

Bernard Malamud won a National Book Award in 1959 for his volume of short stories, "The Magic Barrel." "The Refugee" is part of a new collection, "Idiots First," which Farrar, Straus will publish next month. Mr. Malamud is also the author of three novels. "There seems to be no writer of his background," comments critic Alfred Kazin, "who makes one feel so keenly the enigmatic quality of life."

The Refugee

I thought I knew his story.

But there was some

Oskar Gassner sits in his cotton-mesh undershirt and summer bathrobe at the window of his stuffy, hot, dark hotel room on West Tenth Street while I cautiously knock. Outside, across the sky, a late-June green twilight fades in darkness. The refugee fumbles for the light and stares at me, hiding despair but not pain.

I was in those days a poor student and would brashly attempt to teach anybody anything for a buck an hour, although I have since learned better. Mostly I gave English lessons to recently arrived refugees. The college sent me; I had acquired a little experience. Already a few of my students were trying their broken English, theirs and mine, in the American market place. I was then just twenty, on my way into my senior year in college, a skinny, life-hungry kid, eating himself waiting for the next world war to start. It was a goddamn cheat. Here I was palpitating to get going, and across the ocean Adolf Hitler, in black boots and a square moustache, was tearing up all the flowers. Will I ever forget what went on with Danzig that summer?

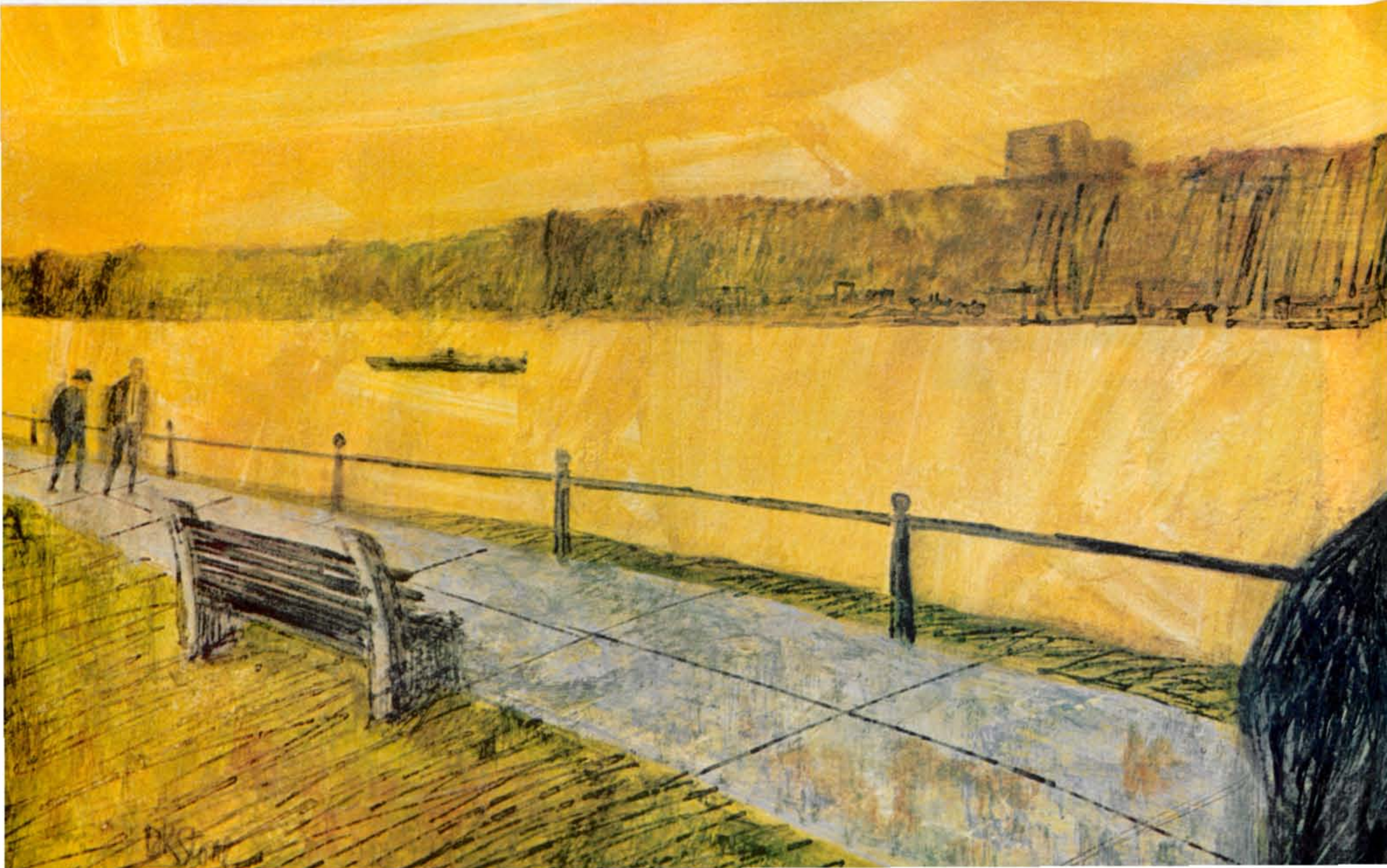
Times were still hard from the depression but anyway I made a little living from the poor

