**On the Bank of the River Vltava**

**By Karen Schwarze**

Matthias sits on the bank of the Vltava River. A duck waddles towards him, but he shoos it away; he has nothing to offer.

Matthias is always hungry. The amount of food he eats is just enough for Matthias to have the concentration to operate the wool-spinning machines in the textile factory. While he’s working, the scent of the machine fumes, the feel of fabric particles in the air, and the careful way he has to operate the machine are all enough to move his mind from his stomach just enough to dull the ache. But when the work’s done and he steps into the sunlight and clear air, that is when it is the worst. That is when his consciousness of the hunger rises up with a vengeance.

It is 1848 in Prague, the navel of the world, the heart of Europe, the timeless city. A visitor can move through time in a glance by looking at structures that are centuries old. He may choose to sit in front of St. Vitus cathedral, in awe of its Gothic architecture as it looms over the city. Or he may find himself standing in front of the Vltava river, basking in the sun and gazing at the hills beyond the city.

But maybe our visitor isn’t much better off than Matthias. Maybe he too has seen food shortages and low wages and disease and death. Maybe he too has tried to stave off the cognizance of his hunger by imbibing the heartbeat of this city, the beauty of its streets and spires that call forth reverence. And maybe in despair he too has realized that no beauty—not the sun setting behind St. Vitus Cathedral, not the view of the grassy hills beyond the city—can distract him enough from the gnawing pain in his stomach.

-

In Matthias’ house, squeezed between two buildings like a stone block wedged in an arch supporting Charles’ Bridge, there sits another young man. This young man—Josef—rests after his day at the factory. He fingers his worn shirt, the last one that his mother, Anna, made before she died of a fever a year before. Josef was sixteen then, and old enough to sense when death was coming: He felt it, that night, in her presence. That’s when he felt the most keen sense of his familial responsibilities, more than he had before in his life. As the older brother by three years, he had sensed that responsibility before, and had always tried to act with respect to it. But in the moment of Anna’s death, with one parent leaving this world for another, the weight seemed heavier, somehow.

Josef sits at the table, one tan hand wrapped around the other. He stares at the wall in front of him and tries, hard, to not think. Trying to make his mind blank doesn’t do much for the hunger, but he’s found that it takes the edge off the panic that threatens to rise up in his heart on a regular basis.

When Matthias arrives home from the river and Vaclav, their father, from the market, they all sit down to eat bread and potatoes. There’s a candle that offers meager light. As usual, Vaclav eats just less than his sons. They’ve often noticed this and have asked him about it. He has replied with simple excuses—he is not well, or Aura shared his lunch with him that day at the factory and so he is not really all that hungry.

Every time, his sons believe him and continue eating.

Tonight, just as they finish eating, there is a knock on the door. It’s Simon, their neighbor. He seems excited about something.

They let him in and he sits down. He launches in without preamble: “Have any of you heard about the meetings at the Golden Goose?”

“No,” says Josef. Vaclav and Matthias shake their heads.

“There’s an innkeeper named Faster. He runs the Golden Goose, not far from Town Square.”

Matthias nods, knowing just a little about the inn that is also an eatery. They never go there as a family because it costs more to eat there than to buy food at the market. Matthias wonders if Simon knows what it is like to be as hungry as he is. That is important.

*Can what you have to say help me to not be hungry anymore?* Matthias wonders to himself.

Simon goes on. “Lately there’s been a group of us gathering. There’s been lots of…*talk*.” He says this last word meaningfully.

“Oh, is that all?” says Vaclav. “Just *talk*?” Matthias doesn’t know, but he guesses that speaking in that biting way requires just enough energy to take the edge off his father’s hunger pains.

Simon ignores him. “There’s been talk about Windisch-Grätz. No one likes that he’s here. Damn Austrians.”

“*Damn* the Austrians,” Vaclav says fervently.

“Damn the Austrians,” Josef says, almost in a whisper.

*Damn the Austrians,* Matthias mouths. Concentrating on how his lips form shapes that produce intelligible utterances when he sends air through them—or just on the shapes, without the utterances—also helps.

“And there’s been more talk about the low wages for factory workers. People haven’t forgotten the protest four years ago. They have their own mouths to feed and others besides.”

“So?” Matthias asks. “What’s anyone going to do about it?”

Simon smiles. “There’ve been plans made. But only if Windisch-Grätz strikes first.”

“How do you mean?” asks Josef.

“If he attacks a peaceful assembly, we’ll return the favor. We’ve got informants that say there’ll be troops at the Rossmarkt. Once we show them that we’re a force to be reckoned with, not some randomly ambling group of sheep, then we’ll have their attention. Then we can demand things like reasonable wages from people like Stadion. But first we have to show that we’re not afraid of the damn Austrians. The French got Philippe to leave like a dog with his tail between his legs—we have power, too, if we’re smart enough to use it.”

“How do you know they’ll attack?” Josef asks.

“Tension’s been building for days now. We don’t want Windisch-Grätz here and he knows it. Something’s bound to happen at the Rossmarkt. Alois Trojan—that’s the main fellow who’s been giving speeches at the Golden Goose—says so, and I agree with him. And so do a lot of other people.” He pauses. “There’s a meeting tomorrow night. What do you all say to joining me?”

“Maybe,” says Josef. “Sounds like something that might be worth getting in trouble for.”

Vaclav stiffens.

“And you, Matthias?”

Matthias hesitates. To be arrested would be an ordeal. And physical injury, should they be attacked. For a moment, Matthias sees himself lying wounded on a street…

“There’s a real chance we’ll be hurt, or killed, isn’t there?”

“Why, yes, that’s *generally* the case in an attack,” Simon says dryly.

