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The Death's Head Chess Club

Written by John Donoghue

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The Death's Head Chess Club

John Donoghue



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1.

The Latvian Gambit

1944

Konzentrationslager Auschwitz-III, Monowitz

It is late afternoon and the camp is quiet. The biting February wind blows from the east and prowls along the alleys between the wooden barracks, waiting for the return of the inmates, an enemy in a long list of enemies. Everyone knows that the wind in Auschwitz speaks its own strange language. It does not speak of the outside world, of the sun on distant mountains, or snow falling lightly on city streets. It speaks only of what it witnesses within the electrified wire that surrounds the camp, of hunger and privation, of solitude among the multitudes that live there, and of death. Arc lights cut through the gloom to flood the parade ground with an unnatural brightness, creating sharp shadows between the fence posts that surround the camp. The camp is hungry. Hunger is another enemy, ever-present, heavy and gnawing, a ravening emptiness in the pit of every stomach that neither the bread ration in the morning nor the thin soup at noon can remedy.

Weariness is another enemy, but the camp cannot rest. Constant vigilance is needed to guard against possible infractions of the rules – rules that are unwritten, unknowable, unfathomable; rules which can be made up on the spot; rules where the only purpose is to increase the opportunities for misery. Each and every rule, whether written or unwritten,

known or unknown, is another enemy: the camp is at war, and for each inmate the only measure of victory is that somehow they have managed to survive another day.

In his warm office in the *Kommandantur* building overlooking the camp, SS-Obersturmführer* Paul Meissner gazes out of the window, a cup of coffee in hand. The coffee is good quality, not the ersatz that the soldiers at the front get, for duty in the camps is arduous and essential to the wellbeing of the Reich. Meissner raises the cup to his lips and savours the richness of its aroma. It is a moment of quiet. His gaze lifts to the sky: iron-grey clouds fill his horizon. His leg aches: a sure sign – it will undoubtedly snow before morning.

Meissner is tall, even for a German. His hair is dark, but his eyes are a shimmering blue, disconcertingly so. He is a rarity in the camp – Waffen-SS; his collar bears the double lightning rune in silver on black, not the death's head emblem of the camp SS, the Totenkopfverbände.† He walks with a pronounced limp – a parting gift from a Russian tank. It is a badge of honour: few others in the camp have seen service at the front. Now he spends his days in Abteilung I, responsible to the camp Kommandant. His duties are concerned with overseeing the many satellite labour camps that fall under the umbrella of Auschwitz, mainly the old *Zwangsarbeitslager für Juden*, Fürstengrube and Blechhammer and others even further afield. He is responsible for the SS personnel, and two Scharführers and their teams work daily miracles for him with rosters of men and transport.

* See appendix for a table of SS ranks.

† The SS was divided into three main branches: the general or Allgemeine-SS; the military or Waffen-SS; and the concentration camp guards, the Totenkopfverbände, or Death's Head Units. Uniquely, the Totenkopfverbände wore a death's head emblem on their right collar tab.

Meissner's biggest headache is the IG Farben *Werke*, the labyrinthine Buna industrial complex that the Monowitz camp was built to serve. Its capacity to produce synthetic oil and rubber from the surrounding coal fields is crucial to the war effort, yet construction is months behind schedule; so far not a single drop of oil or gramme of rubber has been produced.

Without warning, the quiet is broken. The camp orchestra* has struck up a tune, a jaunty marching song. He searches his memory for its name but it eludes him. He glances at his watch. Where has the day gone?

Minutes later, their day at the factory over, the inmates start to enter the camp. The scene is almost comic in its absurdity: ghastly wrecks of men in filthy, blue-striped uniforms marching in time to the cheery melody of the orchestra. Some of the *Kapos*† have even got their men singing. They are led straight to the parade ground where they line up in columns, five abreast. The early arrivals will have to endure the cold while they wait. There are over 10,000 inmates and it will be a while before they are all assembled and the roll call can begin.

