

Comenius

Biographical novel

Jean Bedard

January 2010

E-mail: jphbedard@globetrotter.net

Translation by Richard Clark

Prologue

May 1659. I wasn't sleeping. In front of the window underwear was waving, clean but stained brown by my lochia. I hadn't bled that night. Eight weeks, it was time. The birthing had been difficult, very difficult. I lacked milk. My baby was sleeping from hunger.

We mothers are deeply familiar with the happiness that comes after holding the child of our womb at arm's length in front of us and saying: "Yes! I want you. Come what may!" The thing was not so easy for me.

I was in Amsterdam on a small wooden bridge when I finally presented to Heaven my first living being, three months old. Suspended over the water, he let out a scintillating cry of joy. A flock of gulls departed the canal with a crash. He wrinkled his nose, but overcame tears. His eyes of crystal pierced all my surfaces. My heart was struck, and melted, and I returned his arrow. Between his two prominent cheekbones, his smile triumphed. A cord of fire united our souls. He was so trusting, he was so vulnerable.

I was torn away from myself and, by a grace of God, I saw the mother and child in profile like a rainbow cast over the storm. He was there before me as if before his source of life. He was in my image, but he was not my image. The same and different, we were shipwrecked one in the other and yet one the salvation for the other. By his look, he called me to life.

- Show me the way, I asked him.

He smiled at me. Even and translucent, all the morning horizon presented itself to our gaze. Toward the north and toward the south, toward the east and toward the west, every point of the sundial drank our gaze to infinity: Nothing resembling the vertical where I had placed him. Between sky and earth, no symmetry: above, no obstacle up to infinity; below, at a few cubits, the black water, the silt, the rocks. So then, why does gravity attract us precisely where we break? Why does weight choose mud and rock instead of clouds and light?

But he, at the end of my arms, ignored his own weight and flapped his four limbs like a dragonfly ready to take flight.

- Go my butterfly! Go!

I would have so much wanted him to fly away. The times were so heavy with tension. Behind me, war was screaming, before me, war was calling. We were like a bridge suspended above the abyss, me on the side that was sinking in mud, he on the side that was rising. I was in despair.

- Save me, my butterfly!

The birthing had nearly killed me. I was afraid of drying up and of him dying of hunger. I couldn't do it any more. Death seemed to want to take pity on me. It wanted to carry me all the way under the bridge, in its cold water. It was calling to me: "Come, come rest." I had brought

my baby in a sturdy osier basket and I let myself go in a horrible reverie... And if I did put him there... And if I let the little craft drift away... And if I gave my little one the chance to begin with another mother... My Moses was going to find a better future, perhaps! And I would sleep, finally.

I held him at arm's length and began to shake like a plum tree being cut down. Wouldn't it be better to drop him into death directly? Right here, before he knows war, cholera, exile, cold! All I needed to do was envelop him with all my body pressed around him, dive, sink, rest. He wouldn't be cold, he wouldn't be hungry. No life at all would be sweeter.

How far did it go, my duty to protect?

All my body rebelled, wanted to take him back, replace him in my belly. But this was not possible. So what else? To die is not a sin: it is only jumping a few years ahead of yourself. My God, have mercy! In all of Europe torn by war, who would still want to live?

It was then that I started to bear, as if for the first time, the words of Reverend my father. I felt him behind me as present as my son was in front of me: "Madame my daughter, trust and free your way."

A multitude of times he had held me at the end of his arms on a bridge under which torrents of war and misery passed. Perhaps he too had hesitated. However he had had the temerity to establish himself as my beginning. "This is the first choice. And it is a terrible choice, a very imprudent pretention." He said this while laughing, but he hadn't always laughed.

- Papa, don't abandon me! I cried in the early morning silence.

Father had his eye on death. He was broken. We had walked too much, from exile to exile, from disaster to disaster, from failure to failure on highways made sticky by the blood of battles and the slime of squalor.

- Papa, if you die, I'll kill myself.

Three pigeons looked at me, taken aback. I felt his hands on my shoulders, but something had changed. He was no longer behind me as my determination, he was not ordering anything, indicated neither the direction nor the trajectory; no! he was there as my foundation. It was less. It was more. I said to myself: On a day of despair, my son will be on a bridge and will look down. What will be his foundation? An act of trust or an act of despair?

Then, I looked at the sky and pronounced these words:

- Oh no! I'll keep you, my butterfly, I'll keep you, and woe to whoever will want to do you harm. I want to be your mother. Come what may.

And I gave a good kick to the osier basket, which slid under the parapet and went to drift away all alone.

But let's get to the beginning...

The Wedding

No bonfire, nor shouts, nor flutes, nor lamps, not even a single candle. Silence and darkness form the exile's safest garment. All our dogs had learned to keep silent. We, the United Brethren, the unsubdued of Bohemia, the pariahs, must die without making noise. Even on this my wedding night, in the year of disgrace 1648 when the treaties of Westphalia were signed, we could not celebrate. We had to disappear. It had to be that after us, no fire, no bush, no branch, no stone, no smell could testify to our existence. Flee, hide, erase all traces, crawl, such was the mercy that the Catholic and Protestant Churches deigned to grant us.

That night, I was so deep in worry that I had no inkling of Mama's silent preparations. I would have so much wanted the full moon to light up my first night with Mister my husband. I would have so much wanted the celebration to conceal our first sighs until the wee hours of the morning. For want of a flute and the moon, a scent of flowers rose through the trap door of the attic. Nothing better than an invasion of perfume to stimulate the memory. Flowers, there were plenty of those...

To advance with a load on your back, hear nothing but distant church bells, follow the trails of wild animals, never draw near a rooster's call, live hunted; as a child, I thought that odors made our exile necessary. The Catholics smelled of incense; Calvinists, of soap; we, of sweat. They said of us people of Bohemia, stubborn disciples of John Hus, that we were the cause of the worst of wars. Everything began, supposedly, with the Defenestration. Following the ancient custom, some of our people, rebellious, had thrown two or three members of the Council of Lieutenance out the window. After that insubordination, it was repression, massacres, exile, misery. Were we the only guilty ones?

On the roads, our house had Mama's aroma. Every morning she asked my sister and I to go and pick fragrant flowers that she slipped as garlands under her belt of red serge. Her bouquet resembled a lighthouse in the night. Nothing is as irresistible as the smell of a rose. Mother spread happiness like soldiers spread unhappiness.

I never knew why we had to walk so much. Right here at Leszno in Poland, we had a hut large enough for the community's printing press, with an attic and a window with glass panes. Leszno tolerated the Brethren's presence; all we had to do was be quiet and furnish good labor. We had scarcely arrived and soon we would have to leave. Father will look at the sky, receive a sign and give the signal. All day long, Mother would fuss while getting the handcart ready. I don't know when, or for what country, but we will leave. "Don't go away", Mama will say; "Let her be", Papa will say and we will get back on the road, barefoot, loaded like mules...

On that wedding night when the war orphan, the adopted son of Pastor Comenius was going to marry me, his oldest daughter, Papa and Mama had left us the attic. The guests had kept talking until late in the night. The children had crowned Mama's bed with wedding flowers. From the trap door, the aroma came. Mama was exhausted by the journey. All day, she had laughed and told stories. No one knew, no one had imagined... True, on this wedding day the wine had flowed. True, the woman must be well numbed for her first night... The moon had not shown up. Barely did a few dim lights caress the drops of moisture that slid along the window pane. The marriage had been hasty. Our pastor had judged the time to be opportune. The Catholics on the north hill and the Calvinists on the south hill were celebrating the peace of Westphalia with loud cries. Consequently, a small celebration in the heretics' community would not remind them too much of our existence.

Reverend my husband had neither a clumsy hand nor an inattentive kiss. He had moved me from the depths up to the surfaces and, in the night, pleasures rose up again like relics. Then fear came in. "Pleasure is not without a sanctifying function", Father, laughing, said in order to prepare me, but everyone maintained the opposite. The prostitute who opened her thighs to Satan in the days of Genesis, it was she who lost Samson for the benefit of the Philistine princes and it was she again who would tear Christian unity asunder. Even on that day, during the wedding meal, I had overheard Calvinist pastors whose idle talk did not extol the necessity of generation. They insisted because Father, accompanied by Mother, went to visit a notorious prostitute sometimes, a woman whom the whole community scorned. She arrived from the mountains in the fall, opened her bed for hire right here in Leszno, and left again in the spring. The whole community condemned the charity of the pastor and his wife.

Mister my husband took me for a long time, too long perhaps... And now, I was afraid. You must understand, Moravia was our body and we had been driven out of it. Reverend my father advocated returning. To enjoy one's country seemed to him natural, primary even. He believed that we must unite ourselves on earth as in Heaven. They called us the United Brethren. But that theory had cost the Brethren dearly. At the age of ten, he had lost his father, at twelve, his mother. He was driven into the woods, knew hunger, cold and isolation. And Mama was going to share his fate...

"Mama!" the sound resonated in my head, but did not leave my mouth. She had moaned. No. The attic had simply cracked. A gust of wind no doubt! No one had awakened. Water was running on the window pane. A spider watched for its prey...

People were talking about heretics burnt alive, women buried alive with their babies, girls defiled in every manner... "Scary stories", Mama said. Doubt, however, had perforated my childhood insouciance. "Don't say anything to your little sister," Mama asked. I had the duty of the eldest: shelter the littler ones. But worry had seeped in. I became mute from it, literally mute. "Which, for your husband, will be a gift", one of the Calvinist pastors had laughingly declaimed.

Papa said: "Free your way". Mama said: "Don't go too far away." So I kept up my worry as others keep up their houses.

Despite its discretion, the wedding was joyful. There was a lot of laughter and a lot of talking. Reverend my father had given me to the best of pastors, Peter Figulus Jablonsky, whom I called simply Ablonsky. Yesterday, a boy with hair like shocks of hay, today a marvelous chorister with a shy heart. His look had changed. A spark shone in each of his pupils. He stood in front of me a long time before unfastening the ribbon of my dress. He hesitated... and resigned himself. He blew out the candle. It was long. It was tender. He swept me away... But worry's screw was tightening in my chest. Mother had warned me: "You will go off the road". I couldn't, really, speak of a road any longer. I felt as if I had closed a novel and begun a duty. "To the obedience of the day will be added the obedience of the night", Mama had warned me. But he, who was he obeying now? I had produced a storm in him. I had been subjected to the rebound of my own effect. Who was obeying who?

With one hand, I swept my hair back over my chest. I brought my nose close to his back. His odor had something pungent about it. I inhaled its ether in the hope of dulling my fears...

A fit of anxiety took me by the throat and I awoke with a start. Ablonsky was sleeping, his head on my chest like a large cat. I succeeded in gently freeing myself. I wrapped myself in a blanket. My heart stopped worrying. I heard a faint moan in the silence.

"Mama!" My mouth had scarcely moved. I was mute. I would have so much wanted to pronounce the name "Dorothea", daughter of the eminent senior Jan Cyrill. They were married in a grand wedding and yet the whole country was in mourning. The Habsburgs had cut off our leaders' heads; the decree of exile had been signed. We had been driven out. From now on Mama was my only native country. She carried the history and the legends, the cuisine and the cures, the customs and the mores... She was my tent and my country, a country like a cart going here and there...

I got my spirits back. I heard the household sleeping, except for Father. He was surely outside looking at his dear stars. I wonder what the stars thought about it. Mother hadn't recovered from her fever very well. No, it wasn't the wind, Mama was letting out barely audible moans. She didn't want to wake up the children, no doubt.

I went down to see the little ones. Daniel was sucking his thumb, pressed beneath Suzanna's arm. "God, help us preserve the joy of our children." The soup in the iron cauldron was still lukewarm. I filled a ladle and went to her bedside...

- Daughter, return to your engagements, she sighed, her faint smile full of pain.

She was surrounded by flowers. Her face was white as milk, her eyelids purplish, her voice sibilant. It was fatigue. I thought it was. We had walked so much since Sweden. Father's mission had failed. Sweden and all the Protestant league had once and for all abandoned us, the Brethren and all Bohemia. The exile would never have an end. We had to return to Poland. Father had ordered it. Autumn was well advanced, the mud froze our feet. The road was long. At last! Leszno. The town was teeming with exiles once again. Epidemics were on the prowl...

I didn't want to move the flowers, so I sat on a block of wood near the bed.

- Is he sleeping? she asked me in a very low voice.

I nodded "yes". She had explained to me how I should leave my man's bed. With his permission or if he says nothing, for a respectable woman can still interpret his silence in her way. And I had resolved to be a respectable woman.

- I ought to explain this to you now, she said, beckoning me to come nearer. You are the oldest, after me it is you who bear the burden of the children, of my two little ones. Your father...

What did she mean? Her sentence remained suspended in a silence tinged with apprehension. She was no doubt asking herself: "Will he hold up?" I didn't understand. She was worried about Papa. Everything had collapsed, the treaties of Westphalia had been signed. We had been abandoned. A man, without a fight, wanders. I knew it. But she wanted to say more, something that I was going to understand later, too late.

I motioned to her not to tire herself out. All would go well.

- Daughter, the land is a woman, she continued. Your father has a need for land. It is, he does. Do you understand that?

"It is, he does", how many times she had told me that. Why another time? Why that night? And what did she mean by "need for land"?

- Moravia is the most beautiful land on earth. One day, you will see it, she added, after a long silence. When you see Moravia, you will not be in Moravia. That is the universal miracle of particular things. We see beings only after we have left them. Do you understand that? We keep only what we have lost.

It was one more riddle. Her moist eyes smiled, but she had difficulty getting her breath back. It wasn't just fatigue. And Father who didn't come back...

- If a man is over a man, it's war, she continued. Then the father of all of us came, the founder of the United Brethren, Peter Chelcicky. "Let us go back to the first days", he said. "No pope, no emperor. Let us elect the best among us, let us be brothers, let us share, and never again the sword." The Czech Brothers quietly cultivated brotherhood. Love has been sown, it must be cultivated, for without

love, cruel is the human animal. But woman is his ground of calm. You understand! Do you understand?

"You don't need to go over everything again, Mama, take a rest". I thought this very strongly, convinced that she read my face better than a Bible. Suddenly I saw the chamber pot; it was full of blood. I touched her hand; it was cold. She smiled at me.

- Don't worry, Lisbeth, you're taking care of me, take care of me... But now you'll have to listen for once. You obey too quickly, you don't listen long enough. A person can't live without laws. Your father told you: the woman obeys the man, the man obeys the community and the community obeys the woman. This is the natural circle. The word is only a bridge. But God in Heaven, Lisbeth, everyone ought to become her own being on this bridge and that requires having laws. So speak. By Mary Magdalen, how women talk!

The night was so cold and Father was scanning the sky instead of taking care of Mama! On serious occasions, she had many times seen him go out at night to consult the stars, question the wind and all of nature; this was his obedience. Yet he was often wrong. It would have been better had he looked one inch ahead of him rather than a century ahead of the world.

She handed me a missive... I read... Father had been elected *senior* of the Brethren. For Heaven's sake! We would have to go back on the road earlier than planned, visit the exiles as far away as Hungary, Transylvania and perhaps even in Prussia. We would have to announce that the end is not entirely in the beginning, that the persecutions are preparations, that the rejection of violence is combat, that hope is in little children, that children are in women and that women are in God. I knew Father, he wouldn't stop. He wanted to completely reverse the order of the world. There where domination reigned, he wanted to do education.

- Your father...

Her voice was barely audible. I took her hand. "My father will not fall. He has never fallen. He doesn't even know what a fall is. He is a rock. Jan Amos Comenius fall! A mountain doesn't crumble... It is you, Mama, who are crumbling..." She was no longer reading my face; she plunged her sky-blue eyes so deeply into mine that all my thoughts went off like swallows in the wind.

- She was named Magdalena Vizovsky, she whispered in little breaths. He loved her. She gave him two daughters...But the war...

She let the silence remind me of the whole story. Everyone knew the defeat of the White Mountain and the repression that ensued. Ferdinand had done no more than carry out the advice of Casinius the Jesuit: "The king must not tolerate any heretic. It would be supremely useful to not at all allow a man infected with heresy to remain invested with any right whatsoever. What he has will be taken away from him and given to Catholics. If a few of them are condemned to the stake,

the remedy will be that much more effective." They massacred twenty-seven Czech leaders. Their heads were hung in iron cages on top of the tower in the Old City. Ferdinand said to whoever would hear him: "It is better to reign over a desert than over a people who question."

She took my hand, for I had turned my eyes away from hers. Her hand was full of flowers.

- He loved that woman... she whispered in a breath nearly drowned by the water in her lungs.

Her eyes shone with a strange joy. I wasn't able to understand. I hadn't had a man before that night. I didn't know yet that a woman measures her man's love by instinct. I didn't even know that men's love had a measure. And above all I didn't know that it is better not to be the first, nor the closest to his heart. She meant to say: "He loved her more than me and I found my happiness in this." I was twenty-two, I couldn't understand.

- Your father was a pastor, condemned to death by the Catholics. He had to flee. Magdalena and her two daughters hid with other women. The imperials plundered and burned the villages as punishment. Behind them the plague was mowing down. It took all three of them.

Big tears ran down her temples and moistened her hair.

- His heart was broken. He never spoke of it, but there was a hole in his heart and in that hole that woman more loved than me softly slept. A woman should know her man's wounds. Her man is her continent and if she doesn't know its ravines, she risks taking some dangerous falls. I, daughter, I loved that woman who stayed in his heart. I loved her because she was part of him...

Her mouth was trembling, pain was distorting her face. I was no longer able to make out her smile. Soldiers and visions of massacre were galloping in my head.

- Don't worry, daughter. I have my own mother, and she hers, and so on to the beginning of the world and you, you are taking care of me... But the Pastor Figulus Jablonsky is enough for you, so find a wife for your father, find a mother for my little ones...

She let out a scream she could not suppress. I heard Ablonsky turn over. Suzanna who was only five cried: "Mama". Daniel, two, began to cry. Pavel hadn't yet returned. Ludmila was seeing Pastor Kokovsky a lot and worked at his parents' sewing workshop. I suddenly realized that it was to me and to me alone that Mama had entrusted her terrible burden.

- Go get the little ones...

I brought them to her. She caressed Daniel's hair, and he went to sleep immediately, but Suzanna looked at me, frightened. I remained mute. I would have so much wanted to say something, reverse the events, make them return, but the words, rather than come out, swelled up in my throat and choked me. It was always like that. I was stuffed with words unspoken.

- Your Mama is fine, she managed to say to Suzanna after struggling to get back her smile.

Her face had lightened up. She took the child in her arms.

- Listen, she said to her. Princess Libuse gets on a beautiful white horse. She rides on the poljes and over all the earth. If a child is afraid, the horse whinnies and paws the ground, the princess shoots arrows from her bow and the Golem never comes near. The white horse will always protect you... White horse, she continued, singing, come, come by the wind, run, run in the courtyards, bring beautiful dreams, carry me off on your croup to my mama...

Suzanna went to sleep and I thought that Mother did too. But she took my hand again.

- Lisbeth, my little ones, Pavel, Ludmila...

She stared at me with a worried look. I felt all her body tense, stiffen around this will to comfort that was her entire being. Her face was covered with sweat, her eyes, with tears. She could no longer speak. She kept herself from moaning. She shivered, and shook so hard that the bed quavered for a moment on the beaten earth. I remained paralyzed.

- My big daughter, my little ones, they need a mama and your father... Take my ring...

I was nailed to the spot, unable to let her out of my sight. I heard the door open. It was Papa. He sat down next to her. He looked at her a long time, I don't know how long. He took her pulse. I showed him the chamber pot. He looked at me, aghast. He turned toward her.

- My God! he exclaimed.

A great and terrible silence froze all the house.

- No, not now, Papa moaned.

She slipped her hand through his hair, patted his head. Big tears ran down his cheeks. The silence struck nails right into my bones. My heart broke. Papa leaned over, kissed her and in a great sob delivered her:

- Go, Dorothea, go...

Obediently, she went away. This was how I became a mother the very night of my wedding.

Father's temptation

In those dark days, Leszno outside the walls, Leszno of the refugees, was nothing more than an agglomeration of hovels and shacks too far from the Oder, too far from the Warta, too far from everything, lost in Poland. It was filled with refugees. Wood was lacking and it was cold, so cold. The grain came to us spoiled, full of mouse droppings and we had nothing else, no oil, so no bread, nothing but a gruel of barley or rye, sometimes a few oats. The water made us sick.

Fortunately we were surrounded by our brothers. Fires were lit here and there, and people crouched around them, ashamed of being alive, jumping up and down so as not to freeze. There were always some who swam against the current, recounting an epic, a silly story, or some vulgarity. My husband the Reverend then started singing one of his canticles which joined our souls to our bodies. A strange impression of strength and eternity passed through us. But time did not release its hold and when, out of fatigue or spite, the men gave way to lewdness, I returned to the house with the children.

Father hadn't gotten over it. His lungs, filled with water, struggled to breathe. Deathly pale, he stayed in his bed. By a sign of his finger, he sent me back to the fire. The air in the house was unhealthy. We had to save the children. I went with the others, I laughed with the children, I danced with them, I forced them into celebration.

We had found some candles and had sung around Mama. Father barely remained standing and nothing came out of his mouth. Father was not resigned, but he collapsed from exhaustion.

I had wrapped Mama in the magnificent embroidery which she herself had knit for this day; we had deposited her in the common cart that carried off the corpses every Saturday.

Little sister and little brother demanded a lot. Sadness threatened. They needed a game, some work, a distraction. We had to go against the current of despair. Pavel, the last adopted child still at home, didn't want to follow my husband the Reverend any longer. We scarcely saw him, but we heard a lot of talk about him. Some evenings he returned with a piece of meat, an onion, a bone and even some wool. Neither Ablonsky nor I asked any questions. I made a good hot soup. Father swallowed a gulp of it, and he went back to sleep.

Because of all my pestering, Ablonsky related to me the mysterious story of Father's first wife. He was eight when the village of Fulnek was pillaged and burned. He had run through the woods as far as Trebic and it was there that Father took him in with other orphans. He had never told me the details of the

story. Magdalena was the most beautiful woman in the area and that was a very great misfortune. No one knew where she had holed up with her two little girls in order to avoid debasement. Fire raged in the village and in the countryside. A certain Christina, barely sixteen, was covered with blood; she held her little brother in her arms. Pavel and other children clung to her skirt. It was she who guided the little troop from clearing to clearing as far as Trebic. People certainly had searched for the young mother and her two little girls, but no one had found them. It was only after the retreat of the troops that the bodies were discovered, lying in a cellar. When my father learned of the tragedy, he fell ill (the lungs, Ablonsky thought). Were it not for the little band of children who needed him so much, for Christina who was almost out of blood, and for the distressed Brothers of the scattered Church, he would never have gotten over it.

"He cared for the young girl as if she were his daughter, and us, as his children", Ablonsky related. He was not ignorant of medicine. We were at the castle of Zerotin, the Moravian nobleman, protector of the Brethren. The Cossacks and the plunderers were on the prowl, but no one attacked. Nevertheless, Zerotin knew that the imperials would come. Father was on the list of those condemned to death. Despite this, he delayed his departure because he was secretly participating in the resistance. He wrote his first manuscript of importance, *The Labyrinth*, remarried and you were born. However, the vise was closing. With a convoy of a thousand refugees, we left for Leszno. We had to hide the children. Many women were crying, for they didn't have the right to bring along their offspring, except for suckling infants. It's not easy to hide a child: they start to cry, they lift up a lid, they cough, they sneeze, they laugh out of nervousness. The imperials were taking them to the Jesuits to make them Catholics. When the mother refused, they ran the child through with their swords and burst out laughing"...

Father already had a hole in the bottom of his soul. Mama's death annihilated him. His lungs went to pieces. My sister Ludmila came two or three times a week. She wept on Papa and he slid his hand on her golden hair. Ablonsky circled around the bed and went away. I think he was participating in the discussions led by Kokovsky, the one who wanted to take Papa's place. Without a doubt, he should keep quiet about it. He only knew how to obey, and this exasperated Papa.

The most demanding thing was the duty of making the children happy. Mother never shirked this responsibility. And I, her eldest daughter, wasn't able to do it. Father, however, had prepared me. In all of Europe and as far as the Americas, he was considered a champion of education. But there he was, dying in front of us.

"The weight is too heavy. I can't do it. I'm overwhelmed. Papa!"

I wasn't even able to comfort my spouse the Reverend, frightened by the duty of replacing, perhaps at any moment, Father before the community. The death of Mother, for such a long time his mother, had plunged him into a double mourning. The massacre of his first mother was so cruel. He had with his own eyes seen her pierced through and through by a musket ball. He will never talk,

but I succeeded in probing this hole in his soul. It was a profound doubt about life, a doubt surrounded by too much resignation. When he took me in his embrace, that resignation became a hesitation. "That is how men talk," Mama had explained to me. "In private you can read the smallest little wrinkles of their souls. Other than that, they don't talk."

Ablonsky will never give Father permission to die. He will never let him do it... Father must not die. He has to go right to the end. It is he who has brought us up to this point... Besides, he isn't dead yet. Duty brought him back to the surface from time to time. If he caught sight of Suzanna or Daniel, he managed to sigh: "I'm getting up, children". He straightened up his smile... and fell back into a deep sleep.

I whispered my thought directly in his ear: "You have no right. The moon is in Scorpio. The stars don't stop whispering against you: Comenius hasn't completed his *Pansophia*, his *Consultation* and his *Panorthosis*... Books barely begun, we don't want, say the stars."

I whispered my thought directly in his ear: "You have no right. The moon is in Scorpio. The stars don't stop whispering against you: Komensky hasn't completed his *Pansophia*, his *Consultation* and his *Panorthosis*... Books barely begun, we don't want, say the stars."

The Brethren's choice

The winter undermined the Brethren's courage. Less and less wood for the fires, less and less songs for the heart, less and less food; the whistling of the wind, the cracking of the cold, the dismal squeaking of the funeral cart, all of this scratched the eardrums. The Brethren became morose, quarrelsome and grouchy. Rumors ran; Jan Amos Comenius, he whom the learned called Comenius, the *senior*, had failed at his task and we were going to die of hunger.

Despite all of Ludmila's reluctance, Jerome Kokovsky had, on his own authority, convoked the community of the Brethren. The great public square was packed. For good reason, Raphael Kokovsky, the father, mayor of all of Leszno's workshops, but above all a lender who had made a fortune from the war, had ordered nothing less than sheep, which were being roasted over huge fires. The aroma much more than the bell, the warmth much more than the criers, made the women and children gather... While the Reverend pastors, those of good family and the guild masters, in short, those who were eating every day, rushed into the church to discuss and decide, the populace remained outside to drink the wine and devour the meat.

I had entrusted the children to Pavel in order to do my duty as a spouse. Dressed up correctly, I accompanied my husband the Reverend. The representatives, well, three of them at least: Kokovsky, someone named Lecky, a very well educated cleric, secretary to a Polish prince, and mister my husband faced the assembly. With them and in front of us, silent and immobile, was my father's chair, empty as were seven others, attesting to the irregularity of the assembly. I took a place with a good view of my spouse. Ludmila didn't show up, nor most of the women, outside, surely, feeding their children.

- My brothers, Reverend Kokovsky began without any introduction, the urgency of the situation obliges me to speak in the absence of our *senior*, who is, as you know - gravely ill. May God take care of him! (He looked up to Heaven.) Brothers, from the beginning, we have believed in different prophecies conveyed by our very dear and very reverend Komensky. Prophecies of victory. Result: defeat. Our reverend *senior* went to England to bring our cause before the Parliament there. Result: civil war. Then came the Swedish hope; for six years, our eminent pastor pleaded our case before Her Highness. Result: at the hour at which I am speaking to you, Prague is Catholic. All these failures and yet, could we have a better leader! I conclude from this that the time has not come. As things are now, we can never return to our homes in Bohemia. We will remain in exile. So, it is our duty to ensure the viability of this exile. Our position remains fragile. Here in Poland, if we don't make any compromises, we are lost. The number of Catholics never stops increasing. We are short of food, of wood, of raw materials. We are, in fact, a besieged ghetto. If we do nothing, we will die...

I was furious. Pastor Kokovsky was taking advantage of Father's illness to attack his authority and throw us back into a dilemma a thousand times reiterated: Protestants, Catholics, which allegiance was most opportune? All this against the background of financial interests much more familial than fraternal.

In front of us, over the representatives, he had unrolled that immense map of Europe dating from 1592, drawn in Bohemia and printed everywhere. Five torches illuminated the immense parchment. The goddess Europe appeared in the form of a queen in a grand robe holding the vine stock in her left hand and the imperial globe in her right hand. This picture was always hung horizontally so that the crown and the head of the lady formed Portugal and Spain, the neck and collar represented France, the bust grouped together the Germanies, the right arm raised the imperial globe in Italy, the left held the vine stock in the Scandinavian peninsula, the feet were supported by the Orient... But the heart, the heart was Bohemia.

All of us knew what was at stake. We were what remained of the hope of the first Christians. And by our geographic destiny, we were the heart, the driving force of the spiritual blood's circulation. In sum, the sole and unique remedy was us. The only ones able to inject fraternity, equality, and liberty were us, for it was we who had drawn from the Gospel the idea of universal democracy without the exclusion of women, the poor and the infirm, a unity of all the human nations. Without this medicine, Europe was no more than a vestige of Rome thrown into the most distant barbarisms in order to subjugate all peoples. The Catholic Church had gone to bed with the Empire. And since the Council of Trent, they had glazed the whore like a jewel: the cathedrals were collapsing under the splendor. The Catholics had to be resisted and yet we were certainly not Protestants; we rejected the idea of predestination and the pessimism of original sin. But above all, we believed that the whole body had to be cured, and not cut up. We were the Church of Unity, brotherhood on the march.

The Reverend Lecky, whom everyone knew was Calvinist in allegiance, got up in his turn:

- We must not surrender to the Catholics. If we submit to the Habsburgs, we will be transformed into valets. All we can do is go to the other side...

And he poured out all the kit and kaboodle about the importance of commerce, riches as a sign of God's blessing... In fact it was all about founding a bourgeois power.

I looked at Ablonsky, my husband. I was furious. He was just as mute as me. He got up, took a step forward, searched pathetically for his words and only managed to stammer:

- Let us wait for our *senior*.

Father was completely set aside, the whole Church was in peril and my husband stayed dumb as a carp! I arose, stiff as a soldier. I was standing up with my mouth open, my arms imploring, but incapable of saying a single word. I scrutinized and stared at Father's friends, one by one. No one stirred.

From the back of the hall, a woman came forward. It was a new refugee by the name of Johanna Gajusova. We didn't know much about her. She had culture from her father and poverty from her husband, dead miserably in the mountains of Moravia. She had lost her children when they were small and since her arrival at Leszno, she took in wandering, sick, or dying little children and attempted to find families for them. She was carrying one in her arms and came close enough to touch Ablonsky, who remained speechless with surprise. She gave it to him. I understood, from my spouse's eyes, that the child was dead. Turning toward Kokovsky, she stared at him for quite a while and threw this at him:

- Where were your sheep when we were dying of hunger?

Half-turning toward Pastor Lecky, she heckled him:

- And you, my smooth talker, do you even know what despair is! And you dare profit from our dying of hunger...

Addressing all three, she continued:

- You sullen gentlemen, I have seen too many like you. (She made a quick general survey of the assembly while staring at the burghers in the front rows.) For thousands of years, you have waged war for the good, your good, according to your ideas. Can you imagine that during this time, your wars kill! So, couldn't you, for one or two centuries, stop willing our good with your ideas! She headed toward the back of the chapel, opened the two large double doors, and concluded with these words:

- Look! The blind see, why can't you see! Come, God in Heaven, come and look!

She hoped that the scales that covered our eyes would finally fall to earth. Many got up and came closer. The answer was there...

The whole community had gathered around a single large fire. The moon and the snow lit up the night. A white velvet covered the roofs of the huts. Near the fire, right next to the sparks, some old men were warming their backs and, for lack of teeth, were sucking a juicy bone. A group of young lads in a very good mood were downing gallons of wine and pitchers of beer. Somewhat tipsy, several women were prancing around a group of toddlers merrily rolling in the snow. Urchins with faces smeared with soot, armed with mutton chops, ran after girls, making them afraid. Off by himself, a donkey, taking advantage of the fact that everyone was busy elsewhere, had plunged his head in a sack of grain. At his sides, a couple of lovers stole kisses. Little rascals were sliding on a frozen pond. Little girls were pinning a mustache of tow on a big snowman. A wheel on a stake

swept away a pack of kids in a furious round dance. And the fire sighed its smells of meat...

