The Spies of Warsaw

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Extract

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HOTEL EUROPEJSKI

In the dying light of an autumn day in 1937, a certain Herr Edvard Uhl, a secret agent, descended from a first-class railway carriage in the city of Warsaw. Above the city, the sky was at war; the last of the sun struck blood-red embers off massed black cloud, while the clear horizon to the west was the colour of blue ice. Herr Uhl suppressed a shiver; *the sharp air of the evening*, he told himself. But this was Poland, the border of the Russian steppe, and what had reached him was well beyond the chill of an October twilight.

A taxi waited on Jerozolimskie Street, in front of the station. The driver, an old man with a seamed face, sat patiently, knotted hands at rest on the steering wheel. 'Hotel Europejski,' Uhl told the driver. He wanted to add, *and be quick about it*, but the words would have been in German, and it was not so good to speak German in this city. Germany had absorbed the western part of Poland in 1795 – Russia ruled the east, Austria-Hungary the south-west corner – for a hundred and twenty-three years, a period the Poles called 'the Partitions', a time of national conspiracy and defeated insurrection, leaving ample bad blood on all sides. With the rebirth of Poland in 1918, the new borders left a million Germans in Poland and two million Poles in Germany, which guaranteed that the bad blood would stay bad. So, for a German visiting Warsaw, a current of silent hostility, closed faces, small slights: *we don't want you here.*

Nonetheless, Edvard Uhl had looked forward to this trip for weeks. In his late forties, he combed what remained of his

hair in strands across his scalp and cultivated a heavy dark moustache, meant to deflect attention from a prominent bulbous nose, the bulb divided at the tip. A feature one saw in Poland, often enough. So, an ordinary-looking man, who led a rather ordinary life, a more-than-decent life, in the small city of Breslau: a wife and three children, a good job – as a senior engineer at an ironworks and foundry, a subcontractor to the giant Rheinmetall firm in Düsseldorf – a few friends, memberships in a church and a singing society. Oh, maybe the political situation – that wretched Hitler and his wretched Nazis strutting about – could have been better, but one abided, lived quietly, kept one's opinions to oneself; it wasn't so difficult. And the pay cheque came every week. What more could a man want?

Instinctively, his hand made sure of the leather satchel on the seat by his side. A tiny stab of regret touched his heart. *Foolish, Edvard, truly it is*. For the satchel, a gift from his first contact at the French embassy in Warsaw, had a false bottom, beneath which lay a sheaf of engineering diagrams. Well, he thought, one did what one had to do, so life went. No, one did what one had to do in order to do what one *wanted* to do – so life *really* went. He wasn't supposed to be in Warsaw; he was supposed, by his family and his employer, to be in Gleiwitz – just on the German side of the frontier dividing German Lower Silesia from Polish Upper Silesia – where his firm employed a large metal shop for the work that exceeded their capacity in Breslau. With the Reich rearming, they could not keep up with the orders that flowed from the Wehrmacht. The Gleiwitz works functioned well enough, but that wasn't what Uhl told his bosses. 'A bunch of lazy idiots down there,' he said, with a grim shake of the head, and found it necessary to take the train down to Gleiwitz once a month to straighten things out.

And he did go to Gleiwitz – that pest from Breslau, back again! – but he didn't stay there. When he was done bothering the local management he took the train up to Warsaw where,

in a manner of speaking, one very particular thing got straightened out. For Uhl, a blissful night of love-making, followed by a brief meeting at dawn, a secret meeting, then back to Breslau, back to Frau Uhl and his more-than-decent life. Refreshed. Reborn. Too much, that word? No. Just right.

Uhl glanced at his watch. *Drive faster, you peasant! This is a motorcar, not a plough*. The taxi crawled along Nowy Swiat, the grand avenue of Warsaw, deserted at this hour – the Poles went home for dinner at four. As the taxi passed a church, the driver slowed for a moment, then lifted his cap. It was not especially reverent, Uhl thought, simply something the man did every time he passed a church.

