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author Rebecca Maria Salentin
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Klavierstimmers

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translated by Philip Boehm
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contact Kathrin Scheel
email kathrin.scheel@schoeffling.de
phone +49 69 92 07 87 16
fax +49 69 92 07 87 20
mail Schöffling & Co.
Verlagsbuchhandlung GmbH
Foreign Rights
Kaiserstraße 79
60329 Frankfurt am Main
Germany
www www.schoeffling.de

I. The necessity of the spoken word

Just as a certain silence entered the being of Karol Laub, the same landed gentleman departed his estate located outside the gates of Krakow.

He was leaving behind not only the *dwór* where he was born and raised, and which he had been managing since the death of his parents, but also his highly pregnant wife Elżbieta and their daughter Katarzyna.

Evening after evening, for weeks before his departure, the thoughts kept turning over in his head. The winter had passed, cold and brooding: Wilhelm I had dissolved the German Reichstag, the Triple Alliance had been extended, and Borodin died in St. Petersburg. Then came the spring: Elżbieta's pregnancy began to show, and Karol's unease grew in proportion to his wife's stomach. April was cold; the wind whistled against the windowpanes coated with frost. The blankets and cloths could not yet relinquish their place covering the gaps in the windows and doors, and the summer net curtains had to wait inside their chests until it was time to greet the spring sun by taking down the heavy brocade drapes.

On one such evening Karol made up his mind.

He lay beside his wife thinking about the previous day. Especially about the forestry crew and their overseer Krzysztof, who weren't working to his satisfaction. He wanted to tell Elżbieta about it and he turned to face her, his mouth already open, so that a tiny squawk escaped. But before he could expand this hoarse sound coming out of his throat into a word or a complete sentence, the whole matter of Krzysztof suddenly seemed completely trivial and insignificant. A routine event, nothing special, just one more everyday annoyance. He snapped his mouth shut like a fish. The squawk could have easily passed as an attempt to clear his throat, or as a prelude to his nightly snoring.

Elżbieta lay next to him in silence. She seemed not to have noticed he was trying to say something, to say something to her. It was probably only Karol's

perception, but he not only heard the sound, he could literally feel it breaking the stillness. Now the thought of disturbing her silence with his words struck him as even more pointless.

At one time they would devote some of their evening to discussing the day's events, but for several weeks Elżbieta had been falling asleep without exchanging a word with her husband. If they had any conversation at all it was Karol who did the talking; she would listen, and on occasion even nod or perhaps go so far as to contribute an approving *umm-hmmm*, but never really say anything herself.

He no longer deemed it necessary to tell his wife about the difficulties with the forestry workers, although this was hardly a trivial matter, since it was always he who had to sort things out: he couldn't count on her. He couldn't even count on Krzysztof, as much as he appreciated the man's knowledge about the land and its peculiarities.

Karol's hands were folded over the heavy down duvet, his fingers hooked and knotted together. As he wondered what really was so important that it needed to be discussed, he began kneading his thumbs, as if he were wrestling with them, until they grew quite warm from the constant struggle.

He could tell from her heavy breathing that she was now asleep. Lately she fell asleep quickly. She was tired, very tired. Her eyelids hung heavily over her eyes and her gaze was dull, empty. In the morning she didn't get up until long after he did, and in the afternoon she would lie down again. She was absent, pale. She wandered about the manor like a specter—half shadow, half silk. And when she wasn't moving about the house, slowly dragging her feet like a sleepwalker, she was either sitting or lying down. Her body poured onto the ottoman couch, hung in the armchairs, sunk into the feather bed or settled apathetically at the grand piano in the salon, her narrow fingers white against the keys, but she never played a single tone.

Elżbieta scarcely moved. At most she would lazily lift her arm to brush a few wisps of hair from her face. In time she stopped doing even that, and let her hair dangle uncombed, so that the strands fell in kinks and knots across her pale face and shoulders. She was hardly recognizable.

She never even left the house to visit Sofia, and because she was no longer up do taking care of her, the child was now looked after entirely by Agnieszka.

“And if I do tell Elżbieta about my troubles,” he thought, “it won’t change a thing about the way she acts.” The more he ruminated on this observation, the more his hands cramped up, and the more fiercely his thumbs wrestled with each other. He began to sweat, his face glowed, the down duvet seemed unbearably heavy against his chest. He was so caught up in this tangle of thoughts that it didn’t occur to him to simply toss off the covers and take a few deep, liberated breaths. The thoughts whirled faster and faster; he could feel them sucking him down; he sensed a tingle go all the way up his spine. The hairs on his body stood up.