Ablonsky, who was still carrying the infant's corpse, steadily contemplated this little people, so poor and yet bursting with hope. His eyes filled with tears. He descended the steps of the church and, with his powerful voice, began singing the best-known of our canticles:

- "Happy are the hearts pierced with windows, for they see..."

Little by little, men and women, children and old men blended their voices with his. My husband the Reverend took the road to the cemetery, not the one to the church, but the one prepared outside the city because of the epidemic. A goodly troop followed us, singing. But the Kokovskys, the Leckys and other well-off families dispersed well before our arrival. At the scene, a gruelling silence awaited us.

Under the forest of little white crosses, there was Mama and so many other mamas, fathers, husbands, too many children, too much blood. We felt this ever so delicate layer of ice that barely separated us from the dead. "If the truth is not what arrives by itself in the greatest of solitudes, it is nothing," Father said, speaking of the Brotherhood. When my husband the Reverend buried the child, lady Johanna's heart burst. Her scream cut through the night. Falling on her knees, she pushed earth into the grave. Little clods of it rolled on the child's hair. We all were paralyzed.

The Brothers were there. I knew them all. Baruch stood in front of me, hat in hand. His two little girls were leaning against him. Their cheeks still brown from the meat-juice, they were looking at the child. Brandys and his family, Elias Rondin, madame Louise and her kid, the young Samuel whose eyes had been put out by soldiers, he also, in his way, looked. All the Brothers were present. Old Juriaen stared at the child. A trickle of tears slipped down his cheek. It was good, this community, it was good.

We went back, crowded together like a herd of deer in winter, hesitant to separate from each other in order to return to our homes. There was in our gathering a scent and a warmth that was almost opaque. The cold bit us, Ablonsky and me. On the little street that led to the house, he had taken my hand and our hearts tensed in the night.

We were approaching the house. An odor of cooking aroused our curiosity at first. Then we heard children's laughter. Pushing open the door, we were astonished. Father, seated on his bed, was playing with the little ones; the warm house sweated an aroma of lamb stew and cabbage; Pavel was proudly stirring the embers of his fire.

- Shut the door, Papa ordered, you're going to make the house freeze.

The weight of things

Father was getting better and every day we could, for a few hours, put the bed away, install the printer and do our job. Ablonsky printed a pamphlet and Pavel had it circulated throughout the whole community. When he was in England just before the civil war, Father had succeeded in amassing donations for the relief of the Brethren in exile. The sum grew so considerable that it attracted the attention of the royal treasurer, who confiscated it. In the war's confusion a high-ranking official released a considerable part of it through bureaucratic inadvertence. The money reached us the day after the irregular "sheep meeting", as it was afterwards called. During the same week, the honorable Louis de Geer, a major dealer in iron throughout the Baltic and patron of the Swedish scholastic reform, sent a convoy of supplies as payment due my father for his teaching manual and his school books. As usual, Father kept for us only what was necessary; everything else went to the community.

Each family received grain, beans, and lard. The community's dependence on the Kokovsky family and the Polish prince was accordingly reduced. This poured some bad humor into Ludmila's suitor's arteries. He broke the engagement. My dearest sister didn't stay up for grabs very long. Her beauty and her dresses gave her plenty to choose from. They were hornets around the hive, and even the Catholic prefect's son showed our father kindness.

One fine morning, the sun finally filtered into our cottage, drove out the damp and the sickly humors. Father wanted to go into the countryside and chose me to escort him. We left Leszno with a piece of bread and counted on finding some cheese and small beer at a farm we knew of. The air was good and Father was humming.

The balmy breeze played in the tender grass. The rustling of the fields inspired confidence. I felt like a little girl and untied the cord in my hair. A great oak rose on the top of the hill we were climbing. Well before the Swedish adventure, and even the English one, we took this road, Papa and I. He had me climb on the first branch of the tree and we watched Leszno bustle about. He asked me to observe and name everything I saw. But I wasn't able to pronounce anything at all.

So Father resolved to teach me to write before I knew how to pronounce the smallest word. Nonetheless, sometimes, though very rarely, Papa did succeed in making me forget my infirmity..

He took my hand and shook it a little to get me out of my daydreaming:

- My daughter the missus, on this beautiful day, you surely have something to say to me.

Everything got mixed up like when I was eight years old. He stopped, caught sight of my face, and pronounced in his inimitable way:

- Daughter, so gloomy and worried a miss, free your way.

I was in his gaze as in a great calm sea. Surprise, two syllables came out of my mouth:

- To...talk...

- My daughter the missus, do you want to?

I nodded yes. He continued to walk without saying a word.

- Yes! finally came out of my mouth.

- Let's see... Let's begin with a very simple exercise. I have an idea. My daughter the missus, run. Go on, run, take your shawl, open your arms and run as if you were catching butterflies.

I hesitated. I walked timidly. He frowned and motioned to me to go faster. I had to obey. So I began to run. And little by little I sank so deeply in my memories of childhood that soon I was floating full sail ahead. I was seized by a fit of giggling. Father motioned to me to turn, to turn back again, to go here and there. He got me out of breath, gazing at me with such devilish faces that I danced like a gypsy around a fire. And we burst out laughing. Forgetting my age, I threw myself in his arms. I was his little girl.

- So, daughter, what did you see when you were whirling around?

I was completely giddy, unable to put my mind in order. So while I was searching for something to say, my mouth took the initiative:

- Flowers, leaves, butterflies.

- And what else?

- Trees. A lake...

- And the cows, you saw them?

- The cows...

- And you didn't hear anything?

- Laugh...

- Yes, I was laughing.

We were seated on a large flat stone. Leszno was coming out of the fog.

- Daughter, he declared, approach things and they will free you. (His face became stern.) For all things are equal. When one part dominates everything, it is violence. When the majority submits, it is violence... and we will die from it.

He stopped short. He took a little path I knew. The path led to a brook. We arrived there.

- Daughter, I have brought you here, not for a lesson, but for a confession. I have been so affected by Dorothea's sudden death. She was your mother too... I haven't been able... Today I want to listen to you, my daughter...

He let an enormous silence set in.

- If there is a suffering, he finally concluded, it is because our children have to set foot in our gaps...

I shrugged. He took my hand. Let go of it. Got up, sat down. His gaze grew distant.

- We are here in this broken world. Unexpectedly, events jump out in our face... We are never ready. The Jews say there are ten terrible events in a life. Ten is too many... Life is what educates us. All the others, parents, friends, teachers, are only commentators...

He stopped talking. He leaned my head against his shoulder.

- Daughter, it is in these terrible moments that we will need her...

He looked at me for a moment. He plunged one hand into the cascade, played for a moment with the water, then, in a burst of laughter, shook his fingers, throwing cold drops on me.

- You are so much like her...

He looked at me. I looked at him. It was then that he let loose with this:

- Understand me, daughter. To who else could I entrust the weight that I carry? To who else? It won't be the future *senior*, my adopted son and your husband, who will be able to lift it.

... And then there was the wedding. From everywhere people had brought roses, daisies, orchids. The church was full to bursting with them. Each gust of air made our minds giddy. It was in joy and celebration that they became one. Side by side, we felt that they were as strong as oaks.

It was I who had introduced him to Johanna Gajusova, convinced that they were made for each other. I had obeyed Mother's order. Three or four times, he brought Daniel and Suzanna to her home, and she fell wildly in love with them. Except for Pavel, she had in a short time won over all the family. Ludmila took advantage of this to slip out of the house; she had a thousand errands to do, at the market, and sometimes even with the Catholics where she exchanged, she said, lacework for pretty dresses. Her hair was so well done, she was so fancied up, made up, and tinted that one would have said she was a Catholic.

The lady moved in to our place the day that we left, Father, my husband and I for the grand tour of consultation with the Brethren in the Habsburg lands. Despite all the journey's dangers, I was happy to depart and leave the responsibility for the children with Johanna.

The Maramone

I was no longer the dreamy, unstable and gloomy adolescent I was before. Mourning and responsibility had matured me. I had become aware that I had a place in the community. The fact of being mute was no more than an inconvenience. I had the advantage of not talking foolishness! People ascribed to me seriousness, levelheadedness, and prudence. They asked me for advice. I was circumspect with all these questions, analyzed them, foresaw the consequences, wrote my point of view in pithy phrases. I was Mrs. Jablonsky. Our income was modest, but I wore a good linen dress, a wide ribbon at the waist, and a little lace bonnet that held my bun in place. I smelled of ink and wax polish and this pleased me.

A Brother who meets a Brother knows what it is to go along the edge of the woods, take cowpaths, squelch through the mud, be saddled with the scorn of the "elect". Reputation is the poor man's last protection. Thus the only thing I dreaded about the journey was to have to swap my clothing for disguises. And Father insisted. We had to don the gowns and the appearance of Calvinists.

I was wearing that gown, which looked very bad on me, when someone entered without knocking. Stunned, I looked at her from head to foot. I simply couldn't get over it. The signs of her profession poured out everywhere. In a shrill voice, she said:

- Mrs. honest woman, know that in a house where a Bohemian woman brings tow, a German will never find hemp. So trust me, I guarantee that you will be protected, you, your father, and your good husband. You won't find a better guide or a better price.

She made a smile, thick with lipstick to the point where her makeup cracked everywhere.

- I have scoured the countryside better than anyone, she added without waiting. I don't need the beating of drums or fifes to know where the Imperials are hiding, their spies and all the same old stuff. There aren't many who have hidden their culverin from me. They are no more Catholic than I am a virgin...

She let out a trumpeting snigger and continued:

- To control an Imperial's blunderbuss with my charms was my profession. I did not, like you, Mrs. respectable, preserve my virginal crown for a blond burgher. The war, I know. Ah! how I can smell them from a distance, these pitiful serpents. So keep quiet, Mrs. Figus of Rabosseky, sleep good and warm in your minstrel's arms, you'll be alive tomorrow to cuddle your little ones, on my word as a Jezebel..."

This is how the Maramone spoke, as crudely as a Swabian, mangling the names of all those she ought to respect. She wore a feathered hat that made her look like a screech-owl and, in order to startle people no doubt, had sewn on it a little silver cross. It was, of all her accoutrements, the precious thing; as for the rest, she wore the soutane of her profession.

My father the Reverend had hired her as a guide and Madame his new wife was in agreement. The courtesan strutted quite proudly throughout the neighborhood. We were the laughingstock of everyone.

He had, to be sure, forced her to don the black dress of Calvinist widows, but her abundant bosom had already burst two buttons, displaying rather well the weapons she knew how to make use of. He had forbidden her to put on jewelry, glass beads, squirrel fur, or the airs of a countess she affected sometimes with her fan. A whole set of props, so worn out moreover that she seemed even more desirable in leaving them behind.

I had asked Mr. my husband to raise an objection with my father. Libouschka of Maramone, in spite of her efforts to present a good appearance, betrayed a sordid past incompatible with our pastorate. A woman of so bad a life could only bring misfortune. I had prepared my timid Ablonsky so well that he pleaded the case in terms perfectly clear to the ears of everyone.

- Don't you know, Reverend my father, that such a woman is...is...the symbol of those we are fighting against. Walking beside her, you think about it...

To this objection, Father gave this answer:

- Mr. my son-in-law, appearances are often deceiving.

She was our guide.

Our equipment would have appeared extremely modest: an old donkey for baggage as limited as could be, its only weight our Kralice Bible, some dried fish and herb bread. We went together: Reverend Father, Mr. my husband, she whom we had, by Father's order, to call " Mrs. widow Libouschka of Maramone", and I, the respectable pastor's wife, who had to walk next to her as if she were my sister; all four dressed in black from head to toe, more austere than Calvin himself. Father's whole strategy was to make us as somber as the countries we had to cross. The whore, however, crowed, guffawed, and spread her perfumes. The further we got from Leszno, on the other side of the hills, as we headed toward Trzebnica, the more the horror of the war opened up its guts. The fields, gray with thistles and brush, gave off odors of burning and carrion. We felt as if we were crossing a desert. As Poland gave way to the Germanies, shadows came out. Among the bushes, carcasses of horses and of all sorts of animals; next to the farmhouses, corpses; hanging from the big trees, clusters of corpses. As for

the living, they resembled standing caskets, floating under heavy brown blankets. They wandered without a cry, without a tear, without a goal.

Their silence would no doubt have engulfed us were it not for the Maramone, who didn't know how to shut up.

- I got sixty pistoles for it, she squealed. Yes, madame, I subjected their trumpets to a king's ransom, the cuirassiers as much as the dragoons, the carabineers as much as the captains. The thing brings in money without too much trouble. We got out of a tough spot, my Patrack and I. You, you haven't known war, Mrs. Figtree of Rabosseky. That's obvious. I'm going to explain it to you. The emperor didn't have enough gold to raise an army, so mercenaries were provided for the business. Wallenstein had made himself master of the Commission of Confiscations. He didn't have any rivals except for the Jesuits of Prague. With the help of the banker Henry de Witte, that dirty traitor to Bohemia, he amassed such a fortune that he proposed to raise for the emperor, the greatest of Catholics, an army of eighty cannons, five thousand cavaliers and thirty-five thousand infantrymen. And that, Madame, that eats, and not just cabbages, and that sleeps, and not just with woolen blankets...

I couldn't stand that screech-owl's cries. We stopped next to a well. Mr. my husband was going to throw the pail down in it, but remained paralyzed. In the bottom of the well, swollen bodies floated. We approached a hut covered with new thatch. A thin but sturdy woman opened the door for us. Three children played around the table, laughing. The woman gave us water and Father handed her bread. Lord God in Heaven! How good that house's shelter would have been without the hooting of our guide.

- I was that kid's age when they arrived (our whore pointed shamelessly at the little girl of the house). My father didn't have a coward's hide. He stabbed one with his knife. They cut his throat. Mother got a bullet in the middle of her chest and me, they penetrated me in another way. I was the sole survivor of the house. After making use of me, they were going to throw me in the fire, but Patrack, the leader of that gang of Imperials, didn't see it that way. Quick as a flash, he carried me off on the run and it was in the train of the army that we made war. And there, my girl (she was addressing the little one), we had a real good time. There were about a hundred of us: clodhoppers, deserters, Poles, gypsies, whores, people of every trade. We sucked the pay and the booty of the poor bastards who went from battle to battle to get themselves filled with holes for religion. The more the war went on, the more wretched the population. The more wretched the population, the more the army's train increased; the more the army's train increased, the more of what the soldiery took got taken. So, they needed more battles to get more booty. For lack of enemies, the garrison razed the countryside and sometimes even besieged allied cities in order to make them cough up all their meats, their wine, their gold and their treasures. It was into our pockets that all this ended up falling. We ate lard, we put butter in our soup. That, my little rascal, that's having brains.

The little girl of the house looked at the Maramone with eyes round with wonder. To lessen the scandal, Reverend my father said nothing more than niceties. Worse,

sometimes he took her hand as if she had been his daughter. Ablonsky kept silent.

At times our guide had to sit on the donkey because her legs were too delicate. We went from village to village. In that gray monotony we were surely the only ones to go anywhere, spreading quite a furor. We must have seemed quite unusual in that unbearable destitution and I had to overcome my pride to pull our donkey onward. For it was I, the pastor's daughter, who had to pull the beast.

The martyr

We were approaching Bohemia. Following the Gory mountain chain through the forest, we hoped to reach Olomouc and Prerov well before winter. But the whore led us into dense woods, far from the roads. She and my father discussed at some length the best route, the resupply places, the dangers. We were now in Habsburg territory where no heretic could set foot without risking his life. We often stopped to listen to the forest. It was restful, for even the Maramone kept silent. And then, she started up again:

- Ah! just look, good God! the whore said, pointing at the dead soldiers. Some lucky ones who weren't cooked on the grill, buried alive or nailed on a tree. You know, Mrs. Figurative of Blonsky, I became a sutler, yes me, a sutler. It was after my Patrack was hanged. I had three men for the kitchen, five girls for the bed and two stout lads for protection. I was at the peak of my fortune. I negotiated directly with the provost in charge of the supply train and took officers and captains into my featherbed. A man, dear Mrs. Figurine, on the eve of a battle where his life isn't worth a red cent, all he thinks about is giving a fortune to wear himself out on top of a pretty lady. There's nothing to understand about it. A man is a woman, minus a brain. They want wealth, they squander their own fortune; they love life, they risk it; they want to command, they obey; they want a woman, they stick together; they sow their seed, they run away from babies, they have their head full of ideals and they make war. And me! Well, I make the men dance on my snuffbox...

And she kept on squealing about all the horrors of the war. She was making so much noise that even before we had heard anything at all, we were surrounded by five strong men, pistols in hand.

- What do you want? Father asked, covering the trembling in his voice with a resolute tone.

- Everything, their leader answered, laughing.

- Hold on, Father answered, opening one of the packs on our donkey's back, we have bread and a Bible, do you want me to read to you?

- Ah! Holy God, Calvinists and educated to boot. That's a lot of money, cried the leader.

- Is that any way to treat your mistress, Fulmy, you old scoundrel, don't you recognize your turtledove? the Maramone said, approaching him.

- By all the devils, the sutler, Calvinist!

- It's my trade. At my age, you have to think about changing professions. I deal in Calvinists, Lutherans, Calixtines, heretics of every kind. I have here three who are worth not just trillions, but a big pile of gold. You must not damage them because I know a Jesuit who likes to burn them good and fresh. When you know what I have in my hands, you wouldn't even sneeze for fear of getting them dirty. Merchandise like that is more precious than a Russian chalice.

The one she called Fulmy looked at us for a long time, up and down and down and up, from close up rather than at a distance, for one of his eyes had been put out. A horrible scar ran all across his face. Having looked us up and down and felt us like fish at the market, the gang brought us to their camp. A discussion with our betrayer stretched on until late in the afternoon. Then, one of the men left with orders to negotiate the best price for us with the Jesuit friend of the traitress or with another, if he didn't get a good rate.

We were thunderstruck, unable to realize what was happening to us. They led us into a kind of cave. Ablonsky alone had his hands tied, for the entrance to the cave was so narrow that all they needed to do to protect their catch was to stand next to the exit, around the fire. The Maramone ate with them, making herself comfortable. Half-unbuttoned, seated like a man on a mossy stone with elbows on her knees, she liberated all her charms and recounted her spiciest affairs. The wine flowed, pistols stuck out of shirts, and meat juice ran out of mouths.

She was as cheerful as a she-wolf returning to her lair with a good catch. Father and Mr. my husband were reading the Bible. The former was as serene and trusting as a baby, the latter like one preparing for death.

- Do you remember Magdeburg? the Maramone asked Fulmy out of the blue. Wasn't it me who made you go over to the Imperials' side? No, it wasn't me? And if you had stayed on the Swedish side, you wouldn't be ogling your old boss now. You owe me one.

- Remind me, my head is full of holes, Fulmy replied.

- Gather round, you pests, I'm going to make your hair stand on end.

She motioned to one of the gang, a big redhead who was eyeing me, to sit down in front of her and she lifted her skirt a little more.

- Gustavus Adolphus, the monarch of Sweden, and his Protestant League had cheated. The companies hadn't waited for the end of winter to attack. It wasn't good for our business, we made more in winter quarters than on campaign. Reinforced by the duke of Mecklenburg's troops, he got hold of Frankfurt-on-the-Oder and K uszttrin. He occupied the Neumark and threatened the Elector of Brandenburg's possessions. He appeared to be firmly in the saddle. So we had to do battle. Who was the sutler who guessed that Gustavus Adolphus would not come to the rescue of Magdeburg and that the Catholics would piss blood about it? Not me!

Fulmy kept his head lowered and spat straight ahead. The redhead winked at me, and the Maramone addressed him directly.

- In any case, it's not your fault, my hooligan, if your boss is in such good health today. It wasn't so easy to see what was coming... The emperor had dismissed Wallenstein. The Catholics only had Tilly. But me, I knew Tilly's general, the handsome Pappenheim, intimately. Yes, himself in person, stark naked, with all the instruments of his nature. That's the advantage of being a beautiful woman and not too much of a prude. (The redhead turned his head in my direction.) A Calvinist like that one there, my redhead, is as cold as ice and bites to tear off your ears. And besides, she's our merchandise, mine and Fulmy's. Don't even think about it and listen to my story. Pappenheim, I knew he was an unbeatable swashbuckler, a pitiless carnivore and more stubborn than a billygoat. The real article. So when Tilly decided to march on Magdeburg, I guessed what was going to happen and I had my plan.

- Anyone would have known, the redhead interjected.

- False, the Maramone cut him off. On the contrary, nobody knew. It was in April that the Imperials besieged the city. Thirty thousand badly paid mercenaries, they raze a country to the ground. Soon the city was starving to death. Magdeburg was still confident, though. It was well laid out, with towers and strong walls. But me, I knew that there weren't any more than three thousand men aboard and only a few hundred Swedes. Eh! Look, I had some good-looking girls who crossed over and shared pillows with the Falkenbergs.

The redhead stood bolt upright and went to hit Father over the head. But Fulmy yelled at him to keep still. So he gagged him to the point of suffocation and the Maramone continued. The fearsome robbers only had eyes for her. And she, gesticulating like a partridge, chest exposed, continued to remind them that they were indebted to her and that if they let themselves go, she would make it very hot for them.

- It was still April, she continued, when the Catholics took most of the outposts. Inside the walls, the populace was now in despair, ready to surrender, but Falkenberg, the commander of the city, announced that Swedish reinforcements were coming. There wasn't a trace of those reinforcements. The city was abandoned...

She burst out laughing.

- Falkenberg, the Maramone endlessly continued, succeeded, by means of intrigues, in persuading the City Council to burn the suburbs of Sudenberg and Neustadt, outside the city walls. He wanted to discourage Tilly from finding booty, our booty. The municipality refused to surrender. The hunger and misery was pitiful to see. Tilly made an ultimatum in order to avoid a slaughter. Falkenberg refused. So Tilly ended up by believing that the Swedes really were on

the point of arriving. And tell me, who was on the Swedish side defending a school reform that would distract Gustavus Adolphus from his plans? Who? None other than the pastor here.

And she pointed at Father.

- So, this good man, he's money, a big pile of money, but we have to keep them alive, him, the scaredy-cat and the goody-goody.

- We won't even break a single one of his teeth, Fulmy agreed, and the girl, nobody is going to touch her. But go on, I feel like you're coming to the best part.

- Tilly gave the order to bombard, the Maramone concluded. Ten days of cannons, and finally he let his dogs loose. What carnage! But what booty! Do you remember it, Fulmy?

- Holy God, don't I remember! Fulmy answered. The officers were so drunk that all it took to empty them of their takings was to hit them with the heel of a shoe. The dummies! They had set fire to the whole city themselves, and then they left like hornets and we picked them off at the gates.

- The best thing, the Maramone concluded, was that the news of the massacre mobilized the Protestant League in spite of the advice of the pastor here. Gustavus Adolphus now had all the Protestant princes behind him. Fifteen more years of such a profitable war, fifteen years for our businesses... How good it is, religious people's gold! They fight and the meat falls into our plate. And now we can sell the Calvinist to the Habsburgs and the Catholic to the Protestant princes...

For two days she talked, two days and two nights. At night, it was very different words, moanings my ears couldn't stand. Impossible to sleep. And Papa praying and Mr. my husband trembling. I wanted to die. A terrible anxiety stifled me, especially when the redhead, wrapped only in a wild animal skin, stared at me while wiping his knife on his tongue. The Maramone, cheerful and always drunk, indefatigable and insatiable, always ended up leading him into her bed. Their clucking, their bleating, their whinnying made my blood run cold.

And the Maramone laughed, and the Maramone purred, and the Maramone moaned with pleasure. Could a person fall that low? It was a miracle that my heart didn't explode.

The redhead had disengaged himself from the whore. For hours he gazed at me, stared at me. The whore placed herself, completely naked, between him and me. He threw her against a wall. I turned around, intending to smash my head against the rock.

Pow! The man was dead and two other brigands were lying in their blood, pierced through and through. Some men, coming from I don't know where, had saved us... They led us even deeper into the forest, to the top of a small mountain, and

into a village of log cabins called Luka. They welcomed us into their community with a great celebration. They were United Brethren, a little strange, but Brothers.

At the little paradise

Some time later...

Songs, meat, fires, children, women, warmth... The pastor had been saved. Father was known in the village as "the patron". How many supplies had he sent there! Nobody knew it. And all the provisions passed via the Maramone.

A woman approached me.

- Are you Elisabeth, Dorothea's daughter?

I nodded "yes".

- The mute girl, the real daughter of the real Dorothea! I can't believe it. Madame Libouschka, the one whom everyone calls the Maramone, loved your mother so much. ...

I burst into tears.

Three men were holding the Maramone high off the ground, seated in a chair. She was laughing till she cried as she sang a Gloria accompanied by Mr. my husband who was still trembling. It was the most beautiful Gloria I had heard in all my life. She kissed the cross on her hat. She told the story as if it had been a farce. But everyone knew of her martyrdom.

The little community of the faithful, half-Adamite from living in the forest, had a Jesuit as its protector, a Jesuit from Olomouc who knew very well that Jesus was neither Catholic nor Calvinist, but on fire with love for all the poor. She had saved us, and at what a price!

Families lived happily in these woods. There were children in every cabin. These people rejected marriage and shared everything. In the summer, they often went nearly naked in the forests, but as for the rest, they embraced Chelcicky's dream, at least as much as they understood of it, for they had no education. The Maramone alone knew how to read the community's Bible. She taught them as well as she could, and between two Gospels, threw out a spicy remark. Everyone had compassion for the vulgar wrapping of this emotionally war-wounded woman.

We only had to open our ears to know in what cottage Mrs. widow Libouschka of Maramone was letting her voice loose. From one family to another, she twittered like a finch mixtures of Bible stories and colorful anecdotes. She laughed a little more every day, and talked a little less every night. And then we stopped hearing her. The Maramone had passed away.

She had bled to death. The woman who took care of her saw her body so mutilated that they thought that the force that kept her alive so long must have been supernatural.

Her last words were for me:

- Tell madame Lisabeth to pray for my wicked soul and give her my feather hat. I would have so much wanted to be an honest woman. God have mercy on me!

The return to the homeland

A silence enveloped me like a drop of ice. Time froze, petrified. My heart was devastated.

Winter filtered in through the logs of the cabin, numbing the flies and the lice in my straw tick. Winter whistled the tunes of Mr. my husband's psalms. It froze the ants and the cockroaches on the edges of the chamber pot. Hoarfrost settled on the table, on the table legs, on the benches, on the breeches of my father who was seated on the bench.

Beneath the table, a spiderweb remained deserted. A white dust covered the fibers of the web. A fly's wing shivered on its shroud of white silk.

Spread out on the table, some pages were being spotted with ink. Father slipped his pen over the parchment. A black line rolled, twisted, broke. A drop of water fell from Papa's eye, spotting the paper. He smoothed his gray beard. His eyes went, came, and sometimes stopped. Then the spiderweb too froze in its frost. The fly's wing seemed pinned to a pane of glass.

At last! Everything had stopped. Nothing would arise in the frozen globe of things. Not anything any more. Impassivity of frozen time. Papa had spotted the paper and nothing moved any more. The wheel of the world resided in that spot. And if the wheel stopped! Forever. And if the wheel stopped! End point. And if my eyes stayed open! Forever. . Stop time between the tick and the tock, see the earth freeze in a drop, watch the drop turn to ice in the mandibles of the fly..

My husband entered. He came near and caressed for a moment Madame Libouschka of Maramone's hat, which I was crushing in my arms. He looked deep into my eyes. He checked to see if I was going to move. He turned away. The wind slammed the door. He came back, went away again. It was the clock. My frozen heart was the point in the middle of the clock. If I succeeded in keeping myself from existing, the earth might live a year in peace, perhaps...

Winter whistled between the logs. The paper was being covered with a thin line of ink. Drops wept and spots formed once more. The world hesitated and started up again. I wanted to die. But Father stared deep into my eyes.

One drop of life in a furrow and day is separated from night, another drop and the firmament escapes the waters, another and the waters gather, exposing the continent, one more and green plants break through the earth, and trees break through the green plants, and animals trample the flowers, and man plunges his sword into the lamb. Seven days and rest. I rested in my halted existence.

In the beginning was the word, and the word made the world. So, be forever silent. Put out the light! I didn't eat any more, I didn't drink any more, I didn't sleep any more. With open eyes, I stared at a dried flower bud in the felt of the hat. All I had to do was wait and the heart too would stop beating.

Mr. my husband entered and began to sing. His subterranean voice made tears arise in the icy trunk of the back of my neck. I ascended in a flood of tears that longed to gush out of my eyes. My body was plunged in a sea. The spider leaped in the middle of the web, the bud opened. And death expelled me.

He tore the hat away. My arms enveloped my blond husband and my thighs opened like a corolla. Lady Libouschka of Maramone was coming back to life, she was opening her body to the flesh. You must take the man to make a child of him.

The village of Luka awoke from its numbness in a nest of sun. Leaves pierced through the snow. Women got together to knit wool. They were making layettes. Many were pregnant. Winter had held us in its grip. Except for the mountains, nothing oppressed this village. I was among these women in a land of peace. All we had to do was make time pass from one stitch to the other, to take the men back into the womb of a new creation so that they would never go off into an idee fixe again.

Nature was our harbor. It kept us at such a small distance from the cycles of life and death that we never dreamed of leaving.

My father didn't understand it that way. He led me on to a promontory from where one could see as far as Olomouc. In the valleys, the smoke rose from the villages, apparently peaceful. But anyone with keen hearing would have heard the women complaining: "Why make us pregnant if it's only to kill our children"! War prowled in the bodies of mad dogs.

I wanted to stay in the mountains, in one of the cabins of the Brothers' hamlet. Do a woman's work; plant the garden, pick berries and mushrooms, wash the wool, feed the children, spin, knit, weave, harvest, thresh, confront cold, harshness, death that is pure, death without hate, provided that it be far from war, far from obsessions, flags and swords.

I wanted to withdraw, desert. I knew that my father would refuse. It was useless to ask it of him. He had planned to leave Luka with the melting of the snow, leave for Skalice, Straznice, Prerov, on Habsburg land still loaded with both sides' mercenaries and go as far as Horni Povazy in Hungary where the resistance was said to be organizing.

Unable to utter a word, I threw myself in tears upon his chest. He gently wrapped himself around me:

- Speak, Lisbeth, speak, or you'll end up exploding.

I freed myself so that he could read my face. He did read it, but he didn't say anything. I thought he was going to cry, for his eyes misted over with tears.

- My daughter, you won't stay here; you would waste your happiness. I understand that temptation, I've felt it myself so many times, but I won't let you do it...(My whole body was shaking.) Unless... Unless you answer my question.

He stepped back a few paces and threw this at me:

- Explain to me, Mrs. my daughter, why you would need to stay here, sheltered from the madness of the world?

I shrugged, so he continued.

- It is written: "God repented having made man". Why didn't he stay in Heaven? Why Jesus?

I remained mute. He took a few steps toward me again and fired off once more:

- Why do men do the opposite of what they want?

He advanced another step. I was exasperated, so I shouted at him:

- I don't know. But I don't want to!

He opened his eyes wide. I was as surprised as he was. I was defying him.

- There it is, the most beautiful thing in the world! That a child finally turns against her father.

- I hate you.

And I burst into tears.

- Dear Mrs. my daughter, he replied, taking me in his arms, your freedom will not be about crawling in the furrows of your fear..

The next day, we headed out.

Czechoslovakia had changed its face. The country no longer resembled the paradise Mama had spoken of. And far from it! Between the start of the war and the signing of the peace treaty, the homeland had increased its German population but lost more than half of its Czech population. In the towns and villages considered Hussite, the losses were enormous. The war and the restoration of Catholicism had taken their toll. The Hussites had been pushed back into the mountains or into silence. The Catholics had taken control of the beer, the linen, the cloth and the textile trades. Their fish-farms flourished. For them, fish was obligatory. On the other hand, they stifled the Protestant economy.

Every man, every woman, every child had borne witness to the greatest horrors. Fear reigned. The villages appeared deserted, shadows fled, doors closed, dogs' muzzles came out of the shutters. A garrison was making its rounds. In the middle of the public square, a magpie on the gallows held the town in its sights. The magpie could be a sister, a neighbor, a husband, a son. Information was sold for bread. One died, the other ate. Here and there insane men shouted, knocked on doors, cursed at lampposts, embraced dead cats.

