

Susanne Goga

Leo Berlin

Leo Wechsler's first case

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1

“Inspector, don’t you think it’s time you should be going home?” asked Ursula Meinelt, the shorthand-typist, laying some papers on Leo Wechsler’s desk. “Your children will be waiting for you.”

Leo looked up quickly from his files, as if he suspected Fräulein Meinelt of merely wishing to go home early.

“Don’t look at me like a policeman.” Her voice was sharp.

“I am a policeman,” Leo replied drily. “You remind me of that fact on a daily basis. And with a colleague like von Malchow, you might as well do all the work yourself.”

She raised her hand in acceptance. “I know, but ... if you’re being honest, you’re not that easy to get on with either.”

He stared in astonishment. “What do you mean? You get on all right with me, don’t you?”

“Every day I ask myself how I manage to.”

“Cheeky today, aren’t we?,” he grinned. “Do you want to know why I get on with you?”

“Because I’m not the son of some landed gentry who only went into the Police force for a laugh and who could spend his life trout-fishing on the family estate if he wanted,” she shot back.

“Exactly,” said Leo Wechsler. “With those powers of deduction you should become a detective.”

“Why? So that I could hang around department stores waiting to catch women wearing three layers of underwear? No thanks. I’d rather be here typing your reports.” She smiled and reached into her pocket. “Here, take these with you if you’re going home.” She held out two sticks of rock.

He opened his mouth to say something, then stopped and took the candy. He had almost said I can pay for my own. In God’s name why did he always think everybody pitied him and that all that interested them was the fact that Inspector Wechsler was a widower with two children?

He snapped the file shut and pushed it to the furthest corner of his desk. “You’re right. I’ll make that do for today. And thank you for the rock. Who knows how much it’ll cost tomorrow.” He pulled out his wallet. “Look at this. It’ll hardly shut with all these notes. I saw somebody the other day in Wertheim’s paying with a ten thousand Mark note.”

Ursula Meinelt looked at the notes in Leo’s hand and shook her head. “Goodness knows where this will all end. How is it that our money is worth less and less every day?”

“It’s because they printed so much of the stuff during the war, as if it was toy money.” He folded his light summer coat over his arm. “And now we’re on a rollercoaster going heaven knows where. Have a nice

evening.”

And with that, he left.

It was not until he was standing outside on the Alexanderplatz in front of the Police Headquarters, affectionately known as “the Factory” by its inmates, that he breathed a sigh of relief. Half-past six and it was still light. The summer solstice was not far off. He decided he would walk down Unter den Linden for a bit before taking the tram to the district of Moabit.

People in summer clothes were strolling along the Boulevard. A headline in a newspaper kiosk caught his eye: **Prussic Acid**. He stopped and read the first few lines.

“Whit Sunday. SPD politician Philipp Scheidemann was the victim yesterday of an assassination attempt when unidentified men attacked him with Prussic acid. Reports are that he was severely injured.”

Leo Wechsler shook his head. It seemed to him sometimes as if the world had gone mad, as if it had lost its mind eight years earlier. First the long war, then revolution and fighting in the streets, the years of famine and instability and ... He shivered as he remembered Dorothea’s death. She had died in January 1919, just as the Spanish influenza epidemic had almost run its course. It was almost as if the treacherous illness had been waiting for her to give birth to Marie to pounce on its prey.

Now and again he caught himself wanting to say something to her or to touch her, and only then did he notice that she was no longer there. Perhaps he hadn’t given himself enough time to grieve after her death. Perhaps he had wanted to forget everything as quickly as possible. On the other hand, his children were a daily reminder of Dorothea, a constant mixture of pain and joy to him. Whenever Marie asked a smart question or Georg came home with good school marks, Leo thought that he had probably done a good job in carrying out Dorothea’s last wish, namely to look after the children.

He patted the sticks of rock in his coat pocket, stood for a moment looking up into the green canopy of leaves on the street. It wasn’t really an evening for going home. Such evenings were meant for spending time in a beer garden, not on his own of course, maybe for a spot of dancing, for stealing someone’s heart, simply for living. He hadn’t done that in a long time.

He shook his head, as if dragging himself out of his reverie, and headed for the nearest tram stop.