* An orchestra made up of inmates was established in the main Auschwitz camp as early as 1941. Others were subsequently formed in Birkenau and Monowitz. The orchestra played when the inmates left, and returned to, the camp each day. According to one account, the orchestra was required to play 'at all official occasions – for the camp commander's speeches, for transports and for hangings. It also served as the entertainment for the SS and the inmates in the medical barracks.' The women's orchestra in Birkenau was the most famous. Its leader was Alma Rose, a well-known musician, who died in Auschwitz in 1944.

† The SS used selected prisoners, the *Prominenten*, to run the camps for them. They were usually Germans sent to a concentration camp for a criminal or political offence. *Ältesten*, or elders, managed the living quarters; *Kapos* supervised the labour squads, or *Kommandos*. They were given privileges, providing they kept control of their fellow prisoners. In order to maintain their privileged status the *Prominenten* often acted with frightening brutality: there are numerous accounts of prisoners being beaten to death for some minor or imagined infraction.

Among the inmates is a recent arrival, from France. He has not yet acquired the haunted, hollow-eyed look of the camp, and, although he has lost weight and his uniform hangs loosely on his frame, his health is still good. He used to have a name, but that was in another life, a life that made sense beyond the daily struggle merely to survive. His name was Emil Clément, and he was a watchmaker. Now he is simply *Häftling** number 163291.

In the eyes of the Reich, Emil is guilty of a crime for which there can be no pardon: he is a Jew.

A hush descends on the parade ground. Roll call begins. The inmates must stand to attention and ignore the bitter fingers of cold that pinch at their emaciated limbs. The camp waits, gripped by numb anxiety. If the numbers do not tally, roll call will have to begin all over again. But not tonight. The Rapportführer† is satisfied and they are dismissed. One might expect to hear a collective sigh of relief, but no – the inmates simply move from one ordeal to the next. They do not have the energy to waste on sighing.

Emil collapses onto his bunk. Normally he spends his day in a machine shop, crafting tiny mechanisms for the repair of the many technical instruments that measure and regulate the processes that are the lifeblood of the Buna factory, much as he would once have created them for the workings of a fine watch. But today there was no electricity and he was reassigned to a labour *Kommando* unloading sacks of cement from railway wagons and stacking them in a warehouse. In his life he has never been so tired; every muscle and sinew hurts and his feet are raw from the

* Prisoner or detainee.

† An SS NCO responsible for conducting the roll call.

ill-fitting wooden clogs that the inmates wear so that even the constant clamour of his hunger is subdued.

He shares the bunk with another Frenchman, Yves. They arrived in Auschwitz on the same transport from the internment camp at Drancy, though they did not know one another before being assigned the same bunk. At first, Emil felt disgust at the thought of sharing his bed with another man, a stranger. Now he knows he is fortunate: it is the only time he is warm. They have become firm friends and look out for each other. If one of them is lucky and is able to organize some food – the most precious commodity in the camp – they share it, not like the other inmates in their block. Emil has noticed that most of them keep to themselves; their existence is so marginal, they cannot bear the thought of sharing anything. This solitariness is the source both of their weakness and of the strength of those in charge. Auschwitz is a camp divided against itself.

Yves climbs up to the bunk. They are on the top tier. 'Move over,' he says. Emil groans as he makes his tired limbs obey. Yves grins. 'I had a good day today.' He pushes something towards Emil. It is a hunk of coarse black bread. 'One of the Poles left a woollen jacket lying around. When no one was looking I organized it.' *Organize* is the camp slang for stealing. The inmates are forced to organize if they are to survive. And, in accordance with the absurd rules of Auschwitz, organizing is encouraged, but punished severely if the thief is caught. 'I smuggled it back under my jacket.'

