



BALTIC SEA

EAST PRUSSIA

LITHUANIA

Danzig

Johannisberg

IV ARMY

R. Warta

R. Vistula

Warsaw

R. Bug

R. Bzura

GERMANY

P O L A N D

VIII ARMY

X ARMY

XIV ARMY

Krakow

R. Silesia

SLOVAKIA

R. Danube

HUNGARY

0 Miles 50 100 150

Noordwest Expres

When a mother and daughter board a train bound for Copenhagen they are drawn into the turbulent wake of a war long since ended.

BY SUSAN CRAWFORD

“EXCUSE ME,” I said first thing to the conductor, a thin, youngish man who peered impatiently at me from behind rimless eyeglasses. “Sorry,” I apologized, as he tried to get by my backpack blocking the corridor, “but I was wondering if it was possible to get two beds in a couchette?”

The train was lurching out of Hengelo station and he accidentally banged his clipboard against the WC door as he brought it up to examine it. Someone inside said something rude in a foreign language, which he ignored. He pointed with a bony finger to the door down the corridor behind me. “That one, closest there. Take the middle and upper beds on the left. The sheets are there for you already. Of course, there is an extra fee.”

I paid him the extra guilders, then he squeezed by hurriedly and went into the next car, the door opening and closing with a grating noise, allowing the sound of the wheels on the rails to reach a crescendo then fall to a muted clatter again.

I yanked my pack along, then threw back the door, stepped in, and nearly collided with an older man who was at least two inches shorter than me. He grunted and actually staggered a few steps back, the motion of the train not helping his balance.

“God, sorry,” I said idiotically. Hastily, I pulled my pack through the door from the narrow passageway outside, and bumped my shoulder on a protruding bunk. “Ouch. Shit.”

“Be careful,” he said with an unidentifiable accent. “Let

me help.” To let him recover his composure and me mine, I slid around him and leaned against the window, rubbing my bruised shoulder as he lifted the backpack awkwardly to the luggage space above the door.

I had time then to see that on the very top bunk, on his back, lay a teenaged boy. His hands were folded under his head, and he was staring fixedly at the ceiling. His socks were made of very thick wool and he still had on his shoes, the dark leather slip-in kind that Dutch men often wear. If he was like them, he had a serviceable, basic knowledge of English, blue-collar skills, and a certain underhand resentment of “American” tourists. Perhaps it was this that made him refuse to acknowledge me.

On the bunk beneath him, the sheets had been spread out neatly and a hardcover book lay face down, opened in about the middle. The traveler had obviously been preparing for the journey before my arrival. The book was Musil’s *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*. The man watched me read the title of the book.

“Safely in the rack now,” he said.

“Thanks a lot. I appreciate that.” I threw my purse on the top bunk and felt to see how hard the mattress was. The sheets, as promised, lay folded antiseptically by the pillow. “Beds don’t look very comfortable,” I remarked to him.

“But it’s better than sitting up for ten hours.” He smiled at me from 15 inches away, and I had a clear view of his over-spent, tired eyes. He sat down on the middle bunk under the Dutch boy, and had to duck his head to avoid knocking against the upper railing. “May even get some

sleep,” he joked. “Are you American?”

“Canadian,” I corrected, perhaps too sharply, but his face brightened.

“My country, Austria, thinks Canada is blessed. Canada is a fortunate country.”

“Yes,” I answered hesitantly, remembering the cemetery at Holten. “Fortunate, but still...”

“Travelling all by yourself?” he asked.

“No, I’m with my mother. She’s sitting a few cars back, so I better go get her, help her settle in.”

I went out then and found Mom dozing in her seat. She’d slept poorly in the bed-and-breakfast last night in Holten, and hadn’t hesitated to tell me about this over the usual Dutch breakfast—eggs, bread, Ry-Krisps, paper-thin slices of cheese, and an assortment of sprinkles—though she was now struggling doggedly through with the trip to Copenhagen.

