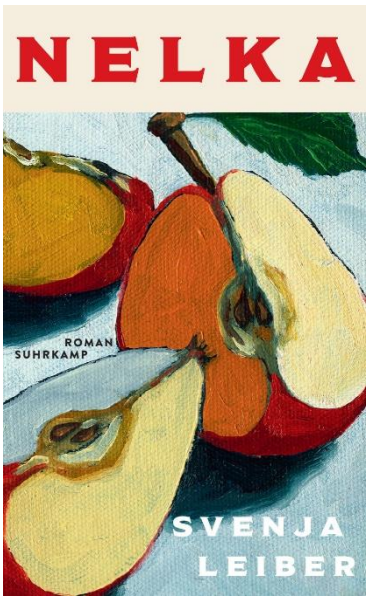

Svenja Leiber

Nelka

A Novel

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You will not remember me. You would not recognise my face if we ran onto each other on the street. But I certainly remember your face. I can still see every detail of it. I've forgotten nothing.

Marten places the letter on the table as if it were fragile. Or poisonous. He leans back and stares at the wall in front of him for a long time. He does indeed try to find the face in his head. It's not like he never once thought of her again, but when he did, it was in an effort to try not to think about her. And for years, he had been successful.

At some point, he stands up, walks over to one of the two windows that face the north, with a view of the orchard, which now, in the morning light of early October, is glowing in shades of red and yellow: Cox, Boskoop, Elstar – in his words: the harvest. Right up the front, where the meadow – pale with hoarfrost – begins in a swale, next to the administrator's house, stands an old tree, much too tall for the orchard, whose crown is half broken. Its deep-red fruits appear to be glowing.

"Pomme de Coeur," says Marten quietly. « Pomme de Cœur, » and it sounds as if he can't decide between a tone of veneration and one of disdain. Indecisive, he turns away, walks back over to the table, bends forward as if he wanted to read the letter again, or maybe even

sniff at it. He has to prop himself up on the tabletop. He closes his eyes, and now he does see her. His gaze wanders in his memory over her fingers, blue with cold, and up her arm, over the coarse fabric of her jacket and up to the collar, from which that neck stretched, taut, like the face above it, surprised, probably more terrified. This woman, hardly more than a girl – in the entrance hall, just as she had gone to take something that didn't belong to her, one of the apples that had been lying in front of the mirror.

"A beautiful apple," she had said quietly and, to Marten's surprise, in German. "The flesh is white. And beneath the peel it is reddish. But it's no blood apple…" She looked at him as she spoke. She had probably scarcely been able to make out his face, because he was standing with his back to the window. She had blinked as if she were being interrogated. But Marten was so taken aback by what she was reciting and how she was doing it, that he just stood there staring at her. She went on: "It ripens in October and keeps for a long time …"

At this point, Marten interrupted her, he remembers with awful precision. He had cut her off, but with his hand. He had grabbed her face and held onto it. It surprised him too. He hadn't known he would do that. He wanted to know why she was telling him this, and she had waited until he let her go, and then said quietly that it was valuable.

"For whom?"

She didn't respond to that, almost as if she didn't know. And he threw her out, even though he had just ordered her to come and see him. She walked out into the cold, her head bowed, and Marten snatched at one of those apples and hurled it against the door so hard that it exploded.

The image blurs. Maybe it had been completely different. It almost certainly had been different. Marten sits up, walks around the table, leaves the silent dining room, this site of failure, goes into the entrance hall, looks around there, looks at the old furniture, the coat rack, the dirty mirror, looks at himself in it. He's been living here alone for years. The windows of the house haven't been opened for just as long, but there are drafts coming from all quarters, a

ceaseless humming. Maybe the droning is just in his head, which has gone soft from the eternal wind of the plains or from something else entirely.

Marten opens the door and leaves the house. He walks across the forecourt and driveway of the former estate down to the little lake on the other side, a mill pond built a hundred years ago that stopped powering a mill a long time ago and is now just turning into a swamp. He stops right by the water. He's not afraid, he tells himself. Should he be? Afraid of her? After all this time? Or maybe because of it. Time heals all wounds. Even if scars remain. On the skin, the bark, the land. And at the end of the day – Marten stares into the water. But the fact that he has received this kind of letter now, after all the others. He realises how cold it is, he might have been freezing for a long time already. With a shiver, he turns his gaze away from the black bottom of the pond and back to the house, and suddenly, it's as if he were seeing it from the outside for the very first time, this big brick building, the middle section with the entrance set back, protected from the wind, as dark as the entrance to a fox's den. The house doesn't have the typical shape of the houses in the area, which stand in the barren landscape like hulking halls, livestock and harvest under one roof, inside, the dark threshing floors and hidden courtyards, so that as little as possible needs to be thrown away during the drafty, wet halves of the years. This house stretches out wide, puffing its chest out. But it's also not sitting on the plains, but in a depression. Only the white and green painted window frames are like everywhere else. But from here, the clouded panes seem to offer no view to Marten, as if they were still covered with blackout paper from the war. It glares at him dully. And yet, it's a respectable house, he thinks. Not to mention the orchard. He has nothing to be ashamed of. Didn't back then, and he certainly doesn't today. With this thought, he sat up as straight as possible. He's got nothing to be ashamed of. He walks back around the house to the orchard and between the rows of the stocky apple trees. He's not afraid. If anything, he's awake, alert. He walks down past the entire row of Elstars and back up between two rows of Boskoops. The air is full of a sweet scent, of autumn and mildew. Marten has his sights on just one tree, the

