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Maria Matusek · *Hans Werner Richter*

WHEN I FIRST MET HER, she must have been twenty years old, maybe only nineteen, I don't know exactly. Nor did this interest me at the time; I was myself only just twenty-two. This first encounter happened at Nollendorfplatz in Berlin. We were not particularly impressed with one another, indeed, we hardly took notice of one another, I suppose. Why should we? She had a job to do, she spoke, and I had to listen to her. She was dressed simply and plainly, and that is how she spoke. But she radiated the force of a conviction that sometimes bordered on fanaticism. Only seldom did she go beyond the limit, but whenever it happened, her voice changed and took on a quality that was not exactly strident, but cold and unappealing.

I remember her as not tall, rather short, of great self-control, so that one had the impression that she always knew what she was doing and saying. Never did I see her impetuous, but sometimes she expressed her convictions with such harshness that it was better to remain silent, in order to avoid an argument. There were hardly ever any arguments between us, even though I often disagreed with her. Perhaps I didn't have the courage, perhaps things weren't clear enough in my own mind for me to articulate them adequately. She, in contrast, knew everything quite precisely; with great self-assurance she defended the position I had firmly held myself only a few months earlier, but was now beginning to give up. This was a process that caused me many restless nights and that I could neither curb nor stop, even if I had tried.

I no longer talked about my reflections, my thoughts, nor even my doubts, but she must have noticed.

We addressed her as Comrade. Her name was Maria, but Comrade Maria was a title we probably found too awkward, I mean I never heard anyone say that. But I want to talk here about Maria, because the term "Comrade" has fallen into disuse entirely.

As I said, I met her near Nollendorfplatz in Berlin, in a cell of the Communist Party. At that time, during the winter of 1930–31, I was a street singer and so were my friends. Some of them, not all, belonged to the Communist Party. It was they with whom I went around at night sometimes, putting up posters. During the winter of that year it was often wet

and cold, with slush in the streets; we were often cold, but we still went out again and again, because we thought this to be our proletarian duty. Proletarian duty and punctuality, just as our fathers had spoken of Prussian duty and punctuality. Once or twice a week we went to a meeting of the party cell, in order to take our instructions from Maria. These were almost exclusively orders from the party which we were committed to obey. We always gathered in the small back room of a beer saloon near Nollendorfplatz.

This back room was poorly lit, of course, and filled with smoke; it had a penetrating smell of cold smoke and stale beer. Still, we felt good in this room. Maria would sit at the front end of a long table. There would be lively conversations, but hardly ever discussions of the pros and cons of this or that command from the party. Maria would inform us of what we were to believe, to do, and not to do. It was almost always rather dry stuff, mostly referring to strategies and tactics of the party. But Maria would present it as if it were a prayer. She was filled with deep, honest conviction; for her the victory of the party was certain, there was no doubt. Strangely enough, we, too, who sat around her, would never express any doubts. Had anyone seen us in this state, he would probably have concluded that he was attending the gathering of a sect, which, though not full of religious fervor, held a shared and very firm belief.

I don't know whether or not Maria tolerated argument. Now, more than fifty years later, I think there never was any. Victory was understood as certain; according to the party, it was a historical given. Knowing this made us feel secure, the proletariat had to win, there was no other outcome. In this respect, Maria personified steadfastness for me, and I admired her, even though many doubts had long since begun to plague me. I did not express them, I just sat there, three or four chairs away from Maria, and held my tongue.

Her appearance left no particular impression on me. I imagine that she had a stern mouth and very narrow lips, that the color of her eyes was gray, that is, rather hard to define; it may have been a different color, I don't remember. Her nose was normal, without anything special, her forehead I would like to describe as high or at least medium high, and her hair, ah yes, her hair, it must have been brunette, any other color, blond or red, would have made an impression on me, I should at least have a vague idea. She would usually stand when speaking, and we would sit in front of her and listen.

She would speak of the central committee as the highest authority in our lives which more or less commanded our services and to which we had to submit ourselves. Usually she read to us what the central committee had decided one or two days earlier, often long epistles that had a dry, leathery quality. No revolutionary spirit of the kind invoked in such decisions emanated from them. We were usually bored and waited for Maria to get to the end. This was all the more peculiar as it was in stark contrast to the political events of those days. The confrontation between the Left and the Right had deteriorated to a permanently latent civil war, the National Socialists marched through the streets of Berlin almost every day, fear was spreading, fear of acts of terrorism such as were reported daily in the newspapers. We did not feel safe anymore ourselves, when we left our saloon or went through the streets at night putting up party posters. Some of us hardly went out at night anymore without being armed in some way, with brass knuckles, steel rods, or some other kinds of beating tools. From day to day the atmosphere became more intolerable; of course it did not affect everyone, usually only those who had engaged in a cause, particularly those who were committed to the Communist Party.

We knew the street battles; we often had to run away from the superior force and brutality of the others, and this superior force grew steadily. I don't know how Maria got home during those nights. I never thought about it, and I probably didn't care. Some comrades surely accompanied her. I cannot imagine her walking in the streets alone during those nights. Still, I doubt that lack of courage kept her from doing it. She had a lot of that, even though she never paraded her peculiar kind of courage. Her political passion seemed greater to me than mine, as did her hatred of our opponents. She was cold and severe on the outside, but probably also to herself. I did not see her very often, only when I went to cell meetings at Nollendorfplatz.