She cast her purse and coat over her arm, and followed me through the cars to the couchette while I carried on ahead of her with her neatly packed, trim suitcase. She smiled amicably at the Austrian and glanced quickly up at the Dutch boy on the top bunk, who had his eyes closed and appeared to be sleeping. He tossed over restlessly, peevishly, onto his side so that his back was to us and his face was to the wall, cutting out as best he could this annoying, foreign invasion into his sleeping quarters. Once Mom had crawled onto her little bed, she sighed contentedly and closed her eyes, leaving me to struggle with stowing the suitcase.

The train slowed suddenly and I had to take a step toward the door to keep my balance. The Austrian put out a hand and steadied me, catching my elbow. But his fingers were like talons and dug so far into my flesh, with such strength, that I let out a yelp.

I began to grumble something about “these Dutch trains,” but the door of the couchette slid open again and my words sputtered into silence when I saw her.

She paused at the door a moment and calmly took us in. Her eyes were very dark and regarded us seriously. She was perhaps 60, still attractive, aged in the manner of European women, with that sophistication and assurance. Her hair was India ink but veined with hues of pewter, styled up into a bun that managed to escape prudery. She was small-boned, but didn’t seem frail or brittle.

“Goedenavond,” she murmured courteously and slowly stepped through the door. Although she had greeted us in Dutch, I doubted it was her nationality. No Dutch woman I had encountered had ever been as dark, or as angular.

With some difficulty I managed to stow Mom’s suitcase, then crawl up onto the top bunk to leave room for her. The man had sprung to his feet. “Kann ich Ihnen behilflich sein?” he said, gesturing towards her suitcase.

“Oh no, no,” the woman did not so much swing the case away from the eager man as move herself around to block off his advance. “Thank you, but there is no need.” She had switched to German without hesitation, but her voice was now firm. He paused with a respectful attitude, his hand still held out in the polite gesture of an unsure gentleman. “Really, everything I need is here,” she said with even more stress, and he stepped back, dropped his hand, and sat down on his bunk.



The dark woman was standing rigidly beside the Austrian’s bunk. He held onto her wrist with a thick, gnarled hand.

The conductor wrenched open the door and it slammed against the wall so hard the glass rattled in its frame. “Passports,” he said loudly. “Passports and tickets.”

Everyone began to pass him their individual papers, but I hesitated.

“This is the frontier,” the conductor said sharply. “We must pass through yet another before morning. They will be returned to you before we reach Copenhagen.”

Still uncertain, I slipped my rail pass into the pages of my passport, then leaned over and looked down at Mom who had sat up. “Where’s your passport?”

“I was almost asleep there,” she laughed a bit, and started to fumble for her ticket.

“That’s okay, Mom, I’ll get things.” I hopped down to the floor, and found her purse under the bed.

“This is so you can sleep,” said the conductor, directing his comments to Mom. “We must have your passports or else the authorities will disturb all of you in the middle of the night.”

“They will be returned in the morning,” the Austrian reassured us. “It is a standard procedure.” He was lying back on his bunk. The woman was unfolding her sheets, and he eyed her legs thoughtfully.

I went out later, thirsty, looking for offsales, thinking of a beer. We had passed through the Dutch/German border, but there was nothing to look at. It was past midnight now, and I was beginning to feel tired. Mom was breathing regularly, finally asleep. Just through the car door lay the conductor’s compartment, a small, office-like booth. He had the door propped open and on a counter displayed a small assortment of beverages and snacks. I pointed to a can of Grolsch, and paid him the exorbitant price in guilders.

“No deutsch marks?” he asked crossly, and when I

shook my head, sighed as if this were possibly final proof of the incompetence of American tourists, and gave me a questionable amount of change in German currency.

The beer was only mildly cool, but tasted refreshingly strong and yeasty. I stood in the doorway of the car, by the WC, back pressed against the wall to brace against the sway of the train, with a window propped open for some fresh air. Occasionally the lights of some town flashed by like bursts of gunfire, then fizzled into the obscurity of the night.

I was looking forward to Copenhagen, where things would be cheerier. There was nothing wrong with Holland; it was a pleasant, friendly country, and I had grown accustomed to the language, but we had only come this far inland because my mother wanted to find my father's grave, which she had never seen.

