



Excerpts from

Brother Mendel's Perfect Horse

by

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Translated from the Dutch

by

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Prologue

“For my sisters, my brother and I, the war was a peaceful time. In the summertime, not a day went by without my going for a ride along the river. Father ran the depot for stallions in southern Poland. He was in charge of more than one hundred pedigreed horses, the most noble animals in the Reich. Each spring they would be brought to the various stud farms to cover the mares; by July they were back at our depot. There were slender English thoroughbreds, two Lipizzaners from the Spanish Riding School at Vienna, five Berbers that had been confiscated in France, a handful of Arabs, thoroughbreds and crossbreeds, and also Noriker workhorses and obedient Huzuls, on which I myself had learned to ride at the age of five.

We lived at Schloss Ochab, a white-plastered mansion that served as the officers' quarters. Stallion depot Draschendorf was on the far shore of the Wijsel, that was where the Polish saddlers lived, the guards and the stablemen – the youngest of whom lived in the hayloft above the stalls. Auschwitz was thirty-five kilometers upstream. We children didn't know what a *Konzentrationslager* was. The word itself was too difficult, so we called it the *Konzertlager*.

Right before Christmas we picked a fat pig for the slaughter. "Churchill, prepare to meet your maker," my father said as he cut the animal's throat. I stood there hopping in excitement, even though I had no idea who Churchill was. The butcher made rolled meat and sausage out of it, which lasted us for months. On Christmas Eve my mother sang hymns from the Evangelical songbook, and accompanied herself on the piano. Father played the cello; he was given lessons by a cellist he had brought in specially from Vienna, a woman of whom we were in great awe, because she was the only one who dared speak up to Father.

For his subordinates, but also for us, he was hard and strict. He never beat us with a belt, but he did box our ears. Every so often he would have the single stablemen line up and drop their trousers; then the vet would come along to see whether any of them had venereal disease.

In the summer of 1944, Father had a siren placed on the roof of Schloss Ochab and established sentry duty at night, so that we could sleep peacefully. I began dreaming about *der Iwan*: that he would come to get us, or the horses. We knew that the Russians were approaching quickly, they had already pushed back our soldiers far to the other side of the Dnieper. But at the Wijsel, or so we were assured, they would be brought to a halt. Our house was on the safe side of the river, but the depot itself lay on the eastern bank. The horses were to be kept out of the hands of the Red Army at all costs.

Father began emergency evacuation drills. At unexpected moments he would set off the siren, and then everyone had to rush and saddle up half the horses and hitch the others to the carts and carriages from the coach house. Oats and hay, ropes, tackle, the tools belonging to the blacksmith and the veterinarian – everything had to be loaded up and tied down, and within three hours there would be a column of men and horses waiting on the road. One time during such a demonstration, when we had an important visitor, Father gave the order to march. He didn't send them across the bridge, but straight into the Wijsel. Everyone had to wade across the river and climb a hill on the other side.

"Just in case the enemy takes out the bridges," he explained to us that evening.

On August 7, 1944, the first swarm of Russian fighter planes appeared in the sky. I ran outside and stood beneath a beech tree, where I could see them flying over. The air shuddered with the roar of the engines. There were so many of them that it gradually grew dark in the middle of the day. Among the hundreds of planes that passed over, one opened its bay doors. A bomb slid out and hurtled to the ground just behind our house, close to the private stables with the coach horses and Hildach, Father's own horse. I braced myself for the explosion, but it didn't come. When we went to look, we found a five-hundred-liter fuel tank. It had been filled with kerosene, but that had run out and left muddy puddles around the tank. "A firebomb," Father said, "meant for us."

I was nine years old. From that moment on, I knew the war would reach us someday.

My sister, two years my elder, and I learned to shoot a pistol. "Beate! Come now, act like the daughter of a soldier!" she would be told whenever she found something to be scary or difficult. What we didn't know was that Father had been urging his superiors for weeks to be allowed to withdraw the stallions to the far side of the Oder. But he did not receive permission; retreat would be seen as a sign of weakness. No one was to know that the Reich was on the point of collapse, so everything continued as usual. During the first week of 1945, everyone was busy preparing for the new foaling season. On January

16 we celebrated Heidi's seventh birthday: she had invited one of her girlfriends and everyone was cheerful. The next morning, a commander phoned for Father. "Evacuate immediately!" was the order. That night the Russians had crossed the Wijsel and were regrouping before pushing on.