The peace treaty had been signed. But who could celebrate? What was this peace? In fact, the war had gone inward. It hid in the entrails of humans. As long as there is fighting, war is outside, one sees it, one hates it. But when the fighting stops, the war enters and devours from within. So, how to organize a resistance without plunging everyone into a bloodbath? All the more so since Father didn't have unanimous support. He had been the protégé of Charles of Zerotin. Now, this noble had not been without controversy. He had remained ambivalent throughout the rebellion. His older sister had been married to the triple traitor Wallenstein. Certainly Father, even while taking refuge with Charles of Zerotin, had secretly supported the resistance directed by Charles' brother, Ladislav Velen of Zerotin. A skillful geographer, Father had drawn a very detailed map of all of Moravia to aid in the organization of a peaceful resistance. But that was something little known.

We arrived in a place near Skalice where plans had been made to consecrate a small church. Father calculated that no garrison would come to disturb this village, too close to Hungary where the royal family was expecting us. Reverend Father had received an invitation on behalf of the royal widow, Szusanna of Hungary, for the reform of education in the cities subject to her rule.

We had set up camp on the other side of the Morava which, at this time of year, was still discharging its meltwater.

We had made a fire on a promontory from which we could observe the village. Ablonsky had been sent to announce our arrival and make sure of the right time for the ceremony. The sun was setting behind us, casting a shroud of blood on the village. I saw in it a bad omen.

Just as a bird encourages its fledgling to fly, Father pushed me toward the edge of the escarpment. I had burrowed into myself like a turtle in its shell... Except that I didn't have a shell. So I trembled, I choked.

- There you are, Mrs. my daughter, in the winepress of the world. But you're not yet outside. And me, it's no use being your father, I'm powerless to make you leave your womb of silence.

I couldn't say a word.

- Since you don't talk, Mrs. my daughter, I am going to talk. Too bad for you. Close your ears good and hard, because I feel like talking.

In response to a childhood reflex, I stuck my tongue out at him. This put him in a good mood, but as for me, his good mood got me mad. He took a pebble and placed it on a rock.

- Don't listen, Mrs. my child, I'm talking to it because it listens and it answers; it's a pebble with a big mouth.

He took a few steps away from the pebble, then abruptly turned back toward it. "Take off your sandals, for you are walking on holy ground". He was pretending that the pebble was God talking to Moses. He removed his buskins, which took awhile because there was a knot in one of his laces. He carefully suspended his shoes on a branch and took a few steps toward the village while wiggling his toes. Then, he put his hands behind his ears in order to listen in every direction.

- Nature speaks. I hear it. It whispers: "I am what has its origin in itself and, me, I speak from myself..."

Father was capsizing in his philosophy. He turned back toward the pebble and continued:

- You have correctly understood, my dear pebble, what Nature says. You are, then, going to have to begin yourself.. Through this you are, master pebble, a holy being. "Me, a holy being!" the pebble exclaimed. "What do you mean," Nature answers him, "you know how to drink light. Obviously you are a little hardheaded. So it's up to you to act like a rock if that's what pleases you. But you could sing better than a finch..." "Sing!" the pebble answers, you're crazy."

He pulled up a tree seedling.

- "See," Nature continues, "see there, right there, in its roots, there is a tiny pebble that is crumbling, that is giving its substance to the shrub, that is slipping into its veins and that is going off to sing in its leaves in accord with the breeze and the wind." So if a stone can sing, you can free your way, Mrs. my daughter. One day, our memory must vomit us like the whale vomited Jonah. We must set foot in a new dawn.

He finally fell silent, stretched out well covered up next to the fire and, after a few minutes, began to snore softly.

The ceremony did not take place in the church, but on the village square. Too many people had come from all of Moravia, from Bohemia, from Hungary and even from Transylvania. Some met friends, others came to hear an educator famous in all of Europe, but for everyone or almost everyone, he was first of all their *senior*. And their *senior* came to indicate to them the direction to take. He embodied the hope of their Church. That Church was all that was left to them.

Ablonsky had had the gallows removed and a podium set up. He had brought together the best choristers. They started singing a canticle. The crowd became a single person.

With the crowd made ready, Father stepped forward:

- Sisters and brothers in the trial, I see only one resistance possible for the spiritual Church that we are: universalization, education, democracy. It is the only way. What interests us in the labyrinth of the world are the seeds of humanity. Education consists of providing these seeds with the best conditions for unfolding. Democracy consists of acting in such a way that each of these seeds participates in the metamorphosis of the labyrinth. Universalization consists of living the Gospel not according to some particular tradition but in all the forms that suit the places and the circumstances... I am undertaking a vast consultation. I want to know what solution you propose. We must think of a constitution that can permit us to pass through time not in one particular form but in an essence that adapts its form...

Such was his message. A message that whispered like air on a stone. The stone remained motionless, and the wind, no one had seen it. Some said that we must become Catholic, others that we must become Calvinist. Many thought that Comenius had given up and that his speech was only hollow words.

The first lesson

At Lednice, a certain Nicholas Drabnik, a fiery preacher of the Brethren, had preached nothing less than the defeat of the two-headed Antichrist, Catholic and Protestant.

This had raised new hopes. Salvation could come from the south, from Hungary. But the prince of Hungary had the audacity to conclude a separate peace with the emperor. We had been betrayed once again. Drabnik the prophet wanted to take revenge and, through prayer, made God's wrath fall upon the prince. The prince died the same year as the Westphalia treaties were signed.

His widow, Szuzanna of Hungary, had invited us. Even while cursing Drabnik the prophet of doom, she was not insensitive to the plan for a union of the Protestants that she thought was Father's project. Her plan began with the marriage of her son Sigmund to Henrietta Maria, daughter of Frederick the palatine, the hero of Bohemia. The marriage would be magnificent and would seal a promising alliance. The Protestant forces could once again unite and overthrow the Catholic antichrist. Such was the new dream. The hope for a Protestant union slipped, then, from Sweden to Hungary. Because of this, Father passed from the North to the South. He had a knack for going to the exact spot where tragedy happens.

Rather than war, Reverend my father advised pursuing, simply but intensely, the improvement of human affairs. More precisely, he proposed to begin the reform with the royal family itself and, thanks to education, extend that reform from the castle to the whole city, then from the city to the country, from the country to Bohemia, from Bohemia to the Germanies... "Joy", he said, "is always the best of weapons. If our reform gives happiness, it has no need of weapons."

He won the favor of the gracious and noble dowager, widow Szuzanna. Education is always a good thing. But reforming the royal family, already so well instructed, was out of the question. It was agreed to send Ablonsky to Berlin to negotiate the marriage of Sigmund to the princess Henrietta Maria. We received a residence and the duty and power to reform education at the castle, in all the city and its territories, and this, for a pretty annuity.

We could finally settle down in a real house, a small estate comprising a vineyard, garden and orchard. Lady Johanna and the children arrived in the course of the month (Ludmila and Pavel didn't want to leave Leszno). The summer shone, the garden yielded, the chickens pecked, Suzanna and Daniel froliced in the surrounding fields, Johanna, radiant, took care of the entire household. A warm tranquillity constructed its domain, a clearing in this misfortune.

With Ablonsky gone, I assisted Reverend my father myself. Busy as bees, we walked with a springy step. Father radiated energy. He wanted to remake the

world. He didn't even ask himself if the thing were possible, it was necessary and that was enough for him. He put his shoulder under the mountain and, whistling, pushed, convinced of his ability to change the course of the monster of "habits".

Our small estate was on a hillside between the castle, higher up, and the little city, lower down. The town was in fact nothing more than a long street running along the Bodrog river. We went from the castle to the town square to negotiate, discuss, distribute our opuscles, organize meetings, listen... Every guild, church, tavern, school, grouping was consulted, starting from Father's printed text:

"The school should aim at the complete development of everyone to the point of making each one a sovereign being, a lever of democracy. Everyone, boys and girls, poor and rich, disabled and healthy, should be on the way to self-development. Set only one person aside and the whole enterprise loses its legitimacy... Each school should be conceived of as a little paradise. Let us break open the building with large windows, let us surround it with a garden with scattered trees, let us transform its walls into views, for first of all it is nature which should teach. The pupils will hear the birds, touch the animals, be constantly in the presence of things... Everything that is taught should be shown... All violence will be driven out of the school: the grayness of the walls, the austerity of the classes, the rigidity of the benches, the physical inactivity so contrary to the nature of children... The school simply does not have the right to create a dislike for learning... Everything must be taught. Culture does not consist of acquiring scattered knowledges, but of grasping totalities... The sun is immense and of a very great heat and yet it cannot set the smallest twig afire unless its rays are concentrated by means of a lens. A couple concentrates its love, and a child results from this. A community concentrates on its children, and we have a school."

In fact, Father was demanding the total opposite of what schools were in Hungary. Through the disastrous defeat at Mohacs in the previous century, the Turks had for decades made themselves masters of the Hungarian plain. It was said and it had been demonstrated here more than in other places: "Their way of making deserts is their greatest weapon." They pastured sheep, goats, camels and horses in such unbelievable numbers that the earth died. They had departed, yes! But not the desert. The peasantry was dying. Utter poverty and despair undermined their courage. The apothecaries, the market stalls, the workshops, the forges had nothing to do. Men and women got involved in quarrels. The clerics and the literate had left the country. Children who, out of boredom, had grown uncontrollable were crammed into ramshackle shelters. Added to this was the fact that a large number of children had been witnesses to all sorts of horrors. Their trust had been devastated more than the countryside. So, the whip was used to abuse, and the circle of misery closed.

The situation was so catastrophic that a reform on the national scale was inconceivable. Father had the idea of making theater the motivating force of his reform. "We will make the stage a school", he had ordered. "The pupils will be spurred on by the desire to make a good impression, the parents will participate,

the community will be proud of itself and will get out of its torpor. Starting from the castle, we will be able to spread our influence..."

We had to first convince the Calvinist pastor, the austere and inflexible Jonas Tolnai. Father wrote a play entitled *Diogenes the cynic*. It was judged "too profane for such a holy enterprise". He composed *The Patriarch Abraham...* "You must not use so holy a text for such profane ends!" He went back to work and transformed his most celebrated schoolbook, *The open Door of languages*, into a series of educational skits. The pastor had to lay down his arms.

The second obstacle came from the mayor of the shoemakers' guild, the richest if not the most powerful person in the town. Despite the grotesque self-importance this man displayed, he was said to be constantly on the defensive. He had grown so fat that he staggered on his too-delicate ankles. He saw no one and distrusted everyone. In order to be admitted to his home, the royal widow's intervention was necessary. At first contact, Father was speechless. He told me later that the mayor looked exactly like a Moravian traitor he had met long ago. That man, who by now ought to be dead or very old, had made a fortune by selling the heads of our Czech representatives one by one. However it may be, the discussion was brief. Only the princely money overcame his stubbornness.

A great hall in the castle was transformed into seven classes. Father appointed me professor of the Vestibule, the cohort that was learning the alphabet. No grumbling. After all, it was the smallest class: sixty-two children from six to twelve years old when lady Johanna finished persuading the mamas to let their little girls go. Little folks, little boys and girls who needed me. I who had the good fortune to be raised by him... I who knew perfectly his *Great Didactic...*

There was nothing that I, incapable of objection, could say that would have been enough to convince him!

From the peasantry to the burghers, passing through all the flunkeys, the families directly connected to the castle had to send their children to it, by order of her Highness Szuszanna. A compensation was provided according to need for the loss of the children's labor. My annual teaching would be divided into forty-two weeks of thirty hours, each thirty-minute lesson being separated by entertaining games. Everything was provided for in the manual. The time was approaching and fear troubled my nights.

Father, after consulting with the families, had provided three decurions for me: Junior, the Reverend Tolnai's eight-year-old son, energetic and very quick to learn, far in advance of the children of his age, Aron Gönc, a blacksmith's son, seven, a little gruff, remarkable in mathematics and already knowing his alphabet, and Thlem Fony, eight, son of her Highness's first valet, without a doubt the most gifted, reading Hungarian as well as Latin. I was free to choose two or three coaches from among the parents later on.

The fateful day arrived. I was very anxious. Starting at six in the morning, lady Tolnai, her head barely emerging from a quilted lace collar that bound her neck up

to the ears, wimple on her head, laces immaculately white, led her Junior in his Sunday best, all stiff in his fabrics, black hat on his head and more serious than an emperor.

- You had better do the family honor, my son, she said, planting her finger in the hollow of his shoulder. Reverend Comenius has entrusted you with this class. Don't let me learn of any lack of discipline! Be respectful to the lady here and she will help you with this responsibility. If something isn't right, your father should be made aware of it immediately. Do you understand!

And she went off without saying a word to me, but not without having looked me up and down, shrugging her shoulders and letting out a groan in which I thought I detected: "A woman! A mute!"

Junior began to inspect the premises like a policeman. He came up to me and said:

- How many decurions in this class? Who are my assistants?

I motioned to him to stop his questions, for he still had his hat on his head. Since he avoided my gaze, I took him by the shoulders and invited him to take his hat off. Which he did, not without hesitation. I thanked him with a smile. He seemed to take this like a slap, turned on his heels and began to pace up and down.

I heard my heart beat. With my thumb, I turned Mother's ring, which floated on my finger. For several days I had been incapable of eating.

Thlem Fony arrived, dressed in a doublet as colorful as recommended at her Highness's court. He greeted me, lifting for a moment his cocked hat with feathers and, with the most charming gallantry, said to me:

- I am yours, Madame. On this fine morning, what should I do to please you?

If I hadn't been so anxious, I would have immediately fallen under this child's spell. But the hour was approaching like a running knot closes on the neck of a hare.

Someone knocked on the frame of the door: three blows, good and loud. A big strong man, short in the legs but enormous at the shoulders, was carrying on his arm a chubby little kid who was clinging to him.

- That, son, is not a matron you are seeing, but the nicest lady in the castle.

He detached the child and, with his enormous hand, delicately pushed him. The boy began to run, made two or three circles and pointed himself right in front of me, his two dark eyes sunk deeply into my own. This set off the most resounding of laughs from the father. Forgetting my anxiety for a moment, I approached the tease, removed his hat and motioned to Thlem and Junior to deposit their

headgear too on the hooks next to the door. Which is what they did under the blacksmith's attentive gaze, thus giving me a short respite from my anxieties.

Tolnai junior took a silver lorgnette out of his pocket and began to read a little book richly illustrated with miniatures, which greatly impressed Aron, the blacksmith's son.

- It's booty! he exclaimed.

- What! Junior responded.

Thlem, who had seen many other treasures, was observing me. I motioned to the three decurions to come up to the blackboard where I had written my instructions.

One by one, the boys arrived, accompanied by their mothers, sometimes by their fathers who, invariably, drummed into their heads bits of advice: "If I hear tell that..."; "Make them laugh and you'll see..."; "You need to behave..."; "Discipline, soldier!"; and more. Each little boy received a final glance, but the most severe one was for me. The order didn't need to be pronounced, it came out of the look like a slap: "If he ever comes back from here with bad manners... that will be the proof that a woman isn't likely to make a man out of a child."

I left them with their decurions who showed each one his place around the three big circles I had drawn with chalk side by side on the floor, with the children's names. Nokolai, the son of the mayor of the shoemakers' guild, who was only five, arrived completely alone. He was warmly welcomed by his friend Junior. They left a large empty space around the child, blushing from this attention.

As the class filled up, the silence increased, an air of authority set in and each boy seemed transformed into a statue of salt. You would have thought you were in a city under siege. Then little brother Daniel arrived. He wanted to liven up his cohort, but couldn't do anything about it. His presence, on the contrary, added to the uneasiness.

The anticipated hour was approaching. The boys, seated on the floor over their names, became paralyzed the more they observed each other. A peasant beside a dyer, a glazier beside a valet, a baker beside a guild master, all seated at the same height, divested of their distinction, friends, sometimes separated, enemies, suddenly brought together. The silence grew leaden.

I was worrying about the girls... when laughter and chirping was heard. I went to the window. Lady Johanna was climbing up the hill with her troop of cheerful little girls. Under a still-yellow sun, trampling the freshly-cut field with their straw-stuffed wooden shoes, a swarm of brightly-colored children...

I motioned to the boys to come and take a look. Each one was to look at his decurion. Aron, the blacksmith's son, invited his cohort to go to the windows. Thlem and, a moment later, Junior followed his example. The windows were too

high, so they had to climb on each other and take turns, which caused a singular racket.

Clapping my hands, I beckoned them to return to their places. No one hesitated. In spite of this, Junior, with the voice of a colonel, commanded:

- To your decurions, in silence, everyone.

In a moment, they were there, motionless and mute as wooden soldiers. They knew only too well the army and fear. Outside, Johanna had started a song, though the children didn't know either the tune or the words. The cacophony would have made Calvin himself laugh, but no one in my class did. They came in more than lighthearted; the boys, on their guard, didn't budge. The little maids shut up completely.

Johanna read on my face how overwhelmed I was. She asked the decurions to come and get their schoolgirls. Which is what Thlem diligently did, followed by Aron. Lady Johanna stamped her foot and Junior complied.

It was time: in front of me, three rings of anxious kids, and me, I was confirming all their apprehensions...

- You all know Mrs. Elisabeth, Johanna said to the children. She is quiet and doesn't speak to no purpose, but there is no better schoolteacher.

Then she left the place to me, sat down next to the door, and took out her knitting. Each one had brought a big slate and a small pointed stone for writing. Fear could be read on their faces. The buzzing of flies, so numerous in this season, was heard. Junior tapped his finger on the floor. Oh! very lightly, but to the rhythm of a drum. This plunged me into an indescribable anxiety.

I heard my heart beat. Each beat seemed as if it were stretching out to meet eternity. Too many eyes were looking at me. Too much fear, too much fright. I was suffocating...

This fear seemed much bigger than the school, much bigger than everything. A disproportionate dread. Crows were cawing and it seemed as if i were hearing in the distance women's screams and shots from arquebuses. I was dripping with sweat and yet I was shivering. I was going to faint.

I closed my eyes, took a difficult breath. A milky halo trembled in front of my eyelids. I opened my eyes. The halo persisted. I was no longer seeing anything. Troops were advancing, pikes in hand. The scene was suddenly there, complete, between two beats of my heart. It had been folded, folded again, crumpled, compressed, and wanted to explode at that very moment...

Barely a thin shaft of light between the planks... Shouts, the whinnying of chargers, a terrible crash and then silence, the gibberish of soldiers sniffing

something out. Not a word, not a sound, we even held our breath, Ablonsky and I... Baby Ludmila in Ablonsky's arms... My hand on the baby's mouth. Three in the big trunk attached to the wagon's underside. "They took our children to Prerov," Father certified, "here are the papers." Moaning, Mama repeated: "They took them from me..." and she wept with loud cries to cover up the silence. We must not sneeze, or cough. Ludmila was looking at me, scared. She was suffocating. She must not cry. She must not move. She must not cough. Not the slightest noise. Ablonsky held her firmly. I kept my hand on her mouth... "Certificate signed by the Jesuits..." Father guaranteed and he was talking loud, with many explanations. Mama was sobbing. Ludmila was turning blue beneath my hand, her eyes bulging... I lifted my hand lightly, but she was going to cry. I tightened it... The wagon's horses began to paw the ground, a thick dust entered the trunk. We must not sneeze, not the slightest sound. Praise God! The wagon finally began to go forward. I lifted my hand. Ludmila was no longer breathing. Her glassy eyes stared at me. There were great shouts. The soldiers had captured two of lady Sophia's children. Through a crack, I saw... Lady Sophia was crying: "My little ones, don't kill them, don't kill them..." and she moaned, striking herself on the head. Tied like saddlebags on the back of a donkey, the boys were yelling: "Mama, mama..." On the ground... the body of a baby... under an enormous stone... the crushed body of a baby... It was Pascal, lady Sophia's youngest... Ludmila began to cry... The horses set off at a gallop... We were suffocating in the dust... Lady Sophia had collapsed on the ground. Father ran toward her...

- Madame, madame, we are ready...

Aron Gönc was pulling my hand. Daniel, at his side, was looking at me. Sixty-two pairs of frightened eyes were staring at me. Johanna was no longer there. An almost supernatural light flooded the class. A little girl wiped her nose with the end of her sleeve, a little boy rocked, gripping his slate. They all swung back and forth, anxious, trembling.

They had known war. Each one had hidden their memories as best they could. The silence was becoming dangerous. Memories were going to explode, as horrible as mine, worse perhaps!

I gripped Mama's ring. The light was blinding. There was something in all these faces like a sun piercing through horrible clouds. I had seen these children playing, I had heard their laughter. You might have said they were squirrels perched nibbling a nut, on the alert, ready to scoot at the slightest sound. The partitions between the memories were fragile.

Each child was before me in all their clarity. Such beautiful faces, looking at me as if the day ought to come from me. A little girl was going to cry. Without thinking, I approached her:

- Don't worry, girl... The war is over. Listen, children. A princess is riding a beautiful white horse... White horse, I continued, singing, come, come through the

wind, run, run in the courtyards. The war is over... White horse, come, come through the wind, run, run in the courtyards. The war will never come again...

The children began to take up the rhyme. An intense clarity flooded all the class.

- No more thugs, no more soldiers, no more torture, it's over, children. We are going to learn some fun things now. We must not be afraid ever again.

A little girl got up, ran and threw herself into my arms. Her little brother was holding his hand very high and biting his lips. I motioned to him to speak.

- That's true, Papa said it, they won't be coming back.

A soft whispering began to circulate among the children. Some coughed, the others sneezed. My face relaxed. From here and there, little laughs sprang up like flowers. Returning to his place, Aron Gönc came out with this:

- Mama said: "Is Lisbeth mute? No! That's gossip. She only says what needs saying, that's all."

The little girl I had in my arms pinched my nose and the whole class burst out laughing. I set her down on the ground and gave her a little tap on the bottom so that she would go sit down at her place. Each child sparkled like a lighthouse.

I started, *allegretto*, my first lesson:

- Stand up, children... Hold hands and turn around your decurion's circle until you take your place again... Can someone pronounce the vowel you just wrote with your feet?

- It's an "O", Rusky cried.

- Punishment, his decurion Junior interrupted, you must raise your hand before speaking.

- Quite right, decurion Junior.

I asked little Rusky to come to me. The whole class turned its eyes toward the stick suspended next to the small blackboard. Nikolai couldn't hold back a cry of fear. I had another solution:

- Take the stick, Rusky, yes, take it. Now, make an "O" on the blackboard with your stick.

The child trembled so much that his "O" resembled a squiggle much more than any kind of vowel.

- I won't strike any child, I interceded (and turning toward little Rusky), so put the stick back in its place, it's only used for demonstrations. Take the white chalk there and make me a big "O", good and round.

The hour for bread arrived. In fact, it was stipulated that every child would receive a roll during the first recess. "An empty belly doesn't learn anything", my father the director had argued before the chancellor of the castle. Many children ate greedily as if it were their first meal of the day, while others looked at the bread as if it were a treasure they hesitated to bite into. One little boy hid it in his shirt.

- You aren't eating your roll, I told him.

He didn't answer.

- It's for your mama? I whispered.

He nodded "yes".

- You really are a good boy. Give me your roll.

I tore the roll in two, ordered him to eat half of it and put the other portion in his pouch.

- You have to eat in order to learn. Your whole family will benefit from it.

The rest of the day, we danced the "O's", sang the "O's", wrote the "O's", found pebbles in the shape of "O's", made a list of "O"-shaped flowers, located the letter "O" in the proverbs painted on the walls. From "O", we passed to the number zero and starting from this number the lesson in metaphysics was begun. For we had to teach all from the first day and the first all was zero.

As specified in the manual, I stated the two instructions:

- You are to find two objects, the first will resemble the shape of the number zero and the second is very hard to find, it's zero itself, the true zero in person.

The last recess was dedicated to this game. On their return, after all the children had shown their first object, I repeated the second question:

- Has someone found zero?

Silence... And slowly, cautiously, Thlem raised his hand:

- Zero, he suggested, cannot be found because it's nothing...

The class was mute with admiration, except for Junior perhaps, who cast a defiant look in Thlem's direction.

- Remember this well, children. You can write even things that don't exist. You can think of zero in your mind, but in reality it doesn't exist. It is very important to bear in mind that sometimes words don't relate to things, but only to images that dance in your imagination.

The bell sounded the end of the day. Three children, however, were still not able to draw a decent circle and clearly distinguish "O" from "0". I decided to go lead them back to their homes while trying to discover why they hadn't understood the lesson. The first simply had difficulty pronouncing the vowel. He didn't hear very well. Whispering in each one of his ears, I perceived that he was deaf in one of them. We agreed that he would occupy a more appropriate place in the class. The second lacked dexterity. I advised him to practice by making huge "O's" around him with a stick, then to shrink the "O's" to the size of a cup. But little Toscana, with her curly topknot black as coal, froze at the slightest question and began to mumble nothing discernable. She was unable to look me in the eyes, nor even fix her attention on anything at all. She led me more than an hour from the village, to the top of a small hill on the other side of the river.

I had never met Toscana's mother; everyone talked about her, but no one said a word to her. They called her the "foreigner". She had come as a child, no one knew from where, with three angora sheep whose wool was rare. She said she was a shepherdess, but had neither the bunions on her feet nor the calluses on her hands to prove it. "Her skin was white as snow and soft as silk", they said, as if everyone had seen her bathing naked in the river! She settled on a rocky piece of land no one wanted and began to spin a fiber of such great quality, to dye it with such beautiful colors, to knit gloves, mittens, chausses, and bonnets of such refined patterns that great profits could be made from them in Germany's specialized markets. They denied her permission to sell directly to the burghers in the area. She had to bring everything to the shoemakers' guild. In spite of this, she had expanded her flock and her production was amazing...

When I saw her garret in the distance, truly the most wretched shieling in the district, I realized that they were giving her only an insultingly paltry price for her work.

Some said that little Toscana was the daughter of a rape. Most of the inhabitants asserted without hesitation that the foreigner had had an affair with an imperial.

When the young woman saw me in the distance, she immediately went back into her garret. Her hair was blond, almost silver. Toscana stopped short and motioned me to go away. I went on a few more steps nonetheless, and the little girl started to shout and throw rocks at me.

- You don't want me to talk to your mama? I asked her.

- Go away, the little girl retorted without even looking at me.

- On one condition, I answered. You must promise me to come to school every day. If not, I will come into your house to look for you.

The child nodded in agreement.

The strange woman

The sun shone brightly all summer. At night, heavy showers penetrated the earth. Nature swelled like dough, wanting to give generously. One might have said that it was preparing to cover the misfortunes of the war with an eiderdown of abundance. The month of the grape harvest was approaching, inviting us to celebration. The school as well now swelled with a sap that wanted to spill out into vacation.

Nearly all my children knew their alphabet, a number of words, and the Arabic and Roman numerals up to ten. Many could read complete sentences. And I had learned how to speak as I taught how to write. Each syllable unfolded in my throat like a butterfly getting out of its cocoon. Deliverance came from the children who called out to me with their big curious eyes. I had the impression I was entering the world of the living. Nevertheless, it was still very difficult to speak outside of class. There had to be a necessity.

One can't teach without learning, and learning is quite simply to make being enter one's self. To make children enter me was my profession. A new people was forming in my heart. "Teaching continues creation", Father said. "All that lives wants to reproduce itself in the human soul."

Thlem's decuria was ahead of Junior's. I had, however, explained to Junior, with examples and details, that too much severity prevents the mind from taking flight. I was pleased that the new trimester required a change of decurions; the competition between the pastor's son and the first valet's son was taking on exaggerated proportions. Only Aron, ever cheerful, escaped this competition. I entrusted him with little Toscana. She mixed with the others only to better disappear and, in spite of all of her decurion's efforts, wasn't learning anything.

It was agreed that Junior, for his good services, would receive the privilege of going to the castle's library once a week. In addition his name would be on the list of the children eligible for the title of consul (which would allow him to participate, alongside his father, in the school council. Thlem, for his part, would be eligible, at the age of fourteen, for the status of lawyer in the council of judges, on condition, obviously, that he continue to forge ahead. The council of judges, made up of teachers, parents and pupils, had the authority to apply the school regulations in contentious cases brought to its attention. Aron Gönc obtained, as an exception, the permission to remain a decurion as he wished and as his father had advised him.

I hadn't found any better coach than my delightful little sister Suzanna. She was so far ahead in her Gateway class that she was given permission to be absent in order to come and help me with the remedial work. However, that wasn't enough. It was out of the question that any child not be able to pass the Vestibule in the time

prescribed; Father wasn't going to tolerate it. I could use the vacation to find the "pedagogical solutions". I had to manage it myself. It was up to me to learn how each child learned.

The grape harvest was a great rejoicing. The grapes were swelling with a vitality that penetrated us through the feet, Suzanna, me and all the girls responsible for crushing the fruit. I managed to cheer up and laugh simply in order to better belong to this community that was trying to heal itself of the war. I missed Reverend my husband a lot and yet I was apprehensive about his return. I had changed so much.

Another problem was bothering me. I was worried about little Toscana. A few days before the end of vacation, Father invited me to follow him. He wanted to go to Györgytarlo to discuss with the mayor's office the possibility of opening a small preparatory school there. We stopped for breakfast on a rocky hill not very far from the Bodrog river.

- Thank you, Father, for getting me out of Luka and giving me this class... It is driving the despondent shadow out of my heart.

I was borrowing one of his turns of phrase here. When his words passed through my own lungs, I had the impression that Father was building me from inside. He wasn't just my origin. No! Through each of his teachings, he was quietly making me, starting from his own interior.

On the sunlit hill, I watched Papa bite, with a good appetite, into his bread, out of which goat cheese was running... It was, I believe, the first time I became aware that I was drawing my life from this strange character who ate, talked, slept, laughed, cried, thought, wrote in the same house as me for such a long time.

- I love you, Father.

He took a big gulp of wine and looked at me with eyes so slanted that I was profoundly moved. He took me in his arms.

- Mrs. my daughter, if you only knew my joy. But tell me, is something bothering you?

He knew so well how to read my face.

- Father, teach me. When does love become a sacrament?

He remained at a loss for words for a moment, took his handkerchief out of his pocket and carefully wiped his mouth. The silence lasted a long time. Father seemed, as always, to be searching for an answer somewhere in the nature surrounding him. He gazed at the landscape, stared at the rivers and hills.

- Eating, he began, is a sacrament when I perceive that food is light become substance. Sacrament is when body and spirit appear indissociable to us. Each human need has its sacrament: the sacrament of cleanliness is baptism; the sacrament of social life is forgiveness; the sacrament of the word is teaching; the sacrament of death is surrender and the sacrament of desire is marriage. I think it is the most demanding and the most delightful of sacraments. Lady my daughter, if pleasure is transformed into happiness, it is the sacrament of marriage... Do you doubt that you have attained it?

He hugged me tenderly.

- Put all your heart in it and all your body. You'll see...

A little bell rang. Behind us, an enormous and magnificent ram was grazing. No flock or shepherd appeared on the horizon. Given the value of the animal, we had to do something to find its owner. Slowly approaching the animal, Father succeeded in seizing its horns and immobilizing it briefly, thus permitting me to read its brand. It was agreed that Father would go alone to Györgytarlo while I would make inquiries at a nearby farm.

The animal belonged to the shoemakers' guild, but it had been rented by Toscana's mother to service her flock. It was out of the question, then, to divulge the ram's escape; the "foreigner's" reputation was bad enough. Instead, we had to help the poor woman recover her animal as quickly as possible.

So I headed straight toward the shieling. No one was in the hut. I was going to come back out when I heard a muffled moan. It seemed to come from the attic. I put the access ladder lying on the ground into position and climbed. The trap door was shut with a latch. I opened it. Nothing, except a jumble of tools for spinning, baskets, and trunks. I climbed back down... One more muffled moan. I climbed back up. Moved several objects aside. Two galoshes stuck out from under a big floorcloth. I lifted the cloth. Toscana! She was hiding her face under a cushion, but her tuft of hair, black as coal, gave her away.

- What are you doing there, my little one?

She pulled back the cushion with one hand, and protected her head with the other.

- Your mother punished you? I asked her.

No answer.

- You were supposed to watch the ram and it got away, is that it?

Still no answer.

- Come with me, let's go and look for it. I know where it's hiding.

The child didn't budge. I took her hand. She began to scream with all her might.

- Good, so stay here if you want to, I'm going to catch the ram all alone...

I left the trap door open and the ladder in place, hoping that she would follow me. She did nothing of the kind. I had to find the mother, equip ourselves with a pail full of grain and a good rope. I saw her, she was heading toward Makkos, to the west rather than to the east.

- Madame, I cried, I saw a ram on the hill leading to Györgytarlo. It wouldn't be yours by any chance?

She was already equipped with three beautiful carrots, a choke collar firmly attached to the end of her shepherd's crook and another rope. She turned on her heels and headed at once toward the path leading to Györgytarlo. She went at such a rapid clip that I had to run in order to not lose sight of her.