The garment is a great prize, but risky. It would be difficult to keep concealed for any length of time: better to trade it. In the washroom in the corner of the camp that is furthest from the barracks of the SS men there is a thriving market. Every day, as soon as the roll call is dismissed, hundreds of inmates rush there, some to sell, some to buy. It is a buyer's

market, for every stomach is empty, and the currency of the camp is bread. Those whose eyes are brittle with hunger can be persuaded to sell for the lowest prices amid the chaotic uproar of barter. Spoons and knives: each prisoner needs one, but the camp authorities do not provide them. They must be purchased. It is here that other items, that various prisoners have managed to organize, are also exchanged.

'What did you do with it?' Emil asks.

'I sold it to the block elder in Block 16. I got two bread rations for it.'

It is a fair price. They eat the bread in silence, savouring every morsel, even though they are painfully aware that every other inmate in their block is hungry. They will not be disturbed. It is a code among the inmates. They would all do the same if they had the chance.

Soon it is lights out and the camp settles into an uneasy slumber; in only a few hours its toil begins again.

Yves is thankful he has been paired with Emil. He is a gentle, cultured man. They talk endlessly about France before the war. Yves is also curious about Emil's passion for the game of chess.

'Explain to me again,' he says quietly in the darkness, 'about the Latvian Gambit.'

2.
The Dutch Defence

1962

Grand Hotel Krasnapolsky, Amsterdam

The interview was approaching its conclusion. Still the interviewer, an old hand who knew how to wring the best and the worst from his guests, had not asked the question. At last, with the deftness of a conjurer, he slipped it in: 'What many of our listeners would like to hear about is your time in Auschwitz.'

The man sitting opposite him adjusted his lanky frame in the armchair and sighed. He glanced at the tape recorder as if he hoped that the spools might stop turning. Again, someone had asked the question; again, the hard stamping on the brakes, bringing the course of his life to an abrupt standstill. Auschwitz: after nearly twenty years, still it followed him everywhere. Bearing witness to the horror was a duty, but a heavy one. He had not expected to be confronted with it here. He raised his head to look at his tormentor. His eyes were a thin murky grey, like a sky threatening rain. They were eyes that seemed to look past the object of their attention, to depths and secrets that were best kept hidden.

The interviewer suppressed a shiver. Realizing that a silence had fallen between them, he felt compelled to break it. 'Your reluctance to speak about this is, of course, completely understandable . . .'

'Reluctance?' The word came out sharply, as if the man had been

caught in an untruth. 'No, not really. It is not so much reluctance, rather, it is not knowing what I ought to say. So much has been said already that there is perhaps little left to tell. It is complicated. If I start, where will it lead? And, of course, at the back of my mind I wonder what it is you really want.' Unconsciously, the man's long, slender fingers gripped the arms of his chair. 'Do you want to know what it was really like in an extermination camp, or do you want to hear lurid tales of what one had to do in order to survive?'

The interviewer knew his listeners would not want him to appear insensitive; he changed tack. 'In your book you wrote that you did not believe that any German who lived through the war could be untainted by what happened in the death camps. Guilt by association, you might say. Do you really believe that – that all Germans are guilty? Were there no good Germans?'

The question did not elicit the hoped-for response. The man bowed his head and ran a hand through his thinning hair.

The interviewer felt the need to prompt him. 'Mijnheer Clément?'

'It seems that everyone wants me to spend the rest of my life looking for a good German. Why? So he can apologize? There is no apology. You want a good German? Let me tell you, I saw none. Not one.' Clément enunciated the last words slowly and clearly.

Sensing there was something more, the interviewer persisted. 'You didn't mention it in your book, but isn't it true that it was a German who saved your wife's life?'

Clément looked sharply at his interrogator. 'Yes, it's true, after a fashion. I didn't include it in my book because I was writing about my experiences, not hers. But I will tell you what happened to her, if only to dispel the myth of the good German.' His voice had become harsh and

tight, as if he were struggling to keep it under control. He took a sip of water before continuing.