refugees. They were all over uptown Broadway in 1939. I had four I tutored—Karl Otto Alp, the former film star; Wolfgang Novak, once a brilliant economist; Friedrich Wilhelm Wolff, who had taught medieval history at Heidelberg; and, after that night I met him in his disordered cheap hotel room, Oskar Gassner, the Berlin critic and journalist, at one time on the *Acht Uhr Abendblatt*. They were accomplished men. I had my nerve associating with them, but that's what a world crisis does for people—they get educated.

Oskar was maybe fifty, his thick hair turning gray. He had a big face and heavy hands. His shoulders sagged. His eyes, too, were heavy, a clouded blue; and as he stared at me after I had identified myself, doubt spread in them like underwater currents. It was as if, on seeing me, he had again been defeated. I stayed at the door in silence. In such cases I would rather be elsewhere, but I had to make a living. Finally he opened the door and I entered. Rather he released it and I was in. "*Bitte. . .*" He offered me a seat and didn't know where to sit himself. He would attempt to say something and then stop, as though it could not possibly be said. The room

was cluttered with clothing, boxes of books he had managed to get out of Germany and some paintings. Oskar sat on a box and attempted to fan himself with his meaty hand. "Zis heat," he muttered, forcing his mind to the deed. "Impossible. I do not know such heat." It was bad enough for me but terrible for him. He had difficulty breathing. He tried again to speak, lifted a hand and let it drop like a dead duck. He breathed as though he were fighting a battle; and maybe he won because after ten minutes we sat and slowly talked.

Like most educated Germans Oskar had at one time studied English. Although he was certain he couldn't say a word, he managed sometimes to put together a fairly decent, if rather comical, English sentence. He misplaced consonants, mixed up nouns and verbs and mangled idioms, yet we were able at once to communicate. We conversed mostly in English, with an occasional assist by me in pidgin-German or Yiddish, what he called "Jiddish." He had been to America before—last year for a short visit. He had come a month before *Kristallnacht*, when the Nazis shattered the Jewish store windows and burned



deep secret he
had never told me.

all the synagogues, to see if he could find a job for himself; he had no relatives in America, and getting a job would permit him quickly to enter the country. He had been promised something, not in journalism but with the help of a foundation, as a lecturer. Then he had returned to Berlin, and after a frightening delay of six months was permitted to emigrate. He had sold whatever he could, managed to get some paintings, gifts of Bauhaus friends, and some boxes of books out by bribing two Nazi border guards; he had said goodbye to his wife and left the accursed country. He gazed at me with cloudy eyes. "We parted amicably," he said in German. "My wife was gentile. Her mother was an appalling anti-Semite. They returned to live in Stettin." I asked no questions. Gentile is gentile, Germany is Germany.

His new job was in the Institute for Public Studies here in New York. He was to give a lecture a week in the fall term, and during next spring, a course, in English translation, on "The Literature of the Weimar Republic." He had never taught before and was afraid to. He was in that way to be introduced to the public, but the



He found it difficult to face either of us in the mirror.

thought of giving the lecture in English just about paralyzed him. He didn't see how he could do it. "How is it possible? I cannot say two words. I cannot pronounce. I will make a fool of myself." His melancholy deepened. Already in the two months since his arrival, and after a round of diminishingly expensive hotel rooms, he had had two English tutors, and I was the third. The others had given him up, he said, because his progress was so poor, and he thought also that he depressed them. He asked me whether I felt I could do something for him, or should he go to a speech specialist—someone, say, who charged five dollars an hour—and beg his assistance? "You could try him," I said, "and then come back to me." In those days I figured what I knew, I knew. At that he managed a smile. Still I wanted him to make up his mind, or it would be no confidence down the line. He said, after a while, that he would stay with me. If he went to the five-dollar professor it might help his tongue but not his stomach. He would have no money left to eat with. The institute had paid him in advance for the summer, but it was only three hundred dollars and all he had.