- There, madame, on the left, we'll have to climb, I cried, as we were approaching the place where we had seen it, Father and I.

She climbed and stopped short. No doubt she had just caught sight of the animal. I joined her. The animal was standing with its head deeply buried in a thick bush.

- Stay here, she murmured coldly.

She approached from downwind without snapping the smallest twig. The ram, too keen of hearing, raised its head and bounded off at lightning speed. But even quicker, the young woman jumped with her crook in the air and caught the fugitive's two horns in its knot. He didn't see it that way. He hightailed it, dragging the poor shepherdess through bushes and rocks. I ran to help her. Unable to catch hold of the rope, I jumped on the lady. He pulled both of us through thistles and brush. The shepherdess finally succeeded in wedging the crook between two wild plum trees. This immobilized the animal.

- We've got him, I sighed, victorious.

We were so tangled up in our dresses and entangled in the thicket, so pummeled by blows and torn by thorns, so aching and relieved, so stiff and victorious, so exhausted and satisfied that it was impossible to separate our laughter from our tears. This lasted a long time. Our eyes crossed each other, fled each other, returned and went away again. We were entwined one to the other, too exhausted to get up, too moved to speak, too much strangers to look at each other...

Then, all unawares, her eyes entered my place, my eyes entered her place, and we were in the same residence.

- Thank you, Madame schoolteacher, were the words she let slip out.

We stayed a while longer on the ground to let our pains unwind.

- He's still not in the pen, that stubborn beast, I reminded her.

- Let's go, she said.

We succeeded in getting up as well as we could. The animal looked at us fixedly as it quietly chewed a little of its cud. Holding firmly with four hands the crook we had no intention of letting go of, we were about to pull, but the animal followed us as naturally as a dog accompanies its master. Without taking a single hand off the precious stick, we went down as far as the road and from there, we headed toward the sheep barn. The ram resisted only once or twice, which cost us a few carrots.

- I am Czech, she told me on the way, but German-speaking.

Did she want to set me against her, or simply check out the ground? No matter! I couldn't hope that it would be so easy to gain her confidence. The whole village rejected her while profiting from her work outrageously. I made do with reminding her that our family wasn't from here, that I had left my country at the age of two...

- You must feel really alone! I ventured.

- I would so much have wanted to be that, she replied after a long silence.

The ram was finally put in the pen. The sun was going down. Our pains caught up with us. I pointed out that the fence had not been negligently driven in; on the contrary, it would have stood up to a bull.

- How could it jump such a high fence! I exclaimed.

She said nothing in reply, but suggested sharing a little bread and ewe's-milk cheese before I went back. She asked me to go and get a pail of water at the well, a few steps away from the hut. This I did, taking lots of time, hoping that the young mother would quickly make up with her daughter. Perhaps the child had left the fence unfastened inadvertently. The mother, driven to despair by the gravity of the consequences, had gotten angry and inflicted on the child an ill-considered punishment...

When I entered the cottage, Toscana was sitting on the ground with her mama and was playing, lining up little colored stones. No table, no chair in this shieling. A chimney, a flagstone for the fire, two straw mattresses, this was all there was for accommodation. The rest was only tools for work. Strange that in this poverty there were, on a shelf, five thick books bound in a purple leather...

As our hunger subsided, we began to feel the pain of our scrapes and especially the points of the thorns that covered our backs and shoulders. After awhile, I don't know from whom the initiative came, we were conversing as we removed

each other's thorns. Night had come and Toscana held the candle so that we could see clearly in it. This put us in the mood to confide.

During the war, a captain had in fact become infatuated with her. For nearly three years he had kept his eye on her. He would, one might suppose, have sincerely wanted to be loved by her. But she felt nothing but disdain for him. This resistance made the captain beside himself and there were no exactions or violence she did not suffer. The man was a fervent Catholic and after having beaten her and taken her by force, he was lavish with tears of contrition. In the early morning and on all the days he could do it, he spent hours reading her Latin, Greek, and Italian, for he was a man of letters. All day long she was held captive, having as companions only two soldiers too cowardly for the war, three Bibles in different languages, Thomas More's *Utopia* and Erasmus's *Praise of Folly* (the five books over the window). She learned to read Latin and Greek as naturally as she had acquired the art of carding. It was her escape...

After our backs were freed of their thorns and washed with cool water, little Toscana went of her accord to stretch out on her mat. I drew the candle closer to her to wish her goodnight. Seeing her dark face and her black hair, I suddenly understood all the drama being enacted in this poor shieling...

The next day, I left to search for some French ointment to soothe the woman who had finally told me her name. She was Clara Schlick, the granddaughter of count Schlick, one of the rebels executed by the Habsburgs and whose head was hung from the top of the Charles Bridge tower. Her life had been nothing more than flight and wandering since her father and mother had been killed during a terrible raid.

I stayed three days with Clara and her daughter, three days of sharing the sufferings of the mother and guessing at those of the daughter. Clara adored her little girl, but she hated her face, her appearance, her eyes, everything that reminded her of the one who had held her hostage, raped her, beaten her, humiliated her... The girl, out of vengeance, refused to learn to read; she knew only too well what the five books on the shelf represented. It was she who had opened the fence. This was only one of the mean tricks she was capable of in order to draw her mother's anger on herself. Being punished was what she deserved and it surely did make her mother feel better for a while!

During those three days, Clara taught me the art of knitting with four needles. The wool was fine and I experienced great difficulty in keeping the tension constant. My teacher showed patience and instructed me on the position of each finger and the way of moving the whole thing by pressing the wool equally between the ring and little fingers. How was I going to pay for these lessons!

- I'll leave you my knitting, I suggested out of desperation.

She raised one corner of her mouth. Observing my work, the numerous loops that stood out, the forgotten stitches...

- My mitten could always serve as a muzzle for one of your goats, I suggested. It's cold in the winter.

Laughter wasn't her thing, but nonetheless we were more and more lighthearted. On the third day, while both of us were absorbed in a complicated design, Toscana entered the hut, crying. She was covered with flour.

- The sack fell all by itself, Mama, it's not my fault.

Clara, suddenly furious, abruptly rose and, holding her needles like daggers, approached the little one. It took me a few seconds to realize that she could very well carry out her threats. I caught her arm.

- Look, Clara, look, I said to her, don't you see?

The little one had taken the trouble to cover her face with the ointment I had brought. Her face was as white as milk and her head, perfectly powdered. The little girl's black eyes pierced all the way to the mother, who could no longer avoid them. It might have been said that she was a rope stretched to the breaking point. The child held her hands stretched out in front of her as one does when imitating a wolf, fingers for claws and ready to attack. Who would leap on the other first?

- That little girl is as white as snow, not Italian one bit, I said in a voice that trembled.

The child turned slowly around her mother, ready to pounce. The looks were like lightning flashes. The mother pivoted on herself, bewitched by her daughter.

- She is white, I repeated.

There was a long silence and the child stood still. The mother suddenly understood what was happening. A tear slipped down her cheek as she twisted the four knitting needles in her hand. Toscana stared at her mother like a wild animal, without retracting her claws one bit. The mother fell on her knees and uttered a piercing scream. The child ran toward the door.

- My little Toscana, the mother sobbed.

The little one stopped short and turned around. Tears had made furrows in the flour. Clara raised her face and looked at the child. Slowly a smile took shape. It was a grimace at first, then, one by one, the features found a way. The muscles trembled, the skin quivered. The child held her head between her hands, grabbing her hair as if she would pull it out. She would have so much wanted not to have that mop.

- You're so much more beautiful black than white, Clara said to her finally. Much more beautiful black.

She repeated that sentence as if to drive it into her heart. The child wiped her eyes; a smile traced its pattern in the flour. It was without a doubt the first smile to pass between the two. Clara held out her hands, and the little one threw herself into her arms.

The living school

The classes had resumed. When Father heard from my mouth all that had happened to Clara and in what a state of poverty and isolation she was being held by injustice, he plunged into a deep meditation. How could that woman be delivered? The school is only a microcosm of the community; justice cannot be taught within its walls when injustice reigns around it. Besides it is impossible to protect a school from injustices experienced between the parents. The iniquities filter through the children and come in like foxes in a henhouse. The children rejected Toscana like the town excluded Clara. To go too quickly could worsen things; to do nothing would be the very death of the school whose first duty is to teach justice.

A Sunday arrived when Father was responsible for the sermon. He seized the opportunity to prepare the ground:

- Jesus first of all attacked injustices. To do nothing in the face of injustice is a crime as great as injustice itself. However, to act justly does not consist of bending reality toward our ideas of justice by force. That is not justice, but violence. Our hope for justice must instead encounter the very real and incarnate seeds of justice buried in human hearts...

He didn't enter into details but drove the nail in two or three more times by examples rather close to the one he was thinking of. Following this sermon, Father and I agreed on a strategy for preparing the school council and the council of judges to hear a grievance they would soon be receiving...

Happily, the little city was in a good mood. The season had been excellent, prosperity was returning and it had been learned that Reverend my husband's mission had brought results: the marriage of Sigmund with Henrietta Maria would soon be celebrated at the castle.

It was in November, Father was seated in the middle of my sixty-two children like a grandfather surrounded by his grandchildren. All had progressed beyond expectations: Toscana had made up almost all she had fallen behind on (every evening, her mother assisted her with a manual I had supplied her with), the new decurions displayed enthusiasm without falling into rivalry, with the result that Father had made his visit in preparation for the "theater" operation earlier than planned.

The day was rainy and the children, a little dull (the more so since they quite naturally feared Mr. the director). So he began with several questions for which he was sure of getting answers from no matter what child. For each success, he exclaimed, he congratulated. After several minutes of this game, he had them

learn two or three rhymes like this one, which I had heard a hundred times during my childhood: "My little one, my sweet little dear, where have you been? What have you brought back here? If you paid attention more, you wouldn't have such a big bump on your forehead for sure."

Next, he entered the heart of the subject as he opened before their awestruck eyes a little chest decorated with leather and brass. Rolling up his sleeves, with the aid of a pair of tweezers he spread out on a silk handkerchief a kernel of corn from America, a bean from Mexico, a grain of rice from the Indies, a capsule containing orchid seed and to conclude, he opened a pouch and displayed a coconut coming from Africa.

- What treasure there! he exclaimed. But wealth for display only, because for the moment we have little of it. And what do we need for our treasure to multiply?

- Water, one suggested.

- Soil, another asserted.

At this game, the peasants' children did better than the townspeople's.

- Manure, specified Jakob, an oxherd's son.

After awhile, the answers began to repeat themselves.

- Sun, Aron the blacksmith's son said hesitantly.

- Very good, but what else? Father asked.

Silence... All the faces tensed as if the answer were going to emerge from the worst of grimaces.

- Luck, a little girl finally stuttered, worried about saying something stupid.

- Yes! my love! a lot of luck even, unless a child like you takes good care of it. Mrs. Elisabeth will give each of you five seeds to grow. Beans, peas, wheat, rice and even flowers. However, one ingredient is still lacking. All the care in the world wouldn't be enough without it.

Only Daniel knew the answer, but he didn't raise his hand.

- Time is needed, Father said at last. You will notice that if I give them the same kind of care, all the beans will take about the same number of days before opening their first two leaves. You will soon be able to tell me if the peas are faster than the wheat, if the wheat is faster than the rice. Each thing arrives in its time. But why are these seeds such a great treasure?

- Because we can eat them, a little boy answered.

- Yes, but if we eat them now, it's not really a treasure, Thlem answered back.

- Perfect! Father continued. With soil, water, manure, sun, time, care, patience, luck, the few seeds we have could feed a whole village. However, it will take time! But notice starting today that a very small seed can make a very large tree and a big seed can make a little plant. There is no proportion between what is small now and what will be big later. The smallest among you will perhaps be the greatest. Certain seeds are so small that you can't even see them. But there is a man who has seen them...

No one dared to ask for an explanation. All were waiting for the answer, some already awestruck, others skeptical.

- That man is Anthony Van Leeuwenhoek, Father said finally, and he uses a microscope. Those of you who will be going to a big university will be able to observe seeds so small that one can see them only with the aid of this instrument. All plants and all animals pass through time thanks to seeds. Scientists say they have seen seeds of animals in a microscope: they are like little drops of water with a tail. Touch your face, your shoulders. Go on, touch... All of your body came from a little seed. That's why a seed is so precious, because each one of you is a treasure.

And he explained that seeds permit plants to move, to run on the back of a mouse, to escape in a horse's stomach, to fly on a hummingbird's beak... Father was in fact calling them to life.

Ablonsky appeared in the open doorway. I was the only one to see him. Father and the children were concentrating on their treasure, and even more so since Father had broken the coconut and had distributed little pieces of it to the children... A shiver went through my belly.

I followed Father's recommendation. That night, while everyone was sleeping, I surrendered to him, and if I hadn't bitten the thickest part of the sheet, I would no doubt have woken everybody up.

Ablonsky received the assignment of recruiting, educating and directing a children's choir which would sing on Sundays, for the holidays and during school performances. It was a pleasure to see him devote himself enthusiastically to this task. In a few weeks, the choir was a delight. Toscana found a way to excellence in this activity. Her voice arrived quite naturally at a great exactness, and she was so pretty in her expressions and gestures that Ablonsky placed her in the front row. Alas, Junior, who wanted at any price to participate more than his talent would allow, needed to be constantly toned down. This led sometimes to fights between him and Thlem, who had made himself Toscana's protector.

The whole school was in effervescence, from the Vestibule class up to the Politics class for the grown-ups (there wasn't yet a Theology class for the graduates). Each

class had to prepare skits. The first performance was planned for the marriage prince Sigismund with the palatine Henrietta Maria.

The theater school took flight. It was a real success. Toward the end of the year, we had a travelling school which moved from performance to performance in the city, the neighboring villages and even in the countryside. The parents were delighted. Education took on a down-to-earth face. The children were overflowing with enthusiasm. By and large, the progress was surprising.

Clara Schlick had quietly gained admittance to the school and occupied the function of coach. Her successes made Junior envious. As expected, complaints had been lodged with the school council and the council of judges. Thlem's family and many others had succeeded in persuading the council of judges to keep Clara, but the school council was difficult to sway. Finally, a favorable majority vote did carry. Had it not been for Father's intervention, this would have cost us Reverend Tolnai's resignation. Father found a way to make the honor of reconciling the school reflect upon this man.

In brief, as much as could be, the school did reform Saraspatak, and Father's reputation little by little won over the kingdom.

With the wet nurses

I think that Reverend my father's greatest discovery has to do with the state of childhood. Little children live in a state of constant attention to flashes of enlightenment, from whence comes their unbelievable ability to learn and their great difficulty in marching like a row of onions. Flashes pass between the child and things and creation explodes. School consists of producing a rhythm adapted to children of each age. Love brings confidence. Confidence invites invention. But education enters unexpectedly through windows, holes, and distractions. The bell sounds at fixed hours, the children laugh no matter when... this is the proof that the school acts on the world and that nothing is lost. "If you no longer hear laughter in a school, it's not a school", Father said.

A new year had begun. Despite all the resistance from the mayor of the shoemaker's guild, Clara Schlick had been named professor of the Vestibule class and Father entrusted me with the creation of a nursery school. It had to do, in fact, with meeting the mothers, with bringing them together occasionally (Ablonsky had to do the same with the fathers), with preparing them for child care. In order to do this, Father first of all gave me a month in which to prepare myself.

Berulle maintained that "childhood is the most vile and abject state of human nature after that of death". Reverend my father said that "there is nothing more grand and more pure". Descartes declared that we have been "children before being men". "Childhood is what we must break away from if we wish to inaugurate a rational existence in which humanity is fulfilled", he added. For my father, childhood was the truth of man. "Childhood, accepted, can alone keep reason within reasonable limits". Calvin said of children that are "little garbage". Father insisted on saying that we are dangerous inasmuch and as long as we are not reconciled with our childhood.

For all of a month, I was going to pass my day with the wet nurses. Pregnant myself, I plunged into this strange jungle where laughter and tears, lost sleep and hasty awakenings blend, into this magma where attachment is formed. I went there on request, losing the thread of my own habits. Nothing recalls your own childhood as much as an infant you hold in your arms. On a surprisingly warm and quiet night, while I was rocking a slightly feverish little girl who was looking at me as if I were God, at the most innocent moment, right in the middle of an almost liquid peace, a fear suddenly stuck its blade into me. I felt a presence...

- Mama, I whispered.

She was there. Her smile poorly concealed a suppressed anxiety. The little girl that she was walking back and forth in the heat of the night was me. Fever burned me, froze me. I was drunk in her arms. The previous afternoon, in the vegetable

garden under a milky sun, while Mama was burping baby Ludmila who had just sucked, I was seized with rage. Grabbing a rock, I threw it at that bawling thing that was drinking up Mama, my Mama. The stone missed the target... "Naughty Elisabeth", Mama cried. A new stone I was about to throw I let fall to the ground. "What got into you?" Mother said angrily. Something had in fact got into me. But what? I was mortified. I was about to break down in tears. She smiled at me and, showing me her still-uncovered breast, called me too to suck it. She wanted, no doubt, to attenuate my jealousy. I slowly approached. Step by step, my anger dissipated. I realized that I was a big girl, that Mama was proud of me. It was I who was going to get the water from the well, the small wood, the diapers...I was certainly not going to drink like a baby. I was appeased. It was over. However, my legs continued to come nearer and, when my lips opened to envelop the nipple, my teeth plunged into her flesh. Her scream was piercing and I received a mighty whack. I ran with all my might down the hill and jealousy released its hold all of a sudden as if it had simply completed its duty. I fell to the ground, exhausted, empty, inert. Then I was raised from the earth by Papa's big hand. He took me by the shoulders and looked at me fixedly and severely. My feet tossed around in emptiness, my eyes saw only a dusty blur: "Daughter, you must no longer let anger take you by surprise, this is the first and the last time". "Sur-prise", the syllables detached and repeated themselves. Papa held me in his arms for quite a long time. I felt as if the innocent little girl I had been no longer existed. At supper, Father explained to me: "Miss my daughter, the age has come to learn the art of fleeing before wounding someone. You didn't know, now you know. There is always an interval sufficient for retreating before you are beside yourself, seized by jealousy or anger..."

And here I too was rocking a feverish little girl, and all the emotions resurfaced... I rocked the child the whole night. It was myself I was rocking. My emotions regained their proportions. I had been a little girl, sometimes well-behaved, sometimes naughty... like all the children here, in this tenant farm now serving as a school. In short, a peace treaty was signed with myself, provisional no doubt, but necessary for anyone who wants to take care of little ones.

They were three women with well-rounded bosoms but agile in the kitchen, one nursing infant attached to her chest, another gripping her skirt. They were stirring soup with one hand and wiping their brows with another... I entered the maelstrom, I plunged in, as if into a happy celebration. The nurses did their work well, the right movement at the right time. But eyes never met eyes. For, in this wet nurse business, the fire must not be lit; the nurslings arrived and departed according to the contract, the wage and the rent. I, on the contrary, extremely careless, was going to chase after sparks.

While I was learning and preparing myself for the nursery school, all was not going so well in the castle school. Now that Clara was directing the Vestibule, Toscana was no longer making any progress. Father and I thought that the situation would be temporary. This tenant farm was so far from the sheep farm and I was so busy that it was impossible for me to go to my friend's. Moreover, I

confess, my mind was so filled with my little ones that I forgot about the world of grownups. No one, then, went to check on what was going on at Clara's.

Moreover, the situation did not appear disastrous; the child was progressing in music to the point of obtaining solos which she performed magnificently. As for Junior and Thlem, they had come to the point of fisticuffs. So much so that one day Ablonsky decided to temporarily suspend them from the choir.

The nursery school

Mrs. Gönc, Aron's mother and the blacksmith's wife, gave birth in July to a beautiful, perfectly healthy little girl. She had scarcely looked at her when the midwife carried the baby off to the country to a hired wet nurse. Every Saturday afternoon, Mrs. Gönc received as guest lady Rafaëla Tolnai, the Reverend Tolnai's niece, six months pregnant and so corseted that it was difficult for her to breathe. Joining them were Miss Judith Rusky, the notary's daughter, still single despite her thirty years, and Sarah, a chambermaid in the castle, a relative of Mrs. Gönc, sixteen years of age but well married and nursing her two-and-a-half-month-old baby herself. The women gossiped the whole afternoon as they embroidered guipure lace for a tradesman in the castle. I knew these ladies well and they tolerated me. I decided then, on the off chance, to start a nursery school class with them.

I remember the first meeting...

- What a strange idea your father has, Mrs. Gönc asserted. Milk is milk, a teat is a teat, why would it have to be mine? My man is not going to like that, boobs that smell like buttermilk...

- Quiet down, lady Rafaëla said drily. A little restraint, we aren't in the country.

- Can you stand even for a moment, dear Rafaëla, for the warmth of the sun to get under skirts as well as in the churches, retorted Mrs. Gönc, who didn't intend to let herself be imposed upon. Does the baby you're carrying come from the operation of the Holy Spirit? So, are you going to give him your breast, yes or no? Not to your husband, but to the baby.

She burst out laughing.

- God in Heaven! Rafaëla answered, stop your obscenities.

- Good, I'll lay off, but do answer, Mrs. Gönc insisted.

- Surely not! It's enough to have to take the rough edges off them when they come back to us at the age of two or three without humiliating ourselves like that. I'm not going to go look for mine until he's at least three. My husband agrees. As long as they don't understand the stick, what can you do against original sin?

- As for me, it's not original sin that holds me back, Mrs. Gönc continued, but a baby and a husband, that's too much. At night, to hear them bawling, he can't stand it. A man and a nursing baby are incompatible. "Take your overalls and put in more hours at your forge, I have brats in the house", I just can't tell him that.

- Yes! Me, I'm very happy not to have a hoodlum like that in my house, Mrs. Rusky sighed, that saves me all those expenses. My guipure and my lace has no wrong knots and no distortions. Compare!

She proudly held out her piece, which really was very delicate and perfectly regular.

- Yes! but me, I like my "hoodlum" husband a lot. But we've gotten off the subject. The pastor Reverend Comenius wants us to treat our little ones like treasures and give them our milk as well as our gospel. He believes that the baby, once it has left its mother's womb, ought to go on being fed by her, by her songs, her affection, her smell, because you can't transplant so young a being without hardening it. He thinks that we harden ourselves and that we harden our babies as if we wanted to make sergeants out of them.

- Good lord, what's that! We don't want fennel, lady Rafaëla, we want a good thick Calvinist. This is how we were raised, swaddled good and tight, fed with country milk and trained with the strap. Today, we walk the straight and narrow. A mother, once she starts to look at her kid's funny face... hug, hug! da, da! she wilts like rhubarb in the cellar, and she spoils a child right away. A wet nurse is much better, she keeps a business going..

- One that brings your uncle big profits, Mrs. Gönc added.

- Lady! Surely someone has to put things in order there, lady Rafaëla immediately continued, you can't after all ask a tenant farmer to take care of the wet nurses' leases, wages, and morals...

- It doesn't matter who the burning house belongs to so long as you can warm yourself over the coals, Mrs. Gönc retorted. Don't you get something out of the business?

- Calm down, Mrs. Rusky interposed, you're going to get your bobbins in a tangle. Let's not spoil our friendship for a problem that doesn't exist. The world is all right the way it is. If you want to make a good lace, you mustn't change the pattern all the time. All we have to do is keep on doing even better what we already do so well. If we bring all the kids back into town, I wouldn't envy the burghers. A woman who knows how to read and count has other things to do than wash diapers. You wouldn't want to go back three centuries! Getting your children brought up by others is exactly what school is about. What's wrong with that? Why not start earlier? I dream of cities without babies, of houses without nursing infants, of a world where children would be confined in specified places and watched over by not-too-well-paid workers. No children in our market stalls and our apothecary shops, no children in our stores and our workplaces. Just imagine that! One fine day, every morning a van would take all these little rascals into a house for children. We could work in peace, and the economy would be the better for it. I adore this idea.

- You're spilling your soup in the hole, my dear Judith, Mrs. Gönc continued. That's a waste. Children are capable of working. At five, a well-trained child can earn his crust.

And turning to me, she continued:

- But there is where I don't understand your father, lady Elisabeth. He's a funny philosopher, he spends the greater part of his day like a woman, taking care of children. That's not the way to do philosophy.

- Worse than that! lady Rafaëla exclaimed. He wants us to make padded helmets for them and clean out a courtyard so they can frolic there without any danger. Our tadpoles. For heaven's sake! How can you make something that stands out of something that crawls, unless it's with a good stick?

- The sooner you place the stake, the straighter the tree will be, Judith Rusky added. Giving milk softens the brain. For proof of that, look at the nurses, they aren't even able to count their wages...

- And then admit it, a real burgher's wife ought to keep her titties good and straight for her husband, Mrs. Gönc concluded.

- Good Lord! Rafaëla exclaimed, if Calvin could only hear you...

This conversation, so opposed to the education I hoped to give, went on for another good hour. One put on the distaff what the other was spinning. They were growing skilful with the wool, the needles, the spinning wheel, the mule-jenny and all sorts of machines, but less and less able to take care of the living.

During all this time, young Sarah didn't say a word and her embroidery was advancing more quickly than lady Rusky's. It was the prettiest bonnet in the world, lengthened by two flaps to cover the baby's ears. He had just woken up. Better than any alarm bell, this made everyone stop talking. She went to get him, removed all his clothes in order to wash him, powdered him with starch the way I had showed her and let him frolic for a moment on her thighs.

The three women looked at him, like the ox and the donkey had, no doubt, stared at Jesus in his creche. The baby stuck out its little tongue, smiled, waved his hands. Sarah held out to him two fingers. He grabbed on to them quite firmly. She pulled him toward her a little and moved her face so close that the infant could suck her nose. I saw Mrs. Gönc's eyes fill with tears. The infant fidgeted. Sarah folded a diaper for him and without impeding any of her movements, opened her blouse and approached the baby. She let him find her nipple, which he did without any trouble.

- I made my knot too tight, lady Rafaëla exclaimed, waving her piece of guipure.

- Hush! said Mrs. Rusky.

The child had given his first lesson. He had already made us a little more human. We remained silent all the time she was nursing, listening to the infant suck as if it were a canticle. The nursling went to sleep and Sarah continued to rock him as she kept him warm under her blouse.

- I really am afraid we had gone off our rockers, Mrs. Gönc exclaimed in a low voice. We'll soon be like monstresses without bread, all pretty metal and jewels but dried up inside. Are we right to wander off from life for the benefit of our businesses?

Every Saturday, baby, Sarah and I taught the lesson. Mrs. Gönc, who had gone to get her little girl from the tenant farm, had not yet dried up and could feed her with her milk. Mrs. Judith Rusky, always serious about her work, now appeared to be developing a plan. Everyone knew that the pastor of Györgytarlo, who had become a widower the previous year, came Sunday afternoons to circle around her hut. Ever since Mrs. Gönc had brought her little one back, Mrs. Rusky's shutters stayed half-open.

Lady Rafaëla Tolnai had loosened her corset a little, but had no intention of changing her mind. The birth was approaching, and the lady turned up at the meeting every Saturday right on the dot, spoke little, and listened much. As soon as the meeting was over, she hastened to her uncle, the Reverend pastor, and his wife. I didn't doubt that our conversations were poured out and pored over down to the smallest details.

On his side, Reverend my husband progressed at no more than a snail's pace with the fathers. Only the blacksmith, on condition that everyone swear on the Gospel not to say a word about it to anyone, dared to hold his baby once. "I was there, and I swear it," Ablonsky whispered to me one evening, "tears appeared in his eyes and he sniffled. He knew what to do with Aron, but in taking his baby's head in the hollow of his enormous callused hand, while the rest of his body barely covered his forearm, he trembled like a girl."

He never wanted to repeat the experience. However, he did encourage his wife to breastfeed the infant... So much so that, according to Mrs. Gönc, he didn't mind finishing what his baby had begun.

The accident

It was the beginning of winter, and a little snow covered the fields. Not very far from the castle school, at the end of a fallow meadow, was an escarpment. Nikolai, from the Vestibule class, the son of the mayor of the shoemakers' guild, had taken a bad fall there, and we feared, if not for his life, at least for some disabling injury. His left arm presented an ugly fracture, but the state of his leg was even more serious: the femur bone protruded from his thigh.

According to one rumor, little Toscana was responsible for having taken her playmate too close to the cliff.

The castle's physician was absent that month but luckily master Joseph Sekurius, a surgeon friend of Father's, was visiting Prerov, two days' ride north of Sarospatak. Father sent Ablonsky there. Two days later, Sekurius examined the child. The mayor hadn't stinted on the riders and the relay horses. They had brought back the surgeon in his heavy wagon loaded with the most sophisticated equipment. Though old and frail in appearance, Sekurius still had a lively eye and a sure hand. The man knew perfectly what was called the "theory of the great circulation of the blood", and none of Ambroise Paré's inventions were unknown to him.

After giving the child alcohol, he numbed him with the help of the vapors of an elixir he kept secret and bound him tightly to a sort of operating table. The unfortunate boy's father, with the help of a cloth rolled between the boy's teeth, held his head on a cushion. With sweat on his forehead, Sekurius delicately stretched out the fractured arm thanks to a distender, adjusted the bones with great care and installed a peculiar splint which he adjusted with vises. When the leg had to be stretched, the child began to shake and moan as if he were going to die. Two men restrained the mother, who was screaming. The bone finally disappeared into the flesh. The surgeon delicately slipped his hand into the wound in order to align the bones. Oil of elderberry had been boiled for the cauterization. Despite the insistence of the father who feared gangrene, Sekurius refused to pour the boiling oil into the wound. He made do with daubing the flesh with a mixture of egg yolk, oil of roses and three drops of turpentine. A splint was installed there also, leaving the gash in the leg available for progressive sutures.

For five days, Sekurius treated the wound, facilitating suppuration with little tubes and suturing the muscles meticulously and progressively, from the inside to the outside. The child suffered from a fever that infusions now were helping to ease. Ten days later, the wound was clean, and Sekurius announced that he no longer feared for the child's life. He meticulously enveloped the wounded limbs in plasters. An opening, however, permitted him to continue to watch the healing of the thigh.

The child had gained strength and recounted the inconceivable. He maintained with no hesitation, but without too many details, that little Toscana had taken him aside on the pretext of wanting to show him a precious stone she had found, but that was so heavy that she couldn't carry it. The instant he looked down from the cliff, she pushed him into the void. The child was categorical; he repeated the same story to his father, to his mother, and to the notary required as witness.

The mayor, who had never accepted being deprived of a part of Clara's work, wanted nothing less than the gallows for Toscana and five years of prison for the mother. Father succeeded in avoiding a formal trial in the castle court, but couldn't prevent the child from being brought before the school council which fortunately didn't have the right to resort to capital punishment. She and her mother were kept on bread and water in two separate cells in the city hall, and the punishment could be as much as one hundred lashes of the leather whip for one and for the other. Children had been seen never to recover from this treatment.

Father was determined to hold an investigation in order to gain time and find reasons to mitigate the punishment. The investigation was refused. Reverend Tolnai, who presided over the school council, thought that the word of the mayor's son could not be doubted. More than that, the pastor had two of his friends come: a certain Francis of Görlitz who claimed to be a theologian, and a Huguenot named René de Cartebourg who had a reputation as a philosopher. It was obvious that the pastor wanted to use the affair as an excuse for putting in question once again all the school reform. The objective was no longer only vengeance, but the dissolution of the "extravagances" of the United Brethren's reverend senior.

The school on trial

The great hall was converted into a courtroom. Tolnai, surrounded by four delegates appointed by the council, presided from a platform constructed for the occasion. All the delegation came from the town's most distinguished guilds. A barrier had been erected so as to form an enclosure for the hearing. Many burghers and property-owners had rented places so as to reduce to the maximum the peasants' attendance. People had come from as far as Györgytarlo in the hope of attending the debate. The hall was packed. Guards had been hired to keep order.

In the hearing enclosure, Francis of Görlits, René de Cartebourg and the shoemakers' mayor were facing Reverend my father. Father had asked Ablonsky to keep the school open despite the absence of a great number of students, and master Sekurius to care for the injured boy until he completely recovered. He would defend himself alone.

Tolnai opened the session in these terms:

- A child of sin was accepted in a school formerly of good morals. With the arrival of the new director this school was converted into a fair for games and theater where girls and boys, rogues and sterling people mixed together. It didn't take much more than that for a child to die. We have no right to legal justice since the pastor from Bohemia has prevented a real trial by putting into action his relations with the royal court over the heads of the guilds. May we at least be permitted to punish this child and her mother to a degree that will never be severe enough, and above all to end this so-called reform that is only the whim of a supposed theologian neither Calvinist, nor Lutheran, nor even Catholic.

