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A Chapter from my Life

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Whenever my mother talked to me about “that chapter of my life,” she did it with a mixture of hint and evasion which turned me into a confidant and at the same time shut me out of the story. I conjured up a world of falsehood, deception, and double-dealing instead of really knowing or understanding anything about that chapter of her life. But she did not leave me in any doubt about the fact that all the lies and treachery were meant to help win the victory for the one great, genuine truth to which Mitzi and her comrades had converted her back then in Vienna. The certain amount of shame I thought I could detect in her stories was not for the most part connected with her shattered hopes, about which she had no illusions despite her “now, now, now...” - even if she refused to admit the entire extent of the debacle - but was probably the shameful feeling that arises when one reveals secrets without really shedding light on the situation. And part of the shame was perhaps related to the delusion of power and the self-aggrandizement that are at the bottom of such espionage activities. The pride, however, that I thought I could sense simultaneously, stemmed from the adventure, and the dangerous game she’d played, although, at least in the life in which I knew her, she was basically not a courageous person. When my mother occasionally told about dropoffs, contact people, secret meetings at places that were constantly changing, code words, and swallowed documents, it really sounded like a spy novel, and, indeed that “chapter of my life” *was* a spy novel, or at least the fragment of a novel.

My father always claimed she was addicted to keeping things to herself, yet at the same time, she was actually a chatterbox who would never stop talking once she got started. So devoted, yet at the same time, so reserved - the fact that a person could be so contradictory got my father worked up every time he and I talked about her. She was an attractive and high-spirited woman but, despite that, sometimes quite shy. Shy, the way she was in that scene in the vestibule of our home in Karlshorst that I remember, when she shamefacedly wriggled out of Uncle Vito’s arms. And it often seemed to me that she made herself small in contrast to him in order to show her great love. Perhaps that sort of subjugation in love resembled her dedication to Communism and her betrothal to the Soviet intelligence service, because in that relationship of devotion, as well, she made herself small and yet occupied an important position - it could only be a small role, but nevertheless she was doing her part for the great cause.

It was her very discretion and reserve that must have made it extremely unpleasant later, when she saw that chapter of her life displayed in countless books and articles, where she was again and again cast in a specific role, that of the seductress, the fiery Jewess who initiated the inhibited Cambridge graduate into love, Communism, and the battles of the Viennese working class. Curiously enough, it was my father who really got upset over those passages, particularly because - whether they happened to be true or false - they contributed much too obviously to a cliché. My mother, on the other hand, was pained by the fact that her two stories, the love story and the story of her marriage to Kim, were being dragged out and made public, while he himself never again uttered a sign of life. I think she would have liked to see him again, so that they could let each other know how they felt, talk it all out. That wish, and her disappointment about the way things ended without a word, I inferred from episodes when she seemed compelled to go into great detail about him and what had brought them together, and even just the way she said his name. A name and a story from a time that now lay far back in the past, woven together in memories, in the internal reiteration of those memories, and, finally, in their shadows, until the past suddenly popped up again in the unreal present-day of newspapers and magazines after Harold Adrian Russel Philby, who'd left Lebanon and crossed the border into the Soviet Union on January 23, 1963 and whose defection to Moscow had been officially confirmed one month later, revealed himself to have been "the third man," whereupon the English journalists started to batter down the door of my mother's home in Karlshorst in order to interrogate her about those days from her far-distant past.

Even when she talked to me afterward about "that chapter," she went on doing it in a conspiratorial tone and with strict orders not to pass it on, not to speak to anyone about it, although I had absolutely no idea why, since it was in print everywhere and was talked about on radio and television from early in the morning until late at night. But the way in which "that chapter of my life" was passed on to me was so intertwined with the commandment to maintain secrecy that I, too, felt bound by it, not out of any conviction that it was necessary, but more out of embarrassment - embarrassment at having to bear that insignia, that title of nobility bordering on the ridiculous, and embarrassment over the agitation that

any mention of her entanglement in the world of espionage invariably caused my mother.

It was not until the year before her death, when she appeared at the door of my studio one morning and suggested that we go to the cafeteria for coffee, that my mother suddenly urged me to write down “that story,” to record “that chapter of my life.” Maybe in the form of a newspaper article for the *Times* or the *New York Times*. I could demand a high fee, maybe even a very high one. Even today I’m not sure how she meant that. Was it that “the cause” was supposed to pay off in the end, at least for her child, and even if only financially?