His name was on the registry at Holten, but it had taken a long time that day to find the actual gravesite. We had wandered in the immense cemetery for the entire afternoon, staring at each round-headed tomb, each tilting maple leaf carved into each stone face. Every gravestone was alike except for the name and age engraved on it, and they were all—thousands and thousands and thousands of them—well kept by scrupulous Dutch hands. We had finally found him, close to a group of trees, and I took pictures: Mom standing beside dad's grave; then one on a knoll facing the sea of gravestones.

We had wandered back to the pavilion and curiously flipped through the guest book to see who else visited graveyards. More than ten people had signed the book ahead of us that day. All were Dutch. Neither a special day of remembrance, nor even a weekend, still they remembered and still they came, an incomprehensible fact that continued to bother me, even on the train ride to Copenhagen. I had leafed back until I found a Canadian signature. Brandon, Manitoba. She wrote, 'Thank you for taking care of our boys.' Mom had signed her name, and I added mine out of respect for my father, but under comments, I hadn't been able to think of anything profound or moving to say.

After the cemetery we went for supper. "Do you remember Bill Anderson?" Mom asked. "He visited us after he came back from the war. You were just a baby, so of course you don't remember this. Bill was a pilot, too, and he knew something about how your father died. Said it didn't matter that his plane was burning up all the way down, that maybe he didn't even know. Cool as anything, he was on the intercom, just getting the final word in, you know, just like he was griping about the weather. He said 'I never could figure out how to fly these bloody things.'"



His expression was one of total defeat and, unexpectedly, I pitied him.

The melancholy atmosphere of Holten had followed us onto this train. I took my can of Grolsch, went back into the berth, and sipped it as I wrote in my diary, a lengthy entry because I couldn't sleep. I lay back finally, my writing hand tired.

I must have dozed off. Suddenly I was aware that my can of beer, mostly gone, had tipped onto its side in my lap and had dribbled warm beer between my thighs. It was the horror from childhood, thinking I had wet the bed. I grabbed the Grolsch can and righted it, gasping with embarrassment.

Intense whispers came from the bunk across from me. I froze. The couchette was almost dark now. I tried to calm the erratic thump of my heart. It took me a moment to make out the two figures and to identify the language, uttered in hushed sentences filled with emotion. With my inadequate university German, I struggled to understand.

The dark woman was standing rigidly beside the Austrian's bunk. He held onto her wrist with a thick, gnarled hand. Although I continued to blot at the beer on my legs, they didn't notice me.

She said something about "our life in Munich," her voice at first incredulous, then her scorn palpable. "You really are a scoundrel."

"It's a strange world," he mused, as though he hadn't heard her. "Imagine meeting you again after all this time. What would it be? More than 40 years, I think."

"Let me go."

"You said once that you loved me."

"A long time ago. Before the war."

"I'm not responsible for any of that."

"No. We were children," she said. "Now let me go. I'm to meet my husband in Copenhagen."

"You said once that you loved me," he repeated.

I shifted apprehensively on my bunk, hoping to hint that I was awake and that I heard and, however imperfectly, understood their private conversation. But they must have believed the Canadian didn't understand German. Their surroundings were forgotten.

The woman made a small gesture. "I knew nothing of love when I spoke those words to you," she said without emotion. "I learned the meaning of the word only after I left Munich."

She didn't seem at all afraid of him, but I was more and more convinced of the danger of her situation. Outwardly there was no sign of violence, yet I felt certain of it. Mom's deep breathing continued as I looked directly across at the Dutch boy. I felt my stomach constrict. He was staring over the head of the woman right at me. He

too was wide awake and motionless. Danger seemed to whisper all around us from out of the shadows of the couchette. We simply stared at each other.

"I told you," he said stiffly, "the war had nothing to do with us."

"But you were a soldier."

"Like thousands."

"And I was sent away," she said quite calmly, "like thousands. Love was beyond me before all of that."

He said something about innocence and youth. I understood from his quick, breathless words that he had been charged with patriotic feelings, exhilarated by a strong sense of purpose and direction during the war. "But it was so long ago" Suddenly he laughed. "It is over with. All over with." The regret in his voice was tangible. He fixed on the woman again. He tried to draw her closer, his fist still clamped around her arm, his other hand now around her waist, drawing her closer to his straining figure and his lips thrust out to touch her now.

