

# Chemnitz

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The connecting train to Chemnitz was not scheduled to leave Holzweg until eight, which left Istvan with precisely forty-four minutes to buy a drink and a filled roll. Steam curled upwards from the hissing trains, and slid along the low metal roof like a dubious rain cloud. After looking around the platform with nervous slyness, Istvan stubbed his cigarette against a faded poster of the Emperor, smearing his fat foolish face with black ash, and felt ashamed at his heart beating from the fear of it. More foolishness, he told himself, the Emperor is as unloved up here on the frontier as at home ... but still. He felt light-headed. Really, he'd have to force that roll down despite himself.

The station cafeteria was dingily lit, as everything was dingily lit in Holzweg, by an inferior gaslight that cast a sickly greenish tinge on every living thing. A couple of farmers slumped aggressively at each other in the corner, reeking of slivovitz. The Emperor simpered fruitily in dragoon uniform from a wonky framed print on the wall. Istvan looked around.

'Service?' he asked.

'What do you want?' sneered the older and sadder-looking of the two farmers.

'Are you the waiter?'

'I might be.'

'Well if you are, I want a roll. If you're not, I want the waiter.'

'Rolls are on the counter, under the glass. Pork, or pickled herring.'

'I don't eat pork.'

'Jew, I suppose.'

'No, I just happen not to eat pork. I was at the front, old man. I've seen what pigs eat.'

'Eat the herring then, it's all the same to me.'

Istvan peered through the glass.

'It doesn't look very fresh.'

'It's the light – you don't look so good yourself. Look friend, go and eat somewhere else if you don't want it. It's nearly eight, and I'm tired. Walk into the square if you're hungry, and go and bother Bogdan instead. But you'll hear the same thing – times are hard here, since the war.'

'Yes. The war. I was forgetting. But you're far from it here, aren't you? Not like the towns actually on the border, or the divisional areas. I'm off to Chemnitz myself, in half an hour. You should see that, before you start moaning. All the houses taken over for billets, shell holes in the streets and in the roofs. It's only soldiers and stray dogs left up there now. Even the whores have left.'

'The herring then, or what? I was talking over here.'

'Yes, the herring. And a coffee.'

'No coffee, not for months. No tea, either.'

'Christ. A brandy, then.'

'Slivovitz.'

'I suppose so. I was almost missing it, you know, I've been so long in the capital. Your picture's wonky,' he added, nodding at the Emperor.

'I know.' The waiter's eyes blinked slyly.

'You know?'

Istvan looked around the room. The government newspapers were neatly folded on the counter, their reports of gallant cavalry charges and brave frontier forts holding out against unequal odds clearly unread. But the foreign papers, the sort that always accumulate in railway towns, were scattered on the table and grimy with prolonged attention and bad news.

'Your drink. I'll dust off your roll – here.'

'Thanks. Your health. Christ, that's rough.'

'Tomasz over there makes it, and look at him. The plums were bad this year, what with the gas clouds and everything. And even down here, you can feel the shells hitting the ground, up at the front. I think it frightens the trees.'

‘Does it frighten you, old man?’

‘Old men are frightened of different things to boys. You’ll learn that. If you’re lucky.’

Istvan raised his eyebrow ironically, then inspected the herring. He pushed the little plate away, scattered a few kopeks on the counter, and lit another cigarette instead. He checked his watch.

‘Another slivovitz.’

The landlord refilled the little glass, then filled another for himself. He held it up, breast height.

‘The Emperor!’

‘The Emperor.’

They wiped their mouths with the backs of their hands, inhaling cool air as they did it. Istvan retched slightly. The waiter smiled, his ugly bald head like an old liver sausage in the greenish light. ‘Ten to eight,’ he said, ‘You’ll miss your train. Don’t you want to go to Chemnitz?’

Istvan nibbled on the butt of his cigarette. The cafeteria clock was surely fast.

‘It’s not about what I want. It’s about duty.’

‘Duty. That’s a fine word. I did my bit for the Emperor when I was young, for all the good it’s done me. You’ll learn what duty means soon enough.’

‘Yes.’

‘Cheer up son, you look like you’re going to cry. Forget it, it might not be so bad. Here, have another drink, on the house. You’ve got time. Here, look, nice big one, see? I’ll have one too. You’ll get out of it all right, lots of them always do. They’re always good to officers. They’ll see your fine boots, and your fur-lined coat, and they’ll treat you like a gentleman. Who knows? Maybe we’ll hold them, anyway. It’s a big river to cross, what with guns firing at you.’

‘Yes. Look, I’ll take the roll after all. I’ll have it on the train, it’ll be too late to eat at Chemnitz when I get there. But I have to go.’

Istvan put his gloves on slowly, looking at the picture on the wall. He spoke in a shy, shameful voice.

‘And can I buy the slivovitz? The bottle, I mean. It’ll do for a present, for the lads in the mess. They’ll like the joke.’

‘Course you can, son, you can have it for a couple of crowns. There’s plenty more out the back.’

‘Thanks. Well. I have to go.’

‘Yes. Good luck, son.’

Istvan smiled a little, looking at the wall. ‘Thank you.’ He buttoned up his greatcoat and rearranged his sword belt before walking to the door. There, he wheeled round smartly, clicking his heels and saluting the Emperor’s portrait, before pushing through the clattering doors with his bottle under his arm. When the jangle of his spurs died away, and the train wheezed its way towards the front, the waiter went back over to his table. He lit a cigarette and studied the print thoughtfully.

‘Tomasz. You know who that was? I didn’t realise at first, but it was the Crown Prince. The Emperor’s son.’

But Tomasz was asleep.