1. September 1939 Paris

by Max Gutmann

We were growing increasingly nervous and tense, almost wishing for some physical release. After the signing of the German/Russian Pact it became clear to me that war was inevitable - and yet one had to wonder, wouldn't England and France capitulate again exactly as they had done a year before? With their well-proven methods, the Nazis' propaganda machine was trying to create a steadily increasing atmosphere of anxiety, and a large part of the Parisian press was a willing follower along this path. You could sense a repressive feeling of fear of the war, and of the unknown. The rolling blackouts of public lighting in the streets had a particularly oppressive effect. People mobbed the newspaper shops. Even in the days before September first, Paris had lost much of its carefreeness.

There was continuous discussion in the office. Budz, as well as Axel and I, were of the opinion that war was now unavoidable. His sister-in-law was firmly convinced that it would not happen. However, she prudently obtained her American immigration visa, which she could have gotten much earlier, so she was only postponing her departure.

On that Friday as always, at about 9AM, I went to the office, still with no clue that this day would be the start of a gigantic world catastrophe which only after five years, all of them filled with unheard of suffering for us, would reach its end. I don't know whether Axel arrived shortly before or after me, in any case he was there when I went to the telephone, as I did every day in this period of uncertainty, to listen to the latest news. And just at that moment they announced that the Germans had begun their invasion of Poland this morning. After Axel had listened to it too, we called Budz. He went to the radio to hear a confirmation of this announcement. It was clear for us that this meant war, as we had foreseen and feared, and the arrival of which we had accepted as unavoidable. But now the reality of it confronted us very suddenly and frighteningly. It was impossible to continue working, we had to decide how to wind things up because we knew that our hours of freedom were numbered and that we would soon be interned. Then we listened to part of Hitler's speech, delivered that morning before the Reichstag, and which was broadcast repeatedly on the radio at regular intervals. The speech made things pretty clear for us. Hitler as usual began with Adam and Eve, arrived with great shouting at the "Polish Affair", in order finally to announce, "We have been shooting since this morning". That was unequivocal, it meant war, which undoubtedly would not remain localized. Indeed, shortly afterwards we heard the announcement over the radio of the French general mobilization which was to begin on Sunday. Thus began the great catastrophe, of which one could not know when it would end, but which one feared would last a very long time. We had only a vague feeling about the degree of suffering which would descend upon us in Europe, fortunately the amount of sorrow, misery and atrocities could not be foreseen. The knowledge of it would probably have made it impossible for us to bear it all and survive.

All of us in Budz's living room that day were nervous and agitated. When we thought of war at that time we imagined, first of all, that heavy bombardments would begin immediately, but in reality that came only much later. But the entire war took a totally different course in detail than our feeble imaginations could have foreseen. Internment certainly awaited us, and we could be certain that it would not be very cheerful.

Budz paced up and down the room as he always did when he delivered his long monologues, or rather editorials. He thought that he would probably be in a camp for only two or three weeks, that it might last longer for the rest of us, but that, in any case, he would do everything possible to assist in our release. This was one of his usual promises, which he would certainly have forgotten even if he had ever had the possibility of fulfilling it. However, this possibility wasn't granted to him because he actually remained in the camp much longer and under much more difficult conditions than I. At that

point he did not take into account the spirit of the French conduct of the war, which began by imprisoning Hitler's victims, and his real and most serious adversaries.

We returned to the office where I went to the telephone to call Friedl. Or rather, I called Fritz Hagen at the Ewerts' in order to have him tell her that she should "pack my backpack". That was the code for her having prepare my things for an internment camp. Fritz agreed. Half an hour later Friedl called me. When I picked up the phone and announced myself (in French), Friedl responded, "Peter?", and immediately the telephone operator cut into the conversation: "*Parlez Francais, s'il vous plais*"[1], although we had not yet spoken another word. It was already the start of the police state, of the mistrustful surveillance that Daladier obviously had begun in the wrong place, instead of directing the war effectively, or at least preparing it energetically. Friedl asked me where we were going. Apparently Fritz had incorrectly transmitted my message. Nevertheless I began to consider the possibility of our leaving together.

We straightened things out in the office, our final task, since it was clear to me that work at the Weltbühne had come to an end.