At last, the imposing Hotel Europejski, with its giant of a doorman in visored cap and uniform worthy of a Napoleonic marshal. Uhl handed the driver his fare – he kept a reserve of Polish zloty in his desk at the office – and added a small, proper gratuity, then said '*Dankeschön*.' It didn't matter now, he was where he wanted to be. In the room, he hung up his suit, shirt and tie, laid out fresh socks and underwear on the bed and went into the bathroom to have a thorough wash. He had just enough time; the Countess Sczelenska would arrive in thirty minutes. Or, rather, that was the time set for the rendezvous; she would of course be late, would make him wait for her, let him think, let him anticipate, let him steam.

And was she a countess? A real Polish countess? Probably not, he thought. But so she called herself, and she was, to him, *like* a countess: imperious, haughty and demanding. Oh how this provoked him, as the evening lengthened and they drank champagne, as her mood slid, subtly, from courteous disdain to sly submission, then on to breathless urgency. It was the same always, their private melodrama, with an ending that never changed. Uhl the stallion – despite the image in the mirrored armoire, a middle-aged gentleman with thin legs and potbelly and pale chest home to a few wisps of hair – demonstrably excited as he knelt on the hotel carpet, while the countess,

looking down at him over her shoulder, eyebrows raised in mock surprise, deigned to let him roll her silk underpants down her great, saucy, fat bottom. *Noblesse oblige*. You may have your little pleasure, she seemed to say, if you are so inspired by what the noble Sczelenska bloodline has wrought. Uhl would embrace her middle and honour the noble heritage with tender kisses. In time very effective, such honour, and she would raise him up, eager for what came next.

He'd met her a year and a half earlier, in Breslau, at a *Weinstube* where the office employees of the foundry would stop for a little something after work. The *Weinstube* had a small terrace at the back, three tables and a vine, and there she sat, alone at one of the tables on the deserted terrace: morose and preoccupied. He'd sat at the next table, found her attractive – not young, not old, on the buxom side, with brassy hair pinned up high and an appealing face – and said good evening. And why so glum, on such a pleasant night?

She'd come down from Warsaw, she explained, to see her sister, a family crisis, a catastrophe. The family had owned, for several generations, a small but profitable lumber mill in the forest along the eastern border. But they had suffered financial reverses, and then the storage sheds had been burned down by a Ukrainian nationalist gang, and they'd had to borrow money from a Jewish speculator. But the problems wouldn't stop, they could not repay the loans, and now that dreadful man had gone to court and taken the mill. Just like them, wasn't it.

After a few minutes, Uhl moved to her table. Well, that was life for you, he'd said. Fate turned evil, often for those who least deserved it. But, don't feel so bad, luck had gone wrong, but it could go right, it always did, given time. Ah but he was *sympathique*, she'd said, an aristocratic reflex to use the French word in the midst of her fluent German. They went on for a while, back and forth. Perhaps some day, she'd said, if he should find himself in Warsaw, he might telephone; there was

the loveliest café near her apartment. Perhaps he would, yes, business took him to Warsaw now and again; he guessed he might be there soon. Now, would she permit him to order another glass of wine? Later, she took his hand beneath the table and he was, by the time they parted, on fire.

Ten days later, from a public telephone at the Breslau railway station, he'd called her. He planned to be in Warsaw next week, at the Europejski, would she care to join him for dinner? Why yes, yes she would. Her tone of voice, on the other end of the line, told him all he needed to know, and by the following Wednesday – those idiots in Gleiwitz had done it again! – he was on his way to Warsaw. At dinner, champagne and langoustines, he suggested that they go on to a nightclub after dessert, but first he wanted to visit the room, to change his tie.

And so, after the cream cake, up they went.

For two subsequent, monthly, visits, all was paradise, but, it turned out, she was the unluckiest of countesses. In his room at the hotel, brassy hair tumbled on the pillow, she told him of her latest misfortune. Now it was her landlord, a hulking beast who leered at her, made *chk-chk* noises with his mouth when she climbed the stairs, who'd told her that she had to leave, his latest girlfriend to be installed in her place. Unless . . . Her misty eyes told him the rest.

