

Translated excerpt

**Christoph Hein**  
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***Roman***

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**Christoph Hein**  
***Portrait of a Son with Father***  
***Novel***

Translated by Alexander Booth



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**A Novel**

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The sixth day of peace was cold.

Ice cold, Mother said years later, and, with your approaching birth, I was happy to have a good reason not to have to leave the house and to allow for the midwife to come instead.

For three weeks the town hall had been the district headquarters of the Soviet military administration, a soldier with a machine gun stood on the top stair in front of the massive entrance, and almost hourly soldiers brought citizens, above all men, inside. Those who came back out spoke little about what had happened there, what they had been asked or how the interrogation had gone, nor how it was that they were allowed to return while others disappeared. People had respect for the foreign occupiers and were afraid of them, but were much busier with coping with the day-to-day, with finding or trading food, collecting wood for the kitchen oven, taking care of the damage to the house or sheds however they could and tearing out the flowerbeds behind the house and in the front garden to make room for potatoes and turnips.

In the market square in front of the town hall and by the church there were public pumps, ancient, cast-iron monstrosities with massive handles one had to push down as hard as one could before the water would finally begin to flow. For a whole week long there was no water in town and day after day everyone had to go stand by one of the two pumps with buckets and cans, and although water began to flow once again through the pumps rather quickly, lines still formed around them, for bombs and undetonated shells had destroyed the pipes in some of the houses and it could be weeks before they were repaired. However, only the pump behind the church was

besieged, and it was only there that from time to time arguments and struggles with tin buckets erupted for the better spots. In front of the pump on the square there were very few people and never any fights. The military administration in the offices and the armed soldiers with their Mongolian-seeming, motionless faces patrolling in front made it advisable to behave, to the best of one's ability, inconspicuously if not to avoid the square altogether. One only saw old women and men there, very old women and men, wrapped up in such threadbare clothing that it was as if they had made an extra effort to dress themselves for their trip and likely in such a particularly poor way so as not to make any sort of impression. Young women remained at home and never appeared on the street, not during the day, and by no means whatsoever at night, especially as there was a curfew, which everyone followed. The younger men avoided being seen by the occupation troops. Too many rumours had made the rounds: so and so was supposed to have disappeared, others had had their flats ransacked and some, above all younger women, had undergone much worse.

Mother expressed herself rather vaguely, and when I asked she only said that everything had been hard enough, no one wanted to remember. Everyone, she said, had been scared and simply dreaded what was to come. And that did not change when Germany capitulated. After May 8 the Russians treated us just like they had throughout the two previous weeks, we were their enemies, as they were for us. Neither trusted the other. They feared attacks by crazy Nazi partisans, by the Werewolves, an organisation of fanatic Hitler Youth that the brother of your father's admired friend, Gebhard Himmler, had founded one year before, and that after the capitulation continued to fight against the victorious Allied armies. I think that, for the Russians, for the Red Army in general, every German was a Hitler supporter, as the young officer had put it.

We had, thank the lord, survived the war, but no one knew what was going to happen, who was going to determine what happened to the region and town, what would happen to its inhabitants nor what punishments the Russians, the occupiers, would mete out to us. As far as fear and terrible conjectures were concerned, everyone seemed to want to outdo one another.

At the end of the war Mother was very pregnant. The midwife had given her a due date for the end of May, but had added that, in wartime, little attention was to be paid to her calculations because you never knew when a bomb would land somewhere in town or there would be artillery fire, you could go into labour at any time. Mother therefore prepared herself for anything. Back then my parents lived on the market square in one of the nicest houses of the town, a real two-storied villa with a magnificent façade. I only ever saw our former house from the outside, I was never able to go in. However, throughout my childhood, I heard many stories about it.

On the second of May a Russian officer came into the house with two soldiers. He must have been rather young, just barely in his mid-twenties, small and stocky, his eyes hardly visible, just two tiny slits. He spoke a somewhat broken and guttural German, but was understandable. In a loud and authoritative voice he announced the seizure of the villa and ordered its immediate evacuation. Two hours, he repeated numerous times, stretching two fingers into the air in order not to be misunderstood. When our housekeeper brought Mother out of her room and the officer saw how pregnant the woman was, he apparently turned quite red and even excused himself for the necessary seizure. He asked Mother to move out within two days, that was a large act of good will on his part, he could do nothing else for the German woman. When Mother broke into tears and embraced her round stomach with both arms, the officer turned to the soldiers and spoke to them in Russian. They thereupon hurried out of the house, and the officer turned back to my mother and politely explained that he himself would make sure that she would not have to stay on the street. He asked her about her family, Mother said that she had a two year-old child and a husband who still had not come back from the war, and that four other people lived in the house. The personnel, Mother had said, and then, as the officer had not understood her, added that they were members of the family who would be living with them for some years and who she had to take care of. The officer had looked at her suspiciously or in surprise. He asked Mother to have someone from the family show him all the rooms. Mother offered to do so herself, but he declined. No, he said and added: One of the personnel, please. And so the gardener went through the house with the officer,