broken one down in the swale. That one is as old as all this business, he thinks. In that sense, it doesn't belong to the orchard, but to his life, growing there like a harbinger of fate, of his fate. And he walks down onto the grass, bends down a few times and picks up apples that he takes back into the house with him. He places them on the table in the kitchen, says once more, this time matter-of-factly: "Pomme de Coeur". He sits down, pulls a gardener's knife from his pocket, opens it carefully, and slowly cuts one of the apples in two. For a while, he inspects the halved core, the neat star, then he bites into one of the halves, closes his eyes, as if he were mentally investigating the taste, stands up with a sudden jolt, rushes to the sink, and spits out the piece he had bitten off.

Only once he has drunk a glass of water and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand does he calm down and take a seat at the table, waiting for the nausea to pass.

These letters have been arriving around these parts for a year or two now. Blowing late into the autumn of these people's lives, nobody had expected them at this point. Every so often, someone would receive friendly mail, brimming with a peculiar gratitude. But when Marten heard about those ones, at the pub or after a town meeting, they were the ones that secretly confused him the most. He found them more unsettling than threats and demands. And now it's his turn. He is overcome by something dark and dull, creeping up somewhere on the horizon of his memory, intangible, with no contours.

Marten walks over to the telephone in the entrance hall, dials the number slowly but without hesitating, and calls his housekeeper.

"I need you to come over today, Gonda. I've got some errands." He can hardly repress his harshness. "Please", he tacks on. Then he hangs up.

He hasn't opened lots of the doors in the house for years. Hasn't even set foot on the upper floor since his wife passed. Maybe even before then. With something akin to amazement, he walks

through the hallways and calls it to mind, everything that would need to be explained to someone who didn't know the house: the top floor has five rooms, the same as the ground floor, a big old administrator's house, with its smell of leather, cold ash, and dogs, with its empty storerooms, with its pantries and pass-throughs, its fireplace, its entrance hall, the walls packed with antlers, trophies of past hunts with guests of the estate – this estate that has sunk like the time it came from, or drowned in it. Its reputation couldn't be salvaged. It was dismantled, bit by bit, as if people wanted to dismantle something entirely different, eviscerate it, erase it. Then the parts were sold off. There is no productive estate anymore. He, Marten, had managed to gild the hectares he'd been left with, got the orchard more productive than ever. But the castle has remained uninhabited to this day. Too big, too tainted, too ugly. The administrator's house had always been the more homely building, even though it is too big for a single family as well, not to mention a single person.

When Gonda finally arrives, Marten puts on his old work jacket, leaves the house again, gets the lawnmower from the side shed, and mows the wilting grass, mows it all down, now almost in a rage, furious at the eternal growth of all that is wrong, while inside, the housekeeper scrubs, flings open windows to let some air in, grabs the fresh sheets from the cupboards, makes beds, and finally heads off to do the groceries, as if she were expecting an international delegation of pomologists.

And yet, it is just a single woman that is coming. In three days. She has obviously planned the short notice with forethought. Perhaps she was worried he might disappear before she arrived, or even pass away. It's possible. She can't even be sure that he still exists. Or she wanted to catch him by surprise. Or – no, he dismissed that thought at once. Whatever. In any case, everything should be in good shape, him too, tip top and battle ready. He makes an appointment with the hairdresser and asks the housekeeper to drive him there. He avoids driving alone. He doesn't see so well anymore, especially in the twilight.