I was supposed to write that she, my mother, was Litzy, Litzy Kohlmann, Friedmann, Philby, Honigmann. That she knew everything and that, in fact, it had all started in Vienna but had only taken on final form in London - her recruitment and enrollment in the Soviet Intelligence Service. That friends they’d had in common in Vienna, or friends of those friends, had cooked up the whole scheme and not she herself as was always claimed. Then they’d moved to London and, after the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, Kim went to Spain as a correspondent, the only English journalist who reported from Franco’s side, but, of course, that was just a ruse to be able to pass information on to the Russians. It was the first real assignment that the Soviet espionage service had given him and during that Spanish episode, she’d been his go-between; that’s why she had taken an apartment in Paris and lived there on his salary from the *Times*. It was simply easier to make contact in France. They met in hotels in Biarritz or Perpignan, and even in Gibraltar, where he gave her information that she then carried to her control officer in Paris. Of course there were problems sometimes. Kim had spent the battle of Teruel at Franco’s headquarters and shortly afterward there was an exchange of fire in which he was wounded in the head, at which point he concealed his information in the bandage. But then, perhaps that was the moment when he had to swallow the message capsule. Hide it first, then swallow it, or maybe both at the same time.

After the outbreak of the war in 1939 they’d returned to London. During our conversation she told me that, at that point, her relationship with the Soviet secret service was terminated, which sounds very improbable, because those were the very years of greatest political mistrust in the Soviet Union, the worst

suspicious and most merciless trials, during which even the most harmless citizens were accused of being enemy spies. And even if they weren't shot on the spot or deported to one of the camps, they surely weren't allowed to just go on their merry way. My mother gave no explanation for the unlikelihood that, considering all she knew, she would have been able to simply say goodbye to the Soviet espionage service and come away unscathed and without being suspected. Her silence about that fact was more likely an expression of a lie than of the truth.

Philby's recollections of the Spanish and Parisian chapters, at least as he related them to a Russian journalist, likewise in the year before his death, differ completely from my mother's story. Perhaps the Russian journalist didn't understand or confused events. If the two versions are compared, everything becomes less and less clear. But on the other hand, one is not likely to find anything that is more inconsistent than the memories of different witnesses. And it was, after all, so far back in the past. Perhaps there was no longer any point in trying to recall things exactly, perhaps one of them had lied deliberately, or they'd both rearranged the past in their memories. Perhaps, however, in the end even the greatest secrets of the espionage service become so lackluster and empty that there's no longer any sense in trying to hold them precisely in one's memory.

Of all the chapters of her life, Paris was my mother's favorite, the one she loved to tell about and did so most frequently, always repeating the same episodes and observations, which were eventually boiled down to an unvarying recitation.

"Did I ever dance! I danced all night! Almost every evening I gave a party in my loft on the Quay d'Orsay," she told me. "Most of the time I barely knew a quarter of the people who were there having a good time. Once, while I was dancing with a man, I asked him how he'd found out about the party, and he told me that on the way over from Dover to Calais he met someone who'd invited half the boat to the party and that they'd come directly from the ferry to the Quay d'Orsay. He asked me if I knew the hostess who'd been talked about so much on the boat, perhaps he ought to introduce himself to her. At that point I laughed out

loud, of course, and said, well then, just go ahead and introduce yourself to me! I no longer even remember what language we were speaking.

“Soon after my arrival in Paris, I collected a group of artists around me, painters and sculptors, students of Maillol, mostly Hungarians or Dutchmen. The Hungarians were terribly poor, the Dutch relatively well off, but at that time I was quite well off, since I was picking up a check every month at Lloyd’s, Kim’s salary from the *Times*, with which I maintained the apartment. Never again in my life did I live in such grand style and toss money around that way - it was all great fun. I bought clothing and hats - you know my passion for hats - big hats with wide brims, with feather boas, *dernier cri, nouvelle collection!* And my artist friends gave me paintings, pieces of sculpture, and drawings. And that’s when I bought the two Modigliani drawings that got lost along with all the other things somewhere in London, sometime or other, with all the moving from one place to another during the Blitz.

