

**THE CELLIST
OF DACHAU**

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MARTIN GOODMAN



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Martin Goodman's debut novel *On Bended Knees*, shortlisted for the Whitbread First Novel Award, heralded a major theme of his writing: the aftermath of wars. His nonfiction picked up the theme when his biography of the scientist who worked to counter WW1 gas attacks, *Suffer & Survive*, won 1st Prize, Basis of Medicine in the BMA Book Awards. In *Client Earth*, which won the Jury's Choice Business Book of the Year Award 2018, and the Green Book Award from Santa Monica Libraries, he told the story of ecolawyers who battle to rescue the planet from human destruction. He is Emeritus Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Hull.

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On Bended Knees

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Suffer & Survive: The Extreme Life of Dr J.S. Haldane

On Sacred Mountains

In Search of the Divine Mother

For

*The adults who made music in the ghetto, and
Honza Treichlinger and the child cast of Brundibár,
Terezín 1943-1944*

We create hell and paradise here,
Where love and hate blossom together,
Animating life.

– Luis Cernuda, ‘The Lover Digresses’
– trs. Rick Lipinski

Time is the *element* of narration . . . It is also the element
of music, which itself measures and divides time, making it
suddenly diverting and precious.

– Thomas Mann (*The Magic Mountain*,
trs. John E. Woods)

Music is mankind’s greatest miracle.

– Alice Herz Sommer

1

Vienna, 1938

We need what the words miss out.

From his cello Otto Schalmik drew notes that went up through the ceiling and into the apartment above, and down through the floorboards to the apartment below. Otto was nineteen and stuck in his bedroom at home. He might have been quieter, but was not in the mood. His manner of playing his cello was to attack it.

Otto's head was bowed and his large ears were close to the belly of the cello, yet what he heard most acutely was not the notes he played but the tread of soft leather shoes on parquet flooring. Though stout, Frau Schalmik walked in a crisp rhythm. That rhythm had nothing to do with the rhythm Otto was playing. Why not? It was deliberate, he decided.

He speeded up a little and played still louder. His mother's footsteps stopped. She opened his door and watched him.

'What?' he said.

He sliced the bow free of the strings and sighed.

'It's a gigue,' she said.

‘So?’

‘A *gigue* is a dance. Try making it dance.’

‘I am making it dance.’

‘You’re making it stomp about. Do you think Bach was angry when he wrote it?’

He looked at her, one of those glares that said *go away*. She wore an apron, its pattern of flowers washed and faded to whiteness. Beneath it was a skirt and blouse of dark crimson. Her hair was pulled back beneath an ebony headband. She was dressed for cooking and yet ready for a party.

‘Come, set the table,’ she said. ‘Your sister will be here soon.’

The cloth was spread over the table. His mother had starched it so its white was brighter than ever. A grandmother he never knew had stitched clusters of tiny daisies around its hem, white on white. Two candles were lit and in glass holders.

‘Oh no,’ Otto said. ‘Hugo’s coming.’

‘Would Erna come without Hugo?’

Frau Schalmik bundled cutlery onto the table for Otto to set in place. Otto’s father brought the wine glasses from the cabinet, one at a time, and polished each with a soft cloth. His mother headed to the kitchen. Otto set down the last knife and followed her.

Frau Schalmik backed away from the oven and even Otto felt the blast of heat as she reached inside and pulled out a blackened tray. She handled it so the spits of fat fell back on the chicken and not into her face, and set the tray down on

the hob. She turned the potatoes and spooned fat on the chicken's flesh that already showed signs of gold. Asparagus spears were aligned in an earthenware dish on the counter.

'Erna comes, and we find food suddenly?'

His mother heaved the bird back into the oven and slammed shut the door and then took a moment to set her fists against her hips and face him.

'A boy who won't stop growing resents that we feed his sister.'

'I grow on potato soup.'

'You grow on air. You grow on anything. You just grow. But today you can grow on chicken and be thankful like the rest of us. Go put on your kippah.'

'Let Hugo wear what he wants. I'll wear what I want.'

'You'll wear what I say. You'll put on a clean shirt too.'

She out-stared him. He turned and left the kitchen.

Herr Schalmik stood by the dining table, folding his own kippah down across his skull. He lifted one eyebrow at his son, and then smiled. 'Your playing was good,' he said.

