

Also by Gert Hofmann
(in English translation)

THE SPECTACLE AT THE TOWER
OUR CONQUEST
THE PARABLE OF THE BLIND
BALZAC'S HORSE AND OTHER STORIES
BEFORE THE RAINY SEASON
THE FILM EXPLAINER
LUCK
LICHTENBERG AND THE LITTLE FLOWER GIRL

GERT HOFMANN

Veilchenfeld

Translated from the German
by Eric Mace-Tessler

TRANSLATOR'S DEDICATION

for Margaret

VEILCHENFELD

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OUR PHILOSOPHER has died suddenly. Our hearse collected him. The hearse drivers – no one knows who had them come – drove up to his place Monday morning on rubber wheels, silently, and they sprang from their box. We saw it ourselves.

We're leaning against Höhler's garden fence and aren't making ourselves dirty. The hearse drivers pull the coffin meant for Herr Veilchenfeld out of their large-wheeled, solemn and rickety hearse with a remarkable scraping noise that carries the length of Heidenstrasse, and disappear, after having tapped in passing on the feather-tufted neck of their little horse. Surely they don't want to go and get Herr Veilchenfeld? Yes, they are getting Herr Veilchenfeld! Only yesterday, around eight in the evening in middling weather, I saw him in his back garden, pale but standing amidst the lilac bushes. He was behind, not in front of, his garden wall, but we could see through the cracks. For, although it was known in our town that after his release Herr Veilchenfeld had moved out to us, and now lived in Heidenstrasse *without connections* (Mother), in the house with the alcove window, he was more and more seldom to be seen in the last days.

Does he really still live here? we ask Father.

Yes, says Father, he is upstairs.

And what does he do?

He sits at his table.

And why doesn't he come down?

BECAUSE I FEEL more secure among my books than among my fellow countrymen, Herr Veilchenfeld always said to Mother across the narrow bit of garden, which he retraced with short steps time and again, and, under the brim of his black hat, he smiled at her out on the street.

IF HE HAD AT LEAST moved into a house with a larger garden, Mother said to Father. At the edge of town there are some. One's even empty up in Birkengasse. There he could have had his exercise without anyone seeing him. While here, where he lives now . . . It's always just the same six or seven paces he can walk here. He'll really go crazy, constantly walking around in circles.

And how was he supposed to know that one day he would not dare leave his garden when he wanted to have some exercise? Father asked her. Though he knew our philosopher well from his visits, Father also hadn't known at that time about leaving the garden.

Yes, said Mother, for a philosopher, he has changed a lot. Unfortunately, he's completely run down now, outwardly, and his nerves as well.

For it was not only when he did go into town sometimes, to buy bread perhaps, that Herr Veilchenfeld pulled his hat far down over his face and turned up his coat collar, so that at least he couldn't be recognised from a distance. He didn't

even willingly go to our shops. And if he did go into a shop and the shop wasn't empty, he placed himself in a corner and let everyone go before him, even us. And he preferred to be looked after by Frau Bichler, even if she did *ruin him financially* (Mother) and often let him down. But if we did see him some time walking down the street, along the kerb as if it were a tightrope, he greeted us of course, but as if under torture, and he said every time: Please, don't tell anyone that you've seen me. The less said about me, the better. Or: I am only an apparition. Poof, I will vanish immediately! Or simply: Forget about me.

As things stand, it would be better if you didn't speak to him on the street any more, Mother always said, once we had passed him.

And say hello? we asked Mother. Should we still say hello to him?

No, said Mother, don't say hello either. Instead we should act as if we don't know him, as if he were already no longer present.

And if he says hello?

My God! Mother cried and flung up her arms, I'm sure that he won't be so tactless.

So that, when we saw him from far away – that was just after the *Deutsche Peter* – we no longer said hello to Herr Veilchenfeld, but instead looked down at the ground. But then when we reached him, we winked at him, so that he realised that we knew who he was. And Herr Veilchenfeld, as a sign that he forgave us, winked back. Sometimes he smiled too when he winked, though naturally only a little, and we went on, each to his own place.