It was winter, perhaps a year and a half before Hitler seized power, a dismal winter, wet and cold, grimy and gray. That is how I remember it. I was unemployed, and so were all the others. I didn't know anyone who went to work. What they lived on remained a mystery. Everyone fended for himself as best he could, often without considering anyone else. What Maria lived on I didn't know. Perhaps she was an employee of the party, a functionary, and in those days the word "functionary" didn't have the stale flavor it has today. It is possible that I assumed that in those days. But since

she was not at the center of my life, it did not concern me.

Once, as I seem to remember, she walked one row behind me in a big demonstration, in the center of Berlin. It wasn't against the National Socialists, but against the government of the republic. We yelled "Down, down!" and didn't know that with this "Down . . ." we ran into the arms of our own defeat, as it were, unaware at the time that this defeat was to be fatal. It is possible that Maria, too, yelled with us during this demonstration. If I think back a long time, I seem to hear her voice. But this is probably just one of those hallucinations of memory that occur easily when one thinks back across several decades in an effort to remember something.

Well, as I said, Maria was only a secondary figure for me in those early years. I had no relationship to her, I don't even think that I ever exchanged a word with her. Then why do I tell you about her, why? I already mentioned that she was at that time deeply convinced of everything her party did, said, and ordered. There was no failure, no mistake. In the Soviet Union this was the time of the dispute between Stalin and Trotsky, and I was reading Trotsky. His arguments seemed more plausible and clearer to me, even though, in retrospect, they reached far into utopia. I didn't see this at the time, however, for we lived on utopias, and it didn't matter which kind we professed. Maria was a Stalinist, a term which did not yet exist in those days. None of us openly professed his position in this dispute. Taking sides with Trotsky was sure to get you caught in the party machinery, which excluded scores of people for "deviations from the party line" and declared them to be enemies. Thus we never spoke about this in the party cell at Nollendorfplatz. Mentioning the name of Trotsky would have been enough to make one appear as an apostate. In November 1932 I was excluded from the party because of Trotskyism, and I had no idea who had denounced or, rather, reported me.

To be sure, I was no supporter of Trotsky, but I read him with great enthusiasm; still, it seems to me that I never talked about that, save to a very close friend. Only the party cell at Nollendorfplatz could have proposed my exclusion from the party, and so my suspicion fell on Maria. The question is, of course, how she knew more about me than I had reason to assume up to that time. Perhaps there were informers within our own party, perhaps I had said a little more here and there than I was aware of. I could not explain it to myself. But my suspicion stuck to Maria. I did not reproach her for it, this was what the party machinery was like, it con-

stantly undermined and weakened itself, even though its very existence was already at stake. However, all this, the party cell at Nollendorfplatz, Maria, my friends, the street singers, quickly lost its importance. Suddenly my own life was at stake.

Hitler began his triumphant march, and the people of the party cell at Nollendorfplatz were violently driven apart: house searches, arrests, escapes. The Third Reich came, the Second World War came, then came the postwar years, the beautiful, lean, hopeful years. I forgot those times of unemployment and the experiences in the Communist Party and, of course, also Maria. She was as remote as all the people who had been part of my life in those days. I would not even have known her name anymore, if anyone had suddenly asked me. Whatever was left in my memory had little to do with the cell at Nollendorfplatz and nothing at all with Maria. Yes, I must admit, I never thought about her. And yet, her fate should have been on my mind.

As early as 1932 I ceased seeing her. I did not live at Nollendorfplatz anymore and was rarely in Berlin. Many of my friends disappeared, went underground, or emigrated. I met some of them in Paris again, but there was no one among them who had known Maria, and so I heard nothing more about her.

Forty years passed. It was October 1971 when I received a letter which was like a call from a time long gone. It was from Maria, and it said: "I don't know whether you still remember me. I was the organizational director of the Communist Party cell in the district surrounding the Winterfeldplatz in Berlin-Schöneberg. Times long gone. In the meantime, storms roared around us which I survived more or less well. I was in prison from 1941 to 1945, including three years in the Ravensbrück concentration camp. But perhaps you no longer remember the Maria Matusek of those years. I have often seen you on television." What she meant was the Third Program of West Berlin television, where I occasionally appeared at the time.

This letter touched me strangely. I wondered how Maria had survived those times and was amazed that she still existed. At the bottom of the letter was the following message: "The illusions I had in those days evaporated a long time ago, as a result of developments I was unable to recognize or predict at the time. What remains? A lively interest in today's confused era of human existence, of which we only know that it will lead us to the year 2000.

“I would be very pleased if you found time for a few lines, in which to confirm that you are the formerly thin and somewhat dreamy young man from Schöneberg and that one cell in your brain still remembers me.”