'It was terrible.'

'The boy knows best. Me, I am not so musical. I have ears for music like a mole has eyes for the world. Still, when my boy plays my heart sings.'

Otto almost smiled, and went to fetch his headgear.

A clean starched shirt hung in his wardrobe, its buttons done up so he could slip it over his head. His head was emerging from the cotton when he heard the knock on their front door. Erna had her own key, but nowadays the door was

bolted when they were all at home. This was Erna's knock, a light and rhythmic frapping with her knuckles. It announced her presence without yelling it out.

The bolts, both top and bottom, were pulled back, the door opened, and the bolts shot back into place. The four adults let themselves murmur as they moved along the corridor. Once inside the dining room their laughter and greetings swelled out.

Otto heard all this, and then went to join them.

'See,' his mother said. 'Look at the smile on the boy. See how happy Otto is to see you. We thought that smile was packed away somewhere, but he gives it to his sister without asking.'

Otto tried to turn the smile off, but he couldn't. His sister held out her arms and he grinned and hurried into a hug.

'Look at me,' Erna said over his shoulder to the others. 'I used to be the tall one and now I have to go up on my toes to hug him.'

She stepped back, her hands on his shoulders to link them.

'You look good, Otto. When you don't find time to come and see me, I imagine you living a wild kind of life. But you look well.'

'He looks pale,' his mother said. 'And thin. He does little but practise. We have to invite you here, Erna, to entice him from his room.'

'Well hooray for the cellist's long arms, I say. You give great hugs, Otto,' and his sister closed him into her arms again.

‘All my children round one table!’ Herr Schalmik opened his arms wide and grinned. He was pleased yet he was also hungry. He had done without lunch, and the smell of bread and chicken was a trial.

The mother laughed and pulled out her chair. The family gathered into their places. Hugo slid his kippah from his pocket and set it on his head while the father poured red wine into his glass.

‘You’ll do us the honour of reciting Kiddush?’ the father suggested.

Hugo nodded, his face solemn. See such a face and you don’t expect much. It was pinched and sour. Otto still could not believe his sister loved such a face, and so he closed his eyes. Hugo raised his glass and gave voice. This alone was an excuse for love. The voice came from a musical soul.

The prayer of thanks for the Sabbath settled into Hugo’s soft high tones. Then it dipped and rose between major and minor keys, like a magpie at flight in a storm.

The prayer was sung. Otto opened his eyes. He raised his glass with the others and sipped. The wine was safer that way. It fired up the tongue and then bit at your throat as you swallowed, but second tastes were kinder. In one movement, the family’s glasses went down and their freed hands reached for bread. They chewed, and their heads turned slowly as they looked each other in the eyes.

Otto was the first to swallow the food.

‘Shalom!’ he said, so loud he surprised himself.

The others jumped a little, and then laughed.

‘Shalom,’ they joined in, and raised their glasses. They didn’t chink them, the glasses were too delicate for that, so thin with a dainty pattern of vines etched around their rims. Each person reached their glass across the table in a silent pressing of air.

And then Erna touched her glass to her lips in a token gesture as the others gulped the wine down.

The chicken was small, but even so it was a chicken.

Otto checked around. Most of the precious objects were in the china cabinet, but he could see no gaps on the shelves. What had his mother bartered for the bird? Jewellery maybe. She seldom wore it so that was something he would not miss if it were gone.

Herr Schalmik carved, though really all it took was steering the blade as it slid through the meat. Frau Schalmik served: a leg each for her husband and Hugo, a token wing and two slices for her two children, and a slither for herself. The best piece of a chicken was its carcass, she always said. That’s where the goodness lies. She could do so much with a carcass.

The potatoes were lush with chicken juice. The family pulled the asparagus between their teeth. Their mouths were too busy for talk.

‘You have work still?’ Herr Schalmik asked Hugo when his plate was clean.

Hugo was trained as an engineer. A friend had lent him the rear of an old carriage house where he now worked repairing bicycles.

‘You know, some days bad and some days good.’

‘Some days good!’ Herr Schalmik nodded, and licked his lips like he could taste the good news.

