Der Arme Dolmetscher

Kurt Vonnegut Jr
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I was astonished one day in 1944, in the midst of front-line hell-raising, to learn that I had been made interpreter, Dolmetscher if you please, for a whole battalion, and to be billeted in a Belgian burgomaster's house within artillery range of the Siegfried Line.

It had never entered my head that I had what it took to dolmetsch. I qualified for the position while waiting to move from France into the front lines. While a student, I had learned the first stanza of Die Lorelei by rote from a college roommate, and I happened to give those lines a dogged rendition while working within earshot of the battalion commander. The colonel (a hotel detective from Mobilo) asked his executive officer (a dry-goods salesman from Knoxville) in what language the lyrics were. The executive withheld judgment until I had bungled through Der Gipfel des Berges foh-uhn-kelt im Abendsonnen-chein.

"Ah believes tin's Kraut, Cuhnel," he said.

The colonel felt that his role carried with it the obligation to make quick, headstrong decisions. He made some dandies before the Wehrmacht was whipped, but the one he made that day was my favorite. "If thas Kraut, whassent man doin' on the honey-dippin' detail?" he wanted to know. Two hours later, the company clerk told me to lay down the buckets, for I was now battalion interpreter. Orders to move up came soon after.

Those in authority were too harried to hear my declarations of incompetence. "You talk Kraut good enough for us," said the executive officer. "Then ain't goin' to be much talkin' to Krauts where we're goin'." He patted my rifle affectionately.

"Heh's what's goin' to do most of youh interpretin' fo' ya," he said. The executive, who learned everything he knew from the colonel, had the idea that the American Army had just licked the Belgians, and that I was to be stationed with the burgomaster to make sure he didn't try to pull a fast one. "Besides," the executive concluded, "then's ain't nobody else can talk Kraut at all."

I rode to the burgomaster's farm on the same truck with three disgruntled Pennsylvania Dutchmen who had applied for interpreters' jobs months earlier. When I made it clear that I was no competition for them, and that I hoped to be liquidated within twenty-four hours, they warmed up enough to furnish the interesting information that I was a Dolmetscher. They also decoded Die Lorelei at my request. This gave me command of about forty words (par for a two-year-old), but no combination of them would get me so much as a glass of cold water.


"Some of the first pages are missing," he donor explained as I jumped from the truck before the burgomaster's stone farmhouse. "Us' em for cigarette papers," he said.

It was still dark when I knocked at the

ACCENT ON LIVING
the burgomaster’s door. I stood on the doorstep like a bit player in the wings, with the one line I was to deliver banging around an otherwise empty head. The door swung open. “Dolmetscher,” I said.

The burgomaster himself, old, thin, and nightshirted, ushered me into the first-floor bedroom which was to be mine. He pantomimed as well as spoke his welcome, and in a sprinkling of danker akim was adequate dolmetsching for the time being. I was prepared to throttle further discussion with Ich sehe nicht, was soll es bedeuten, dass ich so traurig bin. This would have sent him packing off to bed, convinced that he had a fluent, albeit shot-full-of-Weltanschauung, Dolmetscher. The stratagem wasn’t necessary. He left me alone to consolidate my resources.

Chief among these resources was the mutilated pamphlet. I examined each of its precious pages in turn, delighted by the simplicity of transposing English into German. With this booklet, all I had to do was to run my finger down the left-hand column until I found the English phrase I wanted, and then rattle off the nonsense syllables printed opposite in the right-hand column. “How many grenade launchers have you?” for instance, was Vee feel grenade vaifair haben seet? Inspeccable German for “Where are your tank columns?” proved to be nothing more troublesome than Vo mitt earn panzer shpitzen? I mouthing the phrases: “Where are your howitzers? How many machine guns have you? Surrender! Don’t shoot! Where have you hidden your motorcycle? Hands up! What unit are you from?”

The pamphlet came to an abrupt end, toppling my spirits from mania to depressive. The Pennsylvania Dutchman had smoked up all the rear area pleasantry, comprising the pamphlet’s first half, leaving me with nothing to work with but the repartee of hand-to-hand fighting.

As I lay sleepless in bed, the one drama in which I could play took shape in my mind. . . .

Dolmetscher (to Burgomaster’s Daughter): I don’t know what will become of me, I am so sad. (Embraces her.)

Burgomaster’s Daughter (with yielding skyness): The air is cool, and it’s getting dark, and the Rhine is flowing quietly.

(Dolmetscher seized Burgomaster’s Daughter, carries her bodily into his room.)

Dolmetscher (softly): Surrender.

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Wary sentinels directed me to Battalion Headquarters, where I found most of our officers either poring over maps or loading their weapons. There was a holiday spirit in the air, and the executive officer was honing an eighteen-inch Bowie knife and humming Are You from Dixie?

“Well, bless my soul,” he said, noticing me standing in the door, “here’s old ‘sprecken zee Dutch.’ Speak up, boy. Ain’t you supposed to be ovah at the mayah’s house?”

“It’s no good,” I said. “They all speak Low German, and I speak high.”

The executive was impressed. “Too good foah ‘em, eh?” He ran his index finger down the edge of his murderous knife. “Ah think we’ll be runnin’ into some who can talk the high-class Kraut putty soon,” he said, and then added, “Wenz surrounded.”

“We’ll whomp ‘em the way we whomped ‘em in Newk Ca’sina and Tennessee,” said the colonel, who had never lost a maneuver. “You stay heah, son. Ah’m gonna want you foah mahnпуск inteprehah.”

Twenty minutes later I was in the thick of dolmetsching again. Four Tiger tanks drove up to the front door of Headquarters, and two dozen German infantrymen disembarked to round us up with submachine guns.

“Say sumpin’,” ordered the colonel, spunky to the last.

I ran my eye down the left-hand columns of my pamphlet until I found the phrases which most fairly represented our sentiments.

“A German tank officer swaggered in to have a look at his catch. In his hand was a pamphlet, somewhat smaller than mine.

“Where are your howitzers?” he said.

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THE STARS AND I

by R. P. LISTER

Immense the stars are, and immense the sky,
And very, most exceeding small am I;
Sometimes I think, as through the night I lurch,
That I am like a tiny flea in church.

Yet other times I seem extremely big,
A kind of mammoth, or at least a pig;
Then, I conceive the stars as very small —
Or else I do not see the stars at all.