Two days later, Marten looks at himself in the glaringly lit mirror before he gets a cut and a shave. He is seventy-seven. The woman must be around sixty-six, maybe a little younger or older. I'm sure she'll look older, he thinks. She'll have a tough life of work behind her. Those people have always been working folk. Marten turns his head slightly and inspects a brownish mark on his neck. He remembers pictures, pictures of this woman and him in a different mirror. He feels the hands of the hairdresser on his head. She blow-dried his hair much too loudly and is now running the comb and her fingers through his white hair and brushing it the way she always does. His hair has grown accustomed to this part and so has Marten. But how it felt to be touched, that he had forgotten. Thank god, he thinks, because the feel of the hairdresser's fingers on his scalp is much too personal for him. He has no need for these kinds of touch. For a moment, he is tempted to swat away these fiddling fingers. But then the young woman smiles at him in the mirror, and Marten grits his teeth and waits mutely for the whole affair to come to an end.

Back in the administrator's house, he stops for a moment in the entrance hall. It might be a good idea to pick up a reasonably priced lamp tomorrow. Then his head twitches and he walks into his office, he pulls something from the breast pocket of his jacket und sticks it in a broad envelope, which he immediately seals. He then climbs up the stairs and inspects Gonda's handiwork. He sits himself down on an armchair in the corner of the back room. It is a room that was added on later, instead of a making some rooms in the attic, and it's the only room he has clear associations with. And yet he has lived in the house for fifty years, his son and daughter grew up here, his wife died here, and he has no associations with any of it. But this room seems to be imbued with something. Marten blinks. He feels as if he were not alone. It is still cool in the room, the autumn weather and all these years have made everything damp and clammy. There is a muffled smell hanging in the air that Marten finds repulsive. He doubts that this woman will spend the night in his house, that would be absurd. But it is almost impossible to

get back into town at night from out here. She will have to stay, surely she would be aware of that. With this thought in his mind, he stands up, walks down to the kitchen, and grabs the rest of the apples he had brought in. He takes them into the living room and places them next to one another on the ledge of the fireplace, doesn't even think about how this looks, doesn't feel how exhausted he is, and when he does sense it, he keeps the last apple in his hand, props himself up with his other hand on the ledge, holds the fruit in front of his face and closes his eyes: and there it is again, it comes at him like a wave, washing over him, frothing, awful. He feels a rumbling desire, doesn't notice how his jaw is working, as if his body were resisting these feelings, as if he knew the truth he had been repressing for years, so much so that a resolution seems impossible and his muscles cramp from the tension. It is also not a direct desire of the body but more of a bodiless, almost undead desire for something unnameable. Something that was erased from all stories and which had indeed faded with time. This empty space, which seems to have closed at some point, is now ripping open. Like a cheap seam. Beneath it, the flesh of history becomes visible, raw and tender. It comes to the surface. The flesh returns to him.

[…]

Where to begin? With the masters or the slaves? With the stories that have been told or those that have been forgotten? Where to begin? With the anguish or the solace?

It has to be about everything, and it has to begin right at the start, and the beginning took place many years ago in the poor crown land of Galicia, in the city of Lemberg, which at the time was the Polish city of Lwów, where a man by the name of Wendelin Lechner lived, who was no Pole, but who was a pomologist of some standing. Or at least, he was well-known among the local peasants and farmers who knew anything about apples, that so familiar and yet peculiar of fruits, a relative of strawberries and roses, which supposedly grew in paradise, right in the

middle of it, in fact, but which also destroyed paradise and taught people to feel shame, whatever shame is, and whatever paradise might have been, an idea, or maybe ideology.

Wendelin Lechner – until a few years ago an orchardist and travelling agricultural educator in the service of the Austro-Hungarian Empire who inspected, pruned, and documented the public apple trees along the roads of the city and the private apple trees in its gardens and orchards, and who after the fall of the monarchy and the temporary Russification of the city was now an advisor for pomiculture at the botanical institute of the university of Lemberg or Lwów – certainly lived in the heyday of ideology. And Lemberg was situated, like an apple of discord, in a region that all sides snatched at: be it the Tsar, the Polish Republic, the Ukrainians, later the first secretary general, and finally, the fascists.

Wendelin Lechner lived between violent powers. And one day, on his way home from the institute, it was 11 June 1924, he caught a glimpse of Jeva Silber, who at that moment was walking out of a bookstore that stocked books in various languages. For the streets of Lemberg were full of twittering and bickering in at least Polish, Russian, Ruthenian, German, and Yiddish, like in a densely inhabited garden hedge, and Jeva mastered every one of these languages. And so she also understood Wendelin's offhandedly muttered remark, which had slipped over his lips at the sight of her, almost by accident, to the effect of: a June evening as beautiful as this would be lost to the world if a person were to spend it alone. And so they spent it together, close together, as close as two bodies can get. They made love in the dark behind a monument in the park, and over the following days, they made love several times in a back room at the institute, between shelves and crates, or in the hissing rain in the fields on the outskirts of the city. They married while Jeva's belly could still fit into a dress and moved into an apartment on Kopernikusstrasse, or Ulica Kopernika, a two-room flat on the top floor of a building of the kind that was then common in Lemberg: yellow paint, two or three storeys above the ground floor, which in this case was home to a watch shop. There they lived, soon the three of them, and like most, they were neither poor nor rich, and lived no better than most, but also