A silence hung for a moment. Otto wanted to fill it but he could not find the words. Herr Schalmik had returned early from work that day. He carried a small cardboard box that contained the contents of his desk. The civil service had dismissed its Jews. Otto had watched his father’s shoulders shake as he sat in his armchair and tears ran down the man’s cheeks. Frau Schalmik stood behind her husband and stroked his hair. All was so quiet. Otto had returned to his bedroom and played a Bach Suite, gently at first.

Herr Schalmik had asked Hugo about his work. Now Hugo should ask a question back.

‘Erna,’ Frau Schalmik said, to draw her daughter’s attention.

Good. His mother had moved the conversation sideways.

Erna looked up. Her face flushed red. Otto noticed, but did not know why. His sister had a calm way of viewing the world. She never blushed. What had he missed?

‘You have some news for us?’ Frau Schalmik asked.

Erna’s face turned a still deeper shade of pink. She looked at her mother, then at Hugo, then down at the table, and then up at her mother again.

‘A baby,’ she said. ‘We are going to have a baby.’

‘Anaiah.’ Frau Schalmik raised her arms out in front of her, like the news was a dove she had released from her heart. Her chair slid back as she stood up and she hurried round

the table to her daughter. The women wrapped arms around each other and held close, as though frozen in dance. And then the men and the women all took turns to hug each other.

‘May I touch?’ Otto asked.

‘There’s nothing to feel,’ Erna said, but let her brother lay the palm of his hand on her stomach in any case. Otto felt the slight curve of her belly, and its heat.

He drew his hand away slowly.

‘It’s a girl,’ he said.

‘Don’t be silly,’ she said. ‘You don’t know that.’

‘The world needs more girls,’ he answered. ‘God is good.’

The family laughed together. Even Hugo joined in. God was always a joke for Otto, and this was a good joke.

And so they were all standing and laughing when the butt of a pistol rapped against their front door.

2

A Front Room, Vienna

The family went silent. This noise at the front door meant instant calculations. The noise was hostile. Whoever was outside was hostile.

You don't arrive at a door and bang on it straight away, you stand a moment and listen. Whoever was outside, what had they heard?

A family laughing, that was for sure. They had all let themselves loose for a moment. They could not pretend that nobody was home.

Who had laughed loudest? It was hard to say. It was a mix, for sure, soprano to baritone, men and women both. What did they want, these people at their door? Most likely they wanted men. They were rounding up male Jews, so rumour said.

The pistol smashed into the door once again.

'Polizei!'

At the shout, Frau Schalmik jumped from thought to action. She piled her son's cutlery on top of his plate and thrust them at him, his wineglass too.

‘Go,’ she said. ‘Take these away. Hide. Go to your room. Get in the wardrobe.’

Her hands reached toward Hugo’s plate, just a fraction, and pulled back. Hugo would be the provider for her grandson. He should be saved. But the police outside had heard men laughing. They needed to find two men. Hugo must stay or they would look for Otto. They didn’t know Hugo was here. They wouldn’t be looking for him. They did not want Hugo. He would be safe.

Herr Schalmik moved toward the corridor.

‘Stall them,’ Frau Schalmik said.

She reached out and plucked the kippah from her husband’s head. It would only goad them. It disappeared into a pocket in her skirt. She made her own clothes. Her family made fun of her for all the deep pockets sewn into their folds, but hands can’t be holding things all the time.

Erna watched her mother and made calculations of her own. She tipped the chewed bone from Hugo’s plate on top of the carcass and pushed his plate, cutlery and glass into his hand. He had to hide all evidence of his presence at the table.

‘To my room,’ she said. ‘Under the bed.’

‘Coming,’ Herr Schalmik called out as the pistol thundered against the door once again.

What was wrong with knocking? Otto wondered. A heavy brass doorknocker was fixed to the door, in the shape of a hand emerging from a laced sleeve. His mother kept it polished to brightness.

Then he guessed. It was gone. He bet it was gone. Bartered for a chicken.

‘You say you’re the police,’ Herr Schalmik called through the door. ‘How do I know? You could be anybody. Show me your papers.’

A man on the far side cursed him, but papers slid under the door. Otto saw them appear and hurried away down the corridor, Hugo right behind him. The front door had two bolts and a lock. Herr Schalmik rattled the top one, as though finding it difficult.