Mother packed the suitcases and told Beate, Heidi and me to pack our school notebooks and one toy apiece. Sitting at the table, she prepared a huge pile of sandwiches. Heidi and I were to be the first ones to leave, accompanied by a lance-corporal. Our coachman was already waiting on the sleigh to take us to the station. It was still dark out, and the only light came from a slight glimmer on the snow. I had the feeling the landscape was waving farewell. We had to wait forty-five minutes for the train to arrive, after that we had to change trains five times. Then we arrived at our refuge across the Oder, no longer in Poland, but in Czechoslovakia.

In the middle of the night our chauffeur arrived with Mother and Beate and the two little ones. Father was going to come by horse and wagon. His soldiers and servants made the trip in five days, at twenty degrees below zero. Everyone on horseback held a stallion by the reins as well. The riders had to dismount each hour and walk for an hour, in order not to freeze.

Our new shelter was on the estate of a baroness, who had enough stables for the animals. I felt safe, also because the Oder is deeper than the Wijsel. But during the first week of February my mother fell ill; she had stabbing pains in her abdomen. Father took her in the staff car to the hospital at Olmütz, where she was admitted right away. He went to visit her every other day, and always took one of the children with him. Heidi, who was the first to go with him, told us that evening that Mother had been lying there white as a sheet, her cheeks sunken. On February 15 it was my turn. When we arrived, Frau Hartwig, who took care of mother, was waiting for us at the gate. Father climbed out and talked to her, I could hear the tremor in his voice. I knew right away there was

something wrong with Mama. It was terribly cold in the car, and I just sat there and waited. Suddenly Father turned around. "*Friedel, Mutti ist tot!*" he said.

We entered the hospital, walked down high-ceilinged corridors, climbed the stairs. When I saw Mama's dress lying there, I couldn't help myself anymore. Frau Hartwig and the nurses tried to comfort me, but nothing helped. Until Father put on his major's voice. Crying was unsoldierlike, he had taught us not to cry at an early age.

Mother was cremated the next day at the cemetery in Olmütz, and we put her ashes in a copper urn. It was too bad we couldn't sing her favorite song, *Befiehl du deine Wege*, because the organist didn't have sheet music for it. When it was over, Father took Beate and me aside and said that we, as the oldest children, must be very brave from now on. There were more difficult times to come, he said. We didn't dare to ask him: "What kind of difficult times?" But we both had the feeling that Father was sharing with us some very important thing from the world of adults, and for that reason alone we felt very grown-up.

Right after my birthday, my tenth, Father left us alone. He had received orders to bring as many horses as possible by rail in the direction of Dresden. There he would try to get them across the Elbe, and as soon as he succeeded he would come back to fetch us, along with the last fifteen stallions that couldn't go the first time. Meanwhile, we were to form the *Nachtkommando* of the Draschendorf stud farm, under the leadership of Sgt. Wiszik. Father left on the Saturday before Easter and we never saw him again. Our farewell was extremely hurried, because cattle cars had suddenly become available.

Throughout the entire month of April, we waited for him to come back. Every day we heard new rumors about the Russians. The vanguard of the Red Army was rolling towards Berlin, far to the north of us, but the front behind that was spreading out in our direction. And Father still did not show up. In late April, Sgt. Wiszik took things into his own hands and planned our evacuation. In addition to two German corporals, our group

also consisted of seven Polish stablemen. And then there were the fifteen remaining horses, including Poseur, an English thoroughbred; Nero, a Holsteiner warmblood; Ibn Saud and Dakkar, two Arab half-breds, and the two Lipizzaner stallions from the imperial stables in Vienna: Conversano Olga and Conversano Gratirosa – two silvery-white gentlemen of sixteen and twenty-two, respectively. To make it easier to refer to them, we used only their maternal names, Olga and Gratirosa, which of course sounded funny for two stallions. Right before we fled they received new shoes from the village blacksmith.

Grandmother, who had been with us since Mother's cremation, sat with the little children in the tilt cart. In those days, she was never without her bag with the big handles; it contained Mother's ashes. Father's chauffeur was going to drive out ahead with the car bearing the banner of the Draschendorf depot, but suddenly the car refused to start and had to be towed. I sat on a flatbed wagon pulled by Lipizzaners, next to a soldier named Sylvester. We did everything precisely as Father had told us to, but we had no mounted scouts ahead of us or at the back. Standing there waiting to move, the entire caravan was about sixty meters long. We wanted to get going, but the local *Wehrmacht* commander had not yet given us permission. It was April 30: we didn't know that Hitler had committed suicide that day. The commander didn't either, in fact.