no worse. They lived a simple life in this Lemberg, where some streets were lit and others weren't, with its electric trams and its horse-drawn carts, its loud laughter and its quiet rumours, its overheated attics and damp cellars, its blinding reflections and dimly lit bookstores, its bureaus and brothels, jewellers and bakeries, its elementary schools and its university, its soup kitchens and cafés, it dairies and restaurants, its various prayer halls, churches, and theatres, its tobacconists and printeries, its postmen, screw sellers, dentists, and milliners, in that Lemberg that a famous writer once called a *vibrant patch of earth*, and Wendelin Lechner, perhaps referencing the yellow façades or out of idiosyncratic love, called a *Golden Pepping*, the finest of all the apples.

In summer, they drove south-west along the extension of Kopernikusstrasse, the park and the Sobków Pond to their right, leaving the end of the tramline and their maintenance sheds behind them, heading out of the city, where Wendelin had an orchard. While it was still warm enough, they set up camp there in a simple wooden house, tended to the trees by day and entertained friends in the evening.

They raised Nelka loosely in their respective faiths and their respective languages, though Polish was the main language and their faith was just old habit. But when they discussed politics, Jeva spoke Russian, and when the topic was apples, Wendelin spoke German, and so Nelka learned the descriptions of the systems and the descriptions of the fruits, but she herself rarely spoke. She just whispered greetings to the *Komische Grethes*, the *Reinettes*, the *Lord Grosvenors*, *Madame Favres*, and the *Ingrid Maries* in the treetops above her as she strolled through the garden, swam in the pond behind the back fence, as quietly as she could so as not to disturb the frogs, and slept at night in the bottom shelf of the wardrobe, until she got so big that her legs and arms dangled out. The world around her grew and expired, nature put things together and broke them apart again, Nelka picked fruit and planted seeds, believed everything she saw, creation in spring, exhaustion in autumn, and in-between, in summer and winter, two

kinds of sleep, one in warmth, one in the cold, and the only thing that surprised her was that she went from one to the other as if she were a thread – without breaking.

In winter, when the Reinettes and Kartäusers and all the other apples lay on dried moss in the pitch-black cellar under the old wooden house, Nelka was sent into the city's reading rooms to listen to the rabbi, who told the children in a gloomy building in a back courtyard about the transforming and transformative light of the days of creation. It was cosy there, like under a dark hat, different to the blustering garden. She saw the aged face of the rabbi, who had no teeth left, who stooped low over his book and could speak so beautifully without his teeth, and it looked to her as if the book were casting its light on the rabbi, whose beard seemed to flow from his chin onto the table like the stream of his words.

Sometimes, her mother would take Nelka along to the market in the Armenian quarter, where the insides of the churches and the outsides of the houses were painted with stories that Nelka would get Jeva to tell her at night. Stories of animals and flowers and saints. And one night, as Jeva was about to turn off the light, she whispered that she had never seen a picture showing the teeth of a saint, and that the rabbi had none either. Jeva paused for a moment, looked at her daughter with bemusement, and then said maybe that's what people are supposed to learn: not to bite in a world full of teeth. And with that, she stroked Nelka's hair, smiled at her again, and turned off the light.

On some days, Nelka was woken by the smell of the bread that Jeva would bake in the morning. The loaves laid out on a long piece of wood to cool down, covered with cloths that the flies would warm themselves up on. Right on the edge was a small loaf that Nelka was allowed to eat in the morning, while Jeva and Wendelin were working. Then Nelka would sit there and look after the flies, rolling them little balls of dough and watching as they prodded at them with their delicate proboscises, as if they were inquiring about something.

[…]