Gabriel Sartorius bent over the table, gazing at the polished semi-precious stones arranged on the rough wooden board in a pattern only he could decipher. He felt the stones’ energy surging through his fingers, his whole body, imbuing him with superhuman powers he would use to cure the suffering of the woman lying on the divan.

Ellen Cramer lay quite still on the divan, her eyes closed, arms by her sides. She had absolute faith in Gabriel Sartorius. For some weeks now he had been treating her for her dreadful migraines, and already she thought she could feel a slight improvement. She had run from one respected Berlin physician to the next, never finding a cure for the excruciating pains which affected her sight and made her nauseous, finally making up her mind to take this unusual step.

It was a girlfriend who had suggested the faith-healer. Initially she had been sceptical. Her husband, who wasn't interested in anything that couldn't be solved using slide-rules and account-books, knew nothing of these visits. And he need never find out either. She had enough money of her own to pay the healer's fees.

Clairvoyants and hypnotists were currently all the rage in Berlin. There were rumours that even the Police used their services from time to time to solve difficult cases.

Sartorius, however, saw himself not as the latest fashionable doctor, but rather as a man with a calling, someone who had been chosen to ease mankind's pain. With his flowing shoulder-length hair and his oriental robes, he looked not unlike a Renaissance image of Christ. His voice was soft and he exuded a composure which from her very first visit had calmed Ellen's fears.

She now felt his hands gliding softly over her temples, her forehead, gently touching her eyes and back to her temples.

"I shall now transmit the energy of the stones to you," she heard him say. "Amethyst for the pain. Cornelian to improve the blood. Diamonds to give you greater insight. Haematite to increase vitality. Opals to increase your zest for life. Brown chalcedony for passion."

She abandoned herself to him completely. His healing powers flowed soothingly round her head. She might almost have dozed off, but he tapped her cheek gently. "You may open your eyes. Our session for today is over. My advice is to take lots of rest, enjoy your life. Listen to your inner spirit. It will guide you."

Ellen sat up and looked round the room as if in some way the session had also changed her surroundings. Subdued lighting, heavy velvet curtains, on the walls an assortment of Christian, Hindu and Buddhist symbols which had confused her slightly when she had first seen them, but which now seemed familiar and comforting. A seemingly random hotchpotch of objects on a small inlaid table which clearly had a greater meaning for the faith-healer: a dagger with a beautifully engraved blade, a picture of Hildegard von Bingen, a green jade Buddha.

Discreetly, she laid the money next to the dagger and took her leave. "Shall I see you at the same time next week?" he asked her as he accompanied her to the door.

"Perfect. Thank you."

He closed the door behind her, took the money from the table and pocketed it in the lightweight trousers he wore under his wide robe. Then he lay down on the divan and took a handful of grapes from a fruit bowl. He always needed nourishment after a session to restore his powers. Using the precious stones as a medium and transferring their healing powers to his patients was exhausting, but it was his most effective treatment. Sometimes he used the images he saw in the stones to interpret his patients' state of mind and show them new ways forward.

The doorbell rang. Sartorius glanced at his diary, but Ellen Cramer was the last appointment that afternoon. Odd. Laying the grapes down beside the bowl he went to the door.

Many of his patients were surprised to be greeted by him in person. For his part, however, a maid would only

have disturbed him. A woman did come in the evening to clean and cook for him if he was not dining out. That very day he had been invited to a party at the home of an important patient, and he was annoyed that someone else was now at his door, as he wished to bathe and change in peace.

He led his visitor into the treatment room. "This is an unexpected surprise. It has been such a long time. It might have been prudent to telephone beforehand as I would have had more time for you."

"I shan't keep you long, Herr Sartorius." The right hand in the elegant suede glove trembled slightly.

By the time Leo Wechsler reached the tree-lined Emdenerstraße in Moabit which he had called home since his marriage, his shirt was sticking to his back. He had got off the packed tram one stop early, but the walk had done nothing to cool him down. It was simply too hot.

He nodded to the landlord of the local pub where he sometimes drank a pint or two and went on, lost in thought. Then he heard a familiar voice and the patter of small bare feet coming towards him. His daughter Marie launched herself at him, almost knocking him over. "Papa, you're home at last. Aunt Ilse said you would buy me an ice cream. Can I have one, please?"