Goosebumps, thought Karol. He twisted and turned the word, mouthing every single letter and sound it contained, until he had reduced it to a nonsensical jumble of odd sounds hovering weightlessly in the room.

His thoughts whirled away dizzily inside him, fixated on the necessity of speaking, until he realized that none of them was particularly noteworthy, no matter how much he might be engaged or possessed by them. This recognition came with a dull, sobering thud. His breathing again grew calm, and the heat vanished, leaving nothing but a cold damp film.

Basically, he reasoned, our need to speak serves only one purpose: communicating to others whatever moves us or occupies our thoughts. But it has nothing to do with whatever occupies or moves the other person. Consequently the only thing that leads us to speak is the need to communicate.

This sober realization calmed Karol down to the point where his thumbs were at peace, but it was unable to quiet the spinning and whirling inside his head.

The ongoing problem with the forestry crew was precisely something he and Elżbieta had discussed many times. He enjoyed telling her about his surprise visits to check on the men. Even if they managed to see him coming, they acted so clumsily that he knew right away that they couldn’t have been working long. Most of the time they just quickly stashed their cards under a tree trunk or a cap, where he immediately found them. Besides, not a single drop of sweat could be seen flowing down their necks, and the song they sang to cover up sounded very forced indeed.

This day it made no difference whether he talked about his troubles or not. Elżbieta was no longer interested in the men’s latest inventions for shirking their

duties, although in the long run it had consequences for their finances, since the profits from the lumber paid for most of their needs.

This was true of most of the *dwory* in the region. The land could be leased out; the estate owners would sell the wood to the peasants, who did not have the right to simply take what they needed for heating. Even their grubby, black-eyed little children could only collect the brushwood in whatever piece of forest the landowner had allotted their parents at the beginning of each year.

Karol was not as strict a proprietor as his neighbor Anton Koźny, who wasn't afraid to use the whip to get his workers and peasants to obey.

To be sure, the Koźny family estates yielded more than Karol's, and Anton grew wealthier and wealthier. That was also why Anton was able to acquire a new Bösendorfer. His workers were simply better disciplined; they didn't even dream of loafing or lazing. The Laubs' piano came from Drozdowski piano company in Katowice, and piano tuner Katzenstein had to come with his equipment every few weeks so that even halfway respectable tones could be coaxed from the old instrument.

Out of spite, Karol felt obliged to admit that at least his workers had some wits in their head: you could talk with them, and Krzysztof could discourse on the forest and its needs like a true expert. Anton's men were all brawn but no brains.

That was the only explanation Karol could find for the scene he had witnessed a few days earlier at the Koźny estate. The mere thought of it made him grin again all over: the sight of those the three bull-necked men, bathed in sweat, their faces crimson with exertion, their eyes bulging from their coarse faces, as they carried the new piano across the yard and up the broad flight of steps into the neighboring manor. The paving stones were iced over, and the men had had to grope their way ahead with their huge feet and bulky footwear, so that it seemed as though their stocky legs were dancing while their upper bodies were squashed under the weight of the instrument. Anton had supervised the spectacle from his horse, sitting at attention, riding crop at the ready, boots polished to a shine, his face full of threats lest his expensive Bösendorfer incur the slightest scratch. The smoke from the chimney had hovered over the yard, while the wind blew icy and low overhead.

This recollection allowed Karol to step off his mental merry-go-round for a moment, and he was every bit as amused as he had been while secretly watching the curious scene at Anton's. But the delivery of the Bösendorfer had also set off an unpleasant feeling, and that slightly bitter taste resurfaced now as well. While the sight of the men toiling away with their tongues hanging out had been entertaining enough; the presence of the Anton in all his vigilance had elicited a great aversion. Karol had suddenly felt the urge to take his fist and smash it into his friend's smug face and beat Anton's arrogant mug until it was bleeding.

Back then he had turned away and walked back in his house, shocked and shaken by his own aggression, and spent the rest of the day in the armchair of his study. His left hand had kept spinning the globe on the desk, but his eyes had stayed fixed in a blank stare.

This evening, for just a second, he succumbed to the illusion that all he had to do was bend over and tell Elżbieta about the whole affair in order to be able to laugh at it together with her. But then the aversion towards his friend once again gained the upper hand. And his wife's behavior of the past months was too vividly present as well, her obdurate silence and her indifference towards him and their daughter.