very slowly, as he said later, for the latter wrote down what kind of furniture was in each and every room, they were particular, he explained to the housekeeper, and had to remain there, taking anything would be considered theft of military goods and punished accordingly. Mother, the housekeeper and the two young girls went into their rooms and for a long time simply cried and then, with tears still in their eyes, began to go through their things in order to pack the two suitcases each person had been allowed and to arrange the bundle with the bed linens, which Mother allowed Jule, the older housemaid, to help her with.

The Russian officer came back to them the following morning. He came alone in order to communicate to my mother that he had found a room with a kitchen and closet for her and her child in the Bergstraße. He asked her to please have the villa cleaned out immediately, he could no longer wait. He would be back at three o'clock in order to see what they were taking with them from the house, which by that point was the property of the Soviet Military Administration. When Mother asked where the other members of her family would be housed, he only looked at her darkly, said three o'clock one more time and left without another word.

The young officer first reappeared around six. Mother had waited in the villa with the housekeeper, housemaids and the gardener the entire time. They were puzzled and confused, but did not dare leave the house alone and against the Russian's request, especially considering that no one outside of the gardener knew where they would be able to stay.

The officer did not say a word about his delay. He came with four soldiers, did not greet my mother, but just stared at her forcefully and without a word. When my mother asked him if she could offer him anything, a tea or a glass of water, he remained silent. His glance was so contemptuous, Mother said, that she shivered and awaited the worst. She tried to alleviate the uncomfortable situation by talking about the villa, the urgent work that needed to be done on the roof and how, unfortunately, the old vaulted ceiling in the cellar had to be repaired. The young Russian remained silent, and then after a seemingly endless amount of time said only: Gerhard Müller. You are Gerhard Müller's wife.

Mother replied affirmatively, and the Russian asked her: Do you know your husband, this Gerhard Müller?

The question seemed strange to her, and she simply nodded.

Do you really know him? Do you know what he did in my homeland and in Poland?

Mother told him that he never spoke about what happened at the front. Over the last five years he had been at home only rarely, only every six months, and then for just a few days. More than anything else he had looked after his factory and had spent more time with the director he had put in charge of it than with her. He never spoke to her about what happened at the front, about what it was he did there. And then, over the last few months she had not heard from him at all, she did not even know whether he was still alive or was a prisoner of war.

And that there, that is his child? he had asked, pointing to my mother's stomach. And when Mother nodded, he said: Your husband, this Gerhard Müller, he is not a prisoner of war like you think. Or as you perhaps would like me to believe. We are looking for this Gerhard Müller, he will come before a military tribunal. Your husband is a criminal. A war criminal. And he is one of the worst. Please show me what you are taking with you from this house, you and your personnel. And then go. You must find your own place to stay. The flat that I had confiscated for you was given back to its tenants. I can make no flat available for the wife of Gerhard Müller.

Thereafter all the questions that Mother asked him went unanswered. Instead, he ever more forcefully called for her and the other residents of the house to open their suitcases. With a single word he ordered the accompanying soldiers to go through their things. From out of Mother's and the housekeeper's suitcases they pulled letters, two little bundles, one wrapped with a rubber-band and the other, the housekeeper's letters, stuck into a tin of pralines. With a movement of his head he ordered the soldiers to lay the letters on the table. When Mother asked him why and told him that they were private, he answered curtly that no written documents whatsoever, whether files, papers or letters, were to be removed from the house. She was only allowed to take her personal documents, her passport. Then he motioned them to the door.

The gardener carried Mother's suitcases and bed things out of the house, threw them onto the wooden wheelbarrow, which he had thoughtfully placed next to the separate entrance by the coal cellar, then turned back into the house in order to collect his own possessions while Mother went to her two year-old son and left the house with him in hand, the house in which she had lived since being married and into which she would never step foot again in her lifetime.

And that I was allowed to go, that is thanks to you alone, she said to me, I owe my very life to you. You were my lucky child, Boy, for being so pregnant with you the Russian officer did not dare have me picked up. Otherwise I no doubt would have been arrested, and I will not even attempt to imagine what would have happened to me then.

