



WARTIME LIES

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The New York Times
Book Review

A NOVEL BY

LOUIS BEGLEY

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WARTIME



Louis Begley

IVY BOOKS • NEW YORK

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Ivy Books

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“A WONDROUS AND PICARESQUE STORY . . .

Told with haunting grace and austerity, of a golden childhood into which anguish creeps gradually and imperceptibly . . . Powerfully told.”

Los Angeles Times Book Review

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The New York Review of Books

**Please turn the page
for more critical acclaim for
WARTIME LIES. . . .**

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POWER AND ELOQUENCE.”**

The Philadelphia Inquirer

“A virtuoso (and virtuous) accomplishment . . . What Louis Begley’s vividly austere prose embodies is an immaculate act of witness in the form of a novel. . . . Begley raises fresh and risky questions about quarry and hunter, volition and obedience, decency and ideology.”

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“A marvel of compression, recollection, and lyric intensity.”

SHANA ALEXANDER

For my mother

TAKE A MAN WITH A NICE FACE AND SAD EYES, FIFTY or more winters on his back, living a moderately pleasant life in a tranquil country. He is a bookish fellow, the sort you would expect to find in a good publishing house or at a local university teaching how to compare one literature with another. He might even be a literary agent with a flair for dissident writing: texts bearing witness against oppression and inhumanity. Sometimes, in the evening, he reads Latin classics. There is no question anymore of his being able to do a version. He learned Latin in great globs to pass whatever examination happened to be blocking his path, always in the very nick of time; his knowledge was never precise. Fortunately, the power to grasp meaning and to remember has remained. He reveres the Aeneid. That is where he first found civil expression for his own shame at being alive, his skin intact and virgin of tattoo, when his kinsmen and almost all the others, so many surely more deserving than he, perished in the conflagration.

He takes care to keep the metaphor at a distance. His native town in eastern Poland was no Ilium, and even if some SS blackshirt, imperturbably beating an aged former human being with a riding crop, is a pretty good stand-in for Pyrrhus slaughtering Priam, where, in that senseless tableau, are the contending golden-haired gods and goddesses? He has seen such a beating, adminis-

tered to a totally bald man forced to kneel, the blows aimed at the top of the head, the man's hands folded behind his back, unable to wipe the blood streaming down his face. What insult to what goddess was avenged by that outrage? Did Jove, sulking, order into action the detail of old Jews so usefully engaged in cleaning street gutters, also on their knees, under the supervision of Jewish militiamen, long staves held at the ready?

Now he caresses the metaphors. When Aeneas plays the tourist in Carthage, thoughtfully enveloped in a cloud by his immortal mother, his astonished eyes behold scenes of Trojan slaughter portrayed artfully on Dido's palace walls. Did not our man himself, quickly after his war ended, see in the first books of photographs of Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen and Buchenwald naked, skeletal men and women alive and staring at the camera, corpses lying in disorderly piles, warehouses of eyeglasses, watches and shoes? Where is the sense of his survival? Father Aeneas fleeing Troy with little Iulus fulfills an immutable promise: he will found eternal Rome; by the will of Jove and a twist of the tongue, Ascanius-Iulus will become the forebear of the Julian Caesars. Our man, sea-tossed, hollowed out and bereft, thinks he has no discernible destiny. His memorable scenes are the stuff of nightmares, not myth.

Our man avoids Holocaust books and dinner conversations about Poland in the Second World War even if his neighbor is beautiful, her eyes promising perfumed consolation. Yet he pores over accounts of the torture of dissidents and political prisoners, imagining minutely each session. How long would it have been before he cried and groveled? Right away, or only after they had broken his fingers? Whom would he have betrayed and

how quickly? He has become a voyeur of evil, sometimes uncertain which role he plays in the vile pictures that pass before his eyes. Is that the inevitable evolution of the child he once was, the price to be paid for his sort of survival?

A different affinity draws him to Catullus, a beacon flashing across black water. He imagines the poet's childhood near Verona, the charming Sabine villa, the swift yacht. A tender father accompanies Catullus to Rome and sees to his establishment there. The poet loves Lesbia, beautiful nymphomaniac Lesbia, loves her not as the common run of men love a girl but as a Roman loves his sons and sons-in-law. Alas, love for Lesbia is a sickness. Lesbia, whom Catullus loves more than himself and all his tribe, turns tricks in doorways and alleys. The poet no longer wishes her to be faithful, even if that were possible. He wants to heal, to be well, to throw off the foul sickness that has robbed him of his enjoyments. Ipse valere opto et taetrum hunc deponere morbum. . . . The lines have haunted our man for years, he thinks he knows Catullus's sickness to the bone, he too has wanted to heal and to be well regardless of all else. Only this metaphor, too, fails. His disease lies deeper than the poet's. Catullus never doubts he was born to be happy and to have pleasure in past good deeds, benefacta priora voluptas. The gods owe him as much for his piety. O di, reddite mi hoc pro pietate mea. The man with sad eyes believes he has been changed inside forever, like a beaten dog, and gods will not cure that. He has no good deeds to look back upon. Still, it is better to say the poem over and over. He will not howl over his own despair.