Karol lay still and recalled the conversation he'd had a few days earlier with the piano tuner. Yet another thing that hardly seemed worth reporting, though in this case it was out of consideration for her current mood swings.

Finally he turned to her after all, and examined what he could make out of her face in the pale night glow. The darkness made her own pallor seem even more ghostly.

(...)

IV. The lord of the manor has twins

Elżbieta could feel the viscous cold sweat running off her scalp and collecting on her neck before it trickled down her back and over her collarbone between her breasts. Her hair hung in tangle of matted strands that stuck to her forehead in little nests. It was as if the child had no desire to leave her body and enter this world, as if it resisted abandoning the protection of the womb. What was it supposed to do with a family like this anyway, with circumstances like these, with a mother in such a state and a father who had stopped speaking and decided to live in a house in town?

Elżbieta had already spent two days and nights wavering between unconsciousness and boundless pain. Even old Malwina was slowly beginning getting fidgety. Whenever Elżbieta simply allowed a contraction to roll over her without doing anything but rock back and forth, the old woman would smack her on the bottom and yell at her to work with the pain, not simply surrender to it like a woman who'd never given birth before, and a consumptive one at that.

But Elżbieta had no strength left; she couldn't even scream when the dragging pain in her lower body grew overpowering. She didn't want to go on, she couldn't bear the pain any longer, she could no longer hear the old woman's nagging, and she refused to try anything more to induce the birth. She'd had enough of climbing stairs, enemas, herbal concoctions and castor oil. She no longer even wanted the child anymore, no, especially not this one.

Hadn't they assured her that the later births would be easier than the first? Hadn't the midwife whispered something to her about a widening of the birth canal, whatever that was? Even her mother had claimed that the more children a woman had, the easier it was to give birth, and she had born enough to know. Of course the fact that God the Almighty had seen fit to take all but the youngest daughter was much more painful than all the births taken together. And finally hadn't she, Elżbieta, happened to overhear a conversation at the *Rynek Główny* between two tagrag market

women, who hadn't been the least embarrassed when one of them spoke of "popping another one out?" Their laughter had been coarse, rough, and stinky coming out of the brown stubble of teeth.

Elżbieta thought of all these lying proclamations, and gave a furious, scornful snort, this time not linked to a further contraction.

Katarzyna's birth had been bad, much worse than everything Elżbieta had ever been able to imagine about pain and humiliation.

She had been in labor for twelve hours: Agnieszka had been there and so had old Malwina, again acting as midwife. Elżbieta would never forget the shame she had felt when the old woman reached between her legs, stuck her gnarled fingers inside, and started rummaging around, much to Elżbieta's horror.

Her face had seemed on fire; she could feel cheeks glowing bright red. Luckily Agnieszka had turned away during the humiliating procedure to examine the birthing implements spread out on the dressing table. Elżbieta couldn't have stood being seen by a third person in this shameful situation.

Later, when the pain became unbearable, she forgot herself so much that she cried with every new tug in her body and let her cries ring through the house without regard to her appearance. When the midwife felt around inside her once again, with no regard to the contraction that was just beginning, Elżbieta lost all her self-control and completely discharged her venom on the old woman, using expressions she previously would have never dared to think.

When Karol heard his young and gracious wife cursing like that, even to the point of using obscene expressions, it finally became too much for him. He left his own *dwór* and the racking cries of pain and went next door, where he emptied a few bottles of home-distilled vodka with his friend Anton and accepted consolation in this difficult life situation.

He didn't return to his own house until one of the boys fetched him to have a look at his first-born child. Because of Karol's condition, the young man had to prop him up the short way through the forest and shove him up the stairs.

Even when he awoke the next morning Karol still thought that old Malwina had presented him with two identical little creatures, each with a red face and a black bush of hair, which made Elżbieta's pain seem a little more understandable in hindsight. He had no recollection of stumbling over the enameled bowl containing the placenta, or of nearly knocking over the midwife who was cradling the newborn infant in her arm, or of falling asleep on—or rather next to—the couch. Over breakfast the next day, which didn't take place for Karol until the afternoon, he asked how Elżbieta and the twins were doing, provoking strange glances from the servants. It was Agnieszka who explained to him that there was only one child, and that on top of that it was a girl. From then on people in the vicinity enjoyed retelling the story about how none other than Karol Laub, otherwise such a proper gentleman, had gotten so drunk he was convinced his wife had born him twins.

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