

THE PASSENGER

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TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN BY PHILIP BOEHM
WITH A PREFACE BY ANDRÉ ACIMAN AND AN AFTERWORD BY PETER GRAF

After leaving the train station, he climbed into a taxi and headed home. The streets were full of people, many in uniform. Newsboys were hawking their papers, and Silbermann had the impression they were doing a brisk business. For a moment he considered buying one for himself but

then decided against it, since he figured the news was bound to be bad, and almost certainly hostile, at least as far as he was concerned. He would undoubtedly be experiencing it all firsthand soon enough.

After a short ride the taxi pulled up in front of his building. Frau Friedrichs, the wife of the concierge, was lingering in the stairwell. She greeted him politely and Silbermann was somehow glad to see that her behavior remained unchanged. As he stepped onto the red plush runner and climbed the stairs, he once again had the sensation that his life was only half real. Recently such ruminations had become a habit.

I'm living as though I weren't a Jew, he thought, somewhat incredulously. For the time being I'm simply a well-to-do citizen—under threat, it's true, but as of yet unscathed. How is this possible? I live in a modern six-room apartment. People talk to me and treat me as though I were one of them. They act as if I'm the same person I used to be, the liars—it's enough to give a man a guilty conscience. Whereas I'd like to show them a clearer picture of reality, namely that as of yesterday I'm something different because I am a Jew. And who did I used to be? No—who am I? What am I, really? A swear word on two legs, one that people mistake for something else!

I no longer have any rights, and it's only out of propriety or habit that so many act as though I did. My entire existence is based solely on the faulty memory of people who essentially wish to destroy it. They just happen to have forgotten about me. I've been officially degraded, but the public debasement has yet to take place.

Frau Zänkel, the councilor's widow, was just stepping

out of her apartment. Silbermann doffed his hat and greeted her with a “Guten Tag, gnädige Frau.”

“How are you doing?” she asked kindly.

“I’m fine, by and large. And yourself?”

“Tolerably well. For an old lady.”

She held out her hand in parting.

“These must be difficult times for you,” she added, regretfully, “terrible times . . .”

Silbermann contented himself with an attentive little smile that was both cautious and thoughtful, neither agreeing nor disagreeing. “In essence we’ve been assigned a peculiar role,” he said at last.

“But they’re great times, too,” she consoled him. “There’s no doubt that you’re being treated unjustly, but that’s exactly why you need to be fair-minded and compassionate in your thinking.”

“Isn’t that a lot to ask, gnädige Frau? Besides, I don’t think at all anymore. I’ve given that up. It’s the best way to deal with everything.”

“They’ll never do anything to you,” she assured him, and banged the umbrella she was clenching in her right hand resolutely on a stair, as if to signal that she wouldn’t allow anyone to get too close to him. Then she gave him an encouraging nod and stepped on by.

As soon as he was back in his apartment, he asked the maid if Herr Findler was already there. She said he was, so Silbermann hastily took off his hat and coat and stepped into the study, where his visitor was waiting.

Theo Findler was examining a painting with clear disapproval. When he heard the door open, he quickly turned around and smiled at the man entering.

“Well?” he asked, knitting his brow as he always did when he spoke, thinking that the wrinkles added weight to his words. “How are you, my friend? I was afraid something might have happened to you. You never know . . . Have you given my last offer some more thought? How is your wife? I haven’t seen her at all today. So, Becker’s off to Hamburg.”

Findler took a deep breath, because he was only at the beginning of his monologue.

“Well you two sure are clever! A person could learn from you. Becker has a Jewish head on his shoulders. Ha ha, he’ll manage all right, he’ll manage. I’d have been happy to join in the business, but too late is too late, right? By the way, where did you dig up these awful pictures? I don’t understand how anyone could hang rubbish like that on their walls. No order to the things, you old culture-Bolshevik you. Now don’t go thinking that I’ll be raising my last offer even by just another thousand marks. Not on your life, I can’t do it.

“You think I’m a rich man, Silbermann. Everybody does. If only I knew where they came up with that idea. And here I’m having a hard time paying what I owe in taxes. Speaking of taxes, can’t you find me a clever bookkeeper or point me to someone? I mean I know my way around a little bit, but I don’t have time to take care of all that properly. These taxes, these goddamned taxes. Tell me, am I supposed to support the whole German Reich all by myself? Well?