'We both survived the camp, though neither of us knew that the other was still alive. It was months before I found her. Her registration card in Auschwitz said she was dead – "Shot while trying to escape" – usually a euphemism for dying under torture. But she wasn't dead; she was in Austria, in Mauthausen. She was in hospital. She had scarlet fever. If she hadn't been so weak…' His voice caught, and he coughed to clear it. 'All she wanted was to ask for my forgiveness. "What forgiveness?" I said. "You have nothing to be forgiven for. You are blameless." But she was insistent and, bit by bit, she told me what she had had to do to in order to live.

'Her life was saved by a note. Yes, a simple note. A note of the kind that could be written by anyone, for any number of reasons – a shopping list, a reminder, an apology, a demand for payment, an assignation – a tight little ball of paper that struck her lightly on the back of her head and fell to the floor. She knew it must have come from one of the guards. She covered it with her foot and glanced round to see who might have thrown it. There were two SS men nearby – it could have been either of them. She stooped to retrieve it and asked to be excused to go to the latrine. It contained three words: *Are you hungry?*

'It was a German, one of the guards. Yes, he saved her life, but at the cost of her dignity and self-respect. He saved her life, but it would have been better if he had not done so, for she felt she had betrayed not only me, but the memory of our children. How could she deserve life when they had perished? No more than me or any other survivor could she resist the instinct that called on her to choose life, but she could not forgive herself for surrendering to it.' Clément shifted in his chair, leaning forward and raising a forefinger to the other man as if to admonish him. His voice took

on a hard, bitter tone. 'You ask if he was a good German—? Well, if it is good to take advantage of the helpless, those who have nothing, those who have been cast adrift without hope, then he was good. But as far as I am concerned, what he did was an abomination.'

Emil Clément wandered back from the Grand Krasnapolsky and the bustle of Dam Square to his own hotel, a humbler affair overlooking the Singel Canal. It wasn't far. His room overlooked a small bridge, over which cyclists seemed to glide in the dreamy way that the dwellers of Amsterdam had made their own.

Emil wondered at the persistence shown by the interviewer. He had not expected it. It wasn't as if he was a politician or a famous entertainer; he was a chess player, nothing more. He felt unsettled. Perhaps he should not have come straight back to his hotel. He stood at the reception desk, lost in thought.

'Is there anything I can do for you, Mijnheer Clément? Would you like your key?'

Emil glanced at the man behind the desk, a portly man in his sixties. 'Yes, maybe there is. Is there anywhere in the city where people play chess? You know, a city square, or a park, perhaps?'

The man smiled. 'Of course. You should go to Leidseplein. I'm sure you'll find a game there. It's quite a way, but you can take a tram from Dam Square; it's easy to find. '

Clément shook his head. 'Thanks. I'll walk. I could do with some fresh air.'

Lijsbeth Pietersen walked as quickly as dignity and high heels would permit along the gilded corridors of the Krasnapolsky. She held in her

hand a piece of paper that was important, very important: it had the potential to wreck the World Chess Federation Interzonal tournament – due to start in two days' time – before even the first pawn was played. Lijsbeth took her responsibilities seriously. The Interzonal was important: its leaders would progress to the candidates' tournament and from there to the world championship.

At the door of the room that had been allocated to the tournament's chief arbiter she paused to compose herself before knocking. Inside, a man in a dark suit was standing by a window, idly watching the comings and goings of the people on the square below. He turned as she entered.

'Miss Pietersen,' he said, with a thin smile. 'To what do I owe the pleasure this time?'

With studied care she placed the piece of paper on the desk that stood between them, smoothing it onto the polished surface. 'I know you've seen this, Mijnheer Berghuis,' she said, her voice tight with suppressed anger. 'I would like to know why you didn't feel the need to inform me, and what you intend to do about it.'

Harry Berghuis slid his spectacles from the breast pocket of his jacket. In the past week Lijsbeth Pietersen had become something of an irritation. It was he who was the chief arbiter of the tournament; she was merely the administrator, a fact she seemed to find difficult to grasp. He seated himself at the desk and picked up the paper.

It was a copy of the draw for the first round of the tournament. He glanced at it, then let it fall back to the desk.

'I don't understand what you're so upset about,' he said. 'As to what I "intend to do about it" – I intend to do nothing. The games will proceed according to the draw, as they always do.'

