

The Katzenstadel

Augsburg Gestapo Prison, Bavaria

Fear? This wasn't fear, this was something else. This was another dimension to which even the word terror could not do justice. This was a fear that transcended everything he understood as fear. It was a merging of the brutal excesses of the Dark Ages with thoroughly modern psychological tortures of the modern age, creating a disjointed and nightmarish microcosm of sadistic madness.

Richard had been here over a month now, not knowing what terrible fate awaited him.

The dull, cold prison walls seemed to contain within them the collective memories of all those poor wretches who had found themselves here before him. Some had scratched the evidence of their existences onto the walls, epitaphs on tombstones: "***Here I lie, tortured and broken, waiting to die. Thomas R.***" one prisoner had written: "***What is my crime they will not say. Yet here I wait, day on day. Joseph K. November 1933.***"

In the time before the Nazis, the Katzenstadel had served as the Augsburg's city prison, where misery took its mildest form, without the beatings and torture that were carried out here now the Gestapo had taken it over. The Katzenstadel had taken on a new dimension that had more in common with the worst accesses of the Spanish Inquisition than it did with a modern and "enlightened" civilisation. Richard had come to realise that "enlightened" and "modern" and "civilisation" were self-deluding lies built on unsteady foundations. If a country like his could fall so easily into this depravity, then so all civilisations could fall just as easily. Where was empathy? Pity? Justice? Humanity?

The human animal is base and savage at its core, he concluded with deep cynicism that issued from despair. That's why we need laws, because without laws, we become the thing we are, the thing we strive not to be, the primitive and base savage turning on itself. It's far easier to hate than to love, his father once said to him, and there are masses of people who just love to hate. Hatred is the mantra of Fascism and Fascism is the child of hatred, one cannot exist without the other.

The Katzenstadel was like a lunatic asylum. The prison galleries echoed day and night with the slamming of cell doors and the hellish screams of anguish and pain. The beatings, the floggings, the constant degradation.

Today, madness descended to a new level, when the Katzenstadel echoed with the rasping voice of Marlene Dietrich singing: "*Ich bin von Kopf bis Fuss auf Liebe eingestellt.*" The irony wasn't lost on him, over the past several days the prison had been filling up with homosexuals or people accused of being homosexual, from police and Gestapo actions taking place right across country.

They had beaten Richard, abused him, spat on him and several days ago, three politicals sodomised him while the guards looked on. What more could they do to him, *apart* from kill him?

He squatted in the corner of his cell, huddled up embracing his knees, startled witless by every approaching footfall he heard outside on the landing. His heart pounded in his breathless chest in utter dread, paranoid that they were coming to rape him again.

Marlene sang: *“Ich bin von Kopf bis Fuss Auf Liebe eingestellt Denn das ist meine Welt und sonst gar nichts Das ist, was soll ich machen Meine Natur Ich kann halt lieben nur Und sonst gar nichts...”* (Love’s always been my game, Play it as I may I was born that way – Can’t help it...)

Jackboots outside clapped on the landing. They were almost outside the door. His body went rigid with fear, his rictus face pocked with ice-cold beads of sweat. The jackboots stopped outside and he gave out a whimpering gasp and jumped up onto his feet, backing up against the wall as the key clattered in the lock – metal against metal, each sound like a gunshot slamming into his body. The lock turned and clicked...

Marlene sang: *“Männer umschwirr’n mich Wie Motten um das Licht Und wenn sie verbrennen - Ja dafür kann ich nichts Ich bin von Kopf bis Fuss Auf Liebe eingestellt Ich kann...”* (Men flock around me like moths around a flame – And if their wings burn, I know I’m not to blame...)

The door swung open and an SS guard stood in the door holding Richard's clothes. He threw them down on the floor. ‘Get dressed, queer!’ he barked. ‘You’re leaving.’

Richard hurriedly dressed. Dare he hope that they were releasing him? Dare he even think it? Once he was dressed, he was marched along the landing towards the security doors at the end.

‘You’re going to Dachau.’

Richard gasped and the music stopped, and for a second, Richard thought his heart had stopped too. *Dachau!* Just when he thought terror couldn’t become more terrifying, he learned that it could. Terror is the abyss, he thought, bottomless and beyond what words can express.

The sound of the gramophone stylus on the spinning record crackled through the loudspeakers.