Tolnai then gave the floor to René de Cartebourg, describing him as "master" and "illustrious French Calvinist philosopher"... The man arose, rolled up the sleeves of his large black robe and began without even lowering his nose or deigning to look at anyone:

- I have read this Mr. Comenius's *Czech Didactic*, *Great Didactic*, *Nursery School on the Knees* (he stopped himself from laughing), and the strange *Pansophic School*. Quite the opposite of what is needed! A school worthy of this name must in the first place cultivate reason, and this for at least three reasons that are immediately recognizable: get out of magic, get into science, and free ourselves from passions.

- Be more explicit, Tolnai urged.

- Let us take the first point, the Frenchman continued. If nature is a kind of intelligence, as the new director supposes, following the old speculative theory of

centuries past, neither reasoning nor mathematics can be applied to nature. In reality, what is peculiar to intelligence is invention. If the universe invents, nothing can be predicted, mathematics have no object, and we sink back into superstition. Reason can be exercised only on a world that does not think, a machine world.

- What importance does that have? Tolnai insisted.

- A world reduced to laws is accessible to mathematics and logic. Knowing the laws, we can use the world like the blacksmith uses iron. In this way we add order to things. Progress is at our gates.

- In short, Tolnai summarized, a world for the industrious. Not a world that obeys a pope, not a world that obeys theosophists, but simply matter useful for industry. It is right, then, to accept in our city schools only the boys from the guilds so as to subject them to reason so that they may make it benefit the economy. Girls, more averse to reason because more entangled in their passions, should receive an education suited to make them good wives.

- Absolutely, Mr. President, René de Cartebourg continued. And your new director, invited by the widow of the castle, persists in the old beliefs. For him, to know is still a matter of analogy, a way of poetry, as if the human mind and the divine mind communicated with each other through a language that is supposedly nature itself. That's old wives' tales.

The audience had begun to snigger, to whisper, speculating no doubt on who the victor would be and not rating Father's chances very highly. The mayor drummed his fingers on his desk, shook one leg then the other, and fired off impatient looks in the president's direction.

- But can that, Tolnai interposed, lead a child to murder?

And he smiled victoriously at the mayor to encourage him to be patient.

- Yes, de Cartebourg asserted, because this tragic error of thought is accompanied by another whose consequences can be worse. This man thinks that from birth children follow a progressive development due to the unfolding of a consciousness and an intelligence which supposedly is at work in each one of them. For that reason, he encourages children to follow their instincts. That leads to what we have witnessed with horror, a seven-year-old child has planned to kill, has calculated her crime and has executed it in cold blood...

Tolnai barely controlled a satisfaction which, were it not for the frowns of the mayor in a hurry to be done with it, would have set him on the way to crying victory. The president knew that the stakes were political...

- Tell us, master de Cartebourg, Tolnai asked, how should a school be run?

- Just the opposite of the new director's. One must subject the children to reason, one must emphasize mathematics, logic, grammar and all the formalisms to which

men must subject themselves. Art, philosophy and literature are and ought to be only leisure activities. It is not a child that has to go to school, but a head; the rest should wait outdoors until the bell sounds.

All the burghers present whispered in admiration, nodding their heads in great affirmation, no doubt hoping to bring the rabble along with them. But the few peasants present worried all the more as the burghers showed their unity. After they had been mutually supported in this way in regard to a philosophy whose meaning, no doubt, few understood, and whose consequences even fewer imagined, the floor had to be given to Reverend my father.

He arose:

- In short, he summarized, you are emptying the universe and man of all their creative substance and, accordingly, of all their divine substance, in this way reducing the world to the state of a machine that must be exploited and the child, to the state of a machine for exploiting. All this to render omnipotent a very simplistic conception of mathematics, of economics, and of power. This is, I believe, a very dangerous idealism of reason which consists of elevating one of the faculties of the mind while deposing all the others. I do not believe that this is a reasonable use of reason. Don't you see the danger in it? The reason you speak of remains incapable of a science of ends, thus incapable of participating in political decisions. In my schools, sir, I teach children the intelligent use of reason...

The guild master's fingers could be heard drumming on the desk. The mayor was on the point of exploding, but hid his face; he seemed to be afraid of Father's eyes. The audience held its breath as if a barrel of powder was going to explode.

- Let's get down to the facts, Tolnai interjected curtly.

- In what way, logically and rationally, can blows of the whip on the back of this seven-year-old help her to subject her passions to reason? Father demanded. And if we do that, isn't it we who are subordinating our reason to our passions?

Father quietly approached the mayor.

- I sympathize with what you and your wife have endured. The suffering of your son has been horrible. We must do something to understand what happened and prevent its happening again...

I believe the mayor would have thrown himself on Father and strangled him, but he hid his crimson face in his hands. Francis of Görlitz, without even getting up, interrupted Father:

- Evil must be rooted out wherever it is found, Mr. Comenius. Right there is all the danger of the depravity elevated to a system that you call "School of games and theater". In each human being there is an active principle of disorder. It doesn't take long to discover that every child is inhabited by this principle which

goes as far as the filthiest perversities. Education consists of forcing children to conform to public order...

- Reverend Tolnai, Father pointed out, did you give this gentleman the floor?

- I made a sign to him about it, Tolnai answered, without blushing about his lie.

- Good, I didn't want us to fail to respect the most basic rules of etiquette here and for emotion to overcome reason. May I answer this gentleman?

- Do it, acquiesced Tolnai, who had no other choice.

The silence in the hall was absolute.

- In the schools I have visited in England, in the Germanies, the United Provinces, in Sweden, in Poland or here in Hungary, the more they tried to prevent evil, the more it prevailed. Did everything go so well when they struck your children with the rod and confined them in purely formal studies that had no meaning for them? Yes, a tragic event has happened, and I assume complete responsibility for this lack of vigilance. But this error must not ruin all the progress accomplished. There prevails in our school a discipline that is exemplary because it is double: on one side, we encourage creative effort, and on another side, we discourage every form of violence. Suffering creates suffering. Aren't we, even here, witnesses of that? We have all suffered terribly for the mayor's child, for his father and his mother, and thus we are driven to transmit this suffering to the child they say is guilty. But this will only add wound to wound...

- Goddamit! the mayor exploded, keeping his face behind his hands. Honey against blood. Never! I want to whip this vermin with my own hands or I swear to you that the earth will quake from the peasantry to the castle if this isn't granted me. You know what I mean! Finish this farce, Reverend Tolnai, and run this reformer out by the high road, for I might change my mind and demand in high places the hanging of the daughter, the mother and this pathetic Hussite exile.

He began to cough to the point of choking. Francis of Görlits tapped him on the back. Tolnai struck the table with a stick. The burghers arose as one, shouting: "Execution! Execution!" None of the council delegates said a word.

The peasants left the hall when the din was at its height, asking themselves: "Execution of what? We want to know! Hanging or whipping? It's when? It's where?" Two men from the castle led Mr. my father outdoors.

Outside, a part of the crowd dispersed, shaking their heads, but a good number went up around the burghers who were leaving, pressing them with questions to the point of jostling them: "What is going on with the compensations from the castle? What do they do with the girls?" Others shouted: "To the gallows with the whore and her bastard!" or more than that, even, "The whip and the gallows, the two are better, aren't they?" One of the burghers, harassed, threatened the

crowd with his pistol. Peasants seized rocks, and merchants took out their rapiers to intimidate the country folk. Brawls were going to break out.

The grand chancellor, in ceremonial attire and flanked by mounted carabineers, arrived on the scene. The crowd dispersed. Father was put into a carriage which sped off toward the palace. I thought I saw Ablonsky in the vehicle, surrounded by two men-at-arms. The chancellor mounted the platform on the public square where the post was. A drum called out. The crowd, surprised, assembled. Two trumpets sounded. A crier unrolled a parchment:

- Hear ye, Hear ye, people of Sarospatak. Disaster has struck Hungary. His serene highness Sigismund, emperor of the Holy Empire, and his princely spouse have been found dead of causes unknown. Mourning is decreed in all of Hungary. Weep and pray, for Drabik, the prophet of misfortune, has once more called down the wrath of Heaven upon our kingdom...

The school in prison

I took advantage of the noise and confusion to go to the city hall. It was an instinctive movement. Because of the contradictory news arriving from every mouth, such confusion reigned that the city hall was nearly empty. The guard led me to Toscana's cell and as he let me enter wished me: "Good night!" He closed the door behind him.

She was crouching on a pile of straw in one corner of the cell. The smell was foul; she had soiled her face and hair with her excrements and moaned like a dying animal as she attempted to tear out her hair. I wanted to come closer, but she screamed, threatening to smash her head against the wall.

- You really are a naughty girl, I told her.

That sentence seemed to calm her.

- You are bad and you stink.

She stopped moaning. A trickle of water flowed in a sort of rivulet on the other side of the straw tick she was on. No doubt a merciful act for the prisoners' hygiene. I sat down on the ground next to it.

- I wonder why you didn't tear his guts out with your knife. He's already back on his feet and he's going to beat you up.

- Go away, leave me alone.

I no longer knew what to say. I was distraught. There was something in the silence that couldn't be endured, so I prayed.

- My God, make it so that nothing happens to her, deliver her from all the mean ideas she turns against herself...

The image of the mayor with the whip in his fist, the blows, the blood... I silenced my tears in my dress. The little girl had pity on me, I think. She approached the basin, undressed, and began to wash herself. I collected my wits and went up to her. She let me do it. I washed her hair rather roughly. I wasn't controlling my anger very well. A piece of soap was lying on a stone. I got an idea.

- Scrub hard, I asked her, and get a good lather in your hair.

While the water was making her eyes smart, I stuffed her clothes with a little straw and set them down on the torn-open tick as if they were Punch, with hair sticking up and arms like a scarecrow. I continued to wash the little girl, rubbing her rather

harshly, wiping my tears from my sleeves. Toscana was trembling all over from cold. I wrapped her in my coat and sat her down between my legs, back to me. I finally calmed myself down a little.

- So, explain to me how that happened, I asked her in a firm voice... I won't accept any silence.

- They were always laughing at me.

- Who were they?

- Junior and the others. They followed me, they waited until I was all alone and insulted me.

- What did they call you?

- I don't want to say it. I won't say it.

- And where was the mayor's son in all this?

- He was the smallest one. Junior encouraged him to pull my hair. He forced him to take off my dress... The bigger ones stood around and laughed. They had sticks. They said that if I didn't let them do it, they would break my bones.

- They touched you?

- No, they laughed, shoved me, jabbed me with their sticks.

- And Nikolai, the mayor's son?

- He took the little thing out of his pants...

- And the day when you pushed Nikolai in the ravine...

- I wanted to kill them, I wanted to kill them all. I said to Nikolai that I would take all my clothes off if he came with me, that I would count to ten and that he could do all he wanted. But he had to come alone, and right away. He came. He told me that he didn't want to hurt me, but that the others forced him. He just wanted to kiss me, that's all. He came up to me and I pushed him. I wanted to scare him, he slipped...

She was shaking all over. I hugged her lightly, but without turning her toward me. I prayed to God to come to my aid. My head was empty and my heart too full. I calmed down.

- And her, the poor little girl there, I asked her after a while, you wanted to kill her too, that little girl?

I held her face toward the puppet. The form could barely be seen, for night had come. I thought I heard the moaning of the wind, or of another prisoner. My dummy looked so pitiful and miserable that one might have said it was one of those war orphans who no longer expected anything but death.

- You wanted to kill that little girl? I repeated.

In the silence, other distant moans. The wind whistled. The child stared at her effigy.

- You want to kill that miserable little girl just because she hasn't had any luck? You want to kill..

- No, she finally answered. I don't want to kill her. I don't want to kill anyone.

And she broke down in tears. I pressed her against me.

- You're very right because that would break my heart. It's not her fault if her father with his big books didn't do any better than the other soldiers. It's not her fault if her mother was beaten and if she had a lot of pain. It's not her fault if she has her father's black hair and that she reminds her mother of such terrible memories, it's not her fault..

I stroked her hair. After a while, she stammered:

- But the seeds?

- The seeds! I exclaimed.

- The seeds that go from the papas to their children. If I have black hair, I have a black heart too.

God, it's true, the seeds. She hadn't understood anything about the lesson on seeds...

- Carrot seeds don't carry evil, I answered, all they carry is the power to be a carrot. If a carrot meets a rock, it grows crooked because it has to turn around the rock, but a crooked carrot is not an evil carrot. It's true that you have met rocks in your life and that you're a little crooked, but you're not evil...

I told her stories about children of war whom I had known. Little ones who, like her, had been conceived in violence. There were so many of them. Some continued the war and the violence against themselves, others came out of the tragedy stronger, more understanding, more generous. I insisted: evil always emerges from a war against oneself that is allowed to smolder. All violence against others is no more than the surplus of a violence against oneself. A man who has made peace with himself no longer does evil around himself..

- So I'm not evil, I'm just a little crooked, she repeated.

- And if you give enough love to the little wretch there, she won't be crooked much longer...

She went to sleep in my arms. I stroked her hair. I was exhausted.

The first dong of the belfrey's tenor bell had scarcely awoken me when, with loud shouts, people came into the cell. Two soldiers tore the child away from me.

- Lady Zabeth, Lady Zabeth, Toscana cried as she struggled.

They wanted to drive me back into the prison. Abandoning the child was out of the question. Seized with pity for the child, the city hall's guard let me pass. They went to look for Clara. The wretched woman could barely stand up. Her sunken face, her bulging eyes, her body, emaciated and bent by cramps, testified to torture.

- Mama! Toscana screamed.

Clara tried to jump on the sentry who held the child under his arm. Two men raised her off the ground and led her outside. With loud cries, Toscana demanded her mother, sobbed, implored. A guard gagged her. I wanted to run and catch up with Clara. A pikeman intervened.

- Easy, Madame, the guard advised me, if he throws you into the cell, it's not worth it.

We climbed up on the gallows where mother and daughter were bound, each one to her post. Clara stared at me, her expression was so desperate... She was dying. I approached. They wanted to keep me back. The pikeman, by a gesture, gave Clara permission to speak to me.

- Save my little one, Mrs. Elisabeth. Take my little one, she sighed.

My heart was torn. I wanted to answer, but the words drowned. I nodded affirmatively. The city hall guard noticed this.

- Get hold of yourself, Madame.

On the public square, there were only beggars, rogues and cripples. The town was sleeping or holing up. They stripped Clara down to the belt. Her body was skeletal. The mayor mounted the gallows platform. His face appeared to me particularly distorted. He trembled with rage, with an anger coming from I don't know what Cain. What horrible hate was he bearing?

They gave him a leather whip and he began to strike Clara's livid back with so much force that it was obvious that he wanted to kill her. He struck and struck... The thin skin blistered, the blood oozed out, then spurting. Toscana struggled, horrified. She managed to tear out her gag and cried:

- I'm the wicked one, beat me...

- Have mercy on my little one, Clara moaned, I beg of you, I'll say nothing, I swear it...

She collapsed. The mayor continued. The pikeman intervened, glaring at the executioner.

- Good! Go get her, the burgher menacingly commanded.

They took off the coat I had covered Toscana with. The mayor looked at Clara a little while longer, as if he wanted to be sure that she would never get up again. Next, he approached the child, raised his arm, tensed his face... The completely naked child bent her back and cried:

- Do me in, I want to die...

Suddenly I understood. I jumped in front of the mayor and said to him:

- It is because they know the truth that you want to slaughter them (my voice resounded over all the public square). You have forced your own son to tell a murderous lie in order to save your honor and reduce the one who recognized you to silence. I want to cry out to all who your father was: a traitor!

The mayor glared at me, turned the whip against me and began to strike me with all his strength. The pikeman seized the whip. The mayor went at it with his fists. A soldier got hold of him. The execution of the sentence was finished.

All night, Father had tried to negotiate with Tolnai who had remained inflexible, then with the chancellor, for Her Highness Zsuzsanna refused to receive him, fulminating against him because he had disseminated some of Drabik the prophet's declarations. He was unable to obtain anything. They didn't care about the mayor's past; they needed his fortune.

By royal order, Ablonsky, Johanna, Suzanna and Daniel, escorted by a small guard from the castle, were already en route to Leszno with all the furniture. Sekurius had been requisitioned at the palace, for a strange epidemic was decimating all the flunkies. A heavy old wagon and four bay horses were given us by the queen as a going-away present. Father's plan was to bring us to Prerov as soon as possible, to a doctor, a friend of Sekurius, in the hope of saving Clara who was dying.

Clara never regained consciousness, and we had to bury her in a wood near Kosice. And I, exhausted and trembling, hugged the little girl Heaven had given me.

The maternal art of grandpapas

We were alone in the wagon, Toscana and I. Father, rather maladroitly, served as coachman; we had never owned horses, or even a single mule. The team did what it wanted, paying no heed to the gee up's!, the whoa's! and the darn it's! uttered by Mr. my father. The forest of Slovakia enveloped us, the villages grew few and far between and the hills were transformed into mountains.

The road, winding, muddy and rocky, tossed us about and shook us like sailors in a storm. From time to time I had terrible cramps that traversed my belly. I had made myself a mattress from all the clothing available. Tired and feeling as if I were drunk, my head pressed against the Maramone's hat, I wandered in the fog of my mind even as I hummed a lullaby to my little one.

She stayed nestled in my arms, resigned, relaxed, and trusting. How could she be that way so easily? By what miracle could she now accept tenderness and cuddling, she who wanted to die beneath the whip? Are the excesses of suffering like cyclones? After pulverizing everything, they return as trade winds, serene, as if nothing had happened. Toscana was so peaceful, her eyes absorbed by the feverish activity of a spider suspended from the ceiling. It swayed at the end of a thread and made use of the carriage's jolting to reach the door's distant edge. Thanks to our misfortune of being tossed about by rocks, its web had attained unequaled proportions: a lovely shroud for the mosquitoes who were going to run that risk!

Trees paraded past in the door's windowpane. Sunbeams sparkled like agitated swords in a storm. The spider appeared, disappeared, and always reappeared. My belly rose into my chest, my kidneys throbbed, my head had shooting pains...

And suddenly the door opened.

- Get out, you dykes, you don't need a horse and carriage, a highwayman cried, laughing loudly.

As if thunder had struck us, two enormous arms pulled us, Toscana and I, out of the wagon and we found ourselves, suddenly awakened, rolling in a brook. I was hit square in the face by my pouch, which had caught on a branch at first.

On the wagon, two bandits kicked Mr. my father into the ditch and went off with the carriage, horses and baggage.

- Outlaws! lowlifes! good-for-nothing sons-of-bitches! Father cried.

He shouted angrily, fists raised, hurling insults that I didn't know belonged to his vocabulary. He wasn't injured, but limped a little as he came toward me. Seeing

that we were all in one piece and rather comfortable in the mud, he gathered up some clothes that had fallen along the way and, no doubt to reassure the little one, but also because lady Maramone's feather hat had remained perfectly clean and straight on my head, he burst out laughing:

- God! Ladies, there you are in Mother Nature's cushions!

And he looked at Toscana with a clown's face. She began to laugh... then to cry. So he took her in his arms:

- Don't worry, my little one, your grandfather knows how to get along in the forest. I spent long months there when I was young and I return there on almost every journey. It's my custom. So, I know everything. And the wolves are so afraid of me that maybe you'll hear them howl with terror tonight!

And he told her the story of the gnome no taller than an apple who had known how to protect his treasure from an army of crows thanks to magic funny faces. It was this gnome who had shown him the art of attracting fish and frightening bears with fantastic facial expressions. This story led to another and, after a while, the little one began to see fairies and dwarfs.

It was unlikely that any help would arrive before nightfall. Father made a fire to dry us, then built, with Toscana's help, a little hut of branches and reeds. The sky was limpid and springtime promised us a rather mild night. There was enough bread and dried meat in the pouch for two or three days. A passing cart would come, no doubt.

When night arrived, Toscana went to sleep in Papa's arms, and my contractions started in earnest. He went and put the little girl to bed in the hut and returned to me. I was worried. I was probably not to the end of my eighth month, and the poor little one had already known a lot of upheaval.

Father dried his coat and other clothing over the fire, wrapped me up, and kept me warm. He boiled some water in a bowl. He had made some rags. He was ready, he assured me:

- Don't worry, Lisbeth, Mother Nature is not a shrew.

I summoned up the last of my energy. I heard Mama sing. Lady Maramone seemed to be there, sitting on a stump, as if she were waiting to tenderly nibble the newborn's cheeks. I was drunk with fatigue.

The baby came out almost all at once. There was barely a hesitation for the shoulders, and he was in Father's hands.

- There, Mrs. my daughter, is your boy, Father exclaimed in a voice trembling with emotion.

He was certainly alive, but such a little baby. I opened my coat and placed him tenderly on my breast. Then Father cleaned him and, with a splint of split wood, pinched the baby's cord and wrapped both of us good and warm, he and I. Exhausted, I fell asleep even before I fed him. I was a woman who had everything she could possibly wish for.

In the morning, Father brought me a very bitter potion made of plants and roots. He checked to see that I hadn't had a hemorrhage. Much of the clothing had been spotted with blood. He had even taken the bottom of his shirt to make a clean rag to keep us dry and warm, baby and me. But this suckling did not drink. He pressed himself to my nipple but lacked the reflex to suck. I made some drops of milk run over his lips. He did not refuse them. He was so quiet. One might have said he was an angel.

At the end of the day, he was no longer moving. I warmed him on my breast, the milk flowed, dried, and I was cold. Father didn't speak. He held out his hands. I refused to give him the precious package. Toscana looked at me with terror in her eyes. Finally, Papa gently removed lady Maramone's hat from my head and handed it to me while winking at Toscana. I had a duty to the child. I shouldn't feel sorry for myself. After all, I was sharing the fate of so many mamas. I pressed my baby against me, so little, so cold that he burned me. Father held the hat as if it were a cradle. I didn't have the strength to fight. The disproportion of the struggle stifled me. The sun is so ingenuous, the clouds so innocent, the mountains so candid, the birds so carefree... We alone resist the dawn.

I deposited the little corpse in the hat. Toscana collapsed on me, crying:

- Mama, mama.

With a flat stone, Father dug a hole and buried his grandson. I stroked my daughter's black hair. Father sang. His voice was rasping, dissonant; one might have said that he wanted to scratch the eardrum of heaven. After a long while, I came out of it.

- You see, I said to my little daughter, your Mama won't be alone on the road of the freed.

I was a mother, I had no right to retreat into my sufferings. I had to live outside, with my child, in the muck of things.

The morning fog dwindled away in wisps over the trees. Filtered through the foliage, flashes of pink light were gently awakening the forest. A light breeze loaded with twigs brushed against the trunks. A ladybug, numb on a leaf, stretched her hind legs. Enormous beeches extended their great arms. A drop of water fell on my lips. Birdsong tinkled in the morning dampness. The fire was still dancing over the coals. Like a canary cutting through the murmurs, my little girl's voice:

- There's a fish...

- Hush! Father said.

Between the branches, the most surprising picture: Reverend Mr. my father, his clothing in rags, was carrying young lady my daughter on his hip. He had attached her to him with strips of cloth from his frock coat. Barefoot in the river, he was holding a harpoon of his own fabrication, scrutinizing the pools, lowering his face to a few finger-lengths of the water, widening his eyes until they were bigger than a lizard's, stopping at the most incredible grimace, lying in wait for his prey. Presto, he caught a speckled trout. Toscana couldn't keep herself from applauding. He cheerfully scolded her, then strung the fish in a cord he had her hold.

I was lying on a bed of ferns, wrapped up in my dress and a coat, so exhausted that I barely had the strength to follow them with my eyes. Father had made me a beautiful pillow out of rags, so I only had to turn my head in order to be with them.

He walked ahead in the river. The scene awakened distant memories... He called this "funny-face fishing". It had to do with making his eyes shine and transforming himself into an unusual branch. The fish went out to speculate about it, and a harpoon pierced its body through and through. Father used to carry me that way on his side. I was Sigurd on his horse, dragon-slayer, boldest of them all. I felt my mount's muscles ripple, stop, brace themselves from back to shoulder... He fired, rarely missing his target. Invulnerable is what we were...

A clinking sound awakened me.

- It's mealtime, Father announced.

The breakfast, fish, bulbs and rhizomes, though bitter, wasn't too revolting. Toscana ate everything that Father gave her. And Father began to tell his famous story of Adam driven out of Paradise.

- In Paradise, they laughed a lot. A lizard splashed all over with red, a mouse with big mustaches, a dragonfly with eyes bigger than its head, a peacock who opens his tail as he puffs out his chest, everything is made for laughter. Fish of every color, the water that sings, the trees that weep, the nightingales singing at the top of their voices, everything is made to surprise us. But one day, a serious man arrived: "This is not this", he proclaimed. Don't trust appearances: this is that. That apple is not an apple, it's a sin. That woman is not a woman, it's a snake, that tree is not a tree, it's a gallows, the sky is not the sky, it's a condemnation, this game is not a game, it's work, this bite is not a bite, it's suffering, this loss is not a loss, it's a tragedy..." His teaching won over all the earth and no one knew how to take life anymore. They called him the diseducator...

- I don't understand, Toscana protested.

- In order to think, you mustn't get too far away from the trees and the birds.
Production is a mystery, perception is a judgement. Let's look, we'll see!

Sleep swept me off once again...

The return

We had returned to Leszno. Reverend my husband had gotten his spouse back.
But I was no longer the same. Too much trouble had descended upon us.

A miracle had saved us. After five days in the woods, a mystery, one fine morning!
Our wagon was there in front of us, with its four bay horses. Incredible apparition!
All our things were in the front: clothing, food, even our purse... strangely a little fuller than when we started. Enigma. No matter, we reached Poland in one go.

Ablonsky had changed, too. He had learned, I don't know where, the art of sensing my desires and responding to them. He enveloped me in sweetness and tenderness, calm and security. He protected me against all that could hurt me. I floated dangerously over my heart full of holes.

When he saw me appear in the windowpane of the carriage door, empty of the child he had given me, breasts swollen, complexion pale, he smiled, he kissed me, he forgave me. He forgave me so well that I understood my fault. I had substituted a bastard's child for his child. So he began to love Toscana with all the duty required for the task. Didn't he owe his life to a similar adoption? So I drowned in the vast solitude of his too-great love.

My body received that love with an ardor I didn't understand, as if a little pleasure penetrating my insides just went along with my life. I lost my shame: my moanings woke up the whole house sometimes. Father pretended to snore. The children went back to sleep, and no one asked any questions. Suzanna, however, came back to that subject. She was worried that I might be sick. The house in Leszno was definitely too small.

But love is love; its carnal acts blend the surface and the depths, it remakes us and undoes us. In winter, when the cold makes the cottages crack, and the fire moans in the chimney, sadness increases. Such were our acts of love. The greater the pleasure, the greater the sorrow seemed.

Daniel and Toscana, both eight, and Suzanna, three years older, were forever playing, laughing, and cavorting. Toscana always had a new game to propose, but we had to watch out that they not go too far. Few days passed without Johanna and I having to repair the damage caused by some foolishness of theirs. It would often happen that I would enter into the game, forget my role, and get into the devilry myself. Lady Johanna's reprimands stung me, but the match was only postponed. I refused all face-to-face confrontation; I fled.

In brief, we were, the children and I, like butterflies in a glass house. Nearly every day, Father entered that grace for a moment for a lesson or a game. This gave him rest, for outside was Leszno, poverty, intrigues and rumors of wars.

In order to finance the previous wars, Sweden, Poland, and Hungary had given up or alienated the vast domains of the crown. In this way, the nobility had become the owners of almost all the lands. Royalty was thus in a state of total dependence and could no longer counter the rapacity of the lords, and the lords took advantage of this. Every day the peasantry sank a little deeper into destitution. In short, the war had brought back feudalism.

A three-sided battle was taking shape: Poland in the middle, Sweden in the north and Hungary in the south. Carl Gustav of Sweden found in Hungary an ally par excellence in the person of George, the son of the widow Zsuzsanna of Hungary, who had despaired of Reverend my father's far too idealistic project and now turned toward more "concrete" ambitions. The intention was nothing other than taking Poland and sharing it, the north to be placed in servitude to Sweden, the south to be thrown to the Hungarian lions. Sweden and Hungary hoped to make use of us as a brand to light the fire. Many Brothers did in fact live in Poland and hoped that after its submission to Protestant interests it would participate in the reconquest of the Moravian promised land. The Brothers were encouraged to rise up and mine the ground by promising them national salvation. A fine way to weaken Poland and push it to take the first steps in the escalation of violence.

Swedes and Hungarians came to invite the Brothers to ally themselves with the peasants in order to foment discord and lead peasant uprisings. During all the time we were in Sarospatak, Pavel and a group of sappers amused themselves by making incursions into Catholic territory, distributing false information there and making provocations. When Father was informed of this, he went into a rage I didn't think him capable of. He paraded before Pavel the thousand horrors of war. He enumerated one by one the sufferings that his parents had had to endure before dying. He wanted to inspire in him the greatest disgust for war. He reminded him of all he had had to go through to save them, he and his sister Christina. He spoke to him of the thousand and one dangers, the thousand and one privations. He hoped to make life precious for him. He put so much of his heart in it that Pavel broke down in tears. Father thought he had saved him. The next day, Pavel had disappeared.

In spite of all of Father's activities, his books, his preaching, the constant effort to obtain the funds necessary for the community's survival, the difficulty of getting supplies, the care of the sick, the burial of the dead, worry gnawed at him.

Four months later... this letter:

Lublin, November 1654

Reverend and very dear Sir,

I have never thanked you for having saved me from a certain death and I will never be able to apologize enough for having been too heavy a weight for you. You have however been so patient in your education, so good, so generous when I deserved nothing. And that is not enough, you have taken my sweet sister with you, you have fed her, cared for her, instructed her, granting her all the more of your affection because she was weak. I was ungrateful. It is finished. I will no longer be for you an object of shame.

I have found the knight we need, the one who will sustain our cause, he is named Bohdan Chmielnicki. He is leading the revolt of the Cossacks. We have with us Turks, Tartars and Muscovites, we are invading Ukraine and Belorussia, we are fomenting peasant revolts, we will soon be destroying Poland, preparing the Swedish invasion that you hope for. My family will not have died in vain, I will avenge their blood.

Sir, you have one less weight on your shoulders and one more hope in your heart.

Soldier Pavel

That letter crushed Father with the force of lead. His son was going to a certain death. Father made inquiries. The famous knight knew how to recruit. Proud in his armor and agile as a Moor on his horse, he invited men to a holy war. He promised the poor that he would make them owners of the conquered lands. But his greatest occupation consisted of massacring the Jews of Poland and even into Russia. The knight was surrounded by ferocious lieutenants and a frightening secret police. Once the contract was signed, the general accepted no defection. All deserters and those suspected of desertion were punished with death.

To top it all off, Pavel had fled with four Brothers from Leszno, young people, and even one child. Their parents came every day for news. Father remained silent, thrust his hand into his pocket for a moment as if to take out the terrible letter, but only crumpled it. One day, he had the courage to reveal to them the truth. The Brethren's quarter sank in its entirety into a sort of charged silence.

That tragedy was added to many others. The Catholics, fortified by the rumor that the king of Poland might well convert to Catholicism, kept us in a state of siege. Food was lacking. In order to get some, Ablonsky had to infiltrate the Catholics, using Ludmila as an intermediary. Jerome Kokovsky took advantage of this to preach a rallying which slipped increasingly into ambiguity: it consisted of making the Catholics believe that the Brethren would become Catholic and the Calvinists that they would remain faithful to them. In that way, however the war might turn out, it would remain possible to spin the wool and sell the cloth. The economy was his true religion!

Ludmila was one of those who compromised very skilfully with this double game. She was introduced to the Catholics by the prefect's son who asked her hand in marriage every week. She let him have an "if" and a "surely" but did not for all that neglect the Kokovsky family, who had forgiven her breaking the engagement seeing that she had done it out of loyalty to her father (and that the loved one was secretly taking her to bed).

Ludmila came to the house almost every month and talked to us about frills and flounces and things of the world. Her perfume was so strong that she made us nauseous and she went back wiggling her hips like a partridge. Father stayed silent, deathly sad.

Father was sixty-three and it seemed that all he had done was flying away like flower petals in autumn, so he immersed himself in work. It seemed obvious to him that the world was going to sink into three sorts of darkness: fanaticism, he thought of Pavel; the deification of the economy, he thought of Kokovsky; a simplistic rationalism, he thought of René Descartes and his disciples.