He looked at me dully. "*Ich weiss nicht wie ich weiter machen soll.*"

I figured it was time to move past the first step. Either we did that quickly or it would be like drilling rock for a long time. "Let's stand at the mirror," I said.

He rose with a sigh and stood there beside me: I thin, elongated, redheaded, praying for success, his and mine; Oskar uneasy, fearful, finding it hard to face either of us in the faded round glass above his dresser.

"Please," I said to him, "could you say 'right'?"

"Ghight," he gargled.

"No. 'Right.' You put your tongue here." I showed him where. As he tensely watched the mirror, I tensely watched him. "The tip of it curls behind the ridge on top, like this."

He placed his tongue where I showed him.

"Please," I said, "now say 'right.'"

Oskar's tongue fluttered, "Rright."

"That's good. Now say 'treasure'—that's harder."

"Tgheasure."

"The tongue goes up in front, not in the back of the mouth. Look."

He tried, his brow wet, eyes straining.

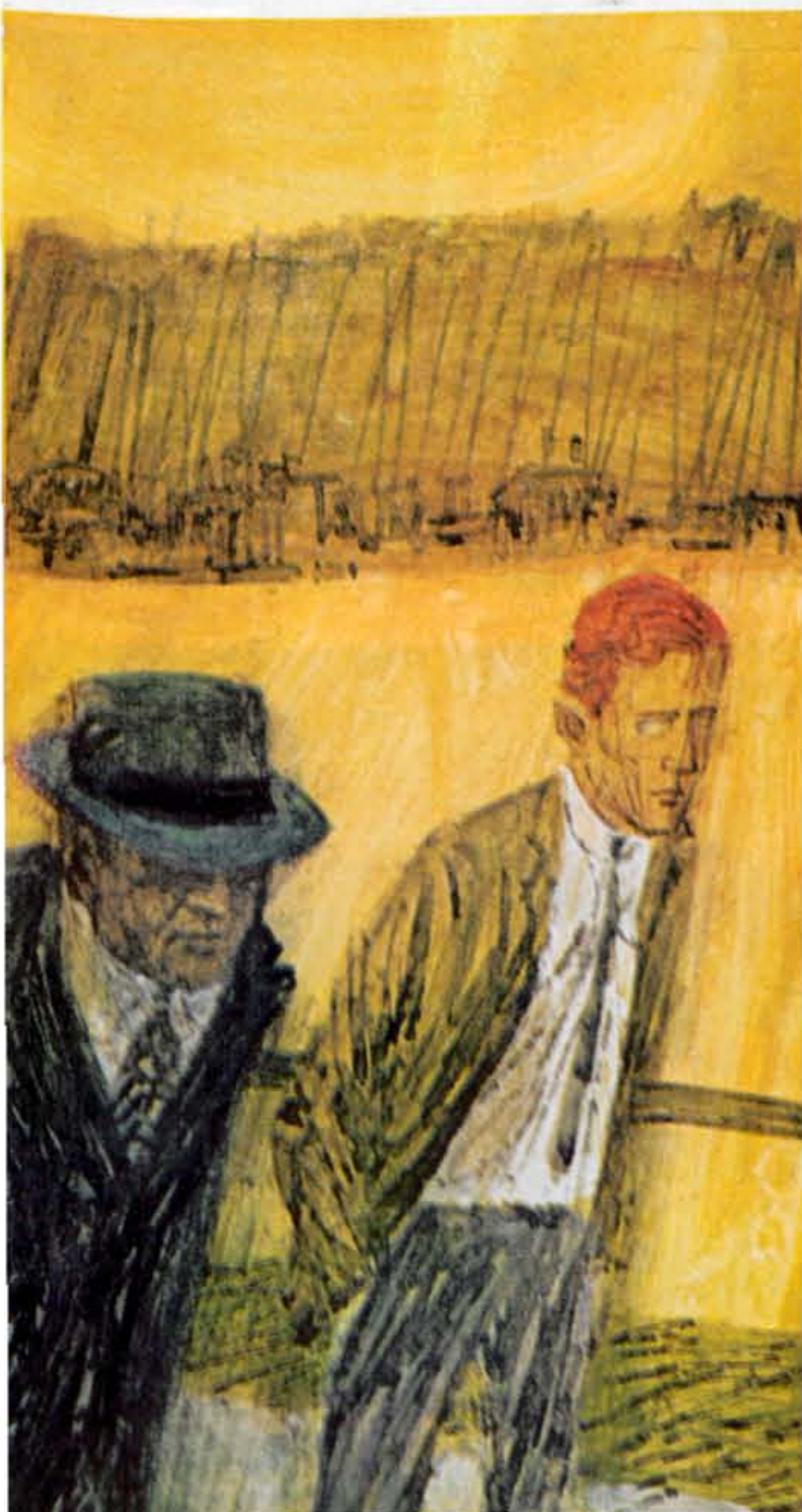
"Treasure."