The man on the far side cursed him again. The father looked back to watch his son disappear, and jerked the bolt free.

Otto closed himself into his wardrobe but still he could hear. The second bolt slid back, and the lock on the door turned clear. There was a scuffle, the bang of the door against the wall, the gruff voices of loud men. How many, two? No, three.

He heard his father complain. They were pushing him in front of them.

‘You’re Jakob Schalmik,’ one man declared. It was an identification, not a question. ‘Where is Otto? Where is your son?’

‘He’s not here,’ Frau Schalmik answered.

‘Where is he?’

‘He’s nineteen. It’s a Friday night. There are things a mother does not want to know. He is where he is.’

‘He is here.’ The voice of the third man from the corridor. Herr Els, the superintendent of the building. ‘I heard him. He’s been playing that cello all day. He’s here. He must be hiding.’

Two voices responded at once.

‘That was the gramophone,’ said Frau Schalmik.

‘That was me,’ said Erna.

‘Two answers,’ the officer said. ‘How many lies?’

‘It was me,’ Erna said, ‘and the gramophone. We have new recordings, Pablo Casals playing the Bach Suites. I’m learning. I listen to a disc and then I play it myself.’

‘She’s lying.’ The superintendent again. ‘She plays the violin. Frau Schalmik the piano. It’s the son who plays the cello. They play together sometimes. It’s endless. And so loud.’

‘I fear Herr Els is not very musical,’ the officer said and laughed. The second officer followed the laughter with his own. No one else joined in. ‘Me, I like Bach. Let me judge if it was you who was playing. Fetch your cello. Play for me.’

Otto heard Erna walk down the corridor. His wardrobe door was not firmly closed. She pushed it to. Still he could hear. She picked up the cello, the bow, the music and music stand, and carried them from the room.

‘Herr Els is right,’ she explained to the officer. ‘I’m only a beginner. This is Otto’s cello. I only get to play when he is out of the house. My parents have the patience of saints, to put up with the noise I make. Herr Els too.’

She had played the Bach before. It was like a dare when Otto was beginning to fathom the music, before he bought

Casals' recordings. She had picked up her violin and instantly transcribed the cello music to suit it. The result was so alive, so sweet, that Otto's eyes burned with tears as he listened.

But she had never, so far as he knew, played the cello. It didn't interest her. As the first-born child she had her pick of instruments and chose the violin. You can't practise too much, she told him. For her, every note not played on the violin was a note wasted.

Now her first ever note on the cello would be in concert.

It wasn't bad. Not so bad. She played with confidence if too lightly. The note was recognisable, and the ones that followed fitted into a tune. It was hard to adapt a violinist's technique to the cello. For a first attempt, this was brilliant.

Hands clapped loudly, three times. It wasn't applause. It was an order for her to be silent. Erna stopped playing.

'Is this what you heard, Herr Els?' the officer asked.

'I heard Otto. He's a student at the Academy. He practises all the time. He's good. I know what I hear. It wasn't a gramophone. Like she said, that is Otto's cello. Otto must be hiding somewhere.'

'I think you're right, Herr Els. Under this table, maybe? Haussmann, perhaps you can look for us?'

The other policeman in the room made his move. The china and the plates smashed on the floor first, and then the table crashed down. Otto heard his mother's cry, and her gasp as she tried to hold the cry in check.

'So where is he? You have a clever son, Frau Schalmik. Hiding under the table is too obvious for him. Perhaps the

china cabinet has a hollow back? Haussmann, is this Otto hiding behind the china cabinet? Check for us, please?’

The joinery on the cabinet was delicate. The wood splintered as it landed, the glass in its doors shattered, the contents smashed.

‘Not there? I’m running out of ideas. This boy could be anywhere. Over to you, Haussmann. Search the whole apartment.’

Otto thought it through. Would they find him in the wardrobe? Surely they would. Might they find Hugo first? Most likely they would. Hugo was under Erna’s bed. They would look there first. Erna’s bedroom was closer to them than his own.

Would they mistake Hugo for Otto? Possibly. Hugo might even allow them to.

And then Herr Els would correct their mistake.

Otto pushed at the wardrobe door and climbed out. He could not save himself. If he was quick, he might save Hugo.