Nelka looks up at the ceiling and listens intently to the sounds coming from outside. In truth, she's hoping that Yasha will wake up and say a few tender words to her. But Yasha keeps on sleeping. It seems that lying awake and brooding is not in his nature. Not even questions of love can keep him awake now, despite the fact that these questions are lying three metres away from him on the blanket in an eery night in early August, and would very much like a comforting response, which might just be something like: tomorrow we'll go for a stroll along the Poltva. Nelka would take that in a heartbeat. They long ago agreed to say these kinds of sentences. For distraction. Because of course it is impossible to stroll along the Poltva, they know that. Everyone knows that. The river was covered over long ago. It only flows through the Lemberg underworld now. But this present doesn't allow for real promises. But you can promise that impossible things are still imaginable: a peaceful stroll together by a river, fingers hooked together as if by accident, or perhaps not even, just beside one another by the river, the glistening, flat water like a living skin above the ground, the duck they have been observing for weeks, as it puts on the plumage of a drake, the conversations that this observation sparks, conversations about existence, about duck existence and that of people and of lovers, that kind of thing. All of this could be contained in the sentence "Tomorrow we'll go for a stroll along the Poltva." But now, Yasha is sleeping, and it is finally quiet outside the window. The grey light of morning is already emerging. A pink glow above the roof of the building across the road, somewhere, a cock crows. Nelka stands up silently, walks over to Yasha's sofa and looks at his face for a while. Then she throws on a dress, puts on her cardigan, the one without the patch, cinches Yasha's belt around her waist, and leaves the apartment and then the building. It's easier to find some breakfast without a star. And maybe she's not supposed to have a star on her jacket, they don't know. The new decrees are too numerous and confusing and are constantly changing. Nelka just wants to go to her aunt's, who runs a bakery a few streets away,

and she only wants to ask for some old bread, because she knows full well that her aunt sticks to the rules about rations.

She is walking down Sykstuskagasse or Sixtusgasse or Ulica Sykstuska when a man in uniform steps toward her from a group of soldiers, all in grey, the fabric creased from the night.

“Ausweis!” he grunts, because the gruff tone provides him some relief or makes him feel awake.

Nelka stops still in front of him. Tries to stall. She doesn’t have her papers with her. Forgot them. She also calls her papers a different name, not so abrupt, *Ausweis*, as if she were being dismissed, but soft and dark like her mother, *Документи*. But she had understood the man perfectly well. So she stands there and looks him in the face and says this word, *dokumenti*, and makes her pitch go up at the end in a question. Tells him he could have called her over for other reasons, he could have invited her out for a coffee, for example. Other young men from Lemberg might even think of other ideas. So Nelka stands there, hoping things might take a helpful turn, and the soldier feels compelled to say something else: “From Lemberg?"

What a question. Where else? Evidently, he was so used to the chaos that his army had caused everywhere that for him, it was anything but obvious that a person might live in the place in which they currently happened to be, and that they could have done so for their entire life.

But Nelka heard only Lemberg. Lemberg, which her father would have like to call a Golden Pepping. So she carefully said in the German she had learned in the orchard: »Ja, mein Herr, from Lemberg …«, the rest she just thinks, the Golden Pepping, her father, his death.

The soldier stares at her as if he had heard her thoughts. Perhaps he had gleaned something else, something that is concealed in the voices of otherwise silent people.

This one speaks German, said one of his companions. We’re not supposed to bring those ones. But the first soldier has no interest in that. He wants to have her now. So he grabs Nelka by the arm: “Come”.

She tries to squirm out of his grasp, but he just squeezes tighter. The other one shrugs his shoulders. They take Nelka with them to a tall truck, on which other girls are sitting, pale and terrified. They sit Nelka down with them and she thinks to herself, I'll jump off at the first corner, but the truck sets off and drives much too fast. They race out of the city heading northwest, maybe towards Królewska.

On the bed of the truck, they sit still, frozen. Firstly, because they are sitting next to strange men, the soldier from Sykstuska is there too, right next to Nelka, not keeping any distance at all, and secondly, because none of them have any words to describe what is happening.

Nelka looks straight ahead at a girl of her age. She's wearing a light summer coat and flats. Her hair is pinned up, and you can see how feathery and soft it must feel. The girl is slight, looks like a child that her mother must have often fretted over. Nelka would rather be sitting next to the girl than the man, whose hidden hand she can feel through her cardigan. When the movement of the truck allows it, she leans as far away from him as possible, but in the next moment, the driver hits the gas and she is pushed back onto his hand. So she keeps looking into the girl's eyes, from which naked terror stares and a few tears flow. Somewhere in the back of her mind, Nelka thinks she can hear her father's voice. "Magic, Nelka." And so she holds that gaze tight. And suddenly, it's as if she and this girl are the only people on the truck, for a few moments, they forget who else is sitting there. It's just the two of them. It's a cool morning, but soon it will get warm. Nelka feels a tiny twitching at the corner of her mouth, once, and then again. And the girl's lips start to twitch as well, and she squeezes them shut straight away. It's strange, there is nothing remotely funny about this situation. But it's like that old game they used to play, all children know it: first one to laugh is the loser. They had both forgotten about it long ago, because they both stopped being children long ago. But some games are eternal. And so it happens that two girls or women from Lemberg or Lwów or Lviv, who have no idea what is going on around them, are unable to suppress a smile for a moment. The soldier pulls

