

The Last Boat

It was still dark when we set out, and, though we knew very well that foolish optimism of that kind was irrational at this day and hour, for it being night or day could make no difference, yet we still believed that on this day, as on all other days, the dawn would break, the sun would rise and light would irradiate the earth – that morning would come, in short, and we would be there to see one another, see the other's worn, tired, crumpled face, baggy, bloodshot eyes and the creased skin at the nape of the neck; see the water ripple behind us, and see it become smooth and still again; see the desolate buildings along the quay and the untouched, empty streets creeping in among them, and far behind, beyond the city, the sloping banks, the whole length of them, threatening to disintegrate at any moment. We set out in the dark, and though one seldom accosted another¹

¹ "Hey, Mister! Is this the right way to the Temporary Dock?"

"Hm. Ghrr."

"You misunderstood me. In any case... Never mind, perhaps you're right."

"Enough of that. Stop molesting me." "Don't run away. All I wanted to say was... I mean, now that we've met and all that, couldn't you lend me a hand? You've only that little bit of a bag to carry, and here I am with these hulking great suitcases..."

"I'm just about ready to throw this little bit of a bag away as far as it will go – and I'm just about ready to knock your block off. I am being quite clear, aren't I?"

(if and when one met anyone at all on the way to the Danube-side docks, if and when one was lucky enough to pass someone by, or be passed by someone!) the faint and wraith-like outlines of the others were very necessary, for they were all we had to determine our present position and the right direction by – the headlights of the EVA-squad's jeeps whizzing dizzyingly past were more a hindrance than a help in orientation, and with everything so fraught with risk, we really could not afford to rely on habit to guide us. In our excitement at hearing the exact time of departure at last over the megaphones at daybreak and reading it on handwritten bills on the walls, after the harassing suspense of the past weeks, we set out without waiting for the inane morning ceremony, of late hopelessly disorganized, to commence; set out from diverse – close-by and more distant – corners of the capital, but from the same regions all: from beneath the earth, like rats which, thanks to their amazing capacity for survival, had for us become a sacred animal of sorts, and thus the sole object of our attention during the last few months; crept out from cellars and burrows, from holes in the ground that had once served as pits, from cesspools and temporary bomb-shelters, or, in the case of those for whom even this did not seem precaution enough, from the tunnels of the local and underground railways, from the depths of Turkish baths and subterranean repair depots, or from the labyrinths of sewers, pronounced to be the safest of all – crept up and set out on the longer and shorter journey with or without luggage packed well in advance. But it would be stretching things to say that the streets soon became "crowded with people", for – as it later turned out – there were scarcely sixty of us left in the city, so the EVA

was quite right in thinking that an average-sized Danube boat would fit the bill to a nicety; and it was only this – the size of it – that caused consternation among a number of us, and that only until we cast off and put forth, for every one of us was fully aware that with land and air transport impracticable, conveyance by water was the only solution left to us. Until we reached the docks our greatest concern was the luggage, the utility or futility of that haphazard collection of travelling-bags, valises and suitcases, carrier-bags and cardboard boxes; for owing to the nature of our situation the useful objects amassed during the initial stages with common sense automatically dictating each choice gradually came to be replaced by effects of a more personal nature, until not a single serviceable piece of equipment remained; a broken cuckoo clock took the place of woolen underwear, a collection of matchbox-labels occupied that of flour and cooking chocolate, and in the days immediately preceding our departure a wooden cigarette-holder seemed more important than a spirit stove, a couple of sea shells infinitely more precious than headache and toothache pills. Knowing both solutions to be equally and perfectly pointless made us react in different ways: some dragged themselves across the city hauling the entire collection behind them and reached the boat panting and with limbs gone numb, ready to drop; others arrived empty-handed, and there were some whose clenched fists were the only indication that there had been one thing at least they had not had the heart to cast aside along the way. We reached the "Temporary Dock" one by one, and since we were all sure – numbering as we did no more than sixty – that we were but a vanguard of sorts, it was the ship itself that

caused the greatest consternation, the ship lying up silently in the dark; a consternation too strong to be dispelled by the overwhelming but short-lived sense of relief at seeing, as we each came to the end of the street of our choice, all converging at this point of the quay, that there had been no mistake, there really was something on the water. Our relief was short-lived because the "average-sized Danube boat", as we unanimously agreed, looked more like an aimlessly floating, sombre wreck than a seaworthy vessel; a travel agency may once have deemed that its pleasant rolling would be a perfectly acceptable substitute for a real cruise on a school outing, but many a day must have passed since then, for this vessel allocated to us was so deep in the water that it looked as though three or four passengers would suffice for it to sink completely and for ever – the higher waves were already licking its decks hungrily. Our apprehensions were further enhanced by the fact that we saw no movement on board whatsoever; there was not a sailor or EVA-officer in sight, the wheelhouse was dark, as dark and empty as the docks we scanned to no avail. And as we waited with growing impatience for someone to show up on the gangway or for an EVA-jeep to appear and the identity check to commence at last, our misgivings concerning the ship intensified, for after a closer look at it, we kept discovering an increasing number of defects on its boards and deck: a couple of handbreadths from its bow there was a gaping, circular hole that looked as if it had been made by a shell; several planks were missing from the stern, the wheelhouse windows were smashed and so on, endlessly, down to the moorings that appeared to have completely rotted away; one of the bollards was standing askew in its concrete bed, as though rooted up in stealth by a sly