It would be necessary to wait until suffering made consciousness rise again. A long process. To prepare that humanity became Father's obsession. He woke Mr. my husband before dawn. All the wisdom of the Ancients had to be repatriated, filtered, written in a precise language, summarized, pansophia, not the encyclopedia that the French wanted. The intellectual Noah's ark was his enterprise.

We had the ideal instrument for this plan: the printing press. A rare legacy, of an inestimable value, coming from the family of Charles of Zerotin, Father's first protector. It was the community of the Brethren's most precious thing, and it was set up in our little house. It was what kept the Church of the Brethren in history. It sat enthroned, the object of the most meticulous care. Each letter in its storage compartment was cleaned or replaced at the slightest fault. Each one constituted a very costly little sculpture. The whole family contributed in polishing, scrubbing and caressing this extraordinary machine for crossing space and time.

Father began to write, to dictate with the frenzy of despair. Ablonsky composed, corrected, copied on sheets which piled up in the attic. The beams of the roof bent under the weight.

When Mr. my husband came to join me in my bed, it was late and his day wasn't finished, for I wanted a child from him.

The island of bells

I was sometimes more exasperating than Suzanna, who was struggling to remain a child. I remember one of those days which was like an island of bells in the midst of the gloom. I was grumbling about I don't know what when lady Johanna tapped me on the shoulder, saying:

- It would give us a good rest if you would go out and get some fresh air.

Which is what I did after giving her the most beautiful of my smiles. I went off toward the market. My legs, however, obeyed another principle, and I arrived in spite of myself on the shore of the Bodrog river. Resigned to being myself, I sat down amid the hubbub of my mind. The village bell rang and, as if by instinct, the Angelus accomplished its prayer within me by suppressing most of my deplorable mood. I calmed down.

Suddenly I heard Father's voice; he was talking with Suzanna next to a large beech, on the other side of a hedge. My little sister was crying, which she rarely did. But we had celebrated her twelfth birthday and ever since, she grumbled about everything, especially the food.

- Why, little sister complained, don't we have the right to chicken, eggs, and mutton? A senior ought to eat better than the others.

- Who put that into your mind?

- That's none of your business.

I didn't believe my ears. It was a long time before he replied. Suzanna hadn't even touched the pork products that Ludmila had brought her for her birthday. She ate less than a bird and wore a black lace on her head, which irritated lady Johanna to the highest degree.

- Miss my daughter, Father said at last, you owe me an explanation. For whom are you in mourning?

He had placed her in front of him and held her by the shoulders.

- You miss Dorothea, Father blurted out.

- I don't want to be addressed formally just because I'm twelve years old.

- That is the custom, Father answered. To signify that you have acquired our respect.

- What respect? Suzanna shot back. Johanna is always after me.

- I would need a few more details, Father demanded in a slightly mischievous tone.

- At Sarospatak, I worked more than anyone else, in the garden, for the meals, to help with the lessons, as coach for the Vestibule class.

- You failed to mention that you also had to go to the Bradys to teach the alphabet. After that I sent you to the old lady Görsi so that you could give her lunch. In the evening, it was you who had to shake the straw mats or replace the straw. Worse, you sometimes went and emptied the chamber pots, and that without anyone ordering you to. I find that you are forgetting a little. But you were speaking about Johanna!

- She wants everything right on time, she pushes me, she's not my mother.

- I grant you that she is not, and no doubt her character is not as calm as that of Dorothea, whom we all miss.

Little sister began to cry again. Father moved away from her. He looked at the river. Suzanna emptied her heart:

- It's you... It's because of you. Mama died worn out. We could have lived differently. We didn't have to be poor. There are plenty of people who live comfortably. The Calvinists, the Catholics, they eat. All those who have education eat lard, sausage and sauerkraut. Mama ate only gruel. You're never there when you need to be. You left us alone with Johanna and you went off to Moravia with Elisabeth. Me, I've never seen Moravia. Mama said that it was beautiful. But she's dead, Mama. She has gone, she too...

- Your Mama didn't abandon you, daughter.

- Yes! She did abandon us. I never saw the white horse. Never. There's only Johanna, always Johanna, nothing but Johanna. Why did you let us go back alone from Sarospatak? Why did you take another road? Weeks of having fun with Elisabeth and Toscana in the mountains.

- "Having fun" is perhaps not the right word, Father interposed.

- That's what you told us. You talked about the funny face fishing, but you've never taken me fishing..

And she burst out sobbing.

- That's a good idea. Come here, Miss my daughter, let's go fishing.

He made a harpoon from a branch, took Suzanna by the hand and went barefoot into the water. He went at it with his best funny faces, but tears slid along in the folds of his smile. But as for Suzanna, she had gotten her good mood back.

- It's not the fishing season. We'll return in the spring, Father declared after a little while. But come sit down here, I have a lesson for you that was a great help to me a long time ago.

Suzanna sat down on the thick branch of a willow; he set himself down a little further off and put his shoes back on.

- Daughter, listen well to what I am going to tell you. Dorothea and I went into a beautiful story and in this story, our little Suzanna played a great role. When we talked about you, our hearts melted like butter. You don't know all the butter that melted concerning you, Miss my daughter. It's true that we hoped for a lot of joy from you. And how much of that joy you've given us! I hope that you will love a child as much as we have loved you, your mother and I. But now, you're twelve, you're of an age to take a more active part in the story of your life. I have, then, a question for you - watch out, it's a little dangerous: why have you kept in your memory so many hurtful events and so few gratifying ones? Why have you organized all these events according to a story that is more tragic than joyful? What plan are you pursuing through this story?

Little sister stared at Father with astonished eyes, incapable of the slightest answer.

- I don't know what you're going to answer, it's your business, but you're big enough and wise enough for me to share with you what this question has produced in me. I was thirty-one then. My past seemed to me terribly bitter. I had lost the woman I loved and my two babies. My past resembled a series of cruelties. But the greatest difficulty was not behind me, and it wasn't in front of me either, it was precisely there, at the very hour I was at, very exactly at the hour where you yourself are, my dear daughter, just at the hour where, since that time, I am. For it is in this very moment that you and I are each writing our stories...

Suzanna was still open-mouthed. Father came up to her and sat down on a rock. He continued as he looked at the river.

- The most difficult thing, he continued, is to realize that, in our memory, we have constructed the story of our past with a certain plan in mind. The past is no more. It disappears as we go along. What remains is its inscription in our memories. And a memory is alive; a memory organizes things according to a plan.

- But, Papa, I didn't choose anything of what has happened to me.

- I know that very well, daughter. But what inhabits your memory is not what has happened to you. Every day and every hour of your life, thousands of facts occur: an ant that scurries along your leg, a drop of water that falls into a well and makes circles, a frog that goes hunting for flies, Daniel who runs and shouts, Johanna who is not in her best mood, your Papa who is leaving for Hungary, etc..

So many facts in reach of our sight, our nose, our ears. At every moment, you choose some of them and reject others. It is up to you to organize your memory as you understand it, and I can't do anything about it. However, let me continue my story. When I realized that I had constructed my life story according to a very definite but undisclosed plan to make my life difficult, I asked myself: why?

He got up and began to throw pebbles into the water.

- I don't know, but I think that I didn't forgive myself for the death of both my parents...

- But that wasn't your fault, Suzanna interrupted.

- There it is, daughter, the paradox of freedom. If I'm not responsible for my memory, if I'm not responsible for the story I have made starting from the thousands of events that have been given me, by what miracle could I take possession of my future? I might as well abandon to fate that future and thus my present, whine about my lot, accuse everyone, wear a handkerchief on my head and refuse to eat. I have obviously not been the cause of my parents' death, but, Miss my daughter, remember this, we mainly feel guilty about what we are victims of, and almost always feel innocent of what we are responsible for.

- But why? little sister asked.

- Because to suffer is not natural for us. To suffer, to endure, to put up with, to be passive is the business of rocks, not the business of a man or a woman. I had accepted the death of both my parents, that of my wife and my two babies. I had set these facts in my memory as if it had been fate. I hadn't made works of art out of these terrible events. Do you understand this? My story was a real mess. Everyone can tell similar stories whose ultimate objective is to say: "I should be pitied. I didn't do anything wrong." It's easy, all one has to do is write the story like everyone else. I hadn't taken my story in hand. The dramas I had come across had in them the power to produce a masterpiece and I, I had made of them a cheap melodrama. There is a form of passivity and submission, dear daughter, which is only a long abortion of the self.

- What are they, Papa, those things that I don't see? Suzanna asked.

- Try an amusing game. Find other points of view, and above all, my big daughter, pursue another plan than that of trying to attract your Mama's attention by inspiring pity. Instead, tell her a story that will make her shout for joy. Then it will come, the white horse, it will come, but first you will have to make a masterpiece.

He came up to her, took her in his arms and went up the path toward the road. His voice reached me:

- I heard a carillon, all the birds flew away. God! How beautiful it is today! There is so much energy and enthusiasm in my little Suzanna's soul that the world is

going to change. It can't keep on like this. There is a ringing island, the island of bells, and it is going to ring. You see, daughter, we are at this moment, at this hour, both of us installed at the beginning of the world. We aren't somewhere on a temporal trajectory. We are at the beginning..

They were too far away, I didn't hear anything any more.

The fire

A storm had arisen. The Swedes invaded nearly all of western Poland. Warsaw and Krakow fell almost without resistance. Hungary spilled over from the south to finish off a country that now was nothing more than ruins. The Jews were often seized as scapegoats. They alone made unanimity between Catholics and Protestants. The massacres were endless. The king of Poland had fled abroad and the nobles had surrendered to his "greatness" Carl Gustav. But there was no longer any greatness anywhere in the world.

Obviously there was no longer any question of Carl Gustav "liberating" Bohemia. One more betrayal. And Father, who had sung the glory of the kings of Sweden and Hungary, imploring them to give equal rights to Catholics and Protestants, to practice tolerance for everything having to do with religion, and to replace the sword with education... They had done quite the opposite.

The Moravian Brethren's quarter in Leszno was standing on a tightrope. We were on a barrel of powder and needed to avoid lighting the fuse. The Kokovsky family's politicking was necessary now for the Brethren's survival, and Ludmila became increasingly skillful in maneuvering. In this Poland, Father had become irrelevant.

One day, a stranger knocked at the door, saying he had come from England. He had not announced his coming and made no introduction either of his person or his cause. He simply wanted a conversation with Reverend my father.

- Here is my private office, Father answered him, pointing out two small chairs beside the printing press, my son-in-law has gone to look for ink and paper, so go ahead and take his place.

Which is what he did, not without hesitation, as he threw at me and the children a disdainful smile.

I wouldn't have understood anything of their discussion if my father hadn't recounted to me many times his journey to England just before the civil war which led to Cromwell's republic. Three gentlemen, Dury, Hübner and Hartlib supported an organization called "The College", whose objective consisted of reforming education, science, religion and politics. They found in Father's works the principles they needed. The College had enemies, many enemies. The stranger's criticism would no doubt again be about the hope for universal democracy.

- I am not coming of my own accord. I will, then, be brief. Let me first of all recall to you, sir, the importance of believing in original sin...

- There is no sinful nature in man, Father immediately retorted, but simply reactions to unhappiness...

- What foolishness! All your fundamental structure for a universal democracy stands on one point, contemptible in every respect: sin does not, supposedly, interfere with consciousness. All men can see, judge, and participate in government... This philosophy we cannot accept, the man peremptorily concluded.

And he went out, slamming the door.
The next day...

- Fire! Oh my God, fire! lady Johanna screamed.

In the attic, the flames crackled, the ceiling beams creaked, planks reddened here and there, firebrands broke loose... The attic... so weighted with manuscripts...

- Get out! Ablonsky cried. Get out! Everything is going to collapse...

- Mama! Toscana screamed.

A glow ran over our faces. The fire had already pieced a large hole next to the ladder. Embers were falling. The straw in our bedding caught fire. We would soon be burnt alive in the flames that ran, jumped and whistled. Father caught hold of Suzanna and Daniel, broke open the door with his shoulder, and threw the children on the street. A strong wind entered and stirred up the fire, which began to moan. Toscana threw herself on me, Father caught me by the arm and pulled us into the street. Ablonsky seized lady Johanna who was on fire, and both of them rolled into a miraculous muddy pool.

The house gave way, and I felt something like a bite on my neck. My nightgown was on fire. Ablonsky tore the garment off me, and made me tumble stark naked into the mud. My pain was eased.

Across the beams and rough planks in flames, the entire library was burning. Manuscripts, parchments, great extracts of wisdom obtained with such difficulty, and the inestimable printing press existed no more.

Father stood in front of the fire like a statue, and, if lady Johanna hadn't intervened and forcibly made him step back, he would have been roasted alive in the heat of the blaze. Nothing had been saved, except for our miserable lives. No! Daniel was holding the Kralice Bible, which he pressed against his chest. Father fell to his knees, hugging his children. Lady Johanna had almost no hair left on her head and her whole body was shaking.

We were on the other side of existence, as if transferred from one world to another. Naked, mute, covered with mud, burned, frozen, we were expecting a signal, a command. Nothing! Not an angel, not a demon. We were alone, stunned, stupefied, frozen in a strange minute that no longer knew which way to turn.

The whole quarter was up in flames. People were running everywhere. Masked men were fleeing, firebrands in their hands. Houses, huts and sheds collapsed one by one. The fire formed whirlwinds that thrashed around like devils, then rushed in every direction. The people were shouting, going this way and that, bumping into each other. The dogs knew better than we where to go. They were all running toward the same destination.

- By the hill road! Ablonsky exclaimed as he observed the animals.

The crowd remained paralyzed for a moment, then rushed toward where the dogs were going. Father seized Daniel, Johanna gripped Suzanna's hand, and Ablonsky tore Toscana from me as a frightened crowd swept us off. The heat burned our lungs, we were short of air, we were going to perish. In front of me a woman draped in too ample a blanket was transformed instantaneously into a torch. Blinded, she jumped screaming into the embers. A wind beat a dense smoke down over us. We were suffocating, but the crowd led us on. As if swept off in a flow of lava, we found ourselves, God knows how, outside the town, in a grassy field where the air filled our lungs at last.

Behind us, the fire howled as if in Hell; before us, the icy night. Some were lamenting because a daughter, a son, a wife, a husband was missing. The others regrouped, counted each other and re-counted, as if surprised to have survived. Women were moaning pitifully in the arms of a husband or a father who restrained them; desperate, they would have jumped in the fire to find a child.

I took Toscana in my arms and fell on my knees as I prayed:

- Thank you, my God!

Tears choked my words. Father and Ablonsky undertook to bring the families together. It was no easy thing, but by means of shouts and orders, thanks to the help of sergeants, almost all the community found itself on the hill where the great oak rose on which I had climbed as a child. Huddled in family groups, pressed one against the other, because we were for the most part nearly naked, we watched our ghetto send up sparks, while all around, the Catholic city celebrated. A small enclave between the Brethren's quarter and that of the Catholics had remained intact: the Kokovsky villa, and the lands adjacent or belonging to it. There was no need to fear for Ludmila.

The moon shone and the countryside sparkled with an incomprehensible serenity. In the distance, the first faint beams of day broke up the azure mists of night. And as if to clothe us with a little more misery, an icy drizzle rose up to reach us.

Slowly, we became aware of the tragedy opening up before us. Where could we go? What country would want us? How were we going to survive?

Our men had scarcely returned with the wounded when torches rose up toward us, the clamor of a multitude. Horses whinnied. They were advancing, striking sword against sword, stick against stick.

- Get out, leave, cried the Catholics among whom we recognized a certain number of Calvinists.

Some of the Brothers, and women and children, grabbed hold of stones. Father ordered them, for pity's sake, not to doom themselves to massacre. We had to resign ourselves. Reverend senior took command, as he had to, and directed us toward the north, en route to Silesia. He knew of a forest about fifteen kilometers to the north. It was there that we established our first encampment.

A Calvinist squire lent us some tools for making huts and fires. We cared for the wounded and consoled those who were in mourning. After all was said and done, there were few dead, but we no longer had anything. The few chests of clothing wrested from the flames were distributed.

As the community came out of its torpor, more and more looks were turned on our family. Whisperings reached us, almost accusations: Father didn't know how to run a family, lacked authority, had compromised himself with the Swedes, had brought on the tragedy.

By negotiating with the squire of the premises, we succeeded in obtaining a mule. Ablonsky went out to search for help. Our living conditions were so pitiful that, short of a miracle, many in the community were going to die of cold or hunger, without taking into account the threat of an epidemic.

Catholics, muskets in hand, came to threaten our host. We had to leave again.

Four carts, but no horse, had been given to us. We piled in them all we had for baggage, the wounded, the old men, the children who were too small. Thanks to long ropes, the men hauled the load while we, the women, pushed. Prudence demanded that we follow a terribly muddy woods road.

We were a pitiful sight. The bandits, instead of robbing us, brought us game. A woman covered me with a heavy wool coat. By one of God's miracles, a messenger from Laurent de Geer, the son of Father's old patron, had come across Reverend my husband on the north road. Clothing, tools, weapons and food had been brought to an innkeeper belonging to an affiliated community. Ablonsky had not waited for us, he had immediately gone off again with the messenger toward

Szczecin with a view to preparing for the settling of the brotherhood under the de Geer family's protection.

The community arrived at Szczecin divided, morose, and embittered. Suffering had been transformed into aversion. The hatred against the United Brethren had produced its venom. Someone had to be guilty, it was as if it were a necessity, and Father was just right for this. Some days after our arrival, a delegation showed up in front of our hut, still under construction. A pastor acted as spokesman:

- Reverend, the community is no longer at ease. Your allegiances with Sweden and Hungary have brought God's wrath upon us. We would be more at peace if..

Father cast a sad look at the man and raised his hand so that he would say no more about it.

The school of life

- This very night! Mr. Rembrandt had announced to the children. It will be tonight.

After all the time that he and Father were waiting, after all the time that they had been getting ready...

-Tonight, Toscana reminded the smallest ones, to encourage them for the final preparations.

- Tonight? Father made certain, half-blind from scrutinizing the Scriptures, the stars, the flowers, the birds. He said "This very night"? So then, it really is tonight. Go on, children, we're getting ready.

Reverend Mister my father had written so much on what was going to take place, on what must take place, that he could barely lift his arm to show the determining star. We never saw it, even Toscana with her eagle eyes was unable to perceive it. And yet Father assured us that it was the one.

- The flash will shoot out from that star, Father added. And we will see.

And he began to laugh. When suffering reaches such an age, when you have been driven out of your country all your life, exiled, deprived of your roots, of your land, pushed here and there at the will of the wind, counting the dead by the thousands, you can't help but be a little crazy. It was even more evident since the "educator from Bohemia", as he was called here, had met the painter from Holland. The neighborhood gossips had a lot to say about these two Methuselahs.

The morning shone on the calm waters of the Ij. The tulips raised their necks to see the great disc detach itself from the mist. "This very night", Rembrandt had said. No more than a single day before the event...

Yes! Things were going to change, things had to change. The city where we had found refuge was the omen of this. You had to see Amsterdam to believe that the future could be different. What determination! Land wrested from the sea by dikes, embankments, canals. In the levees, they had driven pillars thirty or forty cubits long. Supported by these foundations, houses of four stories, sometimes more, heaved themselves upwards. Everything staggered a little. But they had stuck house to house together in such a way as to make them support each other. Drunken houses, leaning forward, backwards, to the side, keeping themselves upright through the force of solidarity. It is thus that Amsterdam wrests time from the sea. A city had risen in response to intolerance. Lutherans were found there, Calvinists, Presbyterians, Baptists, Anabaptists, Mennonites, disciples of

Zwingli, Jews, Catholics, a kind of rather unstable mosaic. Like the buildings, the communities elbowed each other, but in the end tolerated each other.

Commerce became the common religion. A horizontal religion certainly, but in fact more universal, the religion of selfishnesses in competitive balance. A religion of oppositions, but perhaps the only one capable of producing an embryo of humanity. A new form of warfare? Yes, perhaps! But the least cruel. Human sweat and chimney soot rather than blood and bones! Amsterdam hoped to demonstrate the mercantile fertility of tolerance.

Better days arrived. Salvation was going to be accomplished. The first sign came from the rabbi of the city. He announced that all the rabbis, from the Iberian peninsula to Russia, from Sweden to Africa, had come to agreement. Yes, at this very hour, the Messiah was walking on the Holy Land. This explained the horrible sufferings of recent times. The Jews, universal pariahs, were the living expression of this. Bohdan Chmielnicki, Pavel's famous knight, had perpetrated such carnage among them, such massive and cruel exterminations that it was from now on impossible to fall any lower. Kabbalists had declared the year 1666 the number of the Apocalypse. A certain Nathan, called the Precursor, had officially proclaimed that someone named Sabbatai Tsevi was the Messiah, the true one. All this had awakened hopes, encouraged millenarian movements, given birth to esoteric sects of every kind. All was ready for other tragedies.

Father and Rembrandt were looking somewhere else. Quite close to the city, two hours on horseback, the first truly human child would appear at the end of a lightning flash. Mr. Rembrandt had detected the moment: "Tonight".

It had to be verified. Father took my first living child, Ernest, in his arms, hoisted him on his shoulders, took the little street along the canal, scurried along as far as the quay. Toscana dressed Woute and Magdalena, my twins, and she in turn went out. Daniel and Suzanna started to prepare breakfast. I felt that I too was entitled to go to the harbor with baby Henk, my youngest. Ablonsky hesitated a moment and followed us.

They had to be certain. Eight years of preparation had surely made it worth it to upset the schedule. It must be said that, in the little house we were crammed into and which gave out on the canal only by a narrow passage through lord Laurent de Geer's great house, the schedule had become a question of survival. We were fitted together like the parts of a watch in a case. And there was a pain, central, terrible and untouchable, that I would have to speak of one day, but not now. I had to move around it. Seven children, two couples, a thousand chores, a universe in a little wooden chest with an almost vertical gable...And on that day, a breach, a hope, I went to it.

Was it Mr. Rembrandt or Reverend my father who first had the idea? The question made them laugh every time. They had known each other even before Reverend my husband and I were strong enough to go outside and get some fresh air. Mr. Rembrandt had sent his student Juriaen Ovens to hear how we were

getting on. The painter's studio was only a few steps away, and rumor circulated that we might very well have the plague or cholera, for we had come from Silesia weakened and pale as cheeses. The master painter, having lost his house and his position, his wife and his children, except for Titus, his youngest, didn't want us to be driven off. Juriaen brought us food and medicine, but above all, Mr. Rembrandt defended our cause. His fame remained considerable. We were forgotten.

Father was the first to get his energy back. Every morning, he went as far as the little courtyard located behind the Westerkerk church, a few steps from the house. There was an enormous plane tree there and many birds. In his big black coat with its wide fur collar, he began to sing all the canticles he knew, except that he didn't remember the words very well and filled the gaps with everything that passed through his head. His voice, hoarse and raucous, swept away the frightened larks. No one made anything of it, except for the children who, irresistibly, came near. And the place was transformed into the strangest of schools.

About ten little girls and as many little boys were having fun around Father, children too poor for the parish school, watched over by several mothers who took advantage of this opportunity to gossip among themselves. After a few weeks, a painting came to life. One might have said it was a fair's carousel around an old man with somewhat mechanical actions. Two or three children pirouetted in the grass, several others ran around a grove; there, they played at being wolves, somewhere else, at having a wedding; here, they climbed a bush, further off, they played hide-and-seek; then, it was leapfrog. A joyful disorder, but anyone who knew how to observe would ask himself how it happened that no child was crying and no quarrel led to blows. The kids seemed to be rushing around between order and disorder. Father, however, scarcely budged. Sometimes, he entered the circle, other times, he clapped his hands forcefully to stop everything. This way of fracturing time unexpectedly had nothing to do with education, it simply revealed the effort of an exhausted mind to pull itself together. And he was pulling himself together. After awhile, Father began to toss out questions, his kind of questions: "What is a bird? What is flying? What is playing? What is thinking?" And tears ran on his cheeks as if these questions made miracles appear before his eyes.

He was getting better and was gaining physical strength more rapidly than any of us. Surrounded by children, a new country was rising, his country. The Moravian pastor became a teacher. The children of Westerkerk park returned home filled with questions. Armed with questions, they discovered what surrounded them. Then, they wanted to read. And Father taught them to read things as much as books. His education was so satisfying that the mothers present formed a committee and elevated the park to the rank of school. Charter and statute were granted it. It has to be said that Father's reputation was arriving from England, Sweden, Hungary and Poland. And it was no small reputation. Certainly, they smiled at his ways, but they gave in in the face of his results. His little ones learned to read well in advance of the others. Gradually, adolescents were added,

and the two sheds adjoining Westerkerk were converted into classrooms. Ablonsky and I went back into service.

A prefect arrived with great pomp, offered to Father the keys of the city's great library and a post as professor in one of the best schools in the city. Father received the key with gratitude but declined the post.

In the middle of the rows of manuscripts, he questioned the children:

- So, my dear students, do you want to be wise?

- Yes, the oldest ones called out without thinking.

- No! I am not asking you if you want to want, that I know, everyone wants to want this or that. I am asking you if you have found the place where you will champ at the bit and demand to live.

- I want to be a philosopher, asserted Erna, a girl of sixteen.

- So, can you drink the cup? If you knew where this desire goes, you would tremble. It is because wisdom must be gained at the expense of fear that there are so many killers in the world. War is the entertainment of cowards who reject the inner combat...

And he spoke to them of Rembrandt's painting and especially of his etchings. He showed them one of them, entitled "The Good Samaritan". He explained to them that it was an event. And that if they knew how to see, there was nothing but events... Filled with enthusiasm, Erna and Udo took it upon themselves to go and knock on the door of Rembrandt's studio in order to ask him to accept them as students. The old man refused for lack of time. He had to paint in order to satisfy the bankruptcy receiver and regain his rights. But Erna and Udo told in great detail all that they had heard at the library. This didn't change in any way the master's decision, and yet the "nativity" project arose like a flash of lightning in the old man's eyes.

Eight years of preparation followed.

I had regained my strength, and Mr. my husband had also. The death and despair encountered at Leszno and on all the road leading to the tolerance of Amsterdam had increased in us the desire to make children. Father permitted us to make a small room out of the pigeon loft on the roof that we shared with several couples of doves. Out of this room there emerged, year after year, young pigeons and children.

My first was Ernest. I was still so worn out, and our situation so insecure. It was at this moment that I went on the bridge, that I thought of Moses, and that I gave the basket a kick.

No sooner had Father gotten back his spirits than he began the writing of the manuscripts lost in the fire. He wanted to arrive at a complete synthesis. Until late in the night and very early in the morning, he scrawled on paper. The *Universal Consultation for the Reform of Human Affairs* obsessed him. Wasn't Amsterdam an oasis of tolerance in the midst of the wars of religion? Why couldn't it be the cradle of united democratic nations? If this enthused Reverend my father to the point of giving him a third life, it seemed to upset more than one.

A shadow, however, oppressed him more than his inevitable enemies, and it would have broken more than one. It was a terrible desolation that I must speak of now. Lady Johanna never really arrived in Amsterdam. A form of arthritis mixed with a chronic melancholy kept her in a state of premature senility like that of beggars at the last limit of wretchedness. There was no longer any spark in her gaze, no longer any life in her limbs, no longer any memory in her mind. Her lost face remained unfathomable. It might have been said to be a bronze statue in which a soul was moaning.

Father had procured a padded armchair for her. Each morning, assisted by Ablonsky, he dressed her and placed her in front of the window. Alas! in the inner courtyard where we were, the little houses were so close to each other that she could barely glimpse, across the labyrinth, the canal and its masts. Her gaze got lost and she didn't budge the whole day long. Every evening, on returning, Father spoke to her for a good hour and told her all sorts of stories. He could never be certain that she understood. Then he had her eat a gruel which she swallowed with difficulty. And Mr. my husband helped her go to bed.

When, in the murmur of the night, a corpuscle of silence formed, I would happen to hear Father stifle his tears. He was hugging lady Johanna's cold body, no doubt. He whispered sweet words in her ear. He wanted to melt the ice, but the woman remained a prisoner. Every night, to sleep beside such ice, to feel the soul of his beloved quiver in the cold, to share her anguish... How could he survive!

Strangely, the ritual surrounding lady Johanna became in the end like the driving force of the family clock. Everyone participated in it. Suzanna washed her face and her hands, Daniel got the chair ready, Toscana read a passage from the Kralice Bible and had her touch the paper, and my swarming crowd of kids - Ernest, Woute, Magdalena and Henk - provided the sound and the show. I took her hand and placed it on my belly so that she could feel the progress of my latest one. Life turned around her like the foam of a river around a stone.

Nothing changed on her face: her lips remained rigid, not one wrinkle moved, her eyebrows didn't even tremble, her eyes seemed made of sandstone. Only the small variations in the size of the pupils gave any impression of life. Lady Johanna was like an organizing presence. All our little hurts melted like snow before her, our illusions too. Her face said to us that happiness wasn't going to catch on fire for the sake of a few crowns. It was going to come from an absolutely mysterious depth, or it would not come at all. I believe that it was coming. It was a somber happiness, muted like the dampness of the end of winter, but constant and fertile.

The multiplication of children who spun around lady Johanna spoke of all the cosmos.

Father had been admitted to the printers' guild. He directed a small business where Daniel and Suzanna worked. Little by little, our financial situation improved. However, there were too many needs to satisfy. Nearly every month, emissaries from the communities in exile brought news and left with a part of our income. In spite of all this money and that of the lord de Geer, events went from bad to worse. Everywhere the Brethren despaired and submitted: in Bohemia, to the Catholics, elsewhere, to the Calvinists. Where they hesitated, threats, expropriations, killings finished the work.

Father knew that this assimilation was inevitable. It had to be made an opportunity for the healing of the two enemies. To make the spirituality of the Brethren universal, cleanse it of all traces of sectarianism, deliver it from the slightest dogmatic tendencies, free it from its national particularities, purify it from its messianic illusions; so that, once pure, it could enter the two Churches like a medicine. But above all, it had to give the flavor of a brotherhood, the flavor of a universal democracy.

The last great senior put all his enthusiasm into it. He had gone into partnership with a printer. The posthorses galloped, the ideas travelled. But Amsterdam's tolerance trembled on its foundations and worried about such a democracy. How far should it tolerate? How far should faith in the consciousness of men and women go? The coexistence of all religions with a view to commerce, Amsterdam made itself a champion of this, but a spirituality that reassessed the legitimacy of the power struggle leading some to wealth and the others to poverty, this was worrisome.

Universal democracy

A number of councillors asked the city to proceed with an examination of the strange Moravian pedagogue's "political project". Three magistrates were appointed. The hearing would take place in one of the rooms of the City Hall.

First of all, it was important not to attract attention and thus risk disseminating the pastor's work. The hearing room must be modest, and the three officials delegated for the hearing, even more ordinary. Rick Huls was none other than the secretary of the brewers' guild. He bore its stigmata on his chubby and ruddy body. Frank Laar appeared to have a better reputation, he was considered the most puritanical of the Calvinists; he was the exact opposite of Rick, long and lean and as pale as the flesh of a fish. Only Klaus Groth, master of theology, was capable of contributing any wit worthy of the name.

Secondly, the public would serve as a sand bank. No matter what philosophy would be shipwrecked if it were furnished with a public sufficiently allergic to any effort of thought. Everyone knows it, the best poison for philosophy is found in the cult of mediocrity. So then, they thought they would surely succeed by offering a reception in honor of a pastor recognized for his courage, his benevolence and his kindness. The room was full and rather merry.

Master Groth opened the debate with grandiloquence:

- We are eager to hear you on the subject of your work that you say will determine the future...

- ... of an Amsterdam that has so generously opened to you her abundant bosom, Rick added merrily.

The audience guffawed without Father understanding anything about it. Neither he nor I knew that the brewers' guild also ran a prostitution business and that the taxes levied on this business financed the basket of provisions which every new arrival kindly received from the mayor's office. A welcome, a compromise of principle. The master brewer doubtless wanted to lighten the seriousness of the procedure, but the pastor Frank Laar got up, which had the immediate effect of reducing the hall to silence. His scornful glance at Rick in no way spared Reverend my father.

- What end are you pursuing? the Calvinist drily asked my father.

- I simply hope for the awakening of intelligences and consciousnesses. Only cultivated, sagacious and liberated citizens can form a free and legitimate State, and over the States, a universal democracy necessary for peace...

- Subversive, pastor Laar harshly replied.

The confrontation was going to take a little too solemn a turn, which drove master Groth to take the floor and courteously question Father. He delicately pushed him in the direction of utopia... Father fell into the trap.

- Each man, Father asserted, must "free himself" of himself in order to become a center of reflection rather than simply a center of production and consumption, a free and thinking being rather than a mechanical and submissive being.