Never! Where Uhl had just been, this swine would not go! He stroked her shoulder, damp from recent exertions, and said, 'Now, now, my dearest, calm yourself.' She would just have to find another apartment. Well, in fact she'd already done that, found one even nicer than the one she had now, and very private, owned by a man in Cracow, so nobody would be watching her if, for example, her sweet Edvard wanted to come for a visit. But the rent was two hundred zloty more than she paid now. And she didn't have it.

A hundred Reichsmarks, he thought. 'Perhaps I can help,' he said. And he could, but not for long. Two months, maybe three – beyond that, there really weren't any corners he could cut.

He tried to save a little, but almost all of his salary went to support his family. Still, he couldn't get the 'hulking beast' out of his mind. *Chk-chk*.

The blow fell a month later, the man in Cracow had to raise the rent. What would she do? What was she to do? She would have to stay with relatives or be out in the street. Now Uhl had no answers. But the countess did. She had a cousin who was seeing a Frenchman, an army officer who worked at the French embassy, a cheerful, generous fellow who, she said, sometimes hired 'industrial experts'. Was her sweet Edvard not an engineer? Perhaps he ought to meet this man and see what he had to offer. Otherwise, the only hope for the poor countess was to go and stay with her aunt.

And where was the aunt?

Chicago.

Now Uhl wasn't stupid. Or, as he put it to himself, not *that* stupid. He had a strong suspicion about what was going on. But – and here he surprised himself – he didn't care. The fish saw the worm and wondered if maybe there might just be a hook in there, but what a delicious worm! Look at it, the most succulent and tasty worm he'd ever seen; never would there be such a worm again, not in this ocean. So . . .

He first telephoned – to, apparently, a private apartment, because a maid answered in Polish, then switched to German. And, twenty minutes later, Uhl called again and a meeting was arranged. In an hour. At a bar in the Praga district, the workers' quarter across the Vistula from the elegant part of Warsaw. And the Frenchman was, as promised, as cheerful as could be. Probably Alsatian, from the way he spoke German, he was short and tubby, with a soft face that glowed with self-esteem and a certain tilt to the chin and tension in the upper lip that suggested an imminent sneer, while a dapper little moustache did nothing to soften the effect. He was, of course, not in

uniform, but wore an expensive sweater and a blue blazer with brass buttons down the front.

'Henri,' he called himself and, yes, he did sometimes employ 'industrial experts'. His job called for him to stay abreast of developments in particular areas of German industry, and he would pay well for drawings or schematics, any specifications relating to, say, armament or armour. How well? Oh, perhaps five hundred Reichsmarks a month, for the right papers. Or, if Uhl preferred, a thousand zloty, or two hundred American dollars – some of his experts liked having dollars. The money to be paid in cash or deposited in any bank account, in any name, that Uhl might suggest.

The word *spy* was never used, and Henri was very casual about the whole business. Very common, such transactions, his German counterparts did the same thing; everybody wanted to know what was what, on the other side of the border. And, he should add, nobody got caught, as long as they were discreet. What was done privately stayed private. These days, he said, in such chaotic times, smart people understood that their first loyalty was to themselves and their families. The world of governments and shifty diplomats could go to hell, if it wished, but Uhl was obviously a man who was shrewd enough to take care of his own future. And, if he ever found the arrangement uncomfortable, well, that was that. So, think it over, there's no hurry, get back in touch, or just forget you ever met me.

And the countess? Was she, perhaps, also an, umm, 'expert'?

From Henri, a sophisticated laugh. 'My dear fellow! Please! That sort of thing, well, maybe in the movies.'

So, at least the worm wasn't in on it.

Back at the Europejski – a visit to the new apartment lay still in the future – the countess exceeded herself. Led him to a delight or two that Uhl knew about but had never experienced; her turn to kneel on the carpet. Rapture. Another glass of champagne and further novelty. In time he fell back on the pillow and gazed up at the ceiling, elated and sore. And brave as

a lion. He *was* a shrewd fellow – a single exchange with Henri, and that thousand zloty would see the countess through her difficulties for the next few months. But life never went quite as planned, did it, because Henri, not nearly so cheerful as the first time they'd met, insisted, really did insist, that the arrangement continue.