EVER SINCE TWO BLOCKS of flats, in the shadows of which we now live, were built across from us in a single autumn, our house is smaller than it used to be. If someone who doesn't know it is looking for it, he can hardly find it. New patients who want to see Father first ask at the blocks of flats whether or not Father lives there. No, they are told, he lives over there in the little house. Oh, they say, really? They often don't ask at all and just go away. What these new buildings amount to in losses, no one would believe, Father says to Mother and to us, but he doesn't want to move, as he lacks the energy to do so. We also lack our sandpit now. When we heard that they wanted to take it from us, we howled with rage, though that didn't help at all. The fence was simply removed and a street was built through our garden and our sandpit, so that the tenants of the new buildings could get to their flats. Now you see only the street; the sandpit has disappeared. Also lacking: 1 maple, 1 walnut, 1 rabbit hutch (for our annual rabbit named Puschel), which, because there's no longer a run, Father also hasn't rebuilt. Also, now that we lack a horizon, we can no longer see the approach of a storm and we don't know what kind of weather there'll be the next day, or whether there'll be any at all, Father tells us. Instead we're showered by the furnace soot of thirty-eight families, so that our poor mother has to have everything washed twice, as she says. Many brick workers, all from the big city, now live above us, and for them everything here is too close. Father tells us there will also be many misunderstandings between us and them, as for example because of what one said to the other or didn't say.

ON THE DAY that the hearse comes for Herr Veilchenfeld, Mother pulls down the blinds in the evening but doesn't switch on the light. Instead we sit in the dark for a long time, and think again and again that we hear footsteps in front of the house. But we are mistaken, no doubt. Also, when it's time for it, Mother forgets about supper altogether. Mother, my little sister calls, why, you've forgotten about supper! But Mother doesn't answer her. She has sat down on the kitchen chair, but she isn't knitting either. Instead she lets her arms hang down on the right and left sides of the chair, where with the coming of dusk they are more and more invisible. Perhaps she has dozed off, or something much worse.

Mama, my sister calls, the light, the light! Mama, she calls, where are you?

Oh, says Mother, where should I be? I'm here, of course. And, as if she's on a school bench, she raises her hand to show my sister. And she means to get up too and go through the kitchen and finally turn the light on, but she keeps forgetting. Only when we can no longer make out her arms and her hands and her face in the darkness and Father comes back from his house calls and makes a great deal of noise in the hall with his artificial leg does Mother get up and switch on the light. Then the table is set too, but no one wants to eat anything.

Here, Mother says, and points to the food she's placed on the table and pushes it towards all of us, but Father shakes his head and says: Not now, perhaps later. And he lets a really long time pass by and then takes a slice of bread and cuts it into two equal pieces, but then instead of spreading something on them, he lifts the knife in the air and exclaims, Listen to me, there's more coming.

And what more's coming? my sister asks, and looks at the door.

What must come, will come, Father says, since he doesn't want to tell us what.

Then Mother places the bread, which she took after Father did, back in the basket – she doesn't even cut it – and says something, but something completely different. She says that in other times a philosopher of Herr Veilchenfeld's status would have had a splendid funeral. Indeed he would have been entitled to either the simultaneous or subsequent sacrificial death of his connections and other members of his household, who naturally would not have wanted to survive him.

And why not? we ask.

Absolutely, she says.

But he didn't have any connections.

That makes no difference, she says.

Is that what you wanted to say just now? we ask Father.

In any case, Father says, I have no appetite and I'm going to lie down now. I had such a hard day, you wouldn't believe it. And he gets up and goes into his consulting room and he's eaten nothing today and indeed won't eat anything.

But you've eaten nothing at all, Mother calls after Father, everything is still there.

Quite so, says Father, and shuts the door behind him and lies down. Once Father has lain down, it is immediately much quieter, although Father said nothing and didn't shout.

Will Frau Abfalter die too now, since Herr Veilchenfeld is dead? my sister asks Mother.

No, says Mother, not her. And she puts the bread, the sausage and the cheese back in the kitchen cupboard. Now we

keep going back and forth beside her between the table and the cupboard, asking what Father *really* meant when he said there's more coming, but Mother doesn't tell us. Perhaps she doesn't know herself. Perhaps she simply doesn't want to tell us. And then when we're put to bed and covered and I ask her whether she won't at least tell us what she meant by *subsequent death*, she shakes her head. Oh, just that, somehow, she says.

ON THE AFTERNOON of the festival, probably when Mother is already looking for us at the other end of town, Herr Veilchenfeld, with the black now somewhat decayed hat on his head, with his scarf wound around his neck – that is, as if prepared for a long trip which would take him far from our town – is in his garden, because here no one will see him when the parade with the music passes through Heidenstrasse. He also has his emergency bag with him, which he won't part with any more. He also has his doctoral diploma (*'summa cum laude'*) in his jacket pocket, right over his heart. In addition: the substitute for a passport, fifty marks in small bills, his birth certificate, his confirmation document, his police clearance, on which it is indicated that previous convictions are inapplicable, a photograph of his wife when young in a high-necked white blouse, and ten sugar cubes for quick energy, Mother says. In case he is suddenly relocated, she says, when we ask about it. And now quickly into the tub, the water will get cold, she calls, and she lets the water run.

And when will he be relocated? I ask, and undress as slowly as possible.

Soon now, Mother says.