“You’re not saying anything? What is it? Did you think things over? Are you going to take my offer? Your wife must have something against me. I see she’s kept herself completely out of sight. I don’t understand it. Is she upset with me because we didn’t say hello to you the other evening? But

good grief, how could we have? The place was teeming with Nazis! Later my wife pestered me that we should have said hello. But I told her that Silbermann's far too reasonable. He realizes I can't compromise myself on his account. Well?

"So, Silbermann, out with it. Do you want to sell or don't you?"

Findler seemed to have finished talking—in any case he was now looking expectantly at Silbermann. They sat down at the smokers' table, but Findler must have moved too abruptly, since he winced and, with a concentrated expression, started rubbing his left hip.

"Ninety thousand," Silbermann said, ignoring all the various questions and remarks he realized were mostly meant to throw him off guard. "Thirty thousand in cash, the rest secured by mortgage."

Findler started up as if he'd been given an electric shock.

"You've got to be joking," he shouted, sounding offended. "Listen, it's high time we stopped all this dithering. Fifteen thousand on the table, you hear? What on earth—thirty thousand marks! You know, if I had thirty thousand marks lying around, I could think of better things to do than buy your place. Thirty thousand marks!"

"But consider the net income from rent. And since the sale price is already ridiculous, the least I have to have is a decent down payment. The building's worth two hundred thousand marks, you're buying it . . ."

"Worth, worth, worth," Findler interrupted. "What do you think I'm worth? Except nobody would pay a thing for me. Nobody can pay what I'm worth, and nobody would even think of putting down just a thousand marks. I'm

unsaleable. And so is your building. Ha ha ha, Silbermann, and I say it as a friend. I'm taking the shack off your hands, and if I don't then the state will. And they won't give you a lousy pfennig."

The telephone rang in the next room. For a moment Silbermann wondered if he should answer it. Then he jumped up, excused himself, and left the study.

I'll probably take what he's offering, he thought as he picked up the receiver. After all, Findler's still a relatively decent fellow.

"Hello, who is this?"

The long-distance operator answered. "Please hold the line, you have a call from Paris," said a cool female voice.

Silbermann felt a flash of excitement and lit a cigarette. "Elfriede," he called out in a low voice.

His wife, who had stayed in the salon just as he'd suspected, came in, quietly opening and closing the door behind her.

"Hello, Elfriede," he said, covering the receiver with his hand. "I just arrived five minutes ago. Herr Findler is here. Won't you go in and talk with him?"

She stepped close and they exchanged a fleeting kiss.

"It's Eduard," he whispered. "The call is coming at an awkward moment. Please go talk with Findler, otherwise he'll listen in. It's already practically a crime to telephone with Paris."

"Tell Eduard hello from me," she said. "I'd really like to say a few words to him myself."

"That's out of the question." He warded her off. "The lines are all being tapped. And you're too careless. You'd say something you shouldn't."

“I should at least be able to say hello to my own son.”

“I’m afraid you can’t. Please understand.”

She looked at him beseechingly. “Just a few words,” she said. “I’ll be careful.”

“The answer is no,” he said firmly. “Hello? Hello . . . Eduard? Hello Eduard . . .” He pointed imploringly at the door of the study.

She went.

“Listen,” Silbermann said, going back to the phone call. “Have you managed to arrange our permit?” He spoke very slowly, weighing each word before he uttered it.

“No,” Eduard answered on the other end. “It’s extremely difficult. You can’t count on getting it. I’m trying everything I can, but . . .”

Silbermann cleared his throat. He decided he had to be more forceful.

“That’s unacceptable. Either you’re making an effort or you aren’t! And I’m sure you realize the matter is of some importance. I don’t even know where to start with these lazy excuses.”

“You’re overestimating what I can do, Father,” answered Eduard, upset. “Six months ago it would have been a lot easier. But you didn’t want to. And that’s not exactly my fault.”

“It’s not a question of who’s at fault,” Silbermann snapped back, fuming. “Your job is to see to the permits. And be so kind as to spare me your wisdom.”

“Listen, Father,” Eduard said, indignantly. “You want me to get you the moon and the stars and you’re bawling me out because I haven’t delivered them!” Then he added, “But how are you both doing? How is Mother? Please

give her my best. I would have been happy to speak with her.”

“Fix the permit and do it quickly,” Silbermann repeated sternly. “That’s all I’m asking! Your mother sends her best. Unfortunately she can’t talk with you right now.”

“I’ll get it done,” answered Eduard. “At least I’ll try everything I can.”