subterranean animal. We stood about grumbling in the cutting wind, and realizing that further scrutiny might kindle the embers of initial indignation into a blaze of anger, doubtful but surely perilous in effect, we began to castigate our miserable vessel, scourging it in word rather than in deed, subjecting it to scathing remarks that did it no harm but lent it some kind of immunity and surprised us with the pleasurable if ephemeral feeling of release. We had so long been deprived of release that even those who had seemed the most taciturn in the beginning spoke up to complement the remarks already made, and thus, tempered by the gaiety evoked by taunts such as "rotten old tub" followed by "battered old barge" and the even better "dilapidated, decrepit little dinghy", we had begun to contemplate our vessel creaking and pitching down below with something akin to affection – with the kind of affection one feels for the odds and ends one carries about in one's pockets. And by the time the two EVA-jeps shot out almost simultaneously from the parallel streets leading to "our dock" and came to a stop beside our somewhat scattered group with brakes screeching, we were all quite certain that "our boat would not let us down". The sudden and somewhat cataclysmic arrival of the EVA-squad caused no particular commotion, aroused an irate kind of satisfaction rather than anxiety, and the sub-lieutenant in charge of the squad had to rant at us before we moved to form the compulsory double-file. A few years hence, of course, the mere sight of a white uniform or a jeep would suffice to have us cowering with our backs to the wall, our hearts in our mouths and perspiring from terror, but ever since the general staff had left with most of the troops and only this, special-in-name-only squad was left to organize the

evacuation of those left behind, discipline had broken down and confusion reigned everywhere; young louts had donned the once-feared uniforms and no longer bothered with interpreters – words were unnecessary for plunder; so it was not really surprising that all that was left of the former ruthlessness was this inarticulate shrieking, all that remained of the effective trappings of old, characteristic moves was this empty, futile, desperate and ridiculous “cataclysmicity”. But, though we knew from experience that the machinery which had once functioned so smoothly was now but a pale duplicate of its former self, we thought they would make an effort, just this once, in order to dispatch the remaining formalities – which under the circumstances were in any case quite unnecessary – all the more quickly. Instead, nothing happened for a long time. Four or five civilians got out of one of the jeeps and were escorted on board; they passed by us without once looking up at us, their legs unsteady and their heads bowed. Our luggage was then examined at length and since none of the suitcases held a single object to their liking, a number of them were angrily thrown into the water. Later, as they strolled up and down along our ranks, they would stop awhile behind one or the other of us but never quite managed to take a single whisperer unawares², let alone catch us at a more serious offence. Their helplessness was all the more regrettable as it proved to us their inability to recognize that our former stubborn resistance had, in the course of time, been converted into an inevitable willingness to cooperate, which undoubtedly

² “What mugs we are, damn it! I mean, tell me, what was the point in not taking the first boat when here we are taking the last one?”

“Don’t you understand? After all, this was the...”

“Shut up. They’re coming.”

has a paralyzing effect on an organisation for which the fact of persistent defiance is more important than victory for it to remain in operation. When the absurdity of the situation finally struck them, they had no choice but to begin the identity check without delay. For this we had to line up again, in single file this time, facing the gangway, and by that time they were beyond caring that the file did not remain as such for more than a couple of minutes and was more like a weary, muddle-minded mob than an orderly group of people. Establishing our identity was more of an ordeal for them than for us, since it was all the same to us which of our cards passed muster: neither our identity nor our person had any particular significance. Our papers hid nothing, for we ourselves could no longer decide which was genuine and which false: we thought any name, any data would do as we were not in a position to predict who it would be best to be; so we resolved – since we had accumulated so many – that we would keep all of them. The boat which we boarded one by one gave no indication that we would be leaving soon; though the light was on in the wheelhouse, the sight of the two civilians moving about uncertainly inside was none too cheering: they did not seem to know what they were about and appeared to be pushing and pulling at the buttons and levers pot-luck fashion, at random, looking as though they hoped to hit upon the right switch accidentally sooner or later, as for the other two or three civilians, they had so long disappeared down the hold – where they had undoubtedly been sent to repair the obvious imperfections of the engines – that one could almost bet on it that the first thing those lazy loafers did was to find a suitable niche where they could sleep right through the trip in peace (which, as it later turned out, is exactly what they did). In this unpromising situation it came as a real surprise when, in half an hour or so, we suddenly felt a delicate tremor