his hand back for a second with a start, thinks it's about him, even turns red, he's not used to this kind of thing. Normally, everyone is afraid of him. But it's not courage that is being shown here. It's more of a bodily function, or not bodily at all, just something that flattered across their faces, the bright beating of a wing. But the most important thing is: those fingers have been beaten into retreat for a moment, and the fear sitting across from her has been forgotten for a second. And so has hers. This fear about all of this. About everything that is tearing apart the old world here like her mother used to tear old material that had become threadbare, in a single rip. The fear of it has faded, and the smile has disappeared too. They arrive at the train station in Królewska. A freight train is waiting there, which they are told to board without explanation. Now, they have to hold onto something, have to make sure they don't fall over, are not squeezed against the wall, that they can breathe, because there is an awful stench in the carriage, and it is indescribably loud.

*

It would seem that you can age years on just a single journey. Those who boarded the train in Królewska as young girls and had to stay in a transit camp for a few days in Krakow look like washed-out women as they alight the train and walk over to the disinfection centre not far from the capital of the Reich.

It's still August, midday. A warden is standing on top of a large, enamel pot.

While they line up, the women discuss the situation at a whisper. Nelka tries to listen in. She doesn't dare to just ask one of the others. Some are better informed, a small number have even been given a contract. Apparently, they are going to be sent to work in the Reich, in the north. If they work well, they are supposed to get to go home at the start of the winter. She can't find out any more than that.

Nelka waits behind the young woman from the truck. Margaryta is her name, and Nelka has since found out that, until recently, she was a saleswoman at the second watch shop on Kopernikusstrasse, a ways up the street. Though they had never met each other there, it is a circumstance that in these tattered times almost feels like a blood relationship, and so they haven't left each other's sides since they found out, and are standing next to each other now. Margaryta goes to whisper something to her, and doesn't realise that it's her turn. The warden with the ladle barks into the back of her neck that she'd better get moving, but Margaryta was somewhere entirely different and doesn't feel addressed by this language nor by the gruffness of its delivery. So the warden shoves her out of the line, slaps a dollop of porridge in Nelka's tin bowl and urges her to pick up the pace.

Nelka tugs Margaryta along with her. Together, they sit down on the grass and take turns spooning the food into their mouths. The warden peers over at them menacingly, so they spoon in silence. It gets even louder in their heads. They have no idea how things work with these people. It's as if everything they had learned they had learned for a completely different world.

Behind the warden is a squat barracks, beside it, acacias are growing, swaying their delicate leaves in the balmy air. It looks peaceful, and it would be nice to believe that it is, but then the next orders come, furious cries and unpleasant noises issuing from somewhere. Nelka, Margaryta, and the other women stand up, hand their bowls over without making a sound, and take cover in the shadow of the building.

There had been at least fifty women and a few whole families in each carriage. The engine had been pulling six carriages. Now it stands steaming at the end of the makeshift platform, as if it were waiting to continue its journey.

From the back of the shadow of the barracks, a figure peels off, almost saunters past the women towards Nelka and Margaryta. If she is afraid, she certainly isn't showing it. Her hair goes down to her chin, her gaze is full of scorn, she even spits on the ground. Like the workers on a construction site, thinks Nelka.

When the figure reaches them, it smiles from one side of its mouth. Her name is Schura. She had already introduced herself in the camp in Krakow with a soldierly hand against her temple. Margaryta had even blushed. They had lost sight of each other in the inconsiderate pushing and shoving on the platform. And now, Schura shows up again and just plonks herself down beside them.

"There you are", she says. "I thought I was going to have to do this trip all on my own." She motions behind her with her thumb. "Alone with all these moles."

Her thumb is referring to the Germans. They emerge from behind the building in black guards' uniforms and with numerous dogs. They shove the first group away from the barracks, including Nelka, Margaryta, and Schura, and lead them down the tracks for a bit and then to the left into a stone building with tiny windows. After the glaring sunlight outside they can barely see a thing. They are sent along a dark corridor into a whitewashed room with a naked lightbulb glowing on the ceiling. On the back wall, hooks are visible. They are supposed to line up there.

"Strip off!" yells one of them, a short man bouncing on his toes.

Nelka stares at him. That's not going to happen, her face says. She has never before been naked in front of men she didn't know. She stands in front of the guards and is unable to move, while the first women around her slowly begin to take off their clothes. She feels as if the porridge from earlier is starting to bubble in her stomach, as if she's about to vomit.

The man yells his command again. But Nelka still doesn't move.

Margaryta hasn't moved either and looks at Schura in disbelief, who has already hung her clothes on one of the hooks and turned around to face the guards, cool as you like, before stepping in front of Nelka, shielding her from their gaze. Her body is athletic, firm, tanned.

