

The Purloined Manuscript *(Excerpts)*

Basel, April 22nd 2015

Crossing the Rhine, Laura looks instinctively to the right. The steeples of the Basel Munster are smaller than in her memory. At the railway station Badischer Bahnhof she had to explain the route to the taxi-driver; he had never brought somebody to the Wolfgottesacker before. Now he is heading for Zuerich.

“At the tram depot Dreispitz”, Laura repeats and he changes lanes. A silver chain with a ring dangles from his rear-view mirror: a serpent biting its tail. Laura looks at her watch; she is late.

The funeral chapel is empty when Laura enters, all that remains are the residues of the congregation of mourners in the air, suits taken from mothball-filled closets, English after-shaves, damp handkerchiefs. For a moment she considers signing the book of condolences: Laura Merak, wife of the deceased. She leaves her travel bag in the vestibule of the chapel and as she walks down the tree-lined avenue she glances at the photocopied programme placed beside the book of condolences. Air Suite No. 3 by Johann Sebastian Bach, welcome, curriculum vitae, appreciations, more Bach, after the concluding prayer: „Il n'y a pas d'amour heureux“ by Georges Brassens. Laura crumples the programme.

The flock dressed in black surrounds the family grave, a red sandstone monument resembling a flattened temple. Laura recognizes Thérèse, Richard's sister, in the front row by her fur-trimmed funeral hat. Other heads look familiar too. Laura places herself close to one of the sepulchral monuments on the opposite side of the path, a scantily clad angel with a laurel branch in her hand. It is a gloriously blue day and in the spring breeze the words of the minister trail away from her. She can smell the wild garlic at the feet of the angel in the heat of the sunshine. After the last blessing the crowd starts moving. Thérèse steps forward and bending down she throws something into the freshly dug grave, the others follow her example. After a while Laura can see the vase beside the mound of earth: gerberas, Richard's favourite flowers. In the Merak family everybody had a favourite flower, a favourite piece of music, a favourite dish.

Thérèse talks with the minister, some mourners take their leave with a downcast air sorry to miss the funeral meal. Laura steps further back into the shadow of the angel when they pass her. They are Richard's colleagues, professors of modern history, Swiss history, Eastern European history.

“Laura!” Bert Grünfeld has spotted her. “I did ask myself, if you would be here as well.”

Moments later Laura finds herself surrounded by people, some offer their sympathy, others smile. Laura's eyes fill up with tears. The group at the grave has discovered her too, Thérèse

ostentatiously turns her back to her, two old ladies whisper to each other. Laura tries in vain to remember their names.

Together with Bert Laura walks up the avenue back to the chapel. She would like to have spent a moment at Richard's grave, but Thérèse did not budge. The sunlight streams through the spring branches and covers the graves with a mesh of shadows. Here, the old-established patricians of Basel bury their dead and the inscriptions on the stones read like a history of the town. Bert's black suit crackles, the grey silk scarf he wears around his neck is adorned with a pearl. He talks about Richard's projects at the Centre for Renaissance Research. "I'm really sorry", he interrupts himself.

"We were separated."

Bert sighs. "I always thought you were the perfect couple." Through his Basel dialect his Central Swiss origin is audible.

"Many people thought that."

Laura takes the tram to the Central Station. Why did she come to Basel? After she had said good-bye to Bert under the neo-Byzantine porch of the Wulfgottesacker she crossed the tracks at the tram depot with her travel bag heading for the tram stop. A lorry pushed her aside, workmen waved her along road works, it smelt of exhaust fumes. The cemetery in which Richard was buried, belonged to a different world. After the separation she hoped for a while that she could talk to him again. But his communications about what remained to be arranged were so harsh that she didn't find the courage; and then it didn't seem important anymore. Chance would decide if their paths would cross again and it was by chance that they had met last week in the lobby of the Inselhotel in Constance. Laura closes her eyes and the face of Franz Lindner appears. There were greenish circles around his brown irises.