She did not live in Berlin anymore, but in Frankfurt, and her life had obviously been full of cruelties and serious disappointments. I wanted to respond to the letter immediately, but I didn't. The reasons for that have eluded me to this day. I was glad about this sign of life from my early years, I wanted to ask her how she had survived the Nazi years and the Ravensbrück concentration camp. But I did not answer; a few days passed, finally a week or two, and then the letter suddenly disappeared. I had probably misplaced it. But I admit, I didn't really look for it either. Still, I wasn't indifferent to it, on the contrary, and yet it seems to me today that I evaded this letter as if it had caused me some discomfort, a discomfort that I surely did not want to acknowledge. In any case, the letter remained lost. I thought of it now and then, and each time it bothered me and somehow made me feel guilty. I should have replied to it immediately, but I was negligent and, whenever possible, would let things run their course, thinking they would take care of themselves. Thus, years passed again, many years, but the letter from Maria did not turn up. I had probably even forgotten it, though with the kind of superficial forgetfulness that hides the object of oblivion behind a thin wall, ready to be called back at any time.

More than one decade passed. At that time I moved twice, once from Berlin to Munich and finally in Munich from one street to another one. And one day Maria's letter was in my hands again. I don't know how this happened, it simply lay on my desk. It was a yellow sheet of paper with clean handwriting that almost looked engraved. Nothing seemed outdated to me, indeed, the letter might well have been written a few days before. Now I could not simply misplace it anymore. The only question was whether its author was still among the living. So my reply might not reach her anymore. The date of this letter which had turned up again was too long ago, one and a half decades. And my encounter with its author had happened at a time now almost entirely forgotten.

Again I did not respond to the letter immediately, I laid it aside, but in such a way that it could not be lost from sight. I had to reply to it, even though this seemed rather absurd to me. I began with an apology for the one and a half decades of delay in responding. I was embarrassed, I admitted that to myself, but I did not mention it. Rather, I pretended that such a

long span of time between receiving a letter and replying to it was natural, though perhaps not entirely usual.

Yes, so I wrote, I was indeed the young, thin, somewhat shy man who had belonged to the Communist Party at that time and who, during one winter, had been a member of her party cell at Nollendorffplatz in Berlin. I did not write to her that I had later been excluded from the Communist Party, nor anything about my experiences during the Third Reich; I did not mention my life in those years. She had heard me on the radio and seen me on television, and so I assumed she knew something about it. Her letter, too, had led me to think so.

I wrote little about myself, actually almost nothing; I only confirmed what she wanted to know. Of course, I could have written her that my political views today have nothing in common with those of the young man then, but I didn't.

I don't remember whether I expected an answer or not. Her address was perhaps no longer valid. She must have been close to eighty, an old lady who had weathered all the storms of life. Why, after such a long time, should she still expect a letter from me?

Strangely enough, I was nonetheless curious whether I would receive an answer. One came after only a few days, almost by return mail. She accepted my excuse: "I had misplaced your letter." And then I learned what had happened to her. She did not mention one word about how she had survived the concentration camp in Ravensbrück. She only mentioned once again that it had been three years. After the war she had turned again to the party, but then the great disappointment had set in, first about small matters, but those had become ever larger. As an old comrade she had not kept her mouth shut, she had the right to speak, and so she did not conceal her criticism and her doubts. In those days, the first years of East German communism under Ulbricht and Pieck, the party was even more dogmatic than it had been in earlier years. She resisted this development, and one day they excluded her. She escaped arrest only because she had an apartment in West Berlin. This is how she, unlike others, was spared the peregrinations through Soviet prison camps.

Thus, both she and I had been excluded from the Communist Party, I in November 1932, fifty-five years ago, she probably in 1945, forty-two years ago. None of the great conflicts of our time had left us unscathed.

We exchanged a few more letters, then there was silence again. I failed

to respond to one of her last letters, not intentionally, but by neglect. The great disappointment of her life marked the content of all her letters. The faith of her youth, her deep and firm convictions had turned out to be chimeras. Once I found the sentence: "I no longer believe in socialism." And once the sentence: "A human being cannot live without freedom." An entire life, her life, lay between these two sentences.

Thus our development had run a similar course, save that my own doubts had already set in when I was still a member of her party cell, during the great dispute between Stalin and Trotsky. The disintegration of her faith had begun twenty years later, after the National Socialist dictatorship and the war. I found the quintessence of how she rejected the faith of her youth in one of her letters: "Life is one great process of learning. But we never finish learning. Thus the question that preoccupies me is whether human nature is intrinsically good or evil. Judging by the things people inflict on one another, one must conclude 'evil.' In the old days people believed: 'Human nature is good.' It is probably both, depending on where a human being is placed. But he must not be forced into a straitjacket, and above all, he must not be able to exercise too much power. Perhaps there is no answer to all these questions. I do not find any even near the end of my life. But I know that all illusions have evaporated; perhaps only a young person has any. There is no utopia anymore, the young have no role models, no ideals. Sometimes I think there will be a big explosion one day and everything will collapse. Is humanity heading for its demise, is it running, with open eyes, into uncertain nothingness? Yet we must not give up hope, perhaps reason will keep the upper hand after all."

Translated by Tamara Holtermann Schoenbaum