Kissing his daughter on the nose, he put his arm around her waist and set her down. She was now almost up to his middle, although it seemed to him as if only yesterday he had carried her as a tiny bundle in his arms. "I can't believe Aunt Ilse said that. But hold on," he said mysteriously, "what's this in my coat pocket?" He magically produced one of Fräulein Meinelt's sticks of rock.

Marie's eyes shone as she reached out, tearing the paper off and happily stuffing the rock into her mouth. She licked it enthusiastically, then stopped. "Have you got one for Georg, too?" she asked anxiously.

Leo's heart filled with pride. His daughter. "Of course, sweetheart. Where is he anyway?"

Marie pointed down the street. "He's in the courtyard at the back of number 56 with the boys from the blacksmith's. I bet they're looking for fag-ends again."

Leo frowned. Sometimes he was sorry that he had chosen to stay in this area merely because he had grown up there. Pure sentimentality, he thought. Perhaps his children would have been better off somewhere else. Of course he knew that the streets were also a kind of school where they could learn the kinds of things they could never find in books. But collecting cigarette-ends, taking the tobacco out and selling it was a step too far.

"Go and fetch Georg! It's tea-time," said Leo stopping at the front door of the block of flats.

Marie ran along the street and into a doorway, emerging shortly with her eight-year-old brother in tow. He was wearing only an old shirt and shorts. "Hello, Papa", he said. Leo ruffled his hair.

"I'm not going to make a fuss about it, but this business with the cigarette butts has to stop."

Georg gave him a guilty look. "Well, all right. We just thought we could make some money out of it. Times are hard, you know, Papa."

How could he still be hard on the boy? Sighing, Leo opened the main door and entered the welcome cool of the hallway. The simple stairwell was light and clean, the polished wooden steps gleamed, the red and white tiles were freshly scrubbed and it never smelt of stale food or musty washing like it did in the tenements at the back. It was strange how close these two worlds were to one another. He was very familiar with the tenements, investigations had taken him there often enough, and he was always struck by the wretched misery he saw there.

And yet this area in the west of the city was by no means the worst. He knew tenements in the north and east that were more like teeming beehives than human dwellings. On the first floor he stopped outside the door on the left and whispered to his children: “What’s the forecast for today?”

“Slightly overcast but dry,” Georg grinned. This was their secret code for describing his aunt’s moods.

Leo grinned back and unlocked the apartment door. The smell of freshly-boiled potatoes was coming from the kitchen and he was suddenly aware of how hungry he was. There were times at work when he forgot to eat.

“Is that you, Leo?” his sister called from the kitchen. “Did you bring the children back with you? Heaven knows where they are.”

“Don’t worry, Ilse. I’ve got them.” He went into the kitchen and placed a hand on her shoulder. She was smaller than her brother, but with the same dark hair and blue-green eyes. Although only two years older, her face looked weary, resigned and prematurely old. He was conscious of the tension which had never really gone away since she had moved in with them over three years before. After Dorothea died, Ilse had offered to look after the children. Leo secretly suspected that this had been prompted more by a sense of duty and that she was now afraid that life was passing her by.

“These look wonderful,” he said, biting into a bright red strawberry. “They taste of summer.”

She gave a small smile. “I got them by chance. A farmer stopped with his cart right in front of the door, so I couldn’t say no. The children were begging me.”

“Thank you.” He lightly stroked her bare arm, a shy gesture which conveyed his gratitude far more than words. “Georg was out with Pollack’s boys again, picking up cigarette-ends. Maybe I should start giving him a bit of pocket money.”

Ilse sprinkled some sugar over the chopped strawberries and stirred them carefully to draw out the juice. “Oh Leo, I wouldn’t bother. Chances are somebody would just steal it off him.”

“You’re even more suspicious than the Police. You see the worst in everybody.”

Ilse laughed, but the laugh did not reach her eyes. “If you were around more often, you would know what goes on in the back yards. Georg told me a friend of his had his good jacket stolen on the way home.”

“Who on earth would send their child to school in their best clothes these days? And anyway – what kind of

people do you think I'm dealing with all day? The Sally Army?"