She gave him a look that spoke much of her opinion of his intelligence. Taking a pen, she circled two names. 'Look.'

He looked again and shook his head in bewilderment. 'What?'

'Emil Clément and Wilhelm Schweninger will play each other in the first round.'

'You know, Miss Pietersen, you really are going to have to learn to express yourself better. You're not making any sense.'

'Emil Clément is the contestant from Israel. He's a survivor of Auschwitz. He wrote a best-selling account of his experiences in which he said there was no such thing as a good German.'

'And Schweninger is a German.' He gave her a dismissive look. 'So what?'

'Schweninger isn't just any German. During the war he worked in their Ministry of Propaganda.'

Berghuis sighed. 'And?'

Lijsbeth pursed her lips. Was Berghuis really so dense? 'To work in the Propaganda Ministry, he had to have been a member of the Nazi Party.' She took a step towards the desk and placed her fingertips on its surface, leaning over him. 'Am I starting to make sense now?'

Berghuis did not like her tone. He felt his face getting hot and reached for his collar, trying to loosen it, hoping that a reason to ignore what she was telling him would present itself. 'Lots of Germans were members of the Party,' he countered. 'Was he convicted of war crimes?'

'It doesn't matter whether he was or whether he wasn't. If the press get hold of this, they're going to have a field day.'

Berghuis picked up the piece of paper again, as if by looking at it the means to resolve the problem would leap out at him. 'Damn,' he said quietly. 'What do you suggest?'

'The only thing to do is to re-run the draw, making sure that the two of them do not meet unless it happens in the final.'

'No.' Berghuis shook his head. 'We can't do that. Notification has already gone out to all the contestants.'

'We can tell them there's been a mistake, that it needs to be re-done.'

'What kind of mistake? The draw was done in front of at least twenty people.'

Lijsbeth could not resist saying, 'Perhaps now you understand why you should have entrusted the job of doing background research on the contestants to me. There's more to it than creating happy family biographies for the press.'

Berghuis lowered his head. 'Yes, all right,' he acknowledged. 'But that's not what's important now. We have to work out what we're going to do. If we do a re-run, someone is bound to smell a rat, and then the press will definitely stick their noses in. No, we'll have to go with what we've got and pray for a minor miracle.'

'You mean do nothing and hope that nobody puts two and two together?' Lijsbeth rewarded her boss with a condescending smile. It was a small victory, but satisfying. 'Well, I'm sure you know best. You're the boss.'

At fifty, Emil Clément was tall and spare, with dark, receding hair and a closely cropped beard that hid the lower part of his face. Going down the hotel steps, he turned up the collar of his coat. Though it was April, a chill wind was blowing off the North Sea, bringing with it flurries of rain, somewhat different from the weather he was used to now.

He followed the canal southwards, almost to its terminus. He was looking for a street called Leidsestraat, and on reaching it he turned right

– after crossing three canals, he would reach his destination. He flinched as raindrops spattered on his face. Dark clouds were looming: he would be lucky to find anyone foolhardy enough to be playing chess in the square.

By the time he reached the eastern edge of Leidseplein it was raining heavily. The square was indeed empty, apart from a few hardy people hurrying across, some struggling with umbrellas or sheltering in shop doorways. He ducked into the nearest café.

The barman was wiping the counter top with a cloth that had seen better days. '*Nog regent het?*'

'I'm sorry,' Emil said in English. 'I don't speak Dutch. Do you speak French, or German?'

The barman smiled. '*Ja, Ich kann gut Deutsch sprechen*.'

Emil ordered a coffee and said, 'I was told I might be able to find a game of chess around here.'

The barman jerked his thumb in the direction of the parlour at the rear. 'You'll probably find a couple of games going on back there. They're regulars, mind, so you may have a bit of a wait before you get a turn.'

The coffee was placed on the bar and Emil handed over several coins. 'No matter,' he said. 'I'll be happy simply to watch.'