The tram stops in front of the Central Station. Laura feels suddenly tired and she looks at the hotels around the place. In the bar of the Euler Richard and she used to drink a glass of wine after the theatre, on the patio of the Schweizerhof they had lunch in the summer at the invitation of Richard's banker. The Hotel Viktoria makes the most impartial impression. A troop of travellers pours out of a tram and pulling their luggage streams towards the station. From its roof the copper green basilisks stare down at Laura and for a moment she sees herself through their eyes between the tram tracks like in a spider's web. "Everybody was here", Bert said at the good-bye under the porch of the cemetery and it sounded like a consolation.

Laura thought of the black dressed crowd surrounding the grave. "Except Hans Peterson." Bert looked at her bewildered. "Peterson is dead."

"Dead?"

"Yes. Didn't you know?"

Laura shook her head.

“He died last November. Richard wrote an obituary.” Bert started to quote by heart and Laura recognized Richard’s meagre praise between the set phrases.

Shortly after six Laura is back in the Hotel Viktoria and goes to the restaurant. The Merkas frowned upon having dinner before half past seven, only petty bourgeois did that. A week after the kiss in the aviary Richard drove up to the small terraced house of Laura’s parents in his father’s Jaguar. The neighbours stared through the curtains. Inside the car it smelled of leather and Laura was startled when the window suddenly opened at her side during the drive. In her father’s Opel one had to wind down the windows by hand; Richard laughed. He explained they would have dinner in his place. Laura didn’t think about it until they turned into a gateway and parked in the cobbled courtyard under the lime tree. A blonde lady in a Chanel suit received them in the foyer. She put her arm around Richard and kissed him on his lips. It took Laura a moment to grasp that this was his mother. Her high heels clattered on the black and white marble flags. Laura was wearing the Indian blouse her sister had given her and cotton sandals. In the salon a silver ice bucket with white wine was waiting. The room was lit by lamps hidden behind white screens like an aquarium. Richard’s mother kept talking. After a while a sliding door opened and his father appeared, a stocky man with thin lips. He scrutinized Laura. A moment later there was a scratching on the door leading to the garden and Mrs. Merak – without stopping her flow of talk – let a big black Newfoundland dog into the room. Laura’s heart leapt, all her life she had wanted such a dog.

There would be a simple dinner, Mrs. Merak explained. She was at the hairdresser this afternoon and there was no time to plan dinner. Laura was amazed when she saw the bottles of sauces, pots and bowls arranged on the dinner table under the golden chandelier. Never before had she eaten Beefsteak Tartar. Then, the questions started: would she like a raw egg to mix into the meat on her plate, gherkins, onions, bell peppers, red or black pepper, which of the three Cognacs did she prefer, Tabasco? Each of her answers triggered comments, sometime she was in the camp of Richard’s father, sometimes in the one of his mother or his older sister Thérèse who studied art in Paris. If Laura chose what Richard liked she gained an approving nod, but the brownish grey lump she had on her plate after all the decisions met with outright rejection. One would have to beat him to death before he would eat such a tartar, Richard’s father declared. Laura froze. Richard’s mother reprimanded her husband with a laugh. They were an honest family, she said, they could not lie. Only years later Laura realized that the evening had been a test that she failed on every account. At the following weekend Richard invited her to the cinema. His parents must have urged him not to

see her again, but he never mentioned it. He was convinced that Laura was the right one – so much so that in time she believed it herself. After the cinema they slept together for the first time on the folded back seat of his Fiat.

While Laura is waiting for dinner she pulls Hans Peterson's manuscript out of her handbag. Henriette had let her have the spiral bound book willingly; she said she had other copies sent back by publishers. Laura remembered when she heard the name of the Greek scholar for the first time. Chryso meaning golden, louri, strap, Hans explained, one who cuts golden straps, reins, fetters. Manuel Chrysoloras was a forerunner of the Renaissance, Richard interrupted him and Laura felt ashamed that she didn't know his name.