And then, in August, instead of Henri, a tall Frenchman called André, quiet and reserved, and much less pleased with himself, and the work he did, than Henri. Wounded, Uhl guessed, in the Great War, he leaned on a fine ebony stick, with a silver wolf's head for a grip.

At the Hotel Europejski, in the early evening of an autumn day, Herr Edvard Uhl finished with his bath and dressed, in order to undress, in what he hoped would be a little while. The room-service waiter had delivered a bottle of champagne in a silver bucket, one small lamp was lit, the curtains were drawn. Uhl moved one of them aside, enough to see out of the window, down to the entry of the hotel, where taxis pulled up to the kerb and the giant doorman swept the doors open with a genteel bow as the passengers emerged. Fine folks indeed, an army officer and his lavish girlfriend, a gentleman in top hat and tails, a merry fellow with a beard and a monocle. Uhl liked this life very well, this Warsaw life, his dream world away from the brown soot and lumpy potatoes of Breslau. He would pay for that with a meeting in the morning; then, home again.

Ah, here she was.

The Milanowek Tennis Club had been founded late one June night in 1937. Something of a lark, at that moment. 'Let's have a tennis club! Why not? The *Milanowek* Tennis Club – isn't it fabulous?' The village of Milanowek was a garden in a pine forest, twenty miles from Warsaw, famous for its resin-scented air – 'mahogany air', the joke went, because it was expensive to live there and breathe it – famous for its glorious manor houses

surrounded by English lawns, Greek statues, pools and tennis courts. Famous as well for its residents, the so-called 'heart of the Polish nation', every sort of nobility in the *Almanach de Gotha*, every sort of wealthy Jewish merchant. If one's driver happened to be unavailable, a narrow-gauge railway ran out from the city, stopping first at the village of Podkowa. Podkowa was the Polish word for horseshoe, which led the unknowing to visions of a tiny ancient village, where a peasant blacksmith laboured at his forge, but they would soon enough learn that Podkowa had been designed, at the turn of the century, by the English architect Arthur Howard, with houses situated in the pattern of a horseshoe and a common garden at the centre.

The manor house – owned by Prince Kaz, formally Kazimierz, and Princess Toni, Antowina – had three tennis courts, for the noble Brosowicz couple, with family connections to various branches of the Radziwills and Poniatowskis, didn't have *one* of anything. This taste for variety, long a tradition on both sides of the family, included manor houses – their other country estate had six miles of property but lay far from Warsaw – as well as apartments in Paris and London and holiday homes – the chalet in Saint Moritz, the palazzo in Venice – and extended to servants, secretaries, horses, dogs and lovers. But for Prince Kaz and Princess Toni, the best thing in the world was to have, wherever they happened to be at the moment, lots of friends. The annual production of Christmas cards went on for days.

At the Milanowek house, their friends came to play tennis. The entire nation was passionate for the game; in Poland, only a single golf course was to be found but, following the re-emergence of the country, there were tennis courts everywhere. And so they decided, late that June night, to make it official. 'It's the Milanowek Tennis Club now,' they would tell their friends, who were honoured to be included. 'Come and play whenever you like; if we're not here, Janusz will let you

in.' *What a good idea*, the friends thought. They scheduled their matches by telephone and stopped by at all hours of the day and early evening: the baron of this and the marchioness of that, the nice Jewish dentist and his clever wife, a general of the army and a captain of industry, a socialist member of the Sejm, the Polish parliament, the royalist Minister of Posts and Telegraph, various elegant young people who didn't do much of anything, and the newly arrived French military attaché, the dashing Colonel Mercier.

In fact a lieutenant colonel, and wounded in two wars, he didn't dash very well. He did the best he could, usually playing doubles, but still, a passing shot down the line would often elude him – if it didn't go out, the tennis gods punishing his opponent for taking advantage of the colonel's limping stride.

That Thursday afternoon in October, the vast sky above the steppe dark and threatening, Colonel Mercier was partnered by Princess Toni herself, in her late thirties as perfect and pretty as a doll, an effect heightened by rouged cheeks and the same straw-coloured hair as Prince Kaz. They did look, people said, like brother and sister. And, you know, sometimes in these noble families . . . No, it wasn't true, but the similarity was striking.