"If you two don't hurry up, they'll do it for you," she whispers over her shoulder.

Nelka slowly fiddles with the top button of her blouse. It's mid-Summer but her fingers are ice cold and stiff. She takes off her clothes as if they were made of lead. She languorously removes the fabric from her skin, uncovering it, doesn't have the strength to hang up her clothes,

instead dropping them on the floor in a pile beneath Schura's hook. She tries to cover herself up with one arm. She can't believe what she is doing here, what is happening. Then she hears Schura's whispering again. "Breathe," she whispers. "Just keep on breathing. They just want you gasping with panic."

Nelka breathes. In, out, in, out, and slowly she stands up straight. And when she lifts her eyes and sees the men, it almost seems to her as if they were the ones suddenly holding their breath. As if they themselves had frozen for a few seconds. And that's how it is. For they are looking at the angels of Botticelli, at the women of Cranach, and in Margaryta, the shimmering young girl of Petrus Christus, looking at the Madonnas of Europe and the brides of Chagall. In this moment, their eyes seem to have been welded shut by the sight. And they see none of it, are blind. Only a command from the short one causes them to fall back into line. To the fearful and enraged barking of their dogs, they recede into the group and send the women into a slippery room, where they hurl buckets of icy water towards the huddled-together bodies, and it hits them like a fist.

At the sight of the women, cowering with fear and cold, the guards break out in laughter. Then they grab some pumps and start to spray the bodies with some kind of powder. They act as if the bodies were carrying something disgusting and dangerous. They cover the bodies in a cloying powder and seem to forget what they're doing.

Covered in white and bewildered, the women stand herded together in the far corner of the room. Some are crying. Out of shame and fear and rage. Nelka leans against the cold wall, exhausted. It feels as if the musty stones are shivering, but she is the one who cannot suppress this trembling. She closes her eyes, as if that could take her out of the room. Her eyelids twitch. She sees her father, deep in the overgrown garden of their summer house, with a bucket of paint in his hand. He's smiling. She has to paint all the tree trunks white, he says calmly, so that the sun doesn't burn them, because their bark is delicate, like the skin of a child. And Nelka paints the little trunks and the lowest branches white, making it look as if the garden had been dunked

in milk, and her father looks and says she might have overdone it, sits down on the bench in front of the shack and starts to smoke. He looks at the whitened garden and places his arm around Nelka as she sits down next to him.

"White Summer Calville," he says quietly, "Calville blanche d'Été is a fairly large apple, somewhat flat in shape, with edges and ribs. When it is ripe, it has a whitish colour, its flesh is soft, but its flavour is not the finest."

The barking of the dogs and the men's orders bring Nelka back. They have to leave the washroom and line up again in the next room. Here, the soldiers listen to their lungs and examine them. The men grab their hair and their faces. They shove their fingers in their mouths and check their teeth. One of them shoves two fingers so far down Nelka's throat that she gags. He looks her in the eyes. Then he writes something down. There is almost total silence, a peculiar concentration dominates the room. After they have been allowed to put their clothes back on, they are brought back to the carriages.

Once the shutter is closed, they start acting as mirrors to one another, shaking their clothes out and wiping off each other's faces, speaking and getting to know each other a little at a whisper. Some women stand and sway, mutely, as if in prayer, or as if they had lost their minds out of anguish and fear.

Nelka, Margaryta, and Schura sit together in the corner beneath the window. Schura barely stops swearing for a second. She can swear three storey high: "What the dick are we supposed to do in this pig carriage? Do these sticks know how much it fucking stinks in here? Do these arse-sticks have no manners, transporting sweet dames like you two in such a shitty hole of a train?"

Between the swearing, she bites her fingernails and stares into the distance.

"What a dicked-up hovel." Then she reaches for Nelka's hand and strokes it gently. You should sleep, Nelke, your blossoms are closing," she says quietly. "Sleep, sleep, you beautiful little things. Shurka will keep an eye on you."

Nelka hears the two of them talking, and it does her some good. She is too exhausted to say something herself. She feels Margaryta laying her head on her lap, and she leans her temple on Schura's shoulder and must have drifted off, because she dreams of Yasha, with whom she goes for a walk along the Poltva, somewhere deep beneath the city.

[…]

Afterword

In the back garden of the house I grew up in, there is an apple tree. It is eighty years old and the last of its kind. For the longest time, I knew nothing about where it came from.

People always told stories in the village. Including the kind that circulate among children. Stories about women who were locked up in a duck coop; about a bleeding woman in a field of potatoes; about the miller who hanged a man; and about the boy who disappeared in the underground granary of a nearby farm.