There were times when it seemed to him that he and his sister were like an old married couple. They knew each other so well, got on more or less, but had no real affection. Could he go on living like this?

Sighing, he sat down at the table and poured a glass of water.

"Everything all right otherwise? Has Georg done his homework?"

"Yes, everything's fine." She hesitated and looked at him uncertainly.

"What is it?"

"Hmm, I don't know if it's anything important, but... he's been telling me that a boy in his class is saying weird things."

"What sort of weird things?"

"Well, like the Government's nothing but a bunch of crooks. And that everything was better before the War, when we still had the Kaiser."

"Oh Ilse, that's the same old rubbish he can read in any newspaper. Why should I worry about that?"

"He also said that this boy had beaten up a friend of his because he refused to salute him."

Leo looked up. "What?"

"Apparently he said that the other boy's father was a leftie and that he'd betrayed the Fatherland."

Leo sighed. "We live in Moabit. Lefties are two-a-penny here."

"I know, but this little thug was the teacher's son."

"What? Is that chap Scheller at it again?" Although teachers were forbidden by law to glorify war, there were still a great many faithful servants of the state ready to fill the heads of the boys with nonsense and who were keen on the idea of dying for the Fatherland. Ludwig Scheller was a rabble-rouser of the worst kind, and he and Leo had had words more than once. Between them there was now a sort of truce. "Any more of this and I'll have to go and speak to him again." He took a sip of water. "Have you heard the latest? Somebody's tried to kill Scheidemann with Prussic acid. Do you remember that time we watched him on the balcony of the Reichstag when he proclaimed the Republic?"

Ilse shrugged, indifferent to the news, and laid the bowl of strawberries on the table beside the potatoes, margarine and cold cuts. "I've always said politics is a dirty business. And just because the other lot are in now doesn't mean it will get any better. I'm going to fetch the children in for their tea." With these words she left the kitchen. Leo watched her go, suddenly feeling quite, quite alone.

Marie rushed into the kitchen and climbed onto the chair next to her father. "Look, Papa. Aunt Ilse's bought

strawberries. Don't they look delicious?"

Five minutes later her mouth was smudged red and her eyes glistened. "Who's that last one for?" she asked, looking anxiously at her brother.

"Oh, I'm full up", said Georg, glancing at his father, who smiled, appreciating the sacrifice.

Leo walked over to the living-room window, threw it wide open and smoked one of his rare cigarettes. It was funny – most people smoked only in company, but he did so when he was on his own.

Lost in thought, he rubbed his left temple with its long, white scar running from hairline to cheekbone. Three years earlier, during the winter street riots, he had seen three policemen beating up a worker lying on the ground trying to protect himself. Without thinking, he had waded in. The policemen then turned on him with their rubber truncheons. Sometimes he thought that the only reason he was still in a job was because Detective Chief Inspector Ernst Gennat had put in a good word for him.

A few children were still playing in the street. A drunk staggered out of the pub and embraced the nearest lamppost as if it were a woman. From up here everything looked the same as it had always done – no hunger, no misery, no disease. But that was merely the illusion of a light summer evening.

Later he read a book on art, one of his private passions. Around nine o'clock the telephone rang. Leo had one of the few telephones in the area because as a Detective Inspector he had to be contactable at all times.

"Wechsler speaking."

It was his friend and colleague Robert Walther. "Leo, you have to get round here. We've got a murder in Charlottenburg. A man called Gabriel Sartorius has been killed."

He sat at the desk staring at a glass of brandy. His hands motionless on the polished surface, with no sign of trembling. These hands...

The thing was, he had just wanted to talk to him, ask him how somebody else could have found out about the things he had told him in confidence. How somebody could have written this letter. Whether somebody close to Sartorius had used his influence to harm his patients. Sartorius had to come clean. The man owed him that much after he had tried out his whole range of therapies on him: precious stones, meditation, swinging pendulums, hypnosis ... anything and everything that might have helped.

Yet in the midst of his speech, he had noticed a fleeting change, the merest suggestion of a smile at the corners of the faith-healer's mouth. Could he have...? No, that was unthinkable.

(c) English translation by Pamela Russell