



Winner of the  
European Union Prize for Literature

# The Bureau of Past Management

Iris Hanika

Translated by Abigail Wender

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Iris Hanika, born in Würzburg in 1962, has lived in Berlin since 1979. She received the prestigious Hans Fallada Prize in 2006. Her novel *Treffen sich zwei* was shortlisted for the German Book Prize in 2008. *The Bureau of Past Management* was awarded the European Union Prize for Literature and the LiteraTour Nord Prize. She was a resident at the Villa Massimo in Rome in 2017/18. Her most recent novel *Echos Kammern* won the Hermann Hesse Literature Prize in 2020.

Abigail Wender is a poet and translator. Her debut poetry collection, *Reliquary*, was published in 2021. She lives in New York City.

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*We are ugly, but we have the music.*  
Leonard Cohen,  
'Chelsea Hotel #2'



THERE COMES A TIME when it all falls away – the anger of youth, the sorrow you felt at the world's injustice, and also the confidence that things would get better, maybe even good if you just tried hard enough, put your whole heart into it. There comes a time when that heart empties abruptly and you eddy down into yourself, entirely alone. Not a great time.



SOMETIMES HE RECALLED how he'd always think about the trains headed to concentration and death camps whenever he was on a crowded U-Bahn; how those trains had been even more crowded than the one he was in, and about the absence of any seats in those cattle cars. Graziela had described a scene from the American film *The Pawnbroker* (1964, director: Sidney Lumet) in which there was a leap from the quotidian into the past, and had made the comparison between today's underground trains and the trains to Auschwitz. She said she couldn't get the scene out of her head. At the same time, she continued, it made her feel disgusted with herself for two reasons. For one, it was pretentious of her to compare her dignified and privileged life with those who'd been abandoned by civilisation. But 'pretentious' was the wrong word, she said, it was feeble, 'impudent' might be a better word or perhaps 'hubris' would be best in this context, but it was also weak, much too weak, entirely too weak ... 'Obscene,' that was the right word. The second reason, she said, was that she had the luxury to seek the right word, the time and ease, the time and space to think, and her brain at her beck and call, which made her self-disgust even stronger. Back then, he'd thought 'obscene' was overused and privately considered 'immoral' a better choice. But he hadn't said anything, he'd just listened as she described the film's protagonist, who she said was nothing like her. The film wasn't about the granddaughter of a perpetrator – though he knew, because they'd discussed it extensively, there were no real perpetrators in her family. (There hadn't even been a Nazi Party member in her family; there was only her grandfather, who'd been a soldier, strictly speaking a Mitläufer, a political hanger-on, a 22-year-old officer and troop

commander in the 6<sup>th</sup> Army. And he had only survived Stalingrad because, shortly before reaching the city, after storming the Rostov airport, he had sustained a severe head injury. He'd received a so-called 'blighty wound' – a gift as it turned out, since it meant he was flown from the war zone to a field hospital in Hungary and released from combat duty post-convalescence. [After the capture of Rostov, the psychoanalyst, Sabina Spielrein, was murdered along with her two daughters in a mass execution. Graziela's grandfather hadn't been in an SS death squad and hadn't taken part in the shooting, but he had assisted in the capture of Rostov, and hence had brought about the murder of Sabina Spielrein. They had discussed all of this, specifically how it could be endured and whether it could be borne.] *The Pawnbroker* was about an entirely different character, namely Sol Nazerman, a man burdened with survivor's guilt. (Rod Steiger, who played Nazerman, was nominated for an Oscar in 1966, as were Laurence Olivier for *Othello*, Oskar Werner for *Ship of Fools*, Richard Burton for *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, and Lee Marvin, who won Best Actor for his performance in *Cat Ballou*.) She could never forget the scene and it played instantly before her eyes whenever she was on a crowded train.

With that story, she'd planted the scene in him. He borrowed *The Pawnbroker* from the university's media centre and watched it once more at work on his Bureau's video recorder. After that, he too felt uneasy on every crowded train.

Now as he recalled this, he noticed that the uneasiness had disappeared, but he wasn't ashamed. In the past, he would have been thoroughly ashamed of himself for not being ashamed.

Not any more.

Now he could travel on an overcrowded train, even think about the people who had once been transported to the camps, and not feel ill. Now he could see birch trees and not think birch, Birke, 'Birkenau' – and he didn't believe it was because he'd become insensitive.

In the past, he had feared just this lack of sensitivity and was constantly on his guard. Over and over, he'd scrutinised and tested himself and decided he had undertaken every possible act of remembrance.

AUSCHWITZ LIVES IN EVERY SONG,  
every flower, every tree.  
Auschwitz lives in every song,  
every German, including me.

Fiderallala, fiderallala, fideralla lala la.

HE WAS NOW PLAINLY USED TO HIS UNHAPPINESS. (Bless his post-war birth, ha ha.)

To his unhappiness he was now plainly used.

Fiderallala, fiderallala, fideralla lala la.

He wasn't certain when he'd got used to it, most likely after his thirtieth birthday – aeons ago. Perhaps when 'commemoration' was declared the official state duty. After that he no longer dared hope that his unhappiness would end, and so he no longer made the effort to end it. It existed like he existed – it was a part of him. He couldn't think about it any other way, couldn't imagine being without it; he lived with his unhappiness as a matter of course. Some people live in the countryside, others in the city, some have dark hair, others fair hair. Some have good fortune, others misfortune – that's the way it was. He belonged to those who lived with misery.

In the past he'd been able to laugh about it. And there was a lot to laugh about, because nothing went smoothly for him. He was a clown, clumsy, brooding over the smallest things, had no success with women, couldn't overcome his quirks, was always being barged into, and so on. In daily life he was a joke, but it was no longer funny to him. It was just too much effort. But in fact, the laughable things about him had not changed, only the most ridiculous thing about him. In the past his misery had had a concrete source. As long as he'd believed it stemmed from Auschwitz, his misery had substance. And the cause of his misery wasn't just the fact that Auschwitz had happened, it was his fixation with it. He thought constantly about what he could do and what the Auschwitz prisoners couldn't, and that Auschwitz had had a very different meaning for them than it did for him.