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In the last year of school, in the fourth grade, I was invited to attend special training in Leipzig by three men who had come to our school for two days to observe us during sports. All the travel costs and the one-week stay would be paid for by the State, and the school administration made it possible for me to be freed from one week of classes. On a Sunday afternoon a bus came to pick me up at home. Together with six other children, who all lived in neighbouring towns and were, like me, ten years old, they brought me to the dormitory of the Leipzig Sports School and then taught us for an entire week; in addition to the usual course of studies we had four extra hours of sports every day. It was a test, we had to show what we could do, what we had in us, as the trainer said. Whoever passed the test would study at the Sports School up through graduation and then become a competitive athlete. Sports School and competitive athlete: to us that meant being allowed to compete in international contests, to travel abroad and at some point to win an Olympic medal. We would live in the home for eight years and only travel back to our families on weekends. We would receive an allowance and the whole German Democratic Republic would be proud of us and our accomplishments. And at the end of our careers someone would make sure that we received a proper, and well-paid, job.

I was average in track and field but was one of the best in gymnastics and in martial arts I was unbeatable, I was the best of the best in every match, not a single person ever got me on the mat. My trainer, Herr Stessler, kept me after class for two consecutive days to show me, and me alone, a grab that he called Immobilising the Adversary together with a few unusual techniques, which were not illegal and would not be judged as fouls. The next-to-last day of examination week he told me that he would be traveling to a contest that coming weekend and therefore could not train me on Saturday, but that he was certain we would see each other again and he gave me his hand in farewell and patted me appreciatively on the shoulder. A few hours later, on Friday evening, he surprisingly appeared in the dormitory just as we were sitting down to supper in the dining hall. He called me out and took me to the large common room where, at the moment, there were no students.

It's a shame, Konstantin, I'm sorry. You have what it takes to be a fighter, but nothing's going to happen with the two of us, he said and looked at me regretfully.

I looked at him confusedly and did not know what to say. Then I stuttered that I had won all the fights and asked why all of a sudden he no longer wanted to train me.

I gladly would have trained you, my boy, you can believe that, but it just won't work. And I think you know why.

I shook my head forcefully.

What was with your father? he asked.

What should there be? He's been dead for a long time. He died in the war, I never saw him.

Died in the war? Who says that?

I know that from my mother.

I see. Your mother told you that, hmm? Well, you had better have a talk with your mother about it then. Tell her that we need boys and girls who are not only good athletes but who can represent our country abroad. Our job is to form diplomats in training suits. You understand? You can have your mother explain the rest to you. Tomorrow you can participate one last time. In the

evening you'll take the bus back home. Stay true to martial arts though, boy. Even if you won't be one of our athletes, remember that sports are important for your life.

He patted me on the shoulder again and left the home. I went back into the dining hall, grabbed a plate of raw vegetables and tried to eat, but was not hungry and put it back.

Did Herr Stessler tell you that you were going to be picked? Max, who also practised martial arts and was very good, asked me. I had become friends with him.

No. And I don't think that I managed to make it.

Well, you can be sure of it. Should we make a bet? If these guys here are going to take just one person, Konstantin, then it's going to be you.

I don't think so. I wager that they'll take you.

Once at home I told my mother everything. She only said, Father was a high-ranking officer with the Nazis, and that is no longer appreciated today. The children of Wehrmacht officers could not take the Abitur examination, and she had already wondered whether or not it would work out for me at the Sports School. I was to be happy, however, for living in a students' home was fun for a week, but, in the long run, there was no lonelier place. She had experienced it as a twelve year old when she lived for four years in a girls' boarding school in Switzerland, and she did not wish that on anyone. And I believed her and was content with her explanation and at the same time did not believe her but did not want to ask any more questions or enquire any further. I had hoped that this curse would at some point lift and disappear like a black cloud and not continue to follow me and worry me and destroy everything I looked forward to.

Sitting alone in the school toilet I understood that all of this horror had to do with my father. That my father *was* the horror and that I would never be able to free myself from him. He was the great affliction of my life and would stick to me throughout my life just like an affliction.

When I came back to the classroom the teacher looked at me quizzically and asked if everything was all right. I nodded. At that very moment all the class turned to look at me. I would have preferred to yell at them: I know what you all think. I know why you all are staring at me. Yes,

I am the son of a war criminal. Yes, I am the son of a hanged man. Yes, my father is one of those terrible SS officers.

Instead of yelling at the whole class and the teacher, however, I went back to my bench, sat down, lowered my head and hoped to hide from the entire world. Hide, disappear. Be swallowed up by the ground. Concealed. Invisible.

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When he looked up from his files he asked: Boggosch?

Yes, Konstantin Boggosch.

And I am a clerk from the Ministry of the Interior, and you now have a few things to tell me.

He tapped the thick folder and maintained that everything about me lay therein, that all of my encounters and talks were recorded therein, and that there were even things about me in the file I did not even know about myself. He wanted to be able to trust me, and therefore I was to be open and upfront with him about my escape two years earlier and to tell him exactly where I had been, where I had lived and from what, and with whom I had met.

It is all in the file, he said, but I would like to hear it from you.

I nodded and shared all the information he wanted. As I did not say anything of interest to him, however, after an hour he shut the file and stared at me for a long time in silence.

