison. In both places the counter clerks slam down their windows in her face. She already wrote to Pieck, to Dimitroff, Ulbricht and Bredel, but no one is able or willing to give her any information as to whether her husband will return, whether his arrest was a mistake or whether he's being put on trial, whether he'll be sent into exile or shot. Or whether he's already been shot. With the arrest of the person who was closer to her than any other, her own life has become fundamentally inaccessible to her.

*I petition you for acceptance into the Soviet Federation and request that you give me the opportunity to prove myself as a Soviet.*

6.

When the elevator stops on her floor around 4 in the morning, just before sunrise, she doesn't hear it, because she has fallen asleep over the papers on her desk. Her forehead is resting on the word *watchfulness* when the officers come into the room to arrest her. The small dark-blue

suitcase that has long stood in readiness beside the door is forgotten. When silence returns to the building, the suitcase is still standing there beside the door. It contains a photograph of a young woman with a large hat, stamped on the back by the owner of a photography studio on *Landstrasser Hauptstrasse* in Vienna, further a notebook filled with writing, several letters, an Austrian passport, a dirty red handbill, membership papers from the Communist Party of Austria, a typescript wrapped in paper, an index card containing a recipe for challah, and at the very bottom a small dress for a doll, sloppily and shoddily sewn of pink silk.

And now at last she knows whose voices she has been hearing all this time, she encounters them once more at 63° Celsius. How agreeable it is to be without a body in cold like this. At night in this place far beyond the end of the world, ores are separated from their slag and everything worthless is burned, blazing up in flames higher than St. Stephan's Cathedral, brilliantly colorful formations, bright as the horizon itself, fountains of light more beautiful than anything she has ever before seen, how glorious, this burning of slag in the middle of nowhere, the most beautiful of all things ever.

During the day, the living hack away at the ore-rich clay, carting it off with their tipping wagons, and at night they set these fires. And in these fires the dead burn all the sentences they spoke back when they themselves were still alive—sentences spoken in fear, out of conviction, in

anger, out of indifference or love. Why are you here, she asks a person she knows once uttered the words: *We see each other quite clearly in the course of these exchanges*. I was thirsty, he says, and for that reason I drank water that had not been boiled and died of typhus. And you? she asks a person she knows once referred to a mutual colleague as a *pot-boiler specialist*. I froze to death. And you? *What if someone is looking*. I died of hunger. Some sentence flies up into the sky, possessing no more and no less weight than the person who once spoke it. And you? I went mad and only death brought me back to my senses, he says, laughing, and here, 250 meters above the steppe, his laughter has a furry consistency. Another bit of air says: all I remember is leaning up against something because I was too weak to go on walking, and someone looked into my eyes as he walked past, since I still had eyes. I'm glad, she hears a woman's voice saying—hears without ears, just as she sees without eyes—I'm glad, she hears the voice saying, that my tears finally abandoned me along with my eyes, because when I was arrested my own child renounced me, calling me an *enemy of the people*, and so I tore up my shirt, twisted it into a noose and hung myself on the latch.

*We see each other quite clearly in the course of these exchanges.*

Perhaps someone should investigate the strength of the draft created when a soul darts about like this. Perhaps someday flowers will bloom even here, in the middle of the desert, perhaps even tulips, perhaps someday the presence of innumerable butterflies will be just as real as the absence of butterflies of any sort is today, at minus 63°

Celsius. Now, like all the rest of the dead, she has all the time in the world to wait for the arrival of different times. For the living, to be sure, who have no other time at their disposal other than the one in which they happen to possess a body, the only bit of color they are able to behold here, at night, along with the dead, are these flames.

7

Last summer, when she was still alive, she had to dig several large trenches just outside the camp along with the other women, so that when winter came and the ground froze, they would have somewhere to be buried. All of them—she and her friends, and also her enemies, and also others who were indifferent to both—dug graves to be kept in reserve.

On one particular day during the summer of forty-one, she drove her pickaxe into the earth at a specific point and began to dig her own grave, without knowing, of course, that this would be the exact place on all this infinite earth that was destined to become her dwelling for the eternal winter. 45.61404° North latitude, 70.75195° East longitude would be the name people would give to this otherwise nameless place where on a summer's day, 40° Celsius, she would drive her pickaxe into the dry sand, making grass, tiny insects and dust fly about, for the earth here is completely dry far down into its depths.

*How lovely are thy dwellings, O Lord of Hosts.*

One night during the winter of forty-one, while everyone is asleep, the woman on duty pulls the cold right leg of the dead woman out from

beneath the warm leg of a sleeping woman, drags the lifeless body out of the barrack and brings it to the barrack for the dead. At such temperatures it takes less than two days for a body like this, including all the flesh that covered its bones, to freeze into a skeleton.

Many years ago one person said a word and then the other one said another word, words moved the air, words were written down on paper with ink, were clipped into binders, air was balanced out with air, and ink with ink. It's a shame that no one can see the boundary where words made of air and words made of ink are transformed into something real, becoming just as real as a bag of flour, a crowd in which revolt is stirring, just as real as the sound with which the frozen bones of Comrade H. slide down into a pit in the winter of forty-one, which sounds like someone tossing wooden domino tiles back into their box. When it's cold enough, something that was once made of flesh and blood can sound just like wood.