Axel and I left about noon without making arrangements to return either that afternoon or the following day. The streets were full of people, far more than would be normal around this hour. Faces were serious, somber and depressed. We spoke almost not at all. Axel did not know French, and we didn't dare to be heard speaking German. We were afraid of possible outbursts of "popular anger" which obviously would be directed only against refugees. In fact, however, no such excesses happened anywhere, the generally serious mood did not seem to permit the expression of either patriotism or anger.

I joined Friedl while she was packing, which always had a painful effect on me. Our little room already had an empty and sad appearance, the floral wallpaper suddenly looked wilted and poor.

I discussed with Friedl the possibility of going to the Kraus's at Ermitage where only a few days ago we had broken off our vacation. We told ourselves that Paris, as had been announced, would probably be evacuated and that it would be better for us if we could choose the place of our evacuation ourselves. Besides, we were pretty tired of the big city, and the threat of bombardments in Paris was a welcome pretext to leave. Should I have to go to a camp (somehow we still hoped that it wouldn't come to that; a vague and totally unfounded hope) it would, after all, make no difference whether we were in Paris or elsewhere. But behind all that, in the background, was always the unspoken hope that we might possibly be able to escape the war after all, and perhaps dig ourselves into some small little nest far away from the shooting. However, things happened very differently than we had wished.

Finally we made the decision to leave together, this was in the afternoon while we were in town doing some shopping. This decision had come quite suddenly, and we immediately went to the Comissariat in order to officially register our intent to depart. Thus our decision became final. Somehow our hearts felt relieved because we were about to actually do something rather than simply continuing to wait.

We returned home and I told the hotel owner of our departure. He asked me, as he had before, whether I would once again return to my own country. For him it was an obvious course of action. I again tried to explain to him what my position was, and that of a refugee in general, although I had no hope whatsoever that he would ever understand it. But at the moment I didn't much care.

In the evening we went to Hagens to say goodbye. Fritz thought that he too would leave if he could. In addition he expressed some somber thoughts about the possible progression of the war, based on his knowledge of "*je m'en foutismus*"[2], as the French saying goes.

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[1] *"Please speak French!"*

[2] *"I don't give a damn" attitude*

The next Saturday morning we continued our preparations for the trip, mostly packing, which occupied me less than Friedl. Then I brought a few extraneous things, which we could not take with us, to the Hagens. Concidentally, just a few days earlier, I had helped Fritz drag down to the cellar a number of his paintings and other things that couldn't be taken.

Saturday afternoon we were done. I found a cab, which took some effort, and stowed our luggage. All the streets, and especially the railroad stations, were full of police and *gardes-mobile*[3]. Heightened police activity was the first evidence of the war effort.

The *Montparnasse* railroad station was full of humanity, all of them trying to leave Paris. The first refugees. After I had checked the largest pieces of our luggage we went to the train, which although it was long before departure and despite its enormous length, was already chock-full.

Thus with many others we ran along the platform, I with one heavy and one smaller suitcase in hand, puffing, sweating in the heat, looking for an empty seat somewhere. Every car was stuffed full. Because of the effort I could barely run any more, when the handle of the suitcase came loose. That was all we needed, the train was to about to depart. I quickly made a makeshift repair, and we continued running along length of the train. We got on where it was still barely possible to do so and settled ourselves in the corridor of the car standing or sitting on our suitcases. The train was full of refugees, women, children and men, soldiers who had been mobilized and were joining their regiments. Later on Friedl even managed once in a while to find a seat in a compartment. It was already dark when we arrived in Nantes, and again there was a huge mass of people at the station. I inquired about the next train to Pornic and learned, to our terrible disappointment, that we could continue only the following morning. Looking for a hotel room was hopeless, and we had to spend the night in the waiting room just like so many others, most of whom were also coming from Paris. There were many families with children, older ones as well as very small infants. Children were crying, their mothers tried to calm them. They laid them down on benches, on tables and on the floor. Here a woman was nursing her child, there another was changing a diaper. Pieces of luggage were lying about everywhere, people were continually coming and going, there was a pervasive mood of anxiety, and there was no way of even thinking of sleep. Groups of mobilized soldiers ran, stood, lay about in the station. They sang, screamed, quarreled; many were blind drunk but nonetheless continued drinking. Thus we sat amidst the noise and anxiety in this night of war, in a railroad station waiting room, tired and depressed, and considered the woeful image that offered itself. The misery of war was uncovering its face.