Matthias wonders how much more, say, a single leg wound, would hurt than months of hunger. He knows that people die from leg wound infections. Matthias tries to weigh his options in his mind. He’s not sure if it really evens out, in terms of pain, but…

Like Josef says, it might be worth it.

“I’ll go.”

Vaclav speaks abruptly. “Josef…”

“Yes, Papi?” Josef responds.

Instead of speaking, Vaclav gets up out of his chair. He walks to his sleeping area, to the bundle of old fabric he uses as a pillow. He reaches in and procures from the bundle a sack of money. It’s about as tall as Matthias’ hand, wrist to fingertip.

Coming back to the table, he sets down the sack. “Your mother and I have been saving this.”

Josef, Matthias and Simon all stare at the sack.

“I don’t understand, Papi,” says Josef.

Vaclav sits down at the table and emits a deep sigh before he speaks. “We started saving a few years ago—a little, every week, taking from what we normally spent at the market. We knew that conditions here wouldn’t get any better soon, and we’d heard of others going to America. Some have fared better there than they would have here, from what we’ve heard.”

Matthias thought of the stories he’d heard about people traveling by train to Hamburg, then to Liverpool in England. From there they’d go on a ship across the ocean to America, to places like Louisiana and Texas.

“Josef, before she died your mama made me promise that I would keep saving so that you could go to America. You can live there for a while and work. Then, eventually, you’ll have enough money to send for me and Matthias.” He pauses and nods at the sack. “This is enough for you to leave as soon as you can make plans and secure your passage.”

The money sits there on the table. No one speaks. Then the truth dawns on Matthias. His father’s smaller meals. His excuses. Maybe Aura really had been sharing his lunches with him, sometimes.

But maybe not.

And what about Anna? Could it have been that his mother died, at least partly, because she hadn’t been eating enough? So that they could have a little extra food for the next meal, and so have to buy less at the market? So that there could be a little more money…

Weight settles on both him and Josef. The weight of obligation.

Simon stares at the sack and seems to know what Josef and Matthias are thinking. But it does not deter him from asking again.

“Josef…What if you just came, and then went to America…later?”

“Simon, there might not be a ‘later’—not if I am arrested, or killed.” Josef looks first at Simon, then at Vaclav, as he speaks.

“Maybe you won’t get killed…”

“*You* said it was dangerous, Simon,” Matthias reminds him.

“Yes, it is…But…*Damn* it. What if you had a chance to make a difference? Vaclav, what if Josef were to go to the meetings, and fight if necessary, and it made things better for everyone?”

Vaclav is silent.

“And what if I do die or get arrested, and nothing happens? You’re asking me to waste my life, let alone what my parents have already done.”

“I know it. But…The people here are…are…are like your family, too. I mean, it’s your *race*. Your fatherland.”

“Simon, we’re talking about arrest. We’re talking about death. You think they’re going to release you and the others from the chains they’ve put you in when you start singing ‘Among the Czechs, my home’?”

“Maybe they won’t. Maybe I will go to jail. But at least I’ll be proud. I’m a *Czech*. I’m not an Austrian. I won’t be ruled by Austrians anymore, or by their pawns. ‘We ought to show the world what a nation can do when it’s determined to win its freedom.’ That’s what they’re saying in Italy. That’s what they’re doing—showing the world. That’s what we’ve got to do. We ought not to be Stadion’s, or Metternich’s, or Windisch-Grätz’s, *slaves* anymore. We ought to be proud Czechs, damn it.”

“Simon, if there weren’t something better…I would fight with you. I’ve already said as much. If there were no other options, I’d rather fight and die for a chance of things being better than to live like this. But it’s different now. Papi...and my mama…They’ve done this, they’ve sacrificed for me and Matthias. That changes things. Surely you can see that.”

“Yes,” Simon says bitterly. “Yes, I do see.”

“And surely you would leave too, if you could.”

Simon is silent. Matthias knows his brother has spoken the truth, perhaps a biting truth. Otherwise, why won’t Simon refute it?

After a moment, Simon speaks. “Alright, then. Go. Leave us here to suffer and die for the fatherland while you sell your loyalty for the riches of America, while you are a *whore* for what you *think* she can give you.”

“Simon…”

“When you get homesick for the place you left behind, you’ll remember me, you’ll remember this moment.”

Simon rises from his chair, dejected. As he turns to leave, his shoulders slump, and Matthias wonders if he might cry; he seems so terribly disappointed.

-

The Čadeks sit for a while in the space that silence makes. Finally Matthias speaks.

“Papi, why didn’t you let us help?”

Vaclav sighs. “There was always just barely enough to eat. Your mama and I thought…We could

not bear to ask you to eat any less. We would gladly go without a little so that you could stay strong.”

“But Mama…”

“I don’t know, Matthias. It may have.”

There is silence, again, for a while, and Matthias starts to cry in the keenness of the possible truth. Josef and Vaclav are silent. Josef’s face grows wet, too.

After a little while, Matthias stops crying. It’s time to go to sleep, for all of them.

When the morning comes, they will go to work at the factory. After work, Josef and Vaclav will make plans for Josef to go to America. Matthias will still feel the grief inside. In the days that come he will take some comfort at being able to eat a little more once Josef is gone, and will look forward to living better in America. But he will miss his brother. When he sits on the bank of the river and sees leaves floating on the water under the bridge, he will think of him on a ship. He will think of his mother, and a complicated mixture of guilt and hope will rise up in his chest. The panic that he has fought to keep down will ebb. He will pull out a few stale breadcrumbs from his pocket, and when the duck comes near, he’ll throw the crumbs toward it and watch as the duck bends to grab them. The sun will set behind St. Vitus Cathedral, and Matthias will gaze at the hills beyond.