'Good try, Jean-François,' she called out, as the ball bounced away, brushing her hair off her forehead and turning her racquet over a few times as she awaited service.

Across the net, a woman called Claudine, the wife of a Belgian diplomat, prepared to serve. Here one could see that the doubles teams were fairly constituted, for Claudine had only her right arm; the other – her tennis shirt sleeve pinned up below her shoulder – had been lost to a German shell in the Great War, when she'd been a nurse. Standing at the back line, she held ball and racquet in one hand, tossed the ball up, regripped her racquet and managed a fairly brisk serve. Princess Toni returned cross-court, with perfect form but low velocity, and Dr Goldszteyn, the Jewish dentist, sent it back towards the

colonel, just close enough – he never, when they played together, hit balls that Mercier couldn't reach. Mercier drove a low shot to centre court; Claudine returned backhand, a high lob. 'Oh damn,' Princess Toni said through clenched teeth, running backwards. Her sweeping forehand sent the ball sailing over the fence on the far side of the court. 'Sorry,' she said to Mercier.

'We'll get it back,' Mercier said. He spoke French, the language of the Polish aristocracy, and thus the Milanowek Tennis Club.

'Forty–fifteen,' Claudine called out, as a passing servant tossed the ball back over the fence. Serving to Mercier, her first try clipped the net, the second was in. Mercier hit a sharp forehand, Dr Goldszteyn swept it back, Princess Toni retrieved, Claudine ran to the net and tried a soft lob. Too high, and Mercier reached up and hit an overhand winner – that went into the net. 'Game to us,' Claudine called out.

'My service,' Princess Toni answered, a challenge in her voice: *we'll see who takes this set*. They almost did, winning the next game, but eventually going down six–four. Walking off the court, Princess Toni rested a hand on Mercier's forearm; he could smell perfume mixed with sweat. 'No matter,' she said. 'You're a good partner for me, Jean-François.'

What? No, she meant tennis. Didn't she? At forty-six, Mercier had been a widower for three years, and was considered more than eligible by the smart set in the city. But, he thought, not the princess. 'We'll play again soon,' he said, the response courteous and properly amicable.

He managed almost always to hit the right note with these people because he was, technically, one of them – Jean-François Mercier de Boutillon, though the nobiliary particule *de* had been dropped by his democratically inclined grandfather, and the name of his ancestral demesne had disappeared along with it, except on official papers. But participation in the rites and rituals of this world was not at all something he cared about

– membership of the tennis club, and other social activities, were requirements of his profession; otherwise he wouldn't have bothered. A military attaché was supposed to hear things and know things, so he made it his business to be around people who occasionally said things worth knowing. *Not very often*, he thought. *But in truth* – he had to admit – *often enough*.

In the house, he paused to pick up his white canvas bag, then headed down the hallway. The old boards creaked with every step, the scent of beeswax polish perfumed the air – nothing in the world smelled quite like a perfectly cleaned house. Past the drawing room, the billiard room, a small study lined with books, was one of the downstairs bathrooms made available to the tennis club members. *How they live*. On a travertine shelf by the sink, fresh lilies in a Japanese vase, fragrant soap in a gold-laced dish. A grid of heated copper towel bars held thick Turkish towels, the colour of fresh cream, while the shower curtain was decorated with a surrealist half-head and squiggles – where on God's green earth did they find such a thing?

He peeled off his tennis outfit, then opened the bag, took out a blue shirt, flannel trousers and fresh linen, made a neat pile on a small antique table, stowed his tennis clothes in the bag, worked the *chevalière*, the gold signet ring of the nobility, off his ring finger and set it atop his clothes, and stepped into the shower.

Ahhh.

An oversized showerhead poured forth a broad, powerful spray of hot water. Where he lived – the long-time French military attaché apartment in Warsaw – there was only a bath-tub and a diabolical gas water heater, which provided a tepid bath at best and might someday finish the job that his German and Russian enemies had failed to complete. What medal did they have for that? he wondered. The *Croix de Bain*, awarded posthumously.

Very quietly, so that someone passing by in the hall would not hear him, he began to sing.