He thinks on the story of the child that became such

a man. For the sake of an old song, he calls the child Maciek: polite little Maciek, dancing tirelessly while the music plays.

I

I WAS BORN A FEW MONTHS AFTER THE BURNING OF the Reichstag in T., a town of about forty thousand in a part of Poland that before the Great War had belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire. My father was T.'s leading physician. Neither the Catholic surgeon who was the director of the hospital nor my father's two general practitioner colleagues had his Viennese university diplomas, his reputation as a *Zeller* marked for academic success—already acquired in the first year of the *gimnazjum* and confirmed when he received one of the gold watches the Emperor Franz Josef reserved each year for the most brilliant graduating students in the realm—or, for that matter, his overflowing kindness and devotion to patients. My mother, a beauty from Cracow who was much younger than he, died in childbirth. The marriage had been arranged by a matchmaker, but the doctor and the beauty fell in love with a rapidity that became a family fable, and my father swore that he would devote what remained of his life to my mother's memory and to me. For a very long time he kept his word.

My mother's older sister, even more beautiful and, now that she was the only child, much richer, was by common consent unlikely ever to marry—not even her widowed brother-in-law. In the closed world of wealthy Galician Jews, she was haunted by indistinct tales of a romance with a Catholic painter, a missed elopement,

and a suspicion that the artist's subsequent actions were strongly influenced first by the vision of her dowry, and then by the vision's disappearance in the wake of my grandfather's rage, directed with equal force at the religion and bohemianism of my aunt's friend. With other women, such things might have been conveniently forgotten by more acceptable amateurs of good looks and money and their mothers and other female relations on the lookout for brides. But Tania, for that was my aunt's name, could hope for no such indulgence. She was known as widely for her irreverence and implacably sharp tongue as for her stubbornness and bad temper. It was said that she was a female version of her father: a man whom anyone would want as a business partner but no thoughtful and well-informed person would have seriously considered acquiring as a husband or a son-in-law.

Besides, there was the shadow—family bad luck or bad blood—cast over both my mother and Tania by the suicide, some years earlier, of their younger brother. Refused admission to the university (this was at the beginning of the imposition of Jewish quotas in Poland), in love with a girl whose application had been accepted, he took to spending the days of the summer vacation on horseback, wandering through the forest that bordered my grandfather's property. On one of his expeditions, he was surprised by a violent thunderstorm. He dismounted, took refuge under a tree, and, holding his horse by the reins, tried to calm him by stroking and kissing his nostrils. Lightning struck very close. The horse panicked and bit my uncle repeatedly on the face. The scars were very ugly. The girl seemed more distant; my uncle didn't know whether to blame distractions of university life or revulsion. Which reason was worse? Efforts were made to find a place for him in a

university abroad, but before the fall semester was over, he went one afternoon to the stable and killed his horse and himself with two rounds of shot.

So it happened that Tania came to live with us, to make a home for my father and to bring me up.

We continued to occupy the house where I was born, bought with my mother's dowry directly after the marriage. The house stood in a garden on the principal street of T. Our family quarters and my father's office filled the one-story wing that ran parallel to the street. In the other wing, at a right angle with ours, with its entrance in the courtyard, a *gimnazjum* teacher and his wife lived on the ground floor; the second-floor tenants were a stationery store owner, Pan Kramer, his wife, and their daughter Irena, who was two or three years older than I. Until the Germans came, Irena and I never played together: my father did not think it proper.

Like every male in Poland old enough to shave, father Kramer was addressed as Pan; only servants, peasants and manual laborers were denied that honorific syllable. Mother Kramer was Pani Kramerowa or Pani Renata to all but her family and intimate friends. Irena should in time have been known as Panna Kramerówna or Panna Irena or, because the Polish language loves diminutives for food, drink and names, Panna Irka.