“When the war broke out, Kim thought I ought to get myself to safety in England, because, as a Jew, I might find myself in grave danger if the Germans were to occupy Paris. Somehow it was clear to all of us that France was not going to hold out long. In the confusion during the early stages of the war it was hardly possible for a civilian to get across the channel, but through the Foreign Office, Kim was able to arrange passage for me on a boat - we were, after all, still married, and as Mrs. Philby I was considered to be a real Englishwoman. I should add that in Paris I’d already been living with Pieter, and Kim, as well, had had different affairs. Pieter was one of the Dutch sculptors who came to my get-togethers and we just suddenly fell in love with one another. Maybe it was my happiest love affair and the time with Pieter the happiest time of my life. I thought I loved him, but he loved me a little bit more than I did him. It was usually the other way around with the men I lived with, or at least it seems that way - I was always the one who gave more, and eventually the men left me, just like your father. But even the love between me and Pieter got lost somewhere, I don’t even know exactly where and when. At the outbreak of war he had to go back to Holland and we only heard from each other again many years later, when I was already married to your father - or maybe I’d already been divorced from him by then. Maybe the reason my love affair with Pieter seems so happy in my memory

is that external, political circumstances interrupted it, and so we were spared from getting tired of each other after living together for a longer time. We'd rented a house in Grosrouvre, an hour from Paris, in other words, we lived half in town and half in the country, and there were always a lot of friends visiting and soon the first Viennese who'd emigrated to England came over. In Grosrouvre we all spent the last untroubled weeks together, my old friends from Vienna and my new friends from Paris, the Dutchmen and Hungarians. I don't think there were ever less than a dozen people in the house. We sympathized with the Spanish Republic, with Léon Blum and the Popular Front and hated the Nazis, of course. Toward the beginning of the war our mood became more and more somber, but more animated as well. Despite all, the years in Paris were the most beautiful time of my life. It was exactly the way Hemingway wrote about it, 'Paris, a moveable feast.' At that time I had a dog as well, of course, one that I got from an animal shelter. He was so big that nobody wanted him, but the way he looked out of his cage was so sad that I took him with me. For two or three years he had a nice life in Paris and in the big garden at Grosrouvre, all those people never bothered him; on the contrary, he was very devoted and trusted everyone. But then I betrayed his trust in people, because, since I couldn't take him to England with me, I had to put him in a kennel. I found a good, expensive one for him and paid for several years in advance. If I were ever to write a book, it would be about that dog. I still miss him. Naturally it was impossible to locate the kennel in Paris after the war, just as it was impossible to find Pieter. And the Dutch and Hungarian artists as well - I never met up with a single one of them again.

"I only went back to Paris a single time after the war and it really broke my heart, because I knew that it would be the last time. To make myself feel better I bought a great, big hat once again and wore it during those days in Paris. But after that I never put it on again in my entire life."

That last Parisian hat was among the few things - no, was probably the only thing my mother owned that she didn't throw away during all the years in Berlin, even though it was useless, superfluous. I was the one who lost it when I put it in with all the costumes and props that had been gotten together for a school play, where it disappeared in the general confusion and was not to be found even though I looked for it for a long time.

My mother's stories about her Paris chapter didn't stand out just because of the amount of detail. That chapter also had a special melody - sensitive and nostalgic, euphoric and at the same time resigned, given its tone by all the French words that were thrown in, except that her rolled "R's" made it sound a little like the Balkans, too, which is where my father decided she'd come from. But, of course, his own German accent was unmistakable whether he was speaking English or French. He seemed to be a little jealous of that chapter of my mother's life, in which he hadn't yet met her, although at the very same time he was trying his hand as a book dealer in Paris, having been tossed out of his job as London correspondent for the *Vossische Zeitung* after Hitler seized power, a newspaper that ceased to exist not long afterward. However, his career as a bookseller met with no success and he found a place to hang his hat - you can't really say "lived" - somewhere in Belleville, surrounded by nothing but blacks, far removed from the Quai d'Orsay, where Mrs. Philby threw her parties.