- What a marvelous project! Groth insisted. How do you think that we can arrive at this?

His insistence led Rick and Laar to participate in the enterprise. Each in his own way, they threw a little soap on the slope. Reverend my father allowed himself to be carried away:

- The first task of the State is education. A real humanity will emerge from this...

- But tell us, please, by what means can this humanity be achieved? Groth asked.

- If one considers man to be fundamentally evil, repression appears to be the only solution. But that is only elevating an institutional violence over individual violences. All violence against violence does no more than cover up a fire which, a little further off and a little later, will start up again stronger. History is, until now, only the displacement of a violence that goes on, getting bigger. If we do not modify the very principle of this history, we will, inevitably, destroy ourselves.

- But how do you think to change the bellicose nature of man? pastor Laar asked.

- It is precisely this idea that must be changed, Reverend. There is no bellicose nature, there are only men made bad by a carefully maintained ignorance.

The wine circulating in the assembly, the whispers, the laughs, the dirty talk gradually buried the discussion. Rick went at it with a question more sonorous than sensible, at least in appearance:

- What do you think of Amsterdam, isn't it the most beautiful example of tolerance?

- Tolerance is only the passive condition, Mr. Huls, Father replied. As long as we don't dedicate ourselves to a true education in freedom, tolerance will only start the violence up again, it won't reduce it.

- So then, Mr. Comenius, pastor Laar asked, how should our Low Countries organize their powers? Tell us that.

- Yes, tell us that, added several big guys who were a little tipsy.

Father didn't see that they were increasingly making a mockery of him.

- I am proposing four colleges of decisions: a college of education and the sciences, a college of commerce, a college of religions, a college of justice. Each of these colleges must be at the same time autonomous...

The audience had difficulty containing a wind of hilarity that came as much from the heights of hope where Father was as from the wine which stirred up everyone.

- The pacification of humanity, Father insisted, is impossible without economic justice. But this is not sufficient, pacification is impossible without the disarmament of individuals and of organizations...

- No weapons, no police, no prisons, nothing but schools. What do you think of it, gentlemen? Rick asked those present.

They burst out laughing so violently that much of the wine in their mouths went up toward the ceiling and fell back like rain. Master Groth thought it enough to look at his office-holder's gavel, thus demonstrating that he, in any case, didn't want to contradict Father's beautiful philosophy of non-violence.

A terrible racket ensued and the few women present were treated to obscenities that no sentry, obviously, wished to reprimand. Father rushed to the mayor's office to demand the intervention of the guard. The humiliation was complete.

The nativity

Amsterdam had gotten what it wanted. All was now leveled, all religions were at the same height; no hope was above the others; in fact, truth no longer interested anyone. Business could, then, quietly continue to produce its terrible inequalities.

A gray dullness had penetrated the house. The days that followed Father's defeat were only austere tapestries over an implacable silence. Lady Johanna seemed to call us into the cold. One might have said that she had simply preceded us and was awaiting us on the threshold.

Father sat down next to her as if he wished to join her. The children grew impatient, and the impatience made him even a bit more depressed. He seemed to be submitting to the work of time that ends up sweeping everything away. Nonetheless, every morning he rose before dawn, persevered in his writing, walked at a good pace to the great library, pestered his students with questions; in the evening he returned, smoothed his wife's hair and got lost with her in I don't know what mystery.

Life went on. And then, one day in March even more dreary than the others, he returned later than usual, soaked to the skin. He had no doubt walked a long way in the rain. Months later I found out that, on that day, he had been sharply snubbed by three or four parents dissatisfied with the grades of their little geniuses. He said nothing, took off his coat and warmed his hands over the coals for a moment. He was trying to cling to his habits. He prepared the gruel for lady Johanna, approached her with his customary smile but, when he got down on one knee to bring the spoon to his wife's mouth, he collapsed. He gave a desperate groan and began to sob like a child. Lady Johanna remained motionless.

Father's groan was unbearable. The entire household went into a sort of timeless coma. I could no longer move. Ablonsky, who had a canticle for every occasion, had lost his voice. Time had stopped on the most terrible minute of our human existence. The children stared at the scene, mute, dumbfounded.

Woute, by some miracle, edged forward, took lady Johanna's heavy hand and succeeded, not without great effort, in placing it on Father's head.

Very slowly, the tears gave way to silence.

- Grampy cries, Woute stammered.

These were his first distinctly articulated words. Father raised his head and threw him a moist glance.

- Grampy cries, Woute proudly continued.

Father opened his mouth, but only a raucous noise was able to come out of it. He cleared his throat with two or three dry coughs. Woute looked at him, nibbling his lower lip.

- Grampy cries, Father repeated, hugging the little one.

And he started to laugh. Laughs interrupted by sobs that shook his shoulders.

- Grampy cries, Grampy laughs... Grampy loves you... so much, Father mumbled.

The children rushed to embrace him.

- Grandpapa loves you all, he managed to say over the hubbub.

- Oh la la, Ablonsky exclaimed, you're going to knock your grandfather over.

And he caught hold of Papa's hand. Everyone began to sing the hymn for mealtimes, and life returned to normal.

All this had prepared us for the day when Mr. Rembrandt had announced to the children: "This very night, it will be tonight, tell your Reverend grandfather.

The barge was waiting for us on the Keizersgracht. It hadn't been easy to convince Mr. Laurent de Geer to finance the operation. The expense was not high, but the affair seemed definitely crazy. To let it be known would put the prestigious de Geer family in danger of ridicule. Nothing could be more devastating for business! Mr. Laurent was no longer as fabulously rich as his late father, and the bourgeois family didn't look kindly at his assistance to the lost cause of Bohemia. Since the organized farce at the City Hall, the laughter reached all the way to Mrs. the mistress of the great house, Laurent's grandmother. So imagine the looks that would be cast at the master merchant who condescended to the eccentricities of the old senior and the unfortunate painter.

Discretion was, then, appropriate. It was, however, impossible to safeguard the secret. Too many children came, too many parents had given their permission for what appeared to them to be only a game. Fortunately, Mr. Rembrandt had just finished "The Return of the Prodigal Son". The painting had reconciled more than one. People sought to be identified with the merciful father. This was obviously only a concern for appearances, but for the time being this served our purposes.

Lady Johanna had been put to bed. The barge awaited us. The enterprise ought to have delighted me, one more festivity in ordinary life. Alas! Duty had tightened its knot. Mr. Reverend my husband had been named senior. Father had blithely discharged on him the weight of mediations, of complaints, of arbitrations, of journeys, of conciliations, of material goods, of relations with the other communities, in brief, all the daily life of a human Church.

The new senior, whom I cherished a little more every day, had, then, left that very afternoon for Memel. He had to consolidate a community that was said to be very promising. Owing to an exceptional disposition of the stars and seas, the captain had advanced by five days the perilous voyage to Prussia. Worry hung around me.

I drove away the worries as best I could and was busy on the wharf helping the children to embark. In spite of all my efforts, I had not enough hands and too much belly. Luckily, Suzanna had been able to get off work at the printer's and help me. There was a whole people of little ones to help aboard. Toscana had taken charge of five of the children from the park. She remained imperturbable in her obedience. This exasperated me.

Father was accompanied by the very radiant Erna, whom Udo stuck to like a leech. Mr. Rembrandt appeared to float in the wide sleeves of his doublet. His hair frothed up like a white foam around his leather hat. His face, reddened by time, chapped by adversity and baggy under the eyes, grimaced strange smiles at the children. The onlookers were much amused by our undertaking.

Except for Mr. Rembrandt and his two assistants, we were all in the clothing of Judea. The painter rejected the false, he only liked the true. In the past, he would have demanded respect for detail to the point of bankrupting himself for a single painting; today, he went to the essential, but always rejected imitation. "He's a little off", they said, to make fun of him. Nevertheless, the mystery of this man who liked to paint only events left no one indifferent.

The crossing was joyful. For this painting, a particular stable was needed. It was Toscana who was sent on this mission. She discovered a little hill neat Uitdam on the shore of the Ijmeer, two hours away by barge. There was a sheep barn there which in fact was nothing more than an abandoned ruin. The roof was of thatch, the walls of lathing, the beams of beech. Mr. Rembrandt had examined the spot with a great deal of attention. He had had three holes pierced at very precise spots in the roof. They had also boarded up a small window that he judged to be undesirable. A large stone had been placed not very far from the center of the hut. The master had made dozens of sketches. Then he had tried his hand at some very strange colors, similar to those of wine lees.

We took our places according to the prearranged scenario. Erna, who could be none other than the Virgin Mary, crouched next to the hearth. Over her head, a little to the right, suspended on a beam, an osier basket recalled the story of Moses. Titus, Rembrandt's son, had agreed to take the part of Joseph. He was going to hide in a place of great humility, under the stairs where he would be barely visible. Udo was going to lean over the Child like the first shepherd. He was seen from the back. His principal part would consist of reflecting the light in the direction of the mother and child. Baby Henk would be deposited on the straw at the desired time, between Erna's knees. The fire was going to splash over the infant, be reflected on Erna and make a deep and ample shadow behind Udo,

from where, according to Rembrandt, a mysterious presence was going to appear. This presence would be reflected in the bottom of the basket.

Father would play the role of the eldest of the shepherds. He would hold a lamp that was very faint, but sufficient to enlarge the light of the principal fire. The children would be disposed in such a way as to form a living creche around the baby. A donkey and an ox would be standing up behind the principal beam. I, Toscana, and a gray dog had to huddle in the left of the tableau, indicating the exit. In fact, every composition worthy of the name is accompanied by a path running through the painting, in a circle, a spiral, or a figure eight, and leading to the exit from which the visitor departs with the evocative memory. In *The Nativity*, there would be two paths for the eye to visit: one for the composition in light and one for the composition in darkness. The two paths would lead to the same exit so as to produce a comprehensive memory.

In no time, all was ready. An apprentice provided Mr. Rembrandt with paints, brushes, spatulas. The evening light was fading. The fire on the stone had reached the desired maturity. The lamp held by my father the shepherd flickered slightly as planned. At the right moment, the darkness which enveloped us seemed total, solid, compact as velvet. Above Erna, the basket suspended on the beam let its emptiness be glimpsed...

And then, suddenly, without any warning, rain beat down on the sheep barn, as strong as if the seas of heaven had collapsed into the seas of earth. The hut's roof sagged between the batten. Despite our prayers, the rain only increased. Too weighted down, the roof tore open everywhere. Waterspouts fell on our backs. The fire was smothered. The lamp went out. The plan was abandoned.

Soaked to the skin in the barge, huddled one against the other to keep ourselves warm, we were burrowed into an undescrivable gloom and silence. Demoralized.

Only the boatman, in his innocence, succeeded in tearing a sentence out of the silence:

- I have a barrel of wine here that is not too sour...

Each one had his or her swig, or rather two for Reverend my father, or rather three for master Rembrandt. A warmth filtered into each of us and loosened the stiff laces of our disappointment. A second round was proposed. The shivering from the cold gradually left our bodies. In front of us, the lights of the city covered the rain with a film of silver and the night appeared limitless. The drops resembled sparks. One might have said it was a gathering of fireflies. Everything began to lose its forms; our gaze, captivated, without fear and without emotion, went to infinity in the darkness.

Father, who was wrapped up in children, stared Mr. Rembrandt straight in the eyes, a look which only lasted a moment. A sort of trembling made the craft sway. The children came out of their torpor. The eyes of all of us were swept away in

the dance of the sparks. A breeze blew, and silver hair floated in every direction. We were probably approaching the wharf, but the shimmering texture of the darkness prevented us from discerning anything whatsoever. Our eyes searched for the slightest clues.

- Grandma Johanna, Magdalena suddenly cried.

One might have said that the name formed the image. We were so captivated that we found ourselves all on the same side of the barge.

- Hey there! the boatman's cry rang out.

The apparition disappeared. The craft touched the wharf. We had arrived.

- Not too sour, that wine of yours! Mr. Rembrandt said to the ferryman.

And he burst out laughing, a contagious laugh that engendered one from Father and finally from all of us.

Three weeks later, *The Adoration of the Shepherds* was exhibited in the City Hall. In the painting, lady Johanna was at Joseph's side, she was talking with another shepherdess; between the two women, the little baby they were holding looked at Jesus in the manger.

I spent hours immersed in this painting, captivated. The next day, I gave birth to a beautiful boy whom Father called Orau, my fifth sunbeam.

The last battle

- From the continent of Europe, to all the peoples of all languages of the earth: honorable brothers and sisters, loyal inhabitants of the world, beloved fellow creatures, I call you to peace. At the end of my life, I have nothing else in my heart but the hope for peace. Do not trust empires. Their ships go on every sea with great promises, exceedingly beautiful merchandise and heavy cannons...

"I have a hope, I have a dream. We are each one of us a spark of consciousness which must take fire in a universal democracy. For healing, there must be understanding, we must understand the source of the sickness of empires! They want justice, they create injustice; they want peace, they make war; they love pleasure, they torture their fellow creatures. They reverse their aspirations even to the slightest details...

- Grandfather, Grandfather, I have the solution, cried Woute as he turned back toward the bed where Father was with difficulty dictating to me his new *Panglottia* (book of the universal language).

Woute moved his slate up to the sick man's eyes. Trembling, Father took the child's hand, brought the beautiful writing an inch from his nose, and attentively examined the solution:

- Fine discovery! he concluded. Now, go explain your reasoning to Magdalena and ask Ernest to give you another problem, even more difficult.

And he continued his dictation, his enormous utopia. I was tired. *Requiem aeternam...* My hand trembled on the parchment. The ink formed spots. I heard in the distance something like claps of thunder, waves breaking on the wharves, sails tearing. *Requiem aeternam...et lux perpetua...* The ship had finally returned from the voyage that had taken it all the way to Lithuania. Reverend my husband... pale...staggered...looked at me... collapsed... died. My heart gave way and my reason reeled. *Requiem domine...* That wasn't enough. Shortly afterwards Laurent de Geer, our protector, also breathed his last... In view of our poverty, Toscana had gotten a job as a servant with a merchant of dubious reputation who took her to Prussia.

One letter, only one, reached me.

Dear Mama, I wouldn't know how to thank you enough for all you have done for me. I will send you money as soon as I can. Mr. Bogislaw says that I am very gifted in arithmetic and languages. He intends to keep me in his apartments so that I can take on the responsibility of billing clerk as soon as I am qualified for it. Can you imagine it? Me, an accountant! My wages will be fixed, and since he is giving me lodging with him, I will send you everything, for the children...

And then it was total silence. No letter, no money. May God give her claws!

My memory was covered with holes. I was losing my memories. Joachim Hübner, the English scientist who had so much helped Father become known in all Europe, had he too left this world. The English gentry no longer responded. We had been abandoned by the intellectual elite. From now on, the Comenius family was nothing. *Kyrie eleison...* Too many deaths, too many undertakers. I must start laughing. Butterflies froliced around the wells of my spirit. The cemeteries of my soul filled with starlings. My hand could no longer dance. Father, from his bed, went on amusing the children. I went to walk along the edge of the canal and went to sleep sometimes between the crates and the barrels.

War was running everywhere. *Requiem aeternam...* This time, Holland against England. Fighting among Protestants, fratricidal war for the control of the North Sea and through this, the domination of commerce and colonies... Johanna too had finally resigned herself to plunging into the abyss. We saw a flash cross through her eyes, a smile spread over her face, a light illuminate her hair. She arose from her chair, took three steps and collapsed. *Kyrie eleison.* I was afraid. God how I was afraid! I shivered like a little girl on a frozen lake. Titus, Rembrandt's son, died too. *Requiem aeternam...* His wife arrived pregnant at her father-in-law's. The unfortunate painter's mistress, worn out by the hard winter, succumbed in the spring. Before summer, the painter himself was dying from too much sorrow. Death loves death. *Requiem aeternam...*

- There are still the children, Father said in order to encourage me.

The silence began to laugh at every consolation. If I were dead so to speak, surely Father should return to life. He had the strength to take me in his arms, to rock me like a child, I don't know how many nights. During the day, he took care of everything. I was like Johanna, a spider suspended on the end of a thread in a statue of bronze. I heard the echo of the world, but it was so far away.

- Cry, Mrs. my daughter. Cry. Tomorrow will be another day, Father said as he rocked me next to the fire.

I didn't have the right to die, there were so many children. I had little by little ended up in a mechanical life: the care of my little ones, the necessities of existence. My body obeyed. By habit and by necessity, life returned to normal.

As I was returning to life, Father began to decline. He had difficulty breathing. His lungs filled up like sponges. Every morning, he tried to get up, but wasn't able to. The end was near. He sent Suzanna and Daniel to search for Ludmila, and he began to dictate and dictate as if the fruit ought to take everything from the plant, and the plant had no other way of dying than giving itself entirely to the fruit.

The summer began to shine. Days so beautiful that Ernest, helped by the twins, by Henk and Orau who was only four, and forcing me to participate, succeeded in installing Father in a wheelbarrow of their own making. With cables and sticks,

they rolled their rickety invention to the bridge at the church, crossed the canal and went around through the blossoming lanes of Jordaan.

A down of oats covered the fields. Squares of crocuses, narcissus, hyacinths and tulips painted the meadows like clowns at a fair. Behind the dales, apple and plum trees raised their heads, curly with flowers. Thousands of scents wandered about, annoyed the nose, and ran away. In the sky, fine wads of cotton stretched and frayed under the sun's caresses.

By the power of light, things were losing their corsets. Colors overlapped, forms opened their corollas, and all was only movement. One might have said that the history of the world had capsized into its original paradise like a bad dream into a morning of love. Tears flowed from Reverend my father's eyes. With a broad smile he embraced all he saw, probably as multicolored spots. Beauty and children resurrected him for another life, one more life.

He prepared to fight, with fists if necessary, against all the boors who criticized his work, mistreated him through lies or ignorance. The opportunity was given him. A Reformed theologian, a Frenchman by the name of Samuel Desmarets, called Maresius, professor at Groningen, had attacked the millenarism which "perspired", he said, "through all the pores of the *Universal Consultation*, like a theological inevitability".

A family from Naarden, friends of the theologian, much enjoyed ridiculing all the literary ships that Father had launched on the seas of the world: "The pastor Jan Amos Komensky asks men and women, regardless of their rank and fortune, to establish a worldwide constitution, to raise education to a foundational status, to depend entirely on the light of conscience, while calling our civilization barbarous. He had better decide: should we bring the light to the savages of the Americas or cease governing the world?"

Ernest received the strict assignment of taking charge of all the household for two or three days. The next day, as if he had forgotten his seventy-eight years, Father got up straight in his bed, put his shoes on by himself, washed himself with great care, added tea and mint to his boiling water, ate a big bowl of oat gruel and ordered me to follow him to the fortress of Naarden, more than three leagues away.

We had scarcely passed through the doorway of the De Geer's great house when he wanted to sit down to rest. Fortunately a wagon was going to get cheeses for the fortress. By the carter's mercy, we were able to climb aboard with the promise of a return trip if we agreed to take our places in the back in order to drive away with a stick all the good-for-nothings who were trying to spare themselves the expense of a carriage.

In order to keep the anticipated debate from looking ridiculous in a crazy meeting, Father himself had invited pastors, his friends and his enemies, to a big meeting in the town's church. He wanted to spar with Desmarets himself. The man had

made him a definite promise concerning this. Father was not going to withdraw even if he had to spit out his ailing lungs and exhibit all the defects of his aging memory.

Reverend Father hummed, his gaze lost in I don't know what world, while I broke my stick on three rogues of the road. Good Lord! I thanked the cataracts that hid this mean spectacle from Father. He had only smiles for the miserable jerks who laughed at him. A heathen more determined than the others went off with the hem of my skirt. He swore worse than a Swabian.

- Is it the cawing of the crows in the Weesp marsh already? Father asked.

- No, I answered him, out of breath, just the last mongrels in the slum...

- What are you saying? a slim Mongol! But little girl... You're here, daughter? Where are we?

- Don't worry, Father, I'm here. We'll be at Weesp in half an hour.

We left the city and I had a little respite. I leaned Father as comfortably as possible against the side rails of the wagon. He dozed off. God! Must I lead Reverend my father into disgrace! I prayed the Lord to inspire pity in Mr. Desmarets.

"Why be stubborn, and waste beautiful summer days in such a foolhardy duel?" I asked him. "No daughter. To fattle!" he had exclaimed. And he wanted to confront a French rhetorician! Even if he no longer knew how to speak clearly, he did know how to command. It must be said that the Frenchman's satirical tract was fraught with consequences. The eminent professor attacked the very bases of all of Father's hope. More fundamentally, his question dealt with hope, on the possibility of attaining happiness. He asserted in substance: "If time is entirely in the hands of extra-human forces, let us pray and hope for salvation. Faith alone is enough. If time is in the hands of man, let us tremble, then, for man is up until this day no more than his own executioner. Hope is no more than a necessary illusion. Man is predestined anyway..."

It had to be countered. But Father had for a weapon only an intelligence already half in the other world, whistlings in the ears, and "slim Mongols" on the tip of his tongue. As if his mind's defeat were not enough, he had, in a letter, given this Monsieur Desmarets his best weapons. "In sum, for you", Father had dictated to me, "human responsibility remains strictly individual: work and commerce. The collective good and social justice are relegated to the vagaries of human selfishness... A skillful maneuver for escaping from the first political duty: justice. You are seeking to undermine the right and the duty of the community to legislate economic exchanges with an eye to social justice. [...] The essence of *The Universal Consultation* is precisely there: to connect our consciences in order to achieve justice."

Fatigue interrupted him, and two or three days were required for him to get back sensible sentences. I prayed God that he wouldn't have more than one paragraph to say to defend himself. And even if he did manage to speak correctly, his argument could easily be turned against him. Men have this strange inclination to draw great pleasure from making the bridges of hope collapse in front of them. Man adores inventing proofs of the inevitability of his fate and the determinism of his conduct. He draws a great feeling of irresponsibility from this...

And Father, asleep on a wagon full of cheeses, was going into battle on behalf of his dear windmills! And it was me, his daughter, who was taking him!

Arriving at Naarden, we had a good soup at an inn. Father, his nose in the air, hunted for arguments. The bells of the church called us.

- To the bray, Father said, getting up like a soldier.

In the church about ten pastors and their wives had gathered, friends for the most part, a few skeptical Calvinists, but none of Father's enemies had arrived. A very long half-hour passed. The seats of Desmarets and his friends remained vacant. I was relieved. Father, for his part, was seething on his chair. A messenger finally entered with a short letter which proclaimed: "We, Samuel Desmarets, called Maresius, his family and his relations, insist on sparing a man who they tell us is in frail health. This Reverend from Bohemia has been so generous in his life and his actions that it would be disgraceful to take advantage of his old age. We recommend that the assembly honor instead a very great pedagogue."

Father fumed and anger gave him energy again. He rose curtly, and wanted to advance toward the auditorium, but didn't do it for fear of stumbling. After a silence that embarrassed everyone, he asked:

- Is there a chorister in the room?

His voice was perfectly clear.

- I can sing, a pastor suggested after his wife had tugged on his sleeve.

After a first canticle, the Reverend took the initiative to have us all sing. The room arose as a sign of respect. With the aid of the arms of his chair, Father sat down and accompanied us with a movement of the mouth that made no sound. The audience grew silent. The choral pastor walked slowly up to the chair designated for the master theologian, sat down and asked Father:

- Reverend, explain to us the basis of your thought. I think that we haven't understood your project very well.

Comforted by the tone and the sincerity of a man whom he knew very well, Father opened his mouth, but his voice was too weak. He coughed a little to clear his throat and free up his lungs. The pastor then motioned to the audience to

come nearer. We complied. The evening light sparkled in the stained-glass windows and speckled Father's silvery hair and beard with flowers. He was imbued with dignity. I prayed God to have pity on his child.

- My friends, here is a famous fragment from Heraclitus: "From where do all things draw their birth? Things take from each other and are taken from, for none fully achieves harmony." Harmony is not an inevitability, nor a plan, nor a machine, but a project.

A grace compensated for his infirmities. He continued.

- Each life enriches memory as each flower enriches the soil. All the soils are sediments. The creative intelligence always does its work. Nature learns, that is its essence. So why not learn from our history and stop repeating the tragedy?

- But isn't everything contained in our beginning? the pastor inquired, perplexed. Isn't this the heart of a religion: to say that God contains everything in advance? Isn't this the essence of a science: to say that the laws contain all the possibilities?

- God, precisely, precedes nothing and follows nothing, he frees. And science discovers.

- You are saying in sum, the pastor continued, that we are a mind participating in a universal mind. In that case, we ought to be going toward harmony. So, why all these wars?

Father didn't succeed in regaining his breath and his ideas. The pastor wanted to adjourn the meeting. But Father motioned that he wanted to answer. At the end of a very long silence, he managed to pronounce:

- Instead of educating, we reproduce our habits of thinking in our children.

Father wiped his brow as best he could, but big drops of sweat slipped along his face.

- We can sing now, the pastor proposed.

Father signaled that he wanted to finish. He was staggering and his right hand shook. I thought he was going to faint, but he managed to stammer:

- The fear of freedom imprisons us in our reflexes of submission.

- You have fought well, I told him as I approached him.

A little blood was running from his lips. Thinking that he was going to collapse, the pastor got up to support him. Father was looking straight ahead. He was searching.

- Is there someone? he asked.

- We are in Naarden, I answered him with a clear voice in his best ear.

- Naarden! Ah yes! You will tell the children... It is for today...

He coughed, and a trickle of black blood slipped on to his beard. They helped me transport him to a little hospital adjacent to the church. The next day, the singing pastor and his wife took us back to Amsterdam in their carriage. On the way, the lady went up to Papa and said in his ear:

- Reverend senior, the Church of the Moravian Brethren will survive, I assure you. We will keep its traditions intact. Rest. We are bearing you in our hearts.

Father wanted to answer her, but could not. His right hand clenched, then froze as if it had been changed into a piece of wood.

The last game

- Come, Orau... You too, Henk... Magdalena, Woute, go on, come. Captain Ernest, please take the controls again. To your posts. Let us depart.

He was in one of his good times. Since our return from Naarden, Reverend Father got up only to wash himself, and with great effort, making use of two small chairs in order to walk. The bed was set up permanently, and there wasn't enough space. A rale rather than a snore showed me if he were sleeping. I was at that time running a school for children in the small courtyard adjoining our little house. From there I could watch over him through a small window. He had trouble sleeping, woke up often, coughed to free up his lungs, spat in a small bowl, and allowed a groan to filter out.

Neither Daniel nor Suzanna had returned. A letter had reached me, implying that Ludmila's fine family would be difficult to convince. The rumor circulated that Ludmila had maneuvered back on to Catholic soil for the salvation of the heretical Church of the Brethren. Her friends and her money were, long ago, supposed to have succeeded in persuading Her Highness the widow Zsuzsanna of Hungary to send an escort to discreetly ensure our protection along the terrible mountain road leading from Sarospatak to Leszno. It was, then, thanks to her that the wagon, hijacked by miscreants, had returned to us as if by magic. What is more, they added that she had made use of her relations with the Catholics in another way. Some Catholics in Leszno, having learned that the Brethren's quarter was being burned, were supposed to have sent messengers to Holland to persuade the de Geer family to help us. Because of all these rumors, she was distrusted by the Catholics as well as by the Protestants. She was in reality held prisoner by her husband. Suzanna and Daniel believed however that they could convince the family.

Father asked for nothing, but as soon as someone knocked, he turned his glassy eyes toward the door. "It's not them", I answered him. And he sank back into his sufferings.

But, at times, he entered a kind of oasis and called: "Lisbeth...", this was to dictate a letter to me; "The children", this was to tell a story. In fact, as soon as the pain gave him a little respite, if fatigue didn't sweep him off and if he didn't have to answer a letter, his only happiness was having the children come to his bed.

Except for "captain" Ernest, the little herd rushed happily to him, each in his or her corner of the bed, firmly holding on to the rigging when the storm beat down on the ship, or swiftly raising the sails again when land was in sight. Father took them in a vessel, in a boat or on a raft, by sail or by oar, in an astonishing fable that often turned to delirium. The "captain", who was nearing his tenth birthday, didn't have much enthusiasm. He had become aware of suffering and imminent death.

After the father, the grandfather... What was going to happen? He was the eldest. Father wanted to prepare him:

- Ulysses, king of Ithaca, who had sacked a number of cities in Thrace, was returning to his beloved Penelope. (His pronunciation often failed, but the children understood.) The boat was approaching a strange island constantly surrounded by mists. Reefs, shoals and breakers encircled the island, so that there was danger of death. But none of this frightened Ulysses and his crew. The greatest danger came from somewhere else, from something that didn't appear in the form of a threat, but in the form of a dead calm...

- What's a dead calm? Henk asked.

- It's the calm before the storm. The real danger is there. The song of the sirens: "Come, come..." Lisbeth! Bring a little wax.

- Here it is, Father!

They knew exactly what had to be done at this precise point in the story. They tied the "captain" to the mast (the head of the bed). He alone should hear the song. The children carefully rolled the wax between their fingers and stuck it in their ears, not too deep, though, so that they could hear the rest of the story.

- Sing, Lisbeth, Father asked.

While hulling the barley for supper, I improvised a song.

- The sirens are approaching, Father continued, as beautiful as Magdalena, singing better than Mama, much better. "Come, the sirens sang, "Come here, there are whirlpools, barbels, and little baskets of candy."

- Candy, Orau repeated...

- What! You understand! Father exclaimed. Press the wax in, the sirens' song can drag you into the water, and in the water there are hideous monsters. No! There aren't monsters exactly, there are only fish who are generally nice. It is fear that makes monsters, and not monsters that make fear...

- The questions, Woute demanded, we want the questions.

- Yes, the questions, repeated the "captain", who was in a hurry to get into the serious part of the lesson.

Ernest intuited only too well the moments that preceded his grandfather's exhaustion. Anyway, he knew the story of Ulysses and his companions by heart, even if his grandfather changed the version often.

- Where does Ulysses want to go? Father asked, after they had deposited the precious wax in the wooden bowl.

- To find Penelope, his beloved, Henk answered.

- That means that he is looking for happiness, added Woute, who knew all the answers well.

- And what is his guide? Father asked.

- The inspiration felt in the heart, the "captain" solemnly answered.

- Me, I would like very much to have a candy, Orau interrupted.

- We have to wait until autumn for the honey candies. You'll have some soon. Do you still want to play?

- I just want the story. I don't understand the questions.

- It's because I am going to leave, Father insisted. I must explain the way of happiness to the bigger ones. Happiness is the bigger ones' basket of candy. When you are Woute's and Magdalena's age, Ernest will explain it to you.

- Grandfather, we big ones want the lesson, Henk put in with a very serious air. What is the perspiration of the heart?

- The inspiration of the heart, Magdalena corrected.

Father took a while to get his breath back.

- There is the difficulty: what to do to distinguish the inspiration which calls Ulysses toward happiness, his beloved, from the seduction of the sirens which leads to death?

A great pain passed through Father. I recognized it from the grimacing smile he made at the children as he motioned to them to go play a while outdoors. Generally he had to wait until the next day to continue. He spat blood to free his lungs, a fire was burning there then and when the pyre had cooled at last he fell, exhausted. But this time, a few minutes were enough and the children were called back in again.

- You have had time to reflect, dear captain, so put forward an answer, Father insisted, tenderly pressing his grandson's hand.

- I don't know, Grandfather. I thought of beauty, but that isn't a good answer. The sirens are as beautiful as Penelope, and their song, even more beautiful. So I thought of pleasure. But pleasure isn't a good criterion either. There are pleasures that are exciting and lead us to bad choices, but others on the contrary lead us to joy. The truth is what makes all the difference. The sirens lie, they call the

superficial deep, and the dark luminous. So I said to myself, Grandfather is going to ask: "Yes, but how do you distinguish truth from error?" And my answer will only have shifted the question...

- What a captain! You heard it, children, our captain is truly a philosopher. He reflects.

- The answer, I want the answer, Henk demanded as he jumped on the bed.

- Another question first, Father resumed, a question concerning questions. Why is it that, of all the philosophers, of all the sages, of all the saints, no one has found the exact and definitive answer? Why do all the answers collapse as soon as one thinks about them very hard, like our captain? Why do the answers survive only in a setting where no one thinks anymore? For all the time there have been men with always the same questions, we might expect that somewhere there would be a book of answers. And all that survives are books of questions; all the books of answers have been abandoned one day or another because someone has reflected and said to himself: "That's not an answer, that's a question." The Bible, for example, is a famous road of questions. So, why is it that we don't advance from answer to answer, but from question to question? Why don't we go from one adventure to another, and not from one certainty to another...