She turned away from him, too small to withdraw from his grasp, too weak to resist this advance. "Leave me alone," she gasped under her breath. She called him a name I didn't understand. The Austrian forced his lips upon her neck, her chin, her mouth. She rammed her free hand straight into his Adam's apple so that he gagged, sat back and gulped with tiny, choking noises. His eyes narrowed. As I was sitting up, by now enraged, he knotted both aging hands around her throat and squeezed. The woman gave a strangled sob, her fists clenching helplessly at her sides, then tearing impotently at his hands.

I was stock still, my attention riveted on the couple. The Dutch boy leaned over swiftly. In the dim light, his movements were as fluid and purposeful as a swimmer's as he drove his fist down into the Austrian's face. There was a sharp smack of skin and bone coming together. The Austrian's head snapped back, and instantly his upper lip and chin were flooded in a dark drenching of blood from his nostrils. His hands left the woman's neck and grabbed the boy's arm, pulling him downwards. The woman sank to her knees. The Dutch boy flailed ineffectually at the man fiercely gripping his arm. The boy darted one piercing glance my way, as if only curious as to what in the world I was going to do—a look devoid of self-pity.

I stretched for the book at the edge of the Austrian's bunk, raised it back over my head and brought it down with all my force on top of the man's head. It hit with a thud. He collapsed back, moaning, one arm curled protectively over his head.

I felt my eyes grow round. For a few seconds I was completely numb. Then I had a great, wild urge to laugh, or to make a triumphant gesture. I wanted to shake the Austrian, and hit him again. I felt a grin spread over my face and I looked up towards the Dutch boy. His chest was heaving as he fought for control. I shook the book at him, but he didn't notice. A stab of doubt caught me. I looked down at the Polish woman crying silently, her shoulders heaving.

My hands were icy and under both arms sweat trickled. My face felt damp. I tossed the book over the man's subdued form as he dabbed at his nosebleed. The book landed on the mattress with a faint thump.

The woman climbed unsteadily to her feet. She had to lean against the bunk for support while she fumbled for her handkerchief. She dried her face, and I could hear her breathing become normal again. With an odd gesture of tenderness she leaned over the Austrian and wiped his face clean with her hanky. He watched her with an ambiguous expression.

She looked at me, where I was still crouched on my bed, and nodded, as though agreeing with something I had said. Then she turned and looked at the Dutch boy. She patted his hand a few times, while he angled his face away from her shyly. She sat down on her own bed, tucked her feet up over the edge and disappeared from my view.

No one moved. It had happened so fast, and nobody had uttered a sound louder than a whisper, a groan, or a gasp. The Austrian sighed. Little by little, he swiveled his head on his pillow towards me. His eyes were unaccusing, even child-like, as he regarded me across the metre of space between our bunks. I returned his look in silence. He turned his head away from me, towards the wall, but not before his eyes had fallen to the woman beneath Mom. His expression was one of total defeat and, unexpectedly, I pitied him.

Mom stood up, yawned and stretched. I heard the noises of the train coming awake, the sound of footsteps going past our door and the rough rasp of foreign voices coming alive. She fumbled with the door-latch. While she was gone, the silence in the compartment, stiff and uncomfortable, wasn't broken. Then the Dutch boy leaned over and rolled up the faded window shade and the Danish countryside flooded in and lit everything with a dull grey gloom.

No one coughed or cleared their throat. I moved my eyes once from the window to the Austrian, then turned my eyes back to the window and the flashing scenery. I couldn't bear the sight of him.



For a few seconds I was completely numb. Then I had a great, wild urge to laugh.

Mom noticed him right away when she came back. "Oh dear," she exclaimed as soon as she'd closed the couchette door, "are you okay?"

The Austrian ignored her. Finally, to break the awkward silence, she remarked, "There was a long line-up for the WC."

The Dutch boy said "Should we fold our beds against the wall, and sit up again?"

"The conductor thinks we'll be in Copenhagen in 45 minutes," Mom said in agreement. "May as well get ready now."