Although that chapter of her life was the shortest in terms of years, what it most resembled was a novel. There wasn't really a French side to my mother, as there was a Viennese, a Hungarian, an English, and, later, a Berlin side. She too often quoted the saying that every person has two homelands, her own and France, for me to miss the point that, for her, France had remained an unfinished draft of her life from which she treated herself to preliminary readings again and again, the life of a muse and patron of the arts in which she designed hats and rooms, a life between upper middle-class and *Boheme*, between Paris and Sanary-sur-mer and vacations on Corsica. The Soviet Secret Service did not appear in that draft.

It was the France of Léon Blum and the Popular Front that she told about, with the Spanish Civil War off to one side, which, quite apart from throwing parties, dancing all night, and trying on hats, was the actual reason for her stay in Paris. Because in reality, or at least parallel to it, it was the time of conspiracies, of capsules with messages in them, of meetings with control officers to pass on information. That parallel life of espionage was just "the chapter," while the other part resembled the novel into which my mother would have liked to rewrite her life. The novel of a life that, at least in her hindsight, looked at from its end, would have been better suited to her, with a man who would have loved her a little bit more than she did him, and in which she would have been the center of a

cosmopolitan artistic circle. In that life, Léon Blum would not have had to resign, France would have stood up to Hitler, the Spanish Republic would have won, the Munich Treaty and the *Anschluss* of Austria would never have taken place, and certainly not the show trials and mass executions in the Soviet Union.

The Paris novel and the Paris “chapter” were totally divorced in my mother’s narratives, the secret meetings with Philby in towns near the Spanish border and with contacts in Paris seemed to have taken place in another life in which she also heard the words “atomic energy” for the first time and then passed them on - “a friend wanted to inform the Russians about that.” And even if she’d been just a tiny link in that chain of informants, it would nevertheless explain the conviction with which she claimed that the Rosenbergs had not been wrongly executed. But she never went that far in her explanations, the Paris “chapter” was brief and to the point and always without embellishment. The Paris novel, on the other hand, which had to do with parties and friends and hats and her Dutch lover, comprised several volumes, one of which contained a photo essay about her apartment on the Quay d’Orsay that was supposed to have appeared in a magazine under the title *L’Appartement de Madame Philby*. Unfortunately she never told me the name of the magazine, either that or I forgot it, it must have been something like *House and Garden* in French. I really wanted to see that article, and, since I could figure out the approximate years in which it would have appeared, one day when I was in Paris I requested all the back issues of several magazines of that sort for the years between 1936 and 1939 and went through them in the reading room of the *Musée de l’art décoratif*. The world in which my mother lived during those Paris years took on actual form in magazines like *Art et Décoration*, *Plaisir de France* and *Mobilier et Décoration*; it was an unexpectedly intact and carefree world, aside from worries such as *Ou poser votre chapeau? Savez vous choisir un tapis? Voiture et personnalité*. Exactly as my mother had described it, the periodicals often displayed individual apartments that the publishers considered exemplary because of their originality and good taste, with descriptions and photographs from every angle. Large apartments, small apartments, studio apartments, artists’ lofts in Paris, and country houses. My head was swimming from all those gardens, villas, and furnishings, but I couldn’t find the apartment of Madame Philby.

“Oh, my God,” said the librarian, “just think of all that was going on back in those days. Since then, nothing’s been the same. How did it happen that all these silly interior decorating magazines managed to survive?”

After my mother’s death, I thought I ought to inform Pieter, the man who loved her a little bit more. I knew his Amsterdam address quite well - it got to be familiar, as far as I can recall, because it was the return address on the letters he sent regularly. Several years after the war, Pieter and my mother had located each other again and exchanged letters from then on, but he never visited us and obviously they never arranged to see each other again, as if they didn’t care to meet outside of the Paris novel. When I visited him in Amsterdam, he told me that after the war he’d met with Kim Philby; actually it was the latter’s idea, but he’d hoped that it would be a chance to see Litzy again. But that hope was not fulfilled. Philby showed up alone and Pieter couldn’t bring himself to ask about Litzy. “I couldn’t stand him,” he said, “after all, he was my competition.” He also told me that he’d been let in on everything, or at least a lot of it, Litzy had told him right out, the second time they were together, that she was working for the Soviet Secret Service. That was at the end of 1937, he still remembered that exactly, the Russians and English were allies, so that the revelation wouldn’t really have been dangerous at that point.