- Me, I'm not playing anymore, Woute sighed, I want the story.

- Ding, perfect answer, my good man, Father said. It is the story. The answer about the non-answers is the story. We produce ourselves by making a story out of our most sincere desires and our most incisive questions. The sirens put the world in peril because they invite us to stop at the answers. Raise the sail, Magdalena, hold the rudder, Henk, row, row hard, Orau. We're going to follow inspiration. My captain, tell us the direction.

Ernest had tears in his eyes. He saw suffering pass over his grandfather's face.

- Quick, children, put wax in the captain's ears, the siren Melancholy is calling him, he is in danger.

- That's not the story, Woute objected. We have to tie him up, he has to hear, but he must be held back by caution.

- And why? Father asked.

- We can't hear inspiration without hearing the sirens too, Magdalena suggested.

- That's a splendid answer...

He began to get flustered, but this time it was more serious, as if paralysis were trying to impose itself. I stopped hulling my barley and approached the bed. Orau grabbed hold of my skirt. Woute remained frozen as a statue. I took his hand.

Ernest was waiting for his grandpapa's words. Tears ran down his cheeks. Magdalena took Ernest's hand. Father managed to come out of it and continued:

- Children, he said in a solemn tone, the flavor of inspiration brings a pleasure which leaves no bitter taste. In inspiration, pain does not hinder joy. My captain (Father had taken Ernest's other hand), my dear captain, your grandpapa is not unhappy, but profoundly happy. I will not abandon you. I am leaving so that you will become a true captain.

Magdalena's gaze also was so thoroughly plunged into the captain's eyes and with such tenderness that she burst out in a nervous laugh when she became aware of it. Ernest, grimacing, pushed her a little and Father dismissed the children.

Some days he went to the window and tried to distinguish the swaying of masts on the canal. Obviously he did not see anything. He asked for news of Ludmila. I reassured him as best I could.

- They won't be there, he blurted out.

This conclusion ended by becoming a surrender, and he slipped into great sheets of calm water.

One day, he sat up in his bed and called the children for another lesson.

- Watch out for the rocks, on the port side everyone! Father warned. Seaman Henk, to the helm immediately. Cabin boy Orau, lower the sail. Neptune is against us. The sea is going to rage...
It was I who continued:

- Ulysses and his crew were tossed from left to right, so high that they thought they would touch the sky, so low that they thought they would disappear in Hades. But these were only the first caresses of the sea. A gust even greater came like a herd of horses. The ocean began to be enraged. The boat was going to break. A terrible crash was heard. Masts and rigging came down on the bridge. The abyss opened. "Captain, we are lost!"

- No, an island is in sight! cried Magdalena.

- Let's go to it, the "captain" commanded.

The ship broke up on the reefs, I continued in Father's place. All the crew and cargo were found pell-mell on the beach. The next day, the troop awoke from its terror and exhaustion. It was the island of the cyclopes, those who are unable to change their point of view.

Father raised his left arm and waved his fingers to imitate a wolf.

- Ah! the children cried all together (except for the "captain", of course).

And Father continued:

- Ulysses understood the weak point of so big a monster: the cyclops could not distinguish what is near from what is far, what is small from what is great, what is important from what is unimportant. So Ulysses went straight toward him, but slowly and crouching down the closer he approached. The cyclops didn't realize that Ulysses was two cubits from his big nose. With a stake, Ulysses put out his eye.

- Yuk! Orau exclaimed.

- Let's hide, Woute suggested.

- Hiding under the sheep, Father continued, Ulysses' faithful friends succeeded in fleeing, for the blind cyclops touched only the backs of things. They encountered many other threats, but none was truly dangerous. The worst was to come. On the island of Ogygia, a nymph even more beautiful than your Mama was singing as she spun and wove. When she saw your grandfather with his beautiful silver hair, his lovely toothless mouth and his colossal Slavic nose, she became wildly enamored of him.

- Pooh! Henk blurted out, laughing.

- What? Me, I find Grandfather handsome, Magdalena retorted.

- Stop, Woute interrupted, I want the story.

- Ulysses let himself be seduced and stayed with her seven years, I continued. She was named Calypso. She had everything: beauty, intelligence and money, everything.

- Honey candies? Orau, who was single-minded, asked.
Father managed to take over and continued the story himself.

- Yes! And strawberry candies too. Calypso promised Ulysses eternal life in the abundance of everything he wanted. So close your eyes, imagine the most beautiful paradise. Go on, imagine.

- With Papa? Henk asked.

- With Papa, Father answered. Imagine hard... Put more into it... All you want. All kinds of candy. Add more. Good! Your paradise is in front of your eyelids. Everything is there. Now open your eyes. What do you see? The little house, a little bit of oats, some barley, some salted herbs, Mama who's tearing her hands on some bad wool and your old grandfather who is getting ready to leave. Which do you choose, the paradise you imagined or the little house in Amsterdam? No! No

answer now. I am leaving you seventy years to think about it, not one year more, not one year less.

- Seventy years! Orau exclaimed, placing his fingers in front of Magdalena.

- With Mama, that's all the fingers there are in the house, Woute concluded.

- The lesson now, the "captain" demanded.

- When all was going badly, I did like you, I imagined paradises. But none of these paradises was able to make me a true man. Remember this well: You must leave your paradise to find happiness.

- When is autumn, Grandpapa? Orau asked.

- It's soon, Ernest replied, a little impatient.

The ship came into port. Orau had fallen asleep on Ernest's chest. Magdalena and Woute, curled up under Father's paralyzed arm, appeared sunk into a deep meditation. Henk was huddled between my knees and closed his eyes in order to remain in his paradise. Ernest was holding his grandfather's right hand as if he were drawing light from it. No trace of suffering on Father's face.

The departure

It was he who gave the signal.

- Lisbeth, he called, a little more patience again. I haven't got much longer.

And he entered his life's final school. The night before, the pastor of Westerkerk's wife had come for a visit. Seeing that the time was drawing near, she offered me her aid. Every day, once in the morning and another time during the day, she would come with good dry faggots and some bread, take the children (except for Ernest who didn't want to leave his grandfather) to Jordaan for a walk and a few games. This would give me the time to take care of his hygiene and bedding, the herbal teas that he took drop by drop, and to pay attention to his final counsels.

One evening, after prayer, while the children were still on their knees, their eyes plunged in the mystery, Father's body began to quiver, shaken by a particularly cruel nervous storm. The left part of his face was disfigured and froze on the bone, as if dead before the hour.

- Grandfather! Magdalena cried as she approached the bed.

He succeeded in raising his hand to the little girl's shoulder, quieted her with a caress and motioned to us to go to bed.

It was barely seven. The mattresses were spread out, the children put to bed, but the lamp stayed lit. Outside, a wind reminded us of winter by its dull and distant moaning. Ernest was charged with slowly extinguishing the fire in its ashes in order to make the wood last. Except for him, one by one the children gave in to sleep. I, for my part, stayed awake and mended clothing on a bench next to Father...

In the wee hours of the morning, I woke up half spread out on the dying man's bed. Ernest had kept the fire going all night long and was sleeping on the little chair from the print shop. Daylight was beginning to come through the window. I wasn't able to emerge from the mists of sleep and I kept on drowsing in my dreams and my aches and pains. I began nonetheless the heavy mechanics of the everyday...

Two days later, Father had another attack and lost all powers in his lower limbs. From time to time, Ernest and I had to massage his feet and lower legs in the hope of passing on to them a little warmth. Ernest wrapped warm stones in a sheet and arranged them around Father's paralyzed limbs. Despite all our efforts, his body continued to shiver like a baby goat being born. His lungs no longer secreted blood, but a kind of purplish water that coughing was no longer able to get rid of. His rale became short, labored and irregular.

As if they were tides, surges swept him up to the point of violent shaking, then withdrew. He was drenched with sweat and went into a kind of euphoria that he said was very peaceful. He sought my hand, tried to perceive my face, wanted to talk.

He had taught me to teach the school of dying. "There comes a time when the soul feels a pressing need to lighten itself, Death comes to its aid. Death feels such a compassion for the soul that, seeing it swallowed up in too much memory, does not hesitate to deliver it. You will be my instructor in dying, it commanded. I have a little practice, but this is my first dress rehearsal."

Having chosen me, he delivered to me one by one his final moments of grace, most often words full of holes that forgot their beginning before reaching their end, which lacked coherence, but never dignity:

- Happiness, lady my daughter, happiness... Ah!... What was I saying? I'm losing my mind. I'm giving up... Tell me something funny...

I wasn't able to do it. I searched.

- The story of the bump, he suggested.

I took a deep breath and complied.

- My little one, my sweet little one, wherever have you been? What have you brought back here? If you had stayed in the house, you wouldn't have a big bump on your forehead.

He smiled, but laughter was going to start his sufferings going again, so he stopped himself and completed the nursery rhyme:

- I have plenty of bumps. I'm coming back to the house. You have bumps too...

- ... plenty of bumps, Papa. And I've stayed home.

- Do they hurt, all those bumps?

- Very bad, I answered him.

- So you aren't dead then. God! A husband gone; a father who is crumbling. The wind is rising... Prussia is a good country. Don't worry...

He pressed my hand. A tear slipped from his right eye.

- Daughter, break your moorings.

The words arrived slowly between sibilant breaths, each one laboriously climbing from the bottom of a well and in pails too full. I grew drowsy from waiting for then one after the other. Father was going away segment by segment, through the holes that death was making in his body and in his mind. And I had the feeling of disappearing with him.

His right eye stared at me. All his wrinkles went upward like smiles. His living eye pierced me as if he wanted to pour his happiness into my sadness. He gathered up his strength and went on bringing enigmatic objects up from the bottom of the seas:

- My inheritance is minuscule. Daughter... don't listen too much. I lack everything. I've failed a lot... I love you too much. Lend me your face, Mrs. daughter... I want to die on your face...

- You haven't failed in anything, Father. Your books...

- My books are the failures of my inspirations...

- I'm afraid, Father. You mustn't order me to go with you all the way to the end. It's too hard to be the daughter of a man who's dying in your arms.

I stopped short with my complaint. I had to help him, not weigh him down.

He no longer said anything, and softly snored. He no doubt wanted to use a dive to pull on one of my soul's strings and hook it securely to the nervures of life. I was worn out. I couldn't struggle. I who had, so to speak, an obedient nature, I finally yielded to his maneuver. To be carried without being carried away, this was all that I hoped for, since I had five children for whom I had to be the father, the mother and soon the grandfather.

A great silence enveloped the house. A gust of wind suddenly made the door vibrate. Father surfaced. His voice was barely audible:

- Sailors seek God in the seas; birds, in the air; scientists, in things; philosophers, in life... And you, daughter, where are you looking for him?

He stared at me a moment. I moved my face nearer.

- You're not too much like me, he continued... I'm returning home, but it's no longer the same... The school of death... I said that it's the first chapter before the beginning... But the preamble is long. We die too long.

The openings were bigger and bigger. The fabric was coming undone. The window grew larger and our looks slipped into each other all the way to the bottom of the sea. The hole was gaping, and the sounds of the city fell like hail.

Father's pains returned like executioners, shaking him, striking him, burning him, slicing another piece off of him. Had Ernest woken up? I didn't know. I hoped not. His grandfather had become his father. It was too much for him. But me, I was in the storm also and didn't see very much anymore. When the light of the fire lit up the bed again, Father's face had grown peaceful once again. Ernest was dressing the fire with ashes. I fell asleep.

Two more days and there was a long calm. Another miracle, another life, one more. Father called the children one by one beginning with Orau. He remained silent for a moment. He seemed to contemplate the child's curly mop of hair. He wanted to stroke that hair, but his hand couldn't reach it. He asked Orau to close his eyes, no doubt to spare him the distorted image of his face, and took his hand.

- Orau, my dawn... Each thing is a marvel. When you are sad, spy on a marvel. I advise you to look at the ants and the spiders, they never get bored.

He looked at him for quite a while then, as if he were addressing all of us, came out with this:

- You must not stop being four years old. Orau, you are your Mama's sunrise. Go find her.

He beckoned little Henk. The child rushed on to the bed. He asked him to bring his ear close and whispered to him:

- Do you like to sew buttons a lot?

- Yes, Grand-papa, he answered, trying hard to pronounce correctly.

- So then, I am giving you my felt hat. Each time you make a great discovery, you will add a button to it.

- What's a discovery? the little one asked.

- It's the first time that you see a thing enough to know that you haven't truly seen it before. Go, my little one. Don't get used to anything.

He called Woute, but a trembling seized him. He pointed to the window as if he had seen something strange. The children, except for Ernest, ran to look. There was obviously nothing. When the storm had past, he called the child back.

- Seven years old. You're a big fellow and you're truly clever. So say to me a word in Russian.

"Bashmaki" came spontaneously out of the child's mouth.

- You are speaking of the pilgrims' boots that your Papa bought in Prussia and gave to me?

- Yes, Grandfather.

- They're yours. One day, your feet will be big enough...

A pain made him quiver. He took the child's hand.

- You're worried, my boy... Because of the journey to Prussia?

- Will I have to learn Lithuanian, all of it? Woute asked.

- No! You'll just have to learn two words a day, and it's fun.

The boy remained seated at the foot of the bed. Magdalena in her turn approached.

- My sunbeam, come so that I can see you...

He wanted to raise his head in order to see her better, but was unable to. The little girl understood and brought her face a whisker away from her grandfather's nose, opening her eyes wide as if she could in that way restore his sight.

- You're the picture portrait of your Mama... You mustn't worry, girl.

- I don't want you to leave, Grandfather, Magdalena enjoined him. Father had not said no to her often.

- Yes, but I have a beautiful journey to make, he gently replied, frowning a little. Miss my granddaughter, you have your road, become your own captain.

A big tear fell from the little girl on to her grandfather's cheek.

- Don't cry, girl, I am giving you my astronomer's compass and my magnetic compass. You have such good eyes. Look at the North Star often. I will be there every evening. I will have plenty of work because the light business doesn't pay very well. Go now, Grandpapa doesn't have much time left any more.

He motioned to me to put the children to bed and closed his eyes for a long time. Barely a whistling of air showed that he was still with us. But his face remained peaceful. One after the other, the children went to sleep. Ernest awaited his turn, seated on the printer's chair. Father lightly lifted his finger. The boy moved his seat next to the bed.

- The most surprising thing in the world, Father began, is that all this ends by appearing natural to us. Do what force of inertia do we surrender so that such a diversity ends up seeming commonplace to us? My big boy, there is more than duty. Duty can make us nearsighted; love is a better guide.

The child couldn't say a word. He seemed impassive, his eyes lost. Father took his wrist, remained silent for a moment and continued:

- My boy, even if a rabbit dies of hunger, the carrot doesn't ripen any faster for all that. Your Mama will have great need of you, but you won't be able to become a man in a single day. Trust her. Sperm whales dive, and very deeply, and yet they don't drown. They simply go to feed in the depths. Your mother is a little bit like a sperm whale. But she always comes back up...My captain, I am giving you my books... Except for my manuscripts which are going to Daniel... They are ships, not houses... You will teach philosophy.

He put his hand on Ernest's head.

- Receive my benediction... Receive my benediction...

A terrible pain took hold of him. His body quivered. Ernest, frightened, abruptly rose, stepped back and remained stupefied. I too was incapable of the slightest movement. The shaking was terrible. Father couldn't hold back a moan. Too exhausted, the children stayed immersed in their dreams. The whirlwind finally withdrew. This time, the whole body, except for two fingers of the left hand, was paralyzed. "Don't worry", his two fingers said by up-and-down movements. "Don't worry."

The scene was unbearable for Ernest. The silence which ensued seemed icy with dread. I came up to the child and put my hand on his shoulder. He pulled loose and went to huddle next to the fire, trembling, panic-stricken. I went to him and took him in my arms. He then burst out in sobs. I rocked him a long time. He finally fell asleep from exhaustion, his hand so hooked to my woolen shawl that I had to yield it to him.

I returned to Father's side, stunned by fatigue, I also.

Father gave a start. He made a little cross on my hand. No more than a thread was holding him back. It was I who was blocking the thread between my fingers. I didn't want him to die. I was terribly afraid. I had passed all my life with him, in his house, in his heart, in his philosophy. He was my container, my sphere, my school, my earth. What would remain? It was up to me to cut the cord.

What would remain of me? "Your feminine nature will remain with you", Father had answered one day. "I get tangled up in your feminine nature. Get me out of you a little." And he had a good laugh. But me, I didn't know anything about my nature. And what is feminine nature? Everything is man here. The houses, the streets, the wharves, the boats, the monuments, the politics, the legislations, the wars, the treaties, everything is masculine. What is a woman, Papa? What will remain when you are gone? Without husband, or father, or protector, or country, standing on the bridge of a boat leaving for Prussia, five children clutching my skirt... Papa, your death is not a birthing, but a tragedy...

He made another little cross on my hand. "I am freeing your road." I heard him smile with his fingers on the back of my hand. But I held the thread, with both fists closed...

The last words

Knock! Knock! Knock! Someone was knocking at the door. On this night, in this cold! I lent an ear.

- Who is it?

- It's us, Daniel, a voice murmured. Open up.

They entered... He, Suzanna. Ludmila!

- How's he doing? Daniel asked.

- It's the end, I answered.

Father had understood. I knew it from the movements of his two fingers.

- We're here, Daniel and Suzanna said together.

- I'm here, Ludmila announced as she approached the bed.

All of Father's body began to quiver. With the poor two fingers left him, he tried to come toward her and the sheet crumpled in his hand. Ludmila collapsed, loudly sobbing at the foot of the bed.

- Hush! I curtly interrupted, the children are sleeping.

She stopped all at once.

- Sorry, my dear sister! she exclaimed, lowering the tone one syllable after the other.

I took Ludmila's hand and placed it under Papa's two living fingers. As soon as he touched it, his whole body began to quiver again. His rale filled up with blood. He was suffocating. I turned his head so that he could evacuate the liquid. I wiped him and he got his breath back. Ludmila had averted her eyes. I turned Papa's face so that he could see her. At last! A little. His eye stayed fixed. Ludmila got hold of herself and turned her face toward him. A tear formed in Papa's eye. He winked and the drop slid gently on his cheek.

He made a little cross on the back of Ludmila's hand. She didn't understand. I repeated to her verbatim what Father had told me: "The cross means: I love you; the o: I accept; the immobility: I am waiting. No other signs. No does not exist in the face of death."

So she drew a little cross on Father's hand. But he left his two fingers immobile, and his eye grew dry and lost again.

The leaden silence which followed woke up Ernest. He cast a worried look at Ludmila, his aunt whom he had never seen. He wanted to come closer to Father, but went along the wall instead as far as a little stool on which he climbed and from which he could observe everything.

Father drew a new little cross on Ludmila's hand. She responded with another cross, but this time also, Father stayed motionless.

- Tell the truth, I whispered in Ludmila's ear, he doesn't know anything.

She grew white, and her gaze couldn't settle down.

- What are you talking about? she asked me.

I satisfied myself with looking at her. She was more beautiful than ever: made-up, pink, a little plump, but her waist slimmed down by a good corset. She wore a dress of colored lace. A perfect Catholic! She looked at the sleeping children for a moment, and at her nephew standing on the stool..

- Ernest, ah! I didn't imagine you otherwise, you really are a good-looking boy, she said as she approached him.

The boy leaned back against the wall and crossed his arms in front of him. She didn't venture to do anything more and slid her gaze over all of us.

- I missed you so much, she said in a slightly trembling voice.

Father let out a moan, his fingers rose and fell, his eyes went from right to left, and up and down. Ludmila threw herself on him:

- Papa... Papa, forgive me.

Father's hand remained motionless. She got up, looked at us all for one more moment.

- But what is my sin? God! What is my sin? Tell me. Without me, you might not be alive today.

Father moved his two fingers. I took his hand. He refused it. Ludmila slipped in her hand. He drew a very clean circle on the back of her hand, then a large cross, and finally he tapped the hand with his two fingers and the corner of his eye vaguely smiled.

She didn't understand. I thought I did understand. He was forgiving her. But I didn't understand anything at all. Daniel, Suzanna and I looked at Ludmila with

the compassion due a prodigal child. Then Father made a big *v* on Ludmila's hand, then another. No one understood. Ernest struck his heel against the wall.

- Explain, I demanded.

Ernest threw himself on me, weeping. Father's face was covered with sweat, and his eye was restless. Once again I had to free him of the blood that was accumulating in his lungs. I returned to the task.

- Explain, my boy, explain it to us.

- You don't understand anything... Ernest said as he started to cry. He made the sign to Magdalena. Grand-papa... he stammered. He wants... He wants us to untie ourselves from the mast.

- But what mast are you talking about? I asked him.

- Ludmila, she did what she thought was best... The rest of us, we were shaking with fear. We didn't trust... We stayed tied to the mast.

Father was dying and we were in front of him, unable to grasp the first coin of his inheritance. We were arguing, in complete contradiction with the abc's of his education: leave sincerity up to each one and she will find her way as best she can. Father didn't need Ludmila to tell him the truth. He didn't need her confession. He had never abandoned his trust in Ludmila, nor in any one of us, even in the worst times. He was going to breathe his last, and we were still dazed by fear.

Ernest went up to his grandfather.

- Grand-papa, he cried, don't leave, the captain isn't ready.

Father drew a little cross, as if to bless us. Ernest, standing, his shoulders pressed against my stomach, regained his calm. Father's rale picked up its regular rhythm. Ludmila then knelt next to Father and told him everything. Her fear of poverty and persecutions, her jealousy of Pavel, her affairs, her scheming... She stifled her tears in her hair.

- I can't stand poverty and wretchedness, Papa, she concluded, moaning, I can't.

The children woke up. They understood immediately that the final prayer was going to begin, so they climbed on the bed in silence and sat down on the white sheet like a wreath of flowers.

Daniel started a canticle:

I will gladly let Him bring the ax down on my head

If He would only respond to my trouble, He, who is called "Love".

Why does He show me the curl of his hair but never His face?

Why does He open my womb but never fill it?

Why so cruel a game?

The silence was swelled by Papa's breathing, almost imperceptible. There were long intervals between the respirations. Little by little, his face lit up. The paralysis seemed to have left him. All his skin softened around the smiles that formed at the corners of his eyes and of his mouth. Never had I seen so much peace on a face. It might have been said to be Moravia in springtime, its fields of wheat, its solitary trees, its birds and its yellow flowers.

- Papa, I sighed involuntarily, you can leave.
Ernest pressed my hand.

- Captain is ready, he courageously said.

Papa's face grew still and his gaze lost its last spark. Daniel went down on his knees. We did the same. The children joined hands. The silence murmured. A river laughed and joked between the stones. Foam and bubbles were torn between the white threads of the waters. A dense verdure, cedars, a bouquet of lilies-of-the-valley played in the light. Two larks pursued each other. Between the poljes of pastures and grassland, marshes opened their large black eyes. The words let go their grip on things and the colors soared up like fireworks.

Ernest took hold of one of my fingers.

- I'll take care of you, Mama.

- No, my little one, I answered. I am your Mama, and you still need me. Let's get breakfast ready...

The body was buried at Naarden because of an understanding between the de Geer family, who didn't want to devote too much expense to it, and the community's pastor. A small announcement placed at the end of the *Hollandse Mercurius* stated: "The celebrated Jan Amos Comenius, called Comenius, died at Amsterdam and was buried at Naarden on this 15th of November." This was in the year 1670, and the snow was slow in coming.

He had been dispossessed of everything, truly of everything. If a man had to be prepared, stripped down to the marrow of his bones, made as transparent as the coldest night of winter, if his bones had to be hardened in fire, his heart polished on the grindstone, his wings softened by the hammer and his spirit cleansed until nothing remained but the kernel of a naked trust, if he had to attain the absolute of poverty, then the thing was done.

Epilogue

Spring was coming, but the cold was still biting. I had sewn good clean coats for the children from my late husband's and lady Johanna's. It was no use pinching the children's cheeks, we still looked pale. Fortunately, the pastor's wife had given us some fine hats.

The four little ones clutching my skirt, my Ernest holding my hand, I knocked for the first time on the door of the de Geer family's great house. The foyer rose as wide and high as our whole house. The beams on the ceiling were a cubit wide and they were planed and decorated on three sides. Immense windows clothed in velvet revealed the canal in a fog of color.

A smell of bread ran through all this space, and a warmth of summer. The servant did not want to take either our hats or our coats. He led us into an adjacent room and withdrew without saying a word. I thought the room was empty. A fire crackled in the chimney. I was going to approach it with the children when, from an enormous armchair that was back to us but facing the fire, I heard someone cough. The seat turned. A very old woman, shriveled up and twisted by arthritis, seemed so small in her strange wing chair on wheels that my reaction was to get down on one knee to be at her height. The children removed their hats. She showed me an enormous ring with a single diamond. I didn't dare put my mouth on it. She shook my hand.

- Dear Mrs. Jablonsky, your boat leaves tomorrow, she announced, emphasizing the word "dear", but casting a disdainful glance at the children.

I opened my mouth...

- Don't thank me. Good families do charity. You will have no expenses as far as Memel. You will be received by your community. I have had them informed. Good, that's it...

- I will let Heaven thank you then, Madame, I politely replied.

I was about to leave without anything more. But, as I turned around, I saw my Ernest who nodding his head and the smaller ones looking at their feet and fidgeting with their hats. So I changed my mind:

- It would make me ashamed, of me and of my family, I answered her, to have profited from all your kindness without giving you anything in exchange.

I tore Mama's ring off my finger. sliding my gaze over the whole circumference of the room, I was searching for... I saw a small bronze crucifix with a gold Christ on a desk. I slipped the ring on Jesus' neck.

- Look, children! Now, love crowns charity and madame de Geer will be able to restore her strength when she thinks of us. We must now give her a memory even more precious. Show your faces and let's sing to madame the canticle of thanks.

The children took as much care with it as if it were for a birthday. Afterwards, each one went to embrace madame de Geer quite courteously. Assuredly, our protectrice would have beautiful memories for her moments of solitude. It was while leaving that I realized that something had changed. The anxiety had left me. Fifteen more years were necessary before I took up the pen to undertake this account. Writing was not my business and besides I didn't have the leisure for it. The Memel community greeted us with open arms. They lived there in large houses nestled on the shore of the Baltic. Fish abounded and we had it every day. What is more, the community had at its disposal a good-sized enclave which produced an abundance of grain and vegetables. My rent consisted of receiving the owner's children into the community's school, and it was there that it was hoped I would expand the reputation of Father's teaching method.

The thing wasn't easy, but no obstacle was insurmountable. The first advantage came from the absence of a dominant guild of burghers. The rule of sharing peculiar to the Brethren was applied with impartiality. The late Mr. my husband had taken great care with this. The second advantage came from the importance the community accorded education. It was easy for me to recruit a small group of very gifted parents, to complete their education and to carefully instruct them in teaching methods.

The school's beginnings were rather slow. I had to devote a lot of time to the education of my own children. But the effort was profitable; the enterprise became a family one. Orau provided the sun, Henk excelled in mathematics and the sciences. Woute had a surprising aptitude for languages. Magdalena was slower in memory and reasoning, which gave us a great advantage. With her, the less gifted children advanced as well as the others. Ernest showed remarkable talents as an organizer and orator. In a short time I made him my assistant.

All of them knew Lithuanian, Russian and Polish, as well as their mother tongue, Latin and the rudiments of Greek. The natural sciences were favored, and each one practiced an art of his or her choice. Our school became famous and some of our students came from Tilsit and even from Königsberg. The boarding fees brought in money, which allowed us to buy books and help those who couldn't pay.

Memel produced students so advanced that an unusual number of them received offers for their higher education from generous donors; others found places as apprentices in the best ateliers of Europe and Russia. Many returned after a stay in a great university, enriching the community with intellect and with goods. Life grew easier. But the greatest happiness consisted of preparing groups of families to swarm a little bit everywhere in the world with a mind to spreading peace

through education in justice and in tolerance. Some to Slovakia, some to England, some to France... And, from England, groups left for the American colonies.

Ernest became a preacher at the court of Prussia. He was named senior of the community of Brethren and traveled to Russia a lot with his brothers Woute and Orau. They founded a small community at Kiev, where the family of the Tsar and the scholars of the great colleges knew the work of Reverend my father very well. There was even talk of founding a city, in the north, in the delta of the Neva, so as to secure Russian commerce in the Baltic.

In Amsterdam, Daniel had been charged, with the help of a certain Christian Nigrin and of a man of letters by the name of Paul Hartmann, with preparing *The Universal Consultation* for printing. Daniel decided next to go to Hungary despite the threats he received from the burghers of the place. Under the impetus of my sister Suzanna and thanks to Ludmila's skillful protection, the community of Leszno came back to life. In all of Catholic Europe and as far away as Peru, the Jesuits used, without making any display of it, Reverend my father's scholastic works and borrowed his teaching methods. Unfortunately, except in Peru, they used his art for doctrinal ends. They forgot the essence: education for freedom. Nevertheless, all that is spread by force does not stand the test of time and falls from the height of its vanity, all that is spread by education endures, for this depends on consciousness. Force acts more quickly than education, but it destroys, while education goes slowly, but makes alive. Whatever the twists and turns may be, man will end up by using the way of nature: learning. I taught school for fifteen years at Memel in a happiness I thought was impossible in this world. And then, one morning in April 1685, a messenger coming from Amsterdam brought me this letter from Toscana dated from the previous year and coming from Philadelphia in America.

Dearest Mama,

I wounded you right in the heart, but the arrow has just now struck me today, after the disappearance of Juliana, my only daughter. She has run away. It was necessary that the drama go to its very end for me to understand. So forgive me. I am writing you because I expect a letter from my daughter. I am writing you because I have hurt you by my silence. I did not write to you because I couldn't imagine missing you. Toscana, missing someone! Is the child worth the trouble? Is the human being or even being short and simple worth anything? I was bound to be a weight, but I was above all else a barrel of powder. I left to spare you the explosion. Your love was too great, it infuriated me. Today, I would so much like it if Juliana were to explode in my face...

I know it now, all the cosmos is a weight that explodes in an excess of anger. I thought my anger unique. It was however an anger of love similar to life itself. This anger saved me from my master, and it also permitted me to learn, to make the most of all your lessons and those of Grandfather. I have established in America a school which has a fine reputation. But I hadn't yet understood the strength of my origin. Like the waves of the sea, life never gets tired; like the new shoots and the newborns, all its buried memory comes out with the impulse of the first day.

In spite of war, madness, stupidity and terror, life does not wear out, does not get tired, does not weaken, and we are in its vital impetus.

Dear mother, surely you remember the jail in Sarospatak. Pointing at the puppet made from my soiled clothes, you had asked me: "And her, the poor little thing there, you want to kill her too?" At the heart of my misery, the image came back to me. Yes! I did want to kill her. I was the image of man, I didn't want the child I was, I didn't want my humanity, my embryo of humanity. And then I remembered another dreadful moment... It was in Amsterdam, a few months after the birth of Ernest. I had woken up before dawn, already you were no longer in your bed. Grandfather had gotten up also and was preparing to go out. Seeing that I wasn't sleeping, he took me with him. Discreetly, we followed you up to the little bridge at Westerkerk. We watched you from behind a parapet. Grandfather explained to me that you were presenting your little Ernest to heaven. You hesitated, but when you gave a good kick to the osier basket, I felt that you had decided to say your word in that whole story. "Yes, I want you. Come what may." Too bad for Juliana, I decided this morning to beat life in the dust and the wind, to suck its sap, and to grow up to the sun. It is in fact the only gift I can make to my daughter and to you. And everything will return to me: my daughter, my two mothers, my father and my grandfather, all my people and so many others. All will return to me soaked in the most incredible meanders, enriched by what rises every moment in the cosmos to accomplish its infinite destiny.

Your daughter, Toscana

I walked on the seashore, I don't know how long a time. It was the beginning of summer, the air was mild. Little by little all grew calm and I sat down on a tree trunk. The silence was complete. The words had at last abandoned the things, all was there, naked. The waves softly beat against the beach, with each thrust taking back thousands of bubbles. A few little grains of sand danced here and there on a cushion of wind.

I had given five children, had fed them with my milk and with all that there was of blood in me. I had adopted one other. I had been a mother right to the end. I had run a school. I had been a daughter of love. I had just received my recompense. Such a recompense in a heart so full is fatal.

My soul is now pregnant with the entire world. Papa is behind me: He is placing me in an osier basket. We always end up finding ourselves in a Moses, on a river, for an adventure. I could have invented a simpler and easier life, but a life like this one, I couldn't have made up. The sails are raised, let's go! A taste of light burns my tongue.