At this time they spent nearly every Saturday evening with Hans and Henriette Peterson. After graduating from university Laura found a job in an economic research institute and Richard and she got married. It wasn't customary for a Merak to cohabit, his father said. While Richard decanted the red wine he had brought, Hans talked about the concept he had presented to Professor Grimm. In a few weeks time he and Richards would have passed the final exams and could start their doctoral thesis. Manuel Chrysoloras who by the end of the 14th century came from Constantinople to teach the Florentines Greek, was an ideal subject, Hans explained. There was hardly any research about the scholar and Florentine history was one of Professor Grimms special fields of work; a thesis about Chrysoloras must be of interest for her. "Holy shit!" Richard's voice cracked, his red wine had corked. Laura hastily inquired about Henriette's mother who was sickly, Richard poured the wine down the drain and Hans looked for a bottle in his own shelf. Laura heard the men in the kitchen returning to talk about Manuel Chrysoloras, Richard sounded composed again; his temper only ever lasted a few seconds.

'The biographical fragments at hand represent not a conclusive assessment but a starting point for further research, although it is evident that my findings contradict the prevailing assumptions categorically.' The waitress places the Bratwurst with Rösti in front of Laura and she puts Hans Peterson's manuscript aside. At the table next to her an Indian writes a letter and behind her a Dutch couple is talking; only tourists eat here. The sun setting behind the roof of the railway station dazzles Laura. Some days after that Saturday evening at Peterson's Richard unexpectedly appeared at the institute. She was correcting an article for the *Wirtschaftswoche* and it took her a moment to understand why Richard was so excited. Professor Grimm had agreed that he would write his thesis about Manuel Chrysoloras. "An unique opportunity", he declared.

"I thought Hans was going to write about this scholar?"

"Mrs. Grimm will give him another subject." For his research, Richard continued, he would have to spend some time in Florence.

April 25th, 2015

"To us meeting again." Franz Lindner's hand trembles a little when he reaches for his wine glass.

Laura looks around in the low wood-panelled dining room. It is a few steps below street level and in the glow of the lights hanging from the ceiling it feels like being in a cave. "Nothing has changed." They are sitting at the table next to the stove made of green tiles showing the basilisk with the city's coat of arms in its claws.

"A colleague from Basel recommended this restaurant", the Consul General smiles.

"It was the favourite restaurant of my husband", Laura says regretting it the same moment.

"Santé." She picks up her wine glass as if she hadn't noticed Franz Lindner's embarrassment. On the way back from the Rhine she had discovered his invitation on her mobile. Three times she changed clothes until she settled on the black polo neck with the black jeans and the dark red silk scarf. He hands her the silver breadbasket and her signet ring brushes against a glasses with a low ting.

"The Merak's crest?" he asks.

"It belonged to my father-in-law", Laura explains. "He left it to me."

"He must have liked you a lot."

"He despised me." Laura smiles. "I was catholic and the daughter of a book-keeper."

"And you?"

"I tried to please him but didn't succeed."

"Even so he bequeathed you the ring?"

"An atonement. Or the morphine they injected him with in the days before his death."

Franz Lindner doesn't answer.

"You got the police report", Laura inquires as casually as possible.

The Consul General nods and reaches for his briefcase. "And this dossier here. Apparently it was left in the Bishop's room." He hands her Richard's writing case made of olive brown leather.

"And what conclusion did the German police reach?" Laura continues.

"Circulatory failure."

"And what makes the circulation fail?" She opens the writing case and starts to browse through the documents.

"Cardiac irregularity, acute coronary incident, stroke, intoxication, allergic shock; a circulatory failure can have any number of causes."

"You are well informed", Laura says without looking up from the documents.

“It’s part of my job.”

The writing case contains the programme of the conference, Richard’s lecture – tipped with wide margin and double line spacing – the correspondence with the organisers: negotiations about the fee, a reading lamp on the lectern, double room with lake view and bath tub. “I don’t want that.” Laura closes the leather case and hands it back to Franz Lindner.