“I was madly in love with your mother - I can’t tell you what she meant to me and still does,” was the first sentence out of his mouth as soon as we were on our way after meeting at the railroad station, having recognized each other from the descriptions we’d each provided. We were both wearing berets and he looked like a real artist in every other way as well. My mother had never described Pieter’s appearance to me, but, on the other hand, had mentioned several times that he’d lived with two women after the war, one to whom he was married and one who was his mistress, but not in the same apartment with either of them. They all lived in their own apartments and he reserved his studio for himself as neutral territory. That’s where he took me then and we ended up sitting between pieces of his sculpture, some of which I already knew from the photographs that he

regularly enclosed with his letters and which my mother showed me proudly, perhaps because of her conviction that once upon a time she'd been the one who inspired his art and so she deserved credit for some of it. And although all she could do was shake her head over the detailed descriptions of nature's blossoming and fading away that also appeared in his letters, she obediently followed the directions for planting the expertly selected Amsterdam tulip bulbs he sent yearly at the proper time, watered them regularly, and, eventually even rejoiced in their bloom, because, with their rich colors they stood out prominently, in my mother's opinion, against everything that was otherwise to be seen in the gardens at Karlshorst. And a garden didn't even count as "nature."

Just as my father did, Pieter complained to me about Litzy's reticence. Yes, of course he knew that her love and friendship had remained true to him in a certain way through all the years, as had his, but whenever he asked himself what he'd learned from her numerous letters, the answer was very little, actually nothing at all - in any case never anything that might have interested him, such as how she was living and with whom she was living and how she was really getting along. Not once in their decade-long exchange of letters did she ever write one word about her marriage to my father or about their divorce, and not a word, either, about living together with Vito - she didn't even tell him about my father's death. "Why did she conceal her life from me?" is what he asked me, of all people, and I really couldn't give him an answer. Just like my father, he tried to make me an ally against her reticence and remoteness, and, like my father, he loved and admired her, but was also irritated by her impulsive generosity and her chaotic life style, the only difference being that he used the word "Viennese" for those characteristics which my father termed "Balkan." My father, Pieter, and I could have formed a triple alliance - we, who were so fond of her and yet felt that we were excluded from her life, or at least shut out over and over again.

"For exactly a year we were a happy couple in Paris," Pieter told me, "from the spring of 1937 until the spring of 1938. After the *Anschluss*, Litzy was overcome by worries, agitation, and fear. During the first year, the happy one, she told me a great deal about Vienna, less about Hungary, and almost nothing about her parents and her Jewish origins. Sometimes letters came from her parents, and packages - '*packerln*' as Litzy called them - then for hours afterward she'd be

upset, unbearable, and refused to talk. But I certainly wasn't responsible for the *Anschluss*. Of course all of that was terrible, but why couldn't we go on living together happily in the face of it? I didn't understand back then and I still don't really understand today. Soon there was no such thing as being alone any more because there was a refugee sleeping in every available corner of the apartment - and there were a lot of available corners in that big apartment. I was jealous and offended because the refugees were taking Litzy away from me with their agitation and worrying and their endless discussions about the *Anschluss*, about the Spanish Civil War, Franco, Mussolini, and Hitler, and what we were facing and what was going to happen to all of us. With the outbreak of war that sort of communal life ended in a great panic that separated the two of us as well - for ever, as it turned out. I missed her very much, your mother, but after the war we lived our own lives, I in Amsterdam and she in Berlin. We wrote each other letters that didn't shed much light on anything, I sent her tulip bulbs and she sent me art books from a publisher in East Germany, and without ever discussing it, we avoided seeing each other again. I don't know whether, in the long run, considering our opposite natures, we would have continued to be attracted if we'd stayed together, or repelled, because I was never a Communist, I'm not Jewish, don't even come from Austro-Hungary, I'm just a rather boring Dutchman.

“Several years after Philby's defection to the Soviet Union I was summoned to a government office here in Amsterdam for a 'conversation' that went on for two days. You could also have called it an interrogation. Suddenly they seemed to know pretty much everything about our circle of friends and my severed relationship with Mrs. Philby. They questioned me for hours on end and wanted to know who-what-when-where-with whom, but I really couldn't help them, I was just a bit player, the lover of the wife of the secret agent.”