"That's it."

"A miracle," Oskar murmured.

I said if he had done that he could do the rest.

We went for a bus ride up Fifth Avenue and then walked for a while around Central Park Lake. He had put on his German hat, with its hatband bow at the back, a broad-lapeled wool suit, a necktie twice as wide as the one I was wearing, and walked with a small-footed waddle.



By Bernard Malamud

Illustrated by David Stone

The night wasn't bad; it had got a bit cooler. There were a few large stars in the sky and they made me sad.

"Do you think I will succeed?"

"Why not?" I asked.

Later he bought me a bottle of beer.

To many of these people, articulate as they were, the great loss was the loss of language—that they could no longer say what was in them to say. They could, of course, manage to communicate, but just to communicate was frustrating. As Karl Otto Alp, the ex-film star who became a buyer for Macy's, put it years later, "I felt like a child, or worse, often like a moron. I am left with myself unexpressed. What I knew, indeed, what I am, becomes to me a burden. My tongue hangs useless." The same with Oskar it figures. There was a terrible sense of useless tongue, and I think the reason for his trouble with his other tutors was that to keep from drowning in things unsaid he wanted to swallow the ocean in a gulp: Today he would learn English and tomorrow wow them with an impeccable Fourth of July speech, followed by a successful lecture at the Institute for Public Studies.

We performed our lessons slowly, step by step, everything in its place. After Oskar moved to a two-room apartment in a house on West Eighty-fifth Street, near the Drive, we met three times a week at four-thirty, worked an hour and a half; then, since it was too hot to cook, had supper at the Seventy-second Street automat and conversed on my time. The lessons we divided into three parts: diction exercises and reading aloud, then grammar, because Oskar felt the necessity of it, and composition correction; with conversation, as I said, thrown in at supper. So far as I could see, he was coming along. None of these exercises was giving him as much trouble as they apparently had in the past. He seemed to be learning and his mood lightened. There were moments of elation as he heard his accent flying off. For instance, when "sink" became "think." He stopped calling himself "hopeless."

Neither of us said much about the lecture he had to give early in October, and I kept my fingers crossed. It was somehow to come out of what we were doing daily, I think I felt, but exactly *how*, I had no idea; and to tell the truth, although I didn't say so to Oskar, the lecture frightened me. That and the ten more to follow during the fall term. Later when I learned that he had been attempting, with the help of the dictionary, to write in English, and had produced "a complete disaster," I suggested maybe he ought to stick to German and we could afterward both try to put it into passable English. I was cheating when I said that, because my German is meager. Anyway the idea was to get Oskar into production and worry about translating later. He sweated, from enervating morning to exhausted night, but no matter what language he tried, though he had been a professional writer for

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most of his life and knew his subject cold, the lecture refused to move past page one.

It was a sticky, hot July and the heat didn't help at all.

I had met Oskar at the end of June, and by the seventeenth of July we were no longer doing lessons. They had foundered on the "impossible" lecture. He had worked on it each day in frenzy and growing despair. After writing more than

a hundred opening pages, he furiously flung his pen against the wall, shouting he could no longer write in that filthy tongue. He cursed the German language. He hated the damned country and the damned people. After that, what was bad became worse. When he gave up attempting to write the lecture, he stopped making progress in English. He seemed to forget what he already knew. His tongue thickened and the accent returned in all its fruitiness. The little he had to say was in handcuffed and tortured English. The

only German I heard him speak was in a whisper to himself. I doubt he knew he was talking it. That ended our formal work together, though I did drop in every other day or so to sit with him. For hours he sat motionless in a large green velours armchair, hot enough to broil in, and through the tall windows stared at the colorless sky above Eighty-fifth Street, with a wet depressed eye.