It wasn't until May 6 that he allowed us to go. We were planning to head to the west, along a route known as the *Sudetenstrasse*, which gave Prague a wide berth. Our destination was the big Lipizzaner farm at Hostau in the Bohemian Forest, close to the German border. But we got stuck almost right away: the road was too steep, it was raining, the wagons turned out to be overloaded. We may have covered twenty kilometers that first day, no more than that. A stroke of luck was that we were able to spend the night in a flax mill, where there were piles of cloth we could use to make beds. As soon as I closed my eyes, I saw flush-faced Russians everywhere.

The next day I had to ride one of the horses. And whenever one of the stablemen went out ahead, he would toss me the rope of the horse he was leading. We sold our own gelding for six hundred *Reichsmark* to a family who had a cart, but no horse. The roads were becoming clogged with refugees and columns of prisoners of war who were being evacuated on foot. Everything German was running for it. Everywhere we went we heard the lowing of cows who were no longer being milked. Whenever we came past an abandoned farm the Poles would hop off their horses and go looking for something to eat, eggs for example, which they slurped down raw. After the noon break, which had lasted far too long, they began to mutiny. They wanted to be paid in advance, in zlotys, otherwise they had no intention of working themselves to death for "the major's family". Those were their exact words. Grandmother climbed up onto the wagon and reprimanded them as Father would have. That helped a bit, because they decided not to desert.

But in the night of May 8 to 9, which we spent out of doors, they got drunk. We were planning to strike camp at first light. I was going to drive the Lipizzaners, and I was ready to go. Suddenly someone screamed: "Russians, everywhere!" Then there was no point anymore. Women's faces, Mongol women, began appearing all around us. I had never seen female soldiers before, let alone Asiatic female soldiers. They carried their rifles slung across their breasts, and on their belts they wore big cartridge canisters. Some of them were lying on their stomach in the wagons. I thought: German soldiers would sit up straight. Two of them came up to me, smiling – I could see their gold teeth flashing. The next moment they leveled their rifles at me. They waved the barrels to indicate that I should get down off the box. They were going to take me to Siberia, I was sure of that. But they turned out not to be interested at all in a flaxen-haired boy of ten. They were, however, interested in the two Lipizzaners. I had to hand over the reins, and that was it."

The “ts” of Lipizzaner

When you grow up at the edge of town, there are two things you can do. You either go downtown – to the square in front of the movie theater, where you smoke rollups and look out over the main street, which runs on another thirty kilometers to another, bigger town.

Or you head out into the fields.

In the neighborhood where I lived, the edge of town consisted quite concretely of the row of flats on Speenkruidstraat, three eleven-storey walls standing shoulder to shoulder. At the end of the walkways, each floor had a fire escape that wound down acrobatically to right above a ditch and a barbed-wire fence. It was precisely there that the first field began. Crossing it, you came to a rutted road that ran past sourish mounds of silage all the way to the Deurzer Canal.

On warm summer days, we - those of us who had chosen for the fields - floated downstream in rubber boats. The dam at Deurze was as far as we came. During my elementary-school days, this was the world ended. Here the canal had a sloping bank that seemed made for sunbathing. But I had neither the patience nor the propensity for lolling about. One afternoon, while the others were warming themselves like lizards, I climbed the fence to scout out what lay beyond.

Past a stand of willows and an old bathtub that served as a trough, I came to another slope, steep as a railroad embankment with a row of poplars running along the top. There was no way I could see over it, so I climbed up the side of it on my belly like a spy, using knees and elbows. Craning my neck - like a lizard as well - I peered out over a rectangle of white sand worn with paths circular and diagonal.

Tight, symmetrical figures. The sand ran all the way to a barn with both doors closed. Just as I was about to stand up, I heard whinnying.

A door slid open and lit up in the darkness so created was a white horse, that hesitated there for a moment as though posing for a picture. The animal stepped from the frame with a graceless tread, led by a girl in riding boots with hair down to her buttocks. At twenty, thirty paces from my hiding place they stopped. Face to face, even lip to lip they stood there, it was like they were spooning.

Then another stable door opened and from that black square a white horse appeared as well, not hesitantly but at a trot, snorting, its tail raised like a captured flag. A balding man with striking sideburns was leaning back on the halter, yanking on it like an emergency brake, and together they turned a few times on their axis. Sand flew up. I could smell the penetrating odor of horse.

The animal that was waiting began scraping one hoof rhythmically over the ground. "Better put that hobble on her anyway," I heard the man shout to the girl. She took a strap that was fixed at her waist like a lasso and slipped it with no little difficulty around one of the horse's back legs; the other end of the strap she brought up between the forelegs and buckled it around the animal's neck. I understood that the two grays had not been brought out to trot around the exercise ring. But I was still not prepared for what came next. The hobbled mare was. She swept her tail to one side and remained frozen in that position, like a statue.