The front door was open. Otto considered running. It looked like freedom, but it wasn’t. The officer called Haussmann stepped into the corridor and pointed a revolver in his direction.

‘Otto Schalmik,’ he said.

It was all quick. Herr Schalmik was pushed into the corridor ahead of Otto. Frau Schalmik followed, asking questions, firing demands. Where were they taking them? Should she pack? She must pack. Her men needed changes

of clothes, food for the journey. It would take her only a minute. They must wait.

They would not wait.

‘This is for their own good,’ the officer explained. ‘The streets of Vienna are not safe for Jews. We are taking them into protective custody.’

Otto turned toward his mother and sister as he passed the door in which they were standing. Haussmann pushed at the boy’s cheek with his revolver, to keep Otto looking forward. He was at the bottom of the stairs when he heard the loud wail of his mother’s cry.

3

Vienna to Dachau, 1938

Otto stood among six hundred men snatched from all districts of Vienna, arranged in lines across a school gymnasium. His father was over to his right, he thought, though he did not dare turn his head to look. Young Nazi guards were teaching the terrors of the human voice. One guard stood at an end of each row and yelled abuse. Officers stamped in to inspect and flash swastika-banded salutes. These young guards were being judged. Their abuse had to be vile and loud and on point.

This wasn't a gymnasium of a school Otto knew. Its bars and high beams were on a roller system that let them be stacked along the side walls. Its ropes were strung in the ceiling. The yells of the guards echoed against the gymnasium's wooden surfaces. Occasionally a soft thud showed a man had crumpled to the ground.

The captive men stood and they stood. In the morning the guards moved them. The process was ordered and alphabetical. Both Schalmiks, father and son, were locked in the same barred wagon. They were sat on a bench and pressed their

knees to touch each other and felt the other's warmth. They were told they were heading for the police headquarters in Elizabeth Promenade but through the bars they could make out a different route. Westbahnhof, where passengers board trains, went by on their right. The wagon drove them around to the Gueterbahnhof, the freight-loading area. Father and son climbed down and the press of crowd forced them apart.

'Schnell schnell!' Otto watched an old man whose legs moved fast but his steps were small. Quick quick, the old man was being as quick as he could, no one wanted to obey as much as he. An SS guard raised his rifle, lined up the barrel, and shot. The old man fell.

'What are you looking at?' A rifle butt slammed into Otto's face. A tooth broke off and impaled the inside of his cheek. 'You want to be shot too? Why should we bother to drag you to Dachau to die there? You want to die here, now?'

The young officer wore the death's head skull in his cap. Otto glimpsed two men being pulled side by side, both their beards gripped in one young officer's hand. Now this one wrapped his fingers in Otto's hair and yanked him away from his father and to an open carriage. His rifle butt rammed Otto's backside and sped him through its door.

Ten men sat in the compartment, five facing five. They did as told and stared at the lamps in the ceiling. Doors slammed, whistles blew, the engine heaved and belched, the men in their seats shook against each other and they started to move. Otto was shunted from his city.

The windows were shut. The curtains of the carriage were faded brown and drawn closed. Shadows of buildings blanked out the glare of sun and then shadows of trees, and then no shadows for they were speeding through open country. Summer heat baked the carriage. Otto tuned in to the rhythm of the wheels on the tracks.

Dachau was a small town in Bavaria. One man had known this fact and the word had spread around. That destination meant they would have to cross the state border between Austria and Germany. Would the train stop? Would they be inspected? Was there hope in that thought?

Otto kept waiting. And waiting. The train's rhythm thrummed on and on. Otto let that particular hope fade.

Each compartment had its SS guard. Some guards had both a pistol and a baton. In Otto's compartment the guard had a rifle with its bayonet. He was uniformed in grey. Sweat streamed from under his steel helmet. The compartment's ten captured men went through their forced exercises while the young guard shouted: Kneel down, stand up, kneel, stand, forty times fast. One man lurched with the swaying of the train. He lost balance and fell. The rifle butt slammed into his chest.

The guards changed every half hour. A different man, same uniform, stood in the doorway and screamed the slogans he had been taught. 'You degenerate Jewish pigs. All your life you lust after Aryan girls.' The same words came from the other compartments along the corridor, in the same volume, at the same pitch and in the same jagged rhythm: 'Jewish