Then once he said to me, "If I do not this lecture prepare, I will take my life." "Let's begin again, Oskar," I said.

"You dictate and I'll write. The ideas count, not the spelling."

He didn't answer so I stopped talking. He had plunged into an involved melancholy. We sat for hours, often in profound silence. This was alarming to me, though I had already had some experience with such depression. Wolfgang Novak, the economist, though English came more easily to him, was another. His problems arose mainly, I think, from physical illness. And he felt a greater sense of the lost country than Oskar. Sometimes in the early evening I persuaded Oskar to come with me for a short walk on the Drive. The tail end of sunsets over the Palisades seemed to appeal to him. At least he looked. He would put on full regalia—hat, suit coat, tie, no matter how hot—and we went slowly down the stairs, I wondering whether he would ever make it to the bottom. He seemed to me always suspended between two floors.

We walked slowly uptown, stopping to sit on a bench and watch night rise above the Hudson. When we returned to his room, if I sensed he had loosened up a bit, we listened to music on the radio; but if I tried to sneak in a news broadcast, he said to me, "Please I can not more stand of world misery." I shut off the radio. He was right, it was a time of no good news. I squeezed my brain. What could I tell him? Was it good news to be alive? Who could argue the point? Sometimes I read aloud to him—I remember he liked the first part of *Life on the Mississippi*. We still went to the Automat once or twice a week; he perhaps out of habit, because he didn't feel like going anywhere, and I to get him out of his room. Oskar ate little, he toyed with a spoon. His dull eyes looked as though they had been squirted with a dark dye.

Once after a momentary cooling rain-storm we sat on newspapers on a wet bench overlooking the river, and Oskar at last began to talk. In tormented English he conveyed his intense and everlasting hatred of the Nazis for destroying his career, uprooting his life after half a century and flinging him like a piece of bleeding meat to hawks. He cursed them thickly, the German nation, as an inhuman, conscienceless, merciless people. "They are pigs masquerading as peacocks," he said. "I feel certain that my wife, in her heart, was a Jew hater." It was a terrible bitterness, an eloquence almost without vocabulary. He became silent again. I hoped to hear more about his wife but decided not to ask.

Afterwards, in the dark Oskar confessed that he had attempted suicide during his first week in America. He was living, at the end of May, in a small hotel, and had filled himself with barbiturates one night, but his phone had fallen off the table and the hotel operator had sent up the elevator boy, who found him unconscious and called the police. He was revived in the hospital.

"I did not mean to do it," he said. "It was a mistake."