The stallion, trotting to and fro proudly at the end of his slackened rope, shook his head, then stopped abruptly. His black eyes remained fixed either on the tops of the poplars or the high cumulus above them, in any case far over my head. I pressed myself down further against the dyke in order not to be seen, but also in order not to see everything. Beneath the stallion's body, its telescopic member slid out segment by segment. I wanted to run away but kept watching, transfixed. The stallion's penis was black with a

flesh-colored knob, longer than I would have thought possible and crooked and rubbery as an elephant's trunk. Then he pounced. The balding man seized the stallion's crooked organ and tugged at it to help him aim. The powerful male animal was transformed into a pantomime of helplessness, flailing with his front legs but unable to gain purchase on the flanks before him. At every thrust his mane fell ridiculously over his eyes. I remember how he tilted his head to the left, then to the right, to set his yellow horsey teeth in the mare's withers. He bit her, she submitted to it – and all this took place as soundless and jerkily as in a silent movie.

[...]

Almost every afternoon after school Jelle and I could be found at De Tarpan, and at the weekends and during the holidays. The paved yard of the manege was our domain, we were allowed in everywhere: in the tack room, on the roof of the big barn to fasten down a rattling galvanized sheet, amid the audibly breathing horses in the stable and even in the owner's house. Although we did not sleep there, it sometimes seemed as though we, stable-boys and –girls, were at home at De Tarpan – just like the horses.

[...]

In principle, we could ride any of the horses, with the exception of the white stallion. He was not the biggest horse in the stable, but he did possess the most “nobility”. He had a neck like an arch, a silvery-gray mane with an artistic curl to it and eyes that were striking by virtue of their size and blackness. Whenever a mare in heat walked past he would slam his flanks against the walls of his stall. His muzzle was covered in flecks devoid of pigment, he had an “l” tattooed on the left side of his jaw and a “p” on his right haunch, topped by an imperial crown. On the door of his stall was a nameplate:

CONVERSANO PRIMULA

Primula, or “Prim” for short, belonged to Piet. In the five years I spent at De Tarpan, I never saw the owner of our riding school astride his Lipizzaner. Piet trained Primula by walking right behind him, like a coachman without the coach, his hands held out equidistant to the stallion’s tail. At noontime, if there were no lessons to be given, he would take him out of the stall for this “long-lining”. Others climbed onto their horses and spurred them on, but for Piet Bakker this was the ultimate discipline. He needed no spurs, or jodhpurs or boots.

One time I asked Piet what made Primula different from other horses.

“His blood,” Piet answered.

“What’s different about his blood?”

“It’s blue blood. Bluer than that of any other horse. “

I had been watching their noon exercises. Primula could gallop so slowly, almost in slow motion, that Piet could keep up with him by walking. That was how it was supposed to be: during the long-line exercises, you weren’t supposed to run. Your horse’s power was primarily directed upwards, taking him free of the ground. That was easiest to see during the “airs above the ground”: it looked then as though Primula were bouncing on a trampoline and hanging suspended in air for just the click of a shutter.

Harness racing was exhausting, hard riding. Horse races, according to Piet, were like the local motorcycle TT in nearby Assen. But even the more sophisticated forms of riding were not sophisticated enough for him. The steeplechase was track and field. Dressage was gymnastics. What we did at De Tarpan was the art of classical equestrianism. Ballet.

After the noon session, Piet called me over to him on the white sand of the outdoor ring. While Primula chewed on a handful of concentrate, Piet told me that the Lipizzaner breed was the product of centuries of minute adjustments. Since 1580, at the imperial stud farm belonging to the court of the Habsburgs, located on a ridge above Trieste,

form had been given to a horse meant to carry kings and emperors. There, the Austro-Hungarian equerries had created a noble and pure breed. Power and grace, loyalty and eagerness to learn – these traits had all been brought together in this one animal, by means of selection and crossbreeding.

Piet ran his fingers down Primula's backbone, like a vet, and counted the distinct vertebrae starting at the base of the tail. Between the thirteenth and the fourteenth he stopped and pressed against the cartilage. "Amazing, isn't it?"

I suppose I shrugged.

This, Piet said, was one of the breeding traits of the Lipizzaner: starting at the thirteenth vertebra, they possessed built-in flexibility. That was why they were more supple than other horses when it came to performing the levade, the position in which they rise up on their back legs for a few moments – like a controlled form of rearing. It was the pose in which the triumphant general reported to his sovereign, and in which he would later be immortalized in the form of painting or sculpture.