You are a right clever kid, aren't you? he said suddenly. No doubt you know your way around abbreviations. If, for example, I were to say CIA or SDECE or BND, would you know what I was talking about?

More or less, I answered. I think those are all secret services.

Correct, quite correct. And, now, tell me: Who did you speak with from these three agencies? Who spoke to you? Which assignments were you given? What did they promise you? I want to hear from you what I already know, because it's all in here.

He drummed his fingers against the closed, thick file and said that, seeing as that I clearly did not want to tell him anything, he would end our conversation there for the day and give me time

to think about whether or not I might like to improve my situation by being a bit more honest and open.

You can go, he said, but we shall see each other again. I have a lot of time, boy.

On the second day they had already rounded out my file and knew exactly who my father was.

Yes, said the older man who had introduced himself as the clerk from the Ministry of the Interior at our first talk, yes, naturally your father was the owner of the Volcano Plant, I know. We, however, know a lot more about your father. Do you not want to talk about it, Boggosch? How is it that your name is Boggosch, by the way? Your real name is Müller. Your father is Gerhard Müller.

After the war my mother began to use her maiden name again, and my brother and I also received it. Mother wanted nothing to do with her former husband.

She had two children with him. That's a bit more than nothing, I should think. Do you want to tell me a little bit about him, your father?

He's dead.

Yes, he was sentenced to death and hung. What do you think about that? Was your father rightfully condemned and hung?

I looked at him and remained silent. He stood up and limped around the desk, pulling his right leg behind him.

Müller, he said once he was standing behind me, Gerhard Müller, one of the worst war criminals there was. A real beast. And you tell me that you didn't get into secondary school because your father owned a factory before the war. No, Boggosch. It is because your father is a condemned war criminal, that is why no one wants you. And now, once again, Boggosch: Was your father rightfully condemned and hung? What do you think?

The man who was my father was sentenced to death three months before my birth. I never saw him and never had anything to do with him. Whatever I know about him I learned from my

mother and from the people at home and based on everything I was told, yes, he was rightfully condemned.

Well then, now we are finally getting somewhere. Now, tell us why you took off two years ago. Who did you meet in France? Old comrades of your father's? Underground Nazis?

He hobbled back to his stool behind the desk, dabbed at his dry eye and stared at me scornfully.

I have told you everything. I worked in Marseille for four resistance fighters, for people from the Résistance that had been imprisoned in German prisoner-of-war camps. They weren't Nazis at all, on the contrary. When I arrived here my copy of the book *Combat de coqs 22. Juni* was confiscated. Have a look. Inside are the friends I worked for. Emanuel Duprais, Maxime Leprêtre, Mathéo Nicolas, Gabriel Gassner, they're all in there. They were part of the Résistance, they fought against the Nazis. Against people like Gerhard Müller, whose photo is in the book, he's called 'Volcano'.

And these people from the resistance, they had at all costs to have the son of an ex-SS man as a translator? The son of one of the worst Nazi brutes?

Yes, because I don't have anything to do with him. Because I don't know him. Because I never saw him.

Don't yell in here, boy. You will not help your case.

I had not yelled, but had raised my voice. Having my feared, hated father standing before me again had brought me to the point of despair and was destroying everything I had tried to build.

Excuse me, Sir, I know that my father was a war criminal, I know it and it oppresses me. What should I do? Please tell me. I have nothing to do with this man and never saw him. My mother even got rid of his name so that my brother and I would not have to carry it with us. And yet ever since my school days he has always been held out in front of me. But I am someone else, I am Konstantin Boggosch. Why should I always have to be the son of this Gerhard Müller? I'm not.

That man was executed, he was hung, and rightfully so, but my name is Boggosch. Konstantin Boggosch. And I have nothing to do with him.

Well now, boy, that is not entirely true...

I have told you the truth, Sir. I only took off because I wanted to be able to do my Abitur, but also because I did not want to be tied to this SS man Müller at every step. And I thought that in another country, in a country where no one had ever heard of him, I could finally be myself and not always and forever the son of a criminal.

He looked at me but did not respond. Instead he bent over the file and began to write. He wrote slowly and with seeming difficulty. After a while he broke off and looked up.

You can go now, Boggosch. At the moment I do not have any questions, but that does not mean that we are finished here. Not by a long shot, Boggosch.

I went to my room and lay down on my bed. After the discussion I was expected in the garden for work, but I needed a break. Once again I had run into my father, once again he had reappeared in order to make me his son. The son of an SS officer, a war criminal, a hanged man. I had run away from home, had left Germany, had hidden myself away in Marseille all to no avail, everywhere I went he showed up and just a few days after I had gone back, had had to go back so that I would not also become the son of ‘Volcano’ to Emanuel, there he was anew to rule my life.