Our living room was separated from my father's study, where he received patients after their turn in the examination room, by a wide, padded, white door. Adjacent to the door was a huge white porcelain stove. Sometimes in the night, through that door or through the space between the stove and the wall, where kindling and some of my toys were stored, emerged the square-shouldered white giant of my nightmares. It served no purpose when my nurse opened the door and carried me, screaming and rigid, into the familiar ter-

rain of my father's study, or laid out on the rug in front of the stove one by one each piece of kindling and each little truck or shovel so that I could see that nothing, nothing at all, let alone a giant, could have hidden behind them. My terror only increased along with my screams, and soon it would be necessary to send a horse cab to fetch Tania or my father from the restaurant or café where they might be.

At that time, when my memories of the monster and the other circumstances of my life begin to be my own, rather than stories of that idyllic time that Tania later told me during the war years, she and my father were out most evenings. My father finished his house calls early. He would then play with me until it was time to meet the two married Jewish doctors and their wives for dinner or for coffee. The café, understood as a Viennese institution, thrived in T. It was never too soon or too late to find a friend there. One lingered, or perhaps went to another café or a restaurant where there was dancing. Tania sometimes accompanied my father. More frequently, she joined Bern, the richest Jewish lawyer in T. and an acknowledged old bachelor. In contrast to my father, Bern was a bon vivant, proud of his legendary ability to absorb Tokay and vodka. He was also an expert dancer. To coax me out of my dread at the prospect of her going out, Tania would sometimes have him wind up the gramophone when he came to call for her, and they would rehearse his specialties: the slow waltz and the tango.

In the summer, after his nap, my father met Bern, the Catholic surgeon, and one or the other of his Jewish doctor friends for tennis. Tania often took me to watch these matches. On other afternoons, we would go to the beach—a strip of riverbank painstakingly covered each season with a thick layer of white sand. An entrance

fee made the beach exclusive and entitled those who paid to the comfort of deck chairs, parasols and changing cabins. Only the more intrepid swimmers braved the river's swift currents, using a leisurely, face-out-of-water style of breaststroke. Men and women alike wore white rubber bonnets. Some finicky bathers, my father among them, also put on white rubber shoes like ballet slippers to protect their feet from pebbles and the slimy feel of the bottom. By the time I was four, Tania and my father took turns teaching me how to swim. To their relief, I was an eager pupil.

Much as Tania tried to protect my reputation, it was understood in T. that I was a difficult, troubling child. The wet nurse remained with us for the first year after my mother died—to keep her longer was against Tania's principles and, probably, my father's as well—but it was discovered soon after her departure that I didn't want to eat. Mealtimes turned into tests of will between Tania and me, with the cook, the maid, the current nurse and, at moments of great crisis, even the laundress in attendance. Tania usually won. I took my revenge later by vomiting whatever combination of delicacies and essential sources of iron and vitamins I had been made to ingest. The chamber pot also tested her resolution and mine. Like all nicely brought up children of that era, I had been toilet trained very early, and I took the training to heart. By the time I was three, getting me to excrete was an elaborate process, involving installing the pot in the middle of the kitchen, sitting me on it, and pleading and threatening, with the same group that witnessed my defeats in the struggle against intake assembled to see the output. Tania had a repertoire of helpful incantations. Quickly now, one-two-three, we're all waiting here to see. Make, Maciek, make. If en-

couragement failed, an enema would be administered. I loathed my own smell.

A cardiologist specializing in children heard an irregularity in my heartbeat. Another specialist confirmed it. A third disagreed. My father could not hear the offending noise himself but thought it wrong to disregard the views of two eminent professors. It was obvious to all that I was scrawny and nervous. The nightmare of the giant recurred with increasing frequency. I filled the house with shrieks. No nurse proved equal for more than a few months to contending with both Tania and me during the day and then with me at night. These nurses all were called Panny, spectacle-wearing young ladies, daughters of impecunious but relatively assimilated Jewish families, earning their way to a place of higher learning. Tania would give them scarves and hats and advise them on makeup and permanent waves that would bring out the best in their looks and yet were suitably modest. She scolded them about runs in their stockings and corrected them at the piano. Mousy, high-strung, these young women were good at reading to me and teaching me to read. They were grateful to Tania, pitied her (such an extraordinary person wasting her life in T. out of love for her family!), and left with letters of reference from my father.

Then Zosia arrived, on the recommendation of the Catholic surgeon. He had lanced a boil on my thigh and returned several times to rebandage the wound. What Maciek needs, he told my father, is to touch our holy Polish earth. I know that no Jew loves our country more than you and our adorable Panna Tania, or has a truer national character. Still, to have a fine boy like yours educated by these city Jewesses is an error, a scandal. Give him one of our own. Salt of the earth. He will drink strength from her.