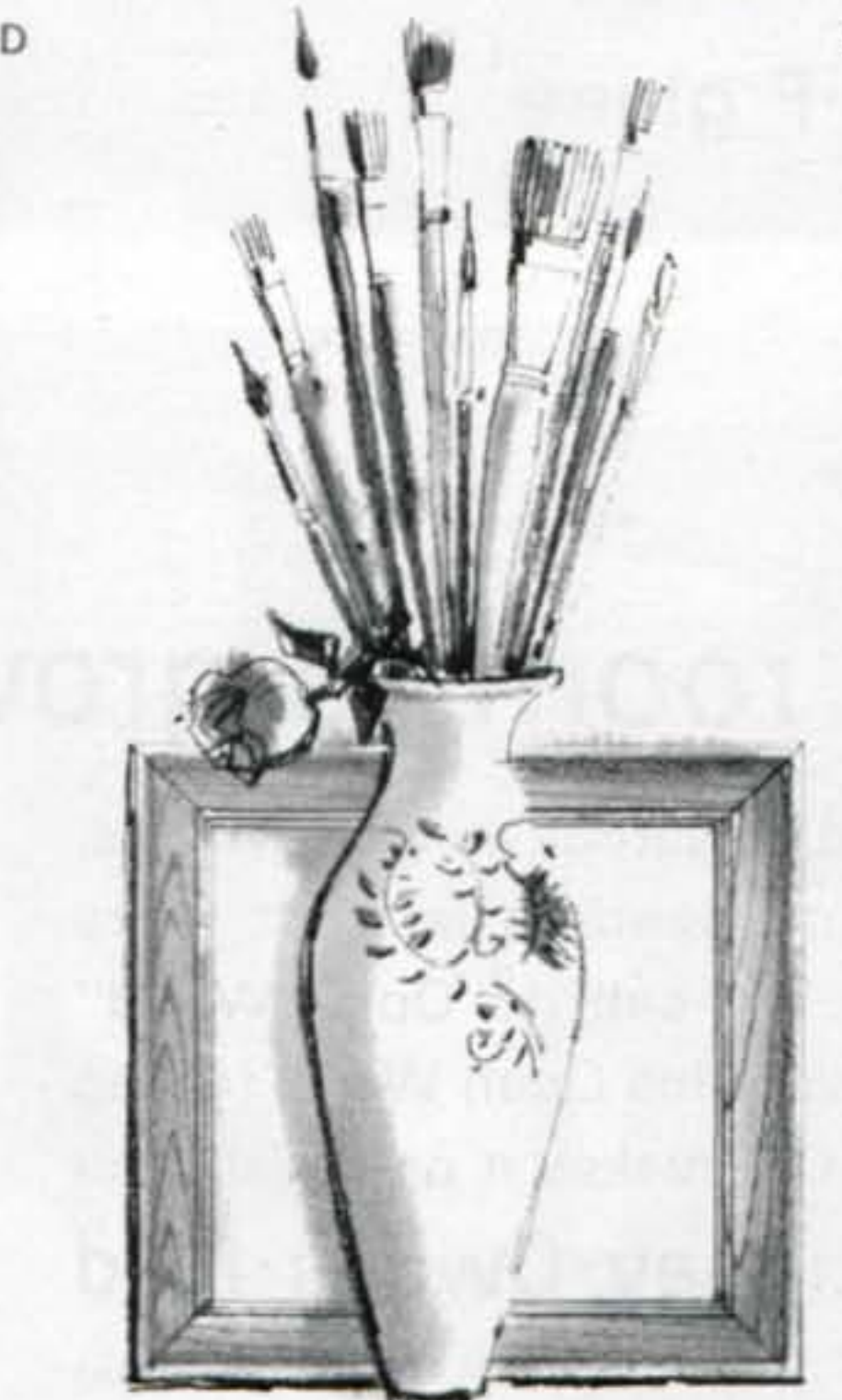
"Don't ever think of it again," I said. "It's total defeat."

"I don't," he said wearily, "because it is so arduous to come back to life."

"Please, for any reason whatever."

Later, when we were walking, he surprised me by saying, "Maybe we ought to try now the lecture onze more."

We trudged back to the house and he sat at his hot desk, I trying to read as he slowly began to reconstruct the first page of his lecture. He wrote, of course, in German.



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He got nowhere. We were back to nothing, to sitting in silence in the heat. Sometimes after a few minutes I had to take off before his mood overcame mine. One afternoon I came unwillingly up the stairs—there were times I felt momentary surges of irritation with him—and was frightened to find Oskar's door ajar. When I knocked, no one answered. As I stood there, chilled down the spine, I realized I was thinking about the possibility of his attempting suicide again. "Oskar?" I went into the apartment, looked into both rooms and the bathroom, but he wasn't there. I thought he might have drifted out to get something from a store, and took the opportunity to look quickly around. There was nothing startling in the medicine chest, no pills but aspirin, no iodine. Thinking, for some reason, of a gun, I searched his desk drawer. In it I found a thin-paper airmail letter from Germany. Even if I had wanted to, I couldn't have read the handwriting, but as I held the thin paper in my hand I did make out one sentence: "*Ich bin dir siebenundzwanzig Jahre treu gewesen.*" Twenty-seven years is a long time, I thought. There was no gun in the drawer. I shut it and stopped looking. It had occurred to me that if you want to kill yourself, all you need is a straight pin. When Oskar returned he said he had been sitting in the public library, unable to read.

Now we are once more enacting the changeless scene, curtain rising on two speechless characters in a furnished apartment, I in a straight-back chair, Oskar in the velours armchair that smothered rather than supported him, his flesh gray, the big gray face, unfocused, sagging. I reached over to switch on the radio, but he looked at me in a way that begged no. I then got up to leave, but Oskar, clearing his throat, thickly asked me to stay. I stayed, thinking, was there more to this than I could see into? His problems, God knows, were real enough, but could there be something more than a refugee's displacement, alienation, financial insecurity, being in a strange land without friends or a speakable tongue? My speculation was the old one: Not all drown in this ocean, why does he? After a while I shaped the thought and asked him was

there something below the surface, invisible? I was full of this thing from college, and wondered if there mightn't be some unknown quantity in his depression that a psychiatrist maybe might help him with, enough to get him started on his lecture.