The Austrian climbed down from his bunk, slow and awkward. The woman stood back, aloof. She had put on a sweater and pulled it up high on her neck. I wished I could see if there were marks there, if only to prove to myself the reality of the incident. As I watched the Dutch boy adjust the bunks, folding them down to seats, it seemed to have happened so long ago. Now it was the morning and maybe I had only dreamed the incident.

Close to the city, the conductor threw back the door and stepped into the couchette. He barely glanced at us as he handed the passports around. His cap was forced far down onto his head, so that his eyebrows were hidden, and he looked as impatient and harried as the day before.

I opened the passport eagerly to see if I'd been given a

new stamp. I flipped the pages back and forth and then blankly looked at the picture and the foreign language. It came to me that it wasn't mine. A Polish passport. The picture made her look elderly, unwell.

I closed it, feeling ill, lonely and lost, tired and far from home. Wordlessly I leaned over and offered her the passport. She looked at me for a second, her expression verging on bitterness, and we traded passports. Her hand trembled a little.

The crowded station was bleak with the confusion of people and baggage. The Polish woman stepped past on the arm of a distinguished-looking gentleman, and nodded courteously to Mom. Across the platform, the Austrian hurried away, and I shivered involuntarily. The morning air was saltwater cold.

As I turned to pick up our luggage, I saw the Dutch boy. His eyes met mine briefly and I stepped forward to say something to him. I had a vague notion that I should tell him my father's story—that the brave had fallen, aware yet full of zest, towards death. But he hurried by without comment and I lost sight of him in the crowd. ☹

This is the winning story of AlbertaViews' first annual Short Story Competition. The author, Susan Crawford, receives \$1,000. Crawford lives in Calgary and is currently working on a novel.



ALBERTA BY NUMBERS (see page 64)

- 1 Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission
- 2 Kensington Wine Market, Calgary
- 3, 4 *Alberta Farm Life* June 21, 1999
- 5 J.G. MacGregor. *The Klondike Rush Through Edmonton, 1897-1898*.
- 6 William Bronson. *The Last Grand Adventure*.
- 7,8 <<http://www.northlands.com/ekde.html>>
- 9-11 Zuehlke, Mark. *The Alberta Fact Book*. Vancouver: Whitecap, 1997
- 12-15 AB "Royal Tyrrell Museum studies skull" Govt. News Release Sept 2, 1999
- 16-18 "1999 Wildfire Season Continues." AB Govt. News Release Sept 22, 1999
- 19, 20 Traffic Injury Research Foundation, *Alcohol Use Among Drivers and Pedestrians Fatally Injured in Motor Vehicle Accidents, Canada 1995*. Ottawa, June 1997
- 21-23 Statistics Canada. *National Population Health Survey, 1996-97*
- 24-26 <<http://www.health.gov.ab.ca/whatsnew/releases/aug11-99>>
- 27, 28 Statistics Canada, *Compendium of Vital Statistics 1996*. Ottawa: 1999
- 29-32 Statistics Canada, 1996 Census: *Unpaid Care*.
- 33, 34 Statistics Canada. *National Population Health Survey, 1994-95*
- 35-37 Zuehlke, Mark. *The Alberta Fact Book*. Vancouver: Whitecap, 1997

Solution to Alberta Acrostic #7 Fall '99

Erin Moure, *Search Procedures*

The bus marked with the Red Cres[c]ent completely blackened, [...] a door opens & the prisoners step out, alive. No one would have believed it. As if the Geneva Conventions covered only "Swiss watches."

Time pieces. Duty free on the plane back from Lisbon.

The winners of the Fall '99 Acrostic contest are:

Hank Unger, *Calgary*
Al Jamison, *Irma*
Grant Rombough, *Medicine Hat*
Lynn Racz, *Strathmore*
R. Shillington, *Calgary*
Mr. & Mrs. J.L.Hainsworth, *Calgary*

The winner of the Name the Poets contest is:

Pamela Banting of Calgary.
She receives a copy of George Melnyk's *Literary History of Alberta, Volume Two*, compliments of the University of Alberta Press.