beneath our feet then heard, casting aside all doubt, the first racking snorts of the engines; the two civilians in the wheelhouse nodded their heads at each other happily and, as we watched them, some of their cheerful relief rubbed off on us, for now, when we had no choice but to leave, the very thought of having to stay after all made us shudder. And strangely enough, now that there was nothing to prevent our leaving – for it now seemed quite certain that the engines at least would not let us down – we suddenly lost patience and without exception immediately found it terribly important that we should start at once, without tarrying a single moment, and these moments seemed all the more unendurable as we were all quite convinced that the majority had yet to arrive and thus there would be hours of waiting still before us. And appearances confirmed our misapprehension, for the EVAs stood indifferently, unhurriedly and silently around their jeeps on the quay; some had even lit cigarettes, which led us to think that they too were preparing themselves for a long wait – in fact it was only a question of security measures. This possibility quite escaped our imaginations; we stared restlessly and tensely at the openings of the two parallel roads leading to our dock and thought with loathing of those who were perhaps at this moment preparing to haul themselves out of bed to arrive God knows when on the quay. We stood there as though we were watching the dark gaping entrances of tunnels from where someone would surely have to turn up in the end – for, as time passed, we would have been content to see a single person come along that street; our hatred soon turned to anxiety, for the thought of a totally empty and deserted capital was intolerable. Some of us pressed against the rails and our vision had begun to blur with the strain but it was all in vain; no one came. Then, when the EVA sub-lieutenant contemptuously signalled to the two civilians (the others

had apparently disappeared down the hold for good) and they cast off and weighed anchor, we all stood on deck with our eyes riveted on the mouths of those streets, and could not really grasp that we were on our way at last, for we needed time to put something in place of the absurdity which intimated that there would be some staying here for good with the other: the vacuous insanity of the deserted city. There were some who breathed more freely as soon as we lost sight of the jeeps and the indifferent squad and attempted to voice their relief³, but most of us only took heart again when we suddenly and "practically simultaneously" perceived that dawn was breaking. We settled down in the stern and around the wheelhouse, tried to make ourselves as comfortable as possible, then some of us attempted – let us add, with little success – to fall into conversation with the two civilians in order to form at least a vague idea of what we should expect in the hours to come⁴, to ascertain whether we would be stopping

³ "Well, what have you to say to that? We don't have a coast, yet here we are leaving by water! Perfectly absurd, don't you think?"

"Leave me alone!"

"What a farce!"

"One more word and I'll kick you into the river."

⁴ "Excuse me, could you tell me where the captain is?"

"Well? What is it you want?"

"I'm looking for the captain. Are you the captain?"

"Come on, get on with it."

"So it is you. You don't look like a sailor."

"I'm not a sailor."

"But you just told me you were the captain."

"I'm not a captain. Can't you see I've got things to do."

"But... I've got to talk to the captain."

"Why don't you go and look for him then? Find yourself one. I'm sure you'll manage. Just get the hell away from here."

before the border or only after, to assess whether there was any hope of wresting some sort of favour on this our boat, sailing under EVA jurisdiction but without their actual presence. The failure of our attempt caused no surprise and in point of fact we were not quite sure whether it might not be better this way, not knowing anything for certain. Those of us who had brought food along ate a little, some dozed awhile, then we all watched the countryside slipping slowly by; the erratic spirals of the deserted look-out posts, the butterfly-shaped strong-points rising in the distance, the gentle undulation of old landing-strips, baked hard and full of cracks from the drought; the mementos of pine forests, burnt to cinders on the slopes extending far into the horizon; listened to the howling of the wind, the monotonous throbbing of the engines, the river splashing against the

battered hull, and the peaceful silence settled upon us was only rarely disturbed by the fleeting forebodings of our more exhausted companions⁵. Our boat sailed upstream in similar tranquility, and because their fate resembled ours, even if their course did not, our fond attention soon turned to the objects passed on the way: old, rusty basins washed ashore, disembowelled refrigerators and oilstoves lying up on the river stones, the debris of trees snapped in two, car tyres and chairs, tin drums and plastic toys, the carcasses of deer, dogs and horses floating past them – until we found ourselves staring at whatever turned up in our vicinity with ever deepening interest, but only till we realized

⁵ "Hey! This is the end. We're sinking! The boat is sinking!"

"Goddamn Hungarian. Shut up. Here's something at last that's not sinking and he's squealing like a stuck pig."

that our curiosity was, in many cases, aroused solely by the direction they were drifting in. Exhaustion soon overcame us; those who could covered themselves, those who could not endeavoured to find a sheltered nook on deck where they could curl up with their hands in their pockets; only the two civilians remained awake in the lighted wheelhouse, where they watched the bow cutting into the calm sheet of water stretching before them silently and contentedly. We were still lying dazed with exhaustion when night set in again, and a muffled grumbling was the only reply when one of us suddenly looked up, scrambled to his feet, hurried back to the stern and, pointing at the sooty-black countryside disappearing forever from our sight cried, in bitter relief, "People! That was Hungary we just left behind.