He meditated on this, and after a few minutes haltingly said he had been psychoanalyzed in Vienna as a young man. "Just the usual *drek*," he said, "fears and fantazies that afterwards no longer bothered me."

"They don't now?"

"Not."

"You've written many articles and lectures before," I said. "What I can't understand, though I know how hard the situation is, is why you can never get past page one."

He half lifted his hand. "It is a paralyzsis of my will. The whole legture is clear in my mind, but the minute I write down a single word—or in English or in German—I have a terrible fear I will not be able to write the negst. As though someone has thrown a stone at a window and the whole house—the whole idea—zsmashes. This repeats until I am dezperate."

He said the fear grew as he worked that he would die before he completed the lecture, or if not that, that he would write it so disgracefully he would wish for death. The fear immobilized him.

"I have lozt faith. I do not—not longer possezz my former value of myself. In my life there has been too much illusion."

I tried to believe what I was saying: "Have confidence, the feeling will pass."

"Confidenze I have not. For this, and alzo whatever elze I have lozt, I thank the Nazis."

It was by then mid-August and things were growing steadily worse wherever one looked. The Poles were mobilizing for war. Oskar hardly moved. I was full of worries though I pretended calm weather.

He sat in his massive armchair with sick eyes, breathing like a wounded animal.

"Who can write about Walt Whitman in such terrible times?"

"Why don't you change the subject?"

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"It makes no difference what is the subject. It is all *uzelezz*."

I came every day to see him, neglecting my other students and therefore my livelihood. I had a panicky feeling that if things went on as they were going, they would end in Oskar's suicide; and I felt a frenzied desire to prevent that. What's more, I was sometimes afraid I was myself becoming melancholy, a new talent, call it, of taking less pleasure in my little pleasures. And the heat continued, oppressive, relentless. We thought of escape into the country, but neither of us had the money. One day I bought Oskar a secondhand fan—wondering why we hadn't thought of that before—and he sat in the breeze for hours each day until after a week, shortly after the Soviet-Nazi non-aggression pact was signed, the motor gave out. He could not sleep at night and sat at his desk with a wet towel on his head, still attempting to write his lecture. He wrote reams on a treadmill; it came out nothing. When he did sleep, out of exhaustion, he had fantastic frightening dreams of the Nazis inflicting tortures on him, sometimes forcing him to look upon the corpses of those they had slain. In one dream he told me about, he had gone back to Germany to visit his wife. She wasn't home and he had been directed to a cemetery. There, though the tombstone read another name, her blood seeped out of the earth above her shallow grave. He groaned at the memory of the dream.

Afterwards, he told me something about her. They had met as students, lived together, and were married at twenty-three. It wasn't a very happy marriage. She had turned into a sickly woman, physically unable to have children. "Something was wrong with her interior structure."

Though I asked no questions, Oskar said, "I offered her to come with me here but she refused this."

"For what reason?"

"She did not think I wished her to come."

"Did you?" I asked.

"Not," he said.

He explained he had lived with her for almost twenty-seven years under difficult circumstances. She had been ambivalent about their Jewish friends and his relatives, though outwardly she seemed not a prejudiced person. But her mother was always a violent anti-Semite.

"I have nothing to blame myself," Oskar said.

He took to his bed. I took to the New York Public Library. I read some of the German poets he was trying to write about, in English translation. Then I read *Leaves of Grass* and wrote down what I thought one or two of them had got from Whitman. One day toward the end of August I brought Oskar what I had written. It was in good part guessing, but my idea wasn't to write the lecture for him. He lay on his back, motionless, and listened utterly sadly to what I had written. Then he said, no, it wasn't the love of death they had got from Whitman—that ran through German poetry—but it was most of all his feeling for *Brudermensch*, his humanity.

"But this does not grow long on German earth," he said, "and is soon destroyed."

I said I was sorry I had got it wrong but he thanked me anyway.

I left defeated, and as I was going down the stairs, heard someone sobbing. I will quit this, I thought. It has gotten to be too much for me. I can't drown with him.