It was still completely dark and long before the scheduled departure time when we sat ourselves down in the train. I was in a bad mood and had some misgivings. Had it been right to leave Paris so suddenly? Should I not have at least informed Budz beforehand? What would Fritz and Anni say when we arrived unexpectedly? As it grew lighter, in order to calm myself, I wrote a letter to Budz. Most of all, I would have liked to return to Paris right away. Everything that I discussed with Friedl on that subject was essentially an attempt to justify myself to myself.

We had a short layover in Pornic before the departure of the bus, and we went to a small café across from the station to have some breakfast. Eventually we continued our travel, and as the bus drove through the beautiful countryside on this summer morning, and as I once again saw the sea, the barometer of my mood began to rise again. What harm could the trip do? What, after all, could I have accomplished in Paris? Perhaps this trip would spare us some anxiety, at least for a short time, and perhaps even for longer. When we arrived at Fritz and Anni's little house in Ermitage, both were still sleeping and we had to wake them. They were more than a little astonished to suddenly see us there. At first they could not quite grasp why we should have come just at this time, while they were considering whether they might not want to return to Paris.

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[3] *a form of National Guards*

In the course of the morning we all discussed it together and decided that we had acted properly. I was satisfied, and became even more so when I was again able to enjoy the beach, the sea, the little woods, and this entire calm, beautiful little piece of Earth.

A sense of anxiety seized us again that evening when the time of the ultimatum that had been given to Germany expired[4]. But we had known the result in advance. It was already dusk when I went shopping with Fritz in the single small grocery of the village. We were just about to leave when a car came driving up at an insane speed and stopped suddenly. An excited man rushed out and called to the proprietress that there was an air raid alarm in Nantes and that she had to lower the shutters immediately for a blackout. He added that there was to be a blackout everywhere in the region. Fritz and I went home. We closed the shutters, and, by the light of an oil lamp, we spent the evening in a pretty depressed mood.

The next morning Friedl and I went to Saint Brevin to register at the Town Hall. We walked along the beach, the sun was shining, as always the sea lay in front of us in all its majesty. In St. Brevin there was hardly any trace of the war to be noticed. The vacationers were in town and in the stores, and were bathing at the beach as usual. At the *Mairie* they endorsed our identity cards without any problem.

All of this gave us the courage in the afternoon to go and rent a little house, the one next door to Fritz and Anni that had just become vacant. We had already discussed this with the owner the day before. We did this with the vague hope of possibly being able to stay there. Our illusions were soon to be destroyed. Towards evening Fritz and I were about to go to the bus station to see if our luggage had arrived. At that moment an acquaintance of Fritz arrived, a Russian woman who lived in the neighborhood, and told us that there were posters everywhere according to which all *"ressortissants allemands"*[5] had to go to a an internment camp. We accompanied the woman part of her way back home and, indeed, found the poster. Discouraged, we went to the man who lived at the bus depot and who was apparently some kind of "stationmaster". He immediately asked us if we had seen the poster. The man suddenly seemed terribly important to himself as protector of the homeland, and without even knowing our nationality, he urged us to immediately get ourselves to the *"camp de rassemblement"*[6] in the region of Nantes. He surely would become a good collaborationist later on. Therefore, carrying the one suitcase that had arrived, we trundled back home to report the sad news to Friedl and Anni. Fritz, of course, did not yet believe that, as a Czech, he might also have to go to the camp. I felt pretty sick. France's very first action was to imprison Hitler's foes, and from that fact no good could come, neither for the world at large nor for us.

We now made the necessary preparations for my departure to camp. Friedl packed my backpack. How often since then did she again pack for all possible journeys into the unknown! We were already in bed when we heard the sound of a motorcycle. We barely heard Fritz talking to somebody, then the motorcycle left. Immediately afterwards Fritz came and told us that "Mr. Busybody" from the bus station had been here to tell us that we had to be on a particular bus to Paimbeouf the following morning, where the gendarmerie was expecting us. He added that we had to present ourselves with the phrase: "*Je me constitue prisonnier*"[7]! For that man the war had truly begun, and he was undoubtedly very proud to have captured two "prisoners". For us, too, the war had begun - it was conducted against those of us who were the most determined of Hitler's enemies. Here again, we were its first victims and its first prisoners.