He puts it into his briefcase as if he hadn’t expect anything else and Laura wonders if the dossier was just a pretext to meet her.

“The fact that the doctor who signed the death certificate knew your husband facilitated the formalities significantly of course”, the Consul General adds.

“He knew Richard?” Laura is surprised.

“She. It seems your husband consulted her the day before.”

“Why?”

“I thought you might know?”

Franz Lindner’s brown eyes are watching her. Did he invite her for dinner to find out what Richard died of? “I have no idea. Maybe he forgot to take his heart pills”, she speculates relieved to see the waitress arriving with their starters. Richard never forgot anything and he hated unfamiliar doctors. He always consulted Doctor Burckhardt in the Engelgasse who went to school with him. The waitress puts the salad in front of Laura and the pasta in front of Franz Lindner; after a short explanation the plates are in the right place.

“How long will you stay in Basel?”, Franz Lindner inquires after a while.

There is no reason to conceal anything from the Consul General and while Laura eats her sage ravioli she tells him about the discrepancies between Richard’s thesis and Hans’ fragments. When she relates her conversation with Marieluise amusement spreads across Franz Lindner’s face and she starts to embellish her report.

“Will you recount this encounter in one of your books?” he asks when Laura has finished.

“Everything is material.” Laura notices the greenish circles around Franz’ irises again.

“I started to read your first novel”, he confesses.

“Is that also part of your job?” she teases him.

“No.” He smiles. “For my job I only have to read the hand-book for Swiss diplomats.”

For a moment their eyes meet. “This garden that you describe”, Laura feels her heart sinking, “with the apple tree, the water lilies. Does it really exist?”

“Why do people always think everything has to be true? Why are we no longer allowed to invent something today?” She reaches for her wine glass.

„I didn’t mean to offend you“, Franz Lindner apologizes.

“I wasn’t talking personally.” Her voice is calm again. “Some is true, some invented. Most of the time you start with something true, you change it, add something. During the writing reality and imagination blend and the aim really is that the reader is not able to distinguish

one from the other." Franz moves the slices of tomatoes to the side of his plate and eats the remaining salad leaves. His hands are hardly larger than hers, the fingers sturdy with short cut nails and he wears no ring. "And a lot happens in the head of the reader", Laura adds.

During the main course Franz Lindner talks about his two daughters, Jacky the older works as a goldsmith in Zuerich, the younger one, Lizzy, just started as assistant consultant at the University Hospital Basel and that is why Franz Lindner is here. He is helping her to move into her new flat.

"Did you show the police report to your daughter", Laura asks.

The Consul General looks shamefaced. "She is under obligation of medical secrecy; and to hear a second opinion is always good."

Laura tries to push the image of Richard's white face aside.

"And what are your plans now?" Franz Lindner asks when they have their espressos (sorry but English speakers just make the plural this way!!) before them.

"Returning to Ireland", Laura answers with little enthusiasm.

"And Chrysoloras?"

"I'm not a historian. I would have to read the source material, compare it with the statements of Peterson and my husband to find the truth."

"Maybe it's not about truth but fabrication."

"You mean Peterson or my husband have invented something?"

"Not a thing but a person, two persons."

"Jekyll and Hyde of Manuel Chrysoloras." Laura smiles.

"Every person has two sides. Isn't that your department?" Franz Lindner continues undeterred. "Your know how to turn facts into fiction."

"Yes, but –"

"Then you should be able to find out what facts are hidden behind the fiction of the two historians."

Laura stares at her espresso cup. "There are very few facts, actually. There are only a couple of letters by Chrysoloras himself, a description of Rome and his *Erotemata*." Franz frowns. "A theory of form of the Greek language. The first Greek grammar for non-native speakers. After Chrysoloras's death the grammar became a work of reference. Every humanist who fancied himself used it."

"Hans Peterson and your husband were friends?" Franz Lindner catches up.

"They used to be." At the wall opposite there is a mirror in which Laura can see herself and the lawyer sitting at the white covered table; she would love to know how it felt to touch his grey hair.