Primula took a few steps to one side and began shaking his head. "Has the inspection lasted long enough?" Piet looked at him the way a father looks at his son, and ran his hand over his neck.

"Try it," he said to me.

I thought he wanted me to feel that his stallion hadn't even worked up a lather, but he had.

"Well? Do you feel that?"

"What am I supposed to feel?"

"When you touch a Lipizzaner," Piet said, "you're touching history."

[...]

The last time I'd seen anything of Primula was in a movie. In an almost deserted theater in 1991 I saw five of his sons and daughters pass by. First Pjotr, then Lublice, Tarras, Latka and Sarpa – all half-breds who had already reached the age of selection and were therefore Lipizzaner white. Along with the purebred Lipizzan mare Nobila, they were playing in a film based on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.

[...]

There were six viewers in the theater, including myself. For ninety minutes were we submersed in a fairy-tale world. We saw winged angels on swings, and greyhounds, the most streamlined of all land animals. Shakespeare did not give one the impression that we flabby humans were the crown of creation. He presented a devil – “a born devil, on whose nature nurture can never stick”- in order to firmly underscore the incorrigibility of the villainous strain of mankind. Against this background, the Lipizzaners radiated calm and innocence, as though they stood far above human machinations. It seemed to me that they looked more sincere than their masters.

For the first time then, and many times since, I asked myself what it was that people tried to express with the animals with which they surround themselves. Or, in the case of the horse: what does the animal embody in the eyes of man? It occurred to me that the horse is a bearer of a host of human traits. Those character traits have been imposed , rubbed in, foisted upon him – which is not to say that he is not saturated with them through and through. For starters, the horse was made a slave, obedient and tame. That took some six thousand years, but the result was really something: unlike the zebra, the horse would eat from your hand. He would allow his hooves to be shod and his teeth to be flossed – as was the daily custom with the Arabs belong to King Hassan. In almost every culture, the horse was on a level above that of other grazers, he was their herder. And festooned with straps he used his muscle power to cleave the soil, thereby

increasing the crops' yield; the surplus he dragged to town as though born to do nothing else. Many a civilization was elevated on four hooves, and when those civilizations collided, the speed and agility of their horses often served to determine the outcome.

A dog could be vicious (something seen as a typically animal characteristic), but a horse was brave and proud. In every age there were men who loved their horse better than their wife. The dying wish of a Roman general? To see his horse one last time. And Emperor Caligula, a contemporary of Jesus of Nazareth, clothed his stallion Incitatus in purple and considered having him appointed consul.

Ever since the distant past, when the horse was first admitted to the circles of aristocracy, he has come to be treated less and less like an animal.

[...]

The Lipizzaner was the horse to top all horses. Of all breeds, the Lipizzaner came closest to the bastions of human power. You saw him perform at the coronation of shahs, parvenu rulers and Third-World dictators – but also in Washington, at the inauguration of President Reagan in 1980. What was it about this animal that appealed to them? Its checked strength? Its training? Or perhaps the white coat and the underlying notion of purity? The human species did not lend itself so easily to being molded and made, it was – despite its knowledge and expertise – as yet unable to significantly improve upon itself. This despite the remarkable results humans had achieved with their own pets. Man had designed the Haflinger, the Orlovdraver, the Clydesdale, the Friesian horse, the Connemara pony. More than four centuries of refinement lay behind the present-day Lipizzaner, as oldest “cultivated breed”. Generation upon generation, the horses were selected for both outer and inner beauty – or at least for what was seen as beauty by the Habsburg court of that moment. Each summer, a number of the best male four-year-olds were brought to Vienna. They ascended to the pinnacle of the pyramid of

civilization, and received shelter in the palace, where they ate from red-marble troughs. It then took ten to twelve years of training to school the individual stallion in all disciplines of the *Hohe Schule*. In the imperial manege, the fully qualified Lipizzaner performed his kinetic art to the strains of Händel, Chopin and Strauss. He danced.

When the credits rolled past, I waited long enough to see the special word of thanks to “Piet Bakker and De Tarpan riding school”, and even after that I remained seated. The lights in the theater went on, but I was still caught up in my flow of thoughts. Man had created the horse in his ideal image, there was nothing religious about that. From the rough *Equus ferus* of the steppes he had molded *Equus caballus*, an animal with 64 chromosomes: two fewer than his wild forefather. Neither God nor Darwin’s slow evolution had played a role in it. The result was a new species which, with a little coaching in the way of stage directions, could perform Shakespeare.