As vague and incoherent as the stories were, they all had one word in common, a word that seemed to create a union between the concepts "Polen" (Poles) and "placken" (to slave away), as if they somehow went together.

Everything begins with language. The thousands of abused, the enslavement and murder through forced labour, they all began with language. With the learning of inhumanity through rendering inhuman ideas in language.

As early as the 19th century, a national self-image emerged of the German work ethic, which found its highpoint – but more importantly, also its lowest point – in the Nazi era, although it did not disappear along with it (Axster and Lelle 2018).

“How the German spirit makes itself known through German work” is something that Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl sought to stress all the way back in 1883 in his discussions of “German work”. The self-description as a diligent and hardworking people helped to cement Germany’s self-image as a nation, and seems to still have an effect to this day. Even back then, the counterparts were “freeloaders”, the “work-shy”, and “parasites”. Particularly as part of the Nazis’ antisemitic, anti-Roma, and anti-Slavic “racial theories”, these denigrating projections were constructed and disseminated, and then, in perverse inversion, used to justify forcing these same groups to work for them, and to ultimately exterminate them through work.

Today, it is estimated that some 20 million people were used as forced labourers by Nazi Germany, both within the “German *Reich*” and in the occupied territories (Knigge, Luttgenau and Wagner 2010). Without the backbreaking and often deadly labour performed by these people, it would have been impossible to feed and arm the German people during the war. To a significant extent, the wealth of many industrialist families and companies is founded on forced labour that was performed during this period.

In this context, women and their bodies played a particular role.

Of course, the Nazis were aware that the transportation of young people into the “Reich” would lead Germans to see that the degrading and demonising descriptions of various groups as “unworthy”, “lazy”, and “malignant” would not hold up when Germans met them face to face. For this reason, the regime imposed strict punishment for friendly interactions and even more so for more intimate, and especially for physical, contact, in order to prevent the development of closer connections that could pose a threat to these racist ideologies. In this context, German women were subjected to much more severe and humiliating punishment than the men. Meanwhile, the girls and women who had been kidnapped from their home countries enjoyed next to no protection from sexualised violence, which also included enforced nudity in the presence of guards and examining doctors (Halbmayr 2009). If they fell pregnant, they were provided next to no respite from their duties, and their newborn children were subjected to such

appalling conditions that many did not survive (Spoerer 2002). From 1943 on, so-called "racially sound" children were transferred to special homes to turn them into "German" children. They were de facto stolen from their mothers.

In the village I mentioned earlier and in the surrounding region, work and industriousness were the yardstick by which the value and esteem of a farm was measured.

While the owners of these farms might have been aware of the fact that hardly a single one of them would have survived the war without the work of forced labourers, this did not lead to any thoughts of compensation, and certainly no binding commitments. The victims had disappeared. And with them, supposedly, all the guilt and any debt as well.

And yet, the number of people forced to work in the region was massive.

Taking 15 November 1943 as a snapshot, the 128,320 forced labourers at that time represented roughly a quarter of the entire labour force in the state of Schleswig-Holstein, where I grew up. According to the figures of the Historical Society of Schleswig-Holstein, at that point in time, 49,626 of these people were deployed in agriculture. Rough estimates suggest that a total of up to 225,000 people were used as forced labourers in Schleswig-Holstein during the Nazi era.

In the 1990s, our neighbour received a letter from Ukraine. The letter included a woman's descriptions of her time in the house that we had been living in since 1980. She described how she had been made to work there during the Second World War, as a fifteen-year-old.

I was in the process of moving out at the time, and initially lost track of the matter, although I did travel through Eastern Europe time and again during my studies, in an attempt to gain even the slightest understanding of the dimension of the crimes that had been committed there by Germany.

A good two years ago now, while visiting my parents, I got to chatting with one of the older people from the town about the apple tree and about how it could be rejuvenated. It was only

then that I found out that this tree, like many others, had been planted by prisoners of war. Ukrainians, Poles, French, Russians – they'd been forced to work all over the place. He didn't know where they had lived, or what had become of them. But more than a hundred of them had been held by one of the nearby estates, he said.

I began researching the trees and the people who must have planted them. Since the letter from Ukraine has not been preserved and the previous occupants of the house died some time ago, my search continued to expand and ultimately ended up taking me outside the bounds of the village entirely.

The novel that grew out of this, *Nelka*, is of course fictional. It is not set in that village, it does not recount a story that played out there, but one that might have occurred anywhere in the whole region, the whole country. It represents an approach, even though I know that I'll never arrive, I can only gesture toward it, give an indication of the Polish and Ukrainian women whose hands have shaped large parts of the landscape. I can no longer look at this landscape without thinking of these women. It bears their mark. It is also *their* landscape. The landscape of Margaryta, Schura, and Nelka.