I stayed home the next day, tasting a new kind of private misery too old for somebody my age, but that same night Oskar called me on the phone, blessing me wildly for having read those notes to him. He had got up to write me a letter to say what I had missed, and it ended by his having written half the lecture. He had slept all day and tonight intended to finish it up.

"I thank you," he said, "for much, also including your faith in me."

"Thank God," I said, not telling him I had just about lost it.

Oskar completed his lecture—wrote and rewrote it—during the first week in September. The Nazis had invaded Poland, and though we were greatly troubled, there was some sense of release; maybe the brave Poles would beat them. It took another week to translate the lecture, but here we had the assistance of Friedrich Wilhelm Wolff, the historian, a gentle, erudite man, who liked translating and promised his help with future lectures. We then had about two weeks to work on Oskar's delivery. The weather had changed, and so, slowly, had he. He had awakened from defeat, battered, after a wearying battle. He had lost close to twenty pounds. His complexion was still gray; when I looked at his face I expected to see scars, but it had lost its flabby unfocused quality. His blue eyes had

returned to life and he walked with quick steps, as though to pick up a few for all the steps he hadn't taken during those long, hot days he had lain torpid in his room.

We went back to our former routine, meeting three late afternoons a week for diction, grammar and the other exercises. I taught him the phonetic alphabet and transcribed long lists of words he was mispronouncing. He worked many hours trying to fit each sound into place, holding half a matchstick between his teeth to keep his jaws apart as he exercised his tongue. All this can be a dreadfully boring business unless you think you have a future. Looking at him I realized what's meant when somebody is called "another man."

The lecture, which I now knew by heart, went off well. The director of the institute had invited a number of prominent people. Oskar was the first refugee they had employed, and there was a move to make the public cognizant of what was then a new ingredient in American life. Two reporters had come with a lady photographer. The auditorium was crowded. I sat in the last row, promising to put up my hand if he couldn't be heard, but it wasn't necessary. Oskar, in a blue suit, his hair cut, was of course nervous, but you couldn't see it unless you studied him. When he stepped up to the lectern, spread out his manuscript and spoke his first English sentence in public, my heart hesitated; only he and I, of all the people there, had any idea of the anguish he had been through. His enunciation wasn't at all bad—a few *s*'s for *th*'s, and he once said "bag" for "back," but otherwise he did all right. He read poetry well—in both languages—and though Walt Whitman, in his mouth, sounded a little as though he had come to the shores of Long Island as a German immigrant, still the poetry read as poetry:

*And I know that the spirit of God is the
brother of my own,
And that all the men ever born are also
my brothers, and the women my sisters
and lovers,
And that a kelson of creation is love...*

Oskar read it as though he believed it. Warsaw had fallen but the verses were

somehow protective. I sat back, conscious of two things: how easy it is to hide the deepest wounds; and the pride I felt in the job I had done.

Two days later I came up the stairs into Oskar's apartment to find a crowd there. The refugee, his face beet red, lips bluish, a trace of froth in the corners of his mouth, lay on the floor in his limp pajamas, two firemen on their knees, working over him with an inhalator. The windows were open and the air stank of gas.

A policeman asked me who I was and I could only answer, "No, oh no."

I said no, but it was unchangeably yes. He had taken his life—gas—I hadn't even thought of the stove in the kitchen.

"Why?" I asked myself. "Why did he do it?" Maybe it was the fate of Poland on top of everything else, but the only answer anyone could come up with was Oskar's scribbled note that he was not well, and that he left Martin Goldberg all his possessions. I am Martin Goldberg.

I was sick for a week, had no desire either to inherit or investigate, but I thought I ought to look through his things before the court impounded them, so I spent a morning sitting in the depths of Oskar's velours armchair, trying to read his correspondence. I had found in the top drawer of his desk a thin packet of letters from his wife and an airmail letter of recent date from his anti-Semitic mother-in-law.

She writes, in a tight script it takes me hours to decipher, that her daughter, after Oskar abandons her, against her own mother's fervent pleas and anguish, is converted to Judaism by a vengeful rabbi. One night the Brown Shirts appear, and though the mother wildly waves her bronze crucifix in their faces, they drag Frau Gassner, together with the other Jews, out of the apartment house, and transport them in lorries to a small border town in conquered Poland. There, it is rumored, she is shot in the head and topples into an open tank ditch, with the naked Jewish men, their wives and children, some Polish soldiers and a handful of Gypsies.

THE END