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[4] *...and the Allies declared war on Germany*
[5] *German nationals*
[6] *detention camp*
[7] *"I surrender as a prisoner"*

The next morning Fritz and I were at the bus station at the appointed time. Anni and Friedl came with us; they wanted to accompany us to Paimboeuf. The "*Chef de Gare*"[8] took our names, and after he had written them down on a piece of paper turned with a triumphant look on his face and announced "*Kreischefaschener*"! We looked at him in astonishment, then looked at each other - what could this strange word mean? He realized that we had not understood, and he repeated his bizarre expression even more vehemently. The solution of the puzzle came to Fritz. *Kriegsgefangener*![9] The man was so happy in his conviction that he had captured two prisoners of war that he felt compelled to say it in German! For him, all foreigners were "*boches*"[10]; he had all the necessary qualities to eventually become a good *Légionnaire*, *Lavalist* or *Milicien*[11], and a year later, when the Germans came to the region, he undoubtedly served them well.

After the good man had assured himself that we had actually gotten on the bus, and after having told the driver that we did not have to pay for the trip, we drove off to Paimboeuf. At the bus station a gendarme approached us and accompanied us to the gendarmerie. There we had to wait a few minutes for the commandant, who, like all the others there, was very friendly and told us simply that we had to be back to board the bus to Nantes at about 5 PM; but in the meantime we were free to do what we liked. Fritz learned, to his distress, that he, too, had to go to the camp. Czechs, as far as the authorities were concerned, were as much German nationals as were German refugees, at least in the *Loire Inferieure*[12]. The fact that later on in the camp we also encountered Poles didn't surprise us anymore. The inhabitants of all those countries which were occupied by Germans were Germans, period! This was a small foretaste of the "*drole de guerre*"[13] which was just now starting. Fritz returned again to the Ermitage with Anni to collect the things he needed for camp. I had all the necessities with me, and these turned out later on to have been chosen quite sensibly. After all, I had been resigned for more than a year to the fact of having to go to a camp at some time, and had had plenty of time to consider what I needed to take along.

Friedl and I went into the village to make some small last-minute purchases: a tin plate, a drinking cup, chocolate, *etc*. We went for a walk, sat on a bench, and talked a lot without saying much, although our hearts were full. We were preoccupied by the immediate and the more distant future, but that future was the war, which was completely unknowable to us in its course and in its duration. Of one thing we were certain, that this marked the eventual end of *national socialism*[14] and the beginning of huge changes. But what was to happen in the meantime lay in the dark, and those few ideas we entertained in our imaginations turned out to have nothing to do with the reality that was to unfold - the horrendous, earthshaking, exhilarating and sometimes grotesque reality of the actual historical events, which had just begun to drag us into its whirlpool.

We foresaw that there would be much personal suffering, we knew that for an unknown period, and under even more unknown circumstances, we would be separated again. Friedl would once again be alone, she would have to try and create a life for herself in this new and unpredictable situation. At first she wanted to stay with Anni, who after all, was also about to be left alone with her small child. But at least I was taken care of, the French state had taken that task on itself. We were not depressed, and I was actually rather curious about what was yet to come.

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[8] *stationmaster*
[9] *"prisoners of war"*
[10] *"krauts"*
[11] *collaborationist paramilitary units*
[12] *region of the Lower Loire*
[13] *"phony war", the militarily quiet 8-month period between the Allies' declaration of war on 3 Sept 1939 and Germany's invasion of Belgium, Holland, Luxembourg and France on 10 May 1940*
[14] *the Nazi movement*

At noon we went together to a restaurant, it was still a good, genuine peacetime meal, with everything that is customary for a French dinner. We went for another walk and sat down on a bench on the bank of the Loire delta. The *gendarme*[15] who had met us at the bus in the morning was making his rounds on a bicycle. He got off and chatted with us. He was an older man who had been retired but was recalled for active duty. He seemed to feel the need to cheer us up.

Time passed quickly, and our time together came to an end. I returned to the Gendarmerie to retrieve the backpack and blankets that I had left there. The bus arrived, Fritz was already sitting inside with many others, all bound for the same destination. I took my leave of Friedl and got on board. The bus began to move in the direction of Nantes, I watched through the window, Friedl stood on the curb and her eyes followed the bus as it moved away. It was September 5, 1939.

[15] *police officer*