

PUTZKAMMER'S SONATA

By Megan Breen

Luftwaffe Captain Emil Putzkammer first saw the girl pushing a carpet sweeper down the hall of the Hotel Skanderborg on a sun-sodden Denmark morning in May 1944. She was younger and taller than Helga. But the thick auburn hair swirled in a braid like spun honey atop her head was the same. The maid's trim waist and small rounded breasts were much like hers. Helga wouldn't mind that the girl was prettier than she; but certainly, no woman could be more intelligent or sensitive. This young girl would have to do. His wing unit of Bf 109s would leave for the eastern front in seventy-two hours. With countless missions and 285 kills to his credit, the Luftwaffe ace knew his luck was coming to an end.

Two hundred kroner to the concierge to guarantee the Danish girl would be delivered to Putzkammer's room. The concierge, an unctuous man named Smedegaard, feigned protest. "But you see, Captain, she's damaged goods. I don't think she's exactly what you have in mind," Smedegaard announced, his elbows resting on the lobby desk, his pudgy, hairy-knuckled hands folded beneath his chin to support his bulbous head.

"You have no idea what is in my mind, Herr Smedegaard," Putzkammer said.

Smedegaard shrugged. "I suppose they're all the same in the dark, Captain." He let out a rumbling laugh.

Putzkammer looked away from him to keep from saying what he was truly feeling about the disgusting man who could procure anything if the price was right. "Bring the girl this evening at eight," Putzkammer ordered. "And I will need a portable record player sent to my room as well."

Putzkammer bathed and shaved in the bathroom at the end of the hall from his third floor room. He put on his freshly brushed blue-gray Waffenrock tunic, its right breast festooned with medals.

A battered black portable wind-up gramophone, a mantel of dust serving as testament to the passage of time since its last use, crowned the dresser. Putzkammer eased a 78 vinyl record disk from the top drawer and gentled it on the felt-topped turntable. Putzkammer had taken the record—a recording of the Jazz Orchester Faconi performing at the Hotel Atlantic in Hamburg in 1938—from the footlocker of a young Luftwaffe lieutenant who failed to return from a blitzkrieg mission over London. Helga loved American Jazz.

He adjusted the dressing screen in one corner of the room to afford the girl privacy when the time came. His violin waited in its case in the opposite corner of the room.

Putzkammer considered his uniform jacket. Most Danes demonstrated passive contempt commingled with assiduous loathing for their occupiers. He had no reason to flaunt his position or authority over this girl. He removed the heavy woolen uniform jacket, folded it carefully, and placed it in the bottom drawer of the dresser.

He smoothed the dusty-rose-colored chenille spread on the bed and punched life into its feather pillows. He turned on the small lamp on the nightstand, washing the wall and floor with a sad, sallow light. Easing into the wingback chair, he rested his head and inhaled the cumbersome air of the room. He was drifting toward sleep when a pounding on the door stirred him.

“Captain,” the concierge said, his hands clasped over his fat stomach as he stood in the hall. “It appears the little maiden is reluctant to participate in, well—whatever your plans are for her.”

“How much?” Putzkammer said.

“80 kroners,” Smedegaard snapped without hesitation.

Putzkammer closed the door on the concierge, retrieved 50 kroners from his wallet, and returned. “Where is she?” Putzkammer said.

The concierge pocketed the money. He lumbered down the hall, reached around the corner, and pulled the girl toward Putzkammer’s room. She pulled back, shaking her head. Her

hair was disheveled and her cheerless brown dress, plainly a size too large, slipped from her shoulder. She carried a crude blue straw pouch handbag, which she drew up and back as if threatening to thwack the concierge, but relaxed it when her glance took hold of Putzkammer. Smedegaard released his hold, displaying his palms in a gesture of deference. She stopped resisting, straightened her dress and smoothed her hair. She settled the handbag in the crook of her arm, squared her shoulders, and moved toward the room.

Smedegaard smiled with gratuitous pride and said, "Captain, may I present Ebba Johansen." He pushed her forward into the room.

"Can't hear or speak a damned word. The perfect woman, huh?" Smedegaard said, pulling the door closed.

Ebba Johansen stood with her back against the door, her eyes locked on Putzkammer. He pointed to the chair. After a moment's hesitation, she sat, holding the handbag tight to her breast. Putzkammer noted two clumsily embroidered red clovers on the bag, outlined in white against the fading blue of the bag—the colorful and silent Danish protest against their German occupiers.

He reached beneath the bed to retrieve a small bundle wrapped in brown paper and secured with string. He set it on Ebba's lap and nodded toward the dressing screen. Ebba touched the fingers of her right hand to her lips, and then danced the fingers rapidly on the thumb to suggest the action of spoken words. She jabbed her index finger several times toward Putzkammer.

"You read lips," he said in Danish.

She nodded.

"Good, I speak decent Danish," he said.

Ebba sighed and shrugged indifferently. Prettier and younger than Putzkammer first thought, she couldn't be more than twenty.

“Open it,” he said, nodding once again toward the bundle in her lap. Ebba set the handbag on the floor; she untied the package. She held its contents up in front of her—a black silk chiffon dress meant as a gift for Helga. Putzkammer nodded again in the direction of the dressing screen. “Put it on, please,” he said. Ebba shook her head back and forth with closed eyes and jutted jaw. Putzkammer looked away. The last thing he wanted was to force the girl; but the anger at her refusal roiled from deep within. “Put the dress on.”

She refused more vehemently than before.

Putzkammer grabbed her shoulders and pulled her to standing; the dress dropping to the floor between them. He held her so close he felt her rapid, shallow breath exploding against his face, her breasts scarcely touching his chest as she discharged her fear.

He released his grip and backed away. “I won’t harm you.” Putzkammer paused long enough to move to the dresser and retrieve a small black and white photo from his wallet in the top drawer. “This is my wife Helga.”

Ebba studied the photo carefully. She picked up the dress and moved slowly toward the screen.

The top of Ebba’s head barely showed above the screen as she undressed. She pulled the dress she wore up and over her head, tossing it carelessly over the corner of the screen. Putzkammer turned his back, waiting for her to finish. Helga was never shy about undressing in front of him.

He felt a rush of ineffable joy to think this young Danish woman would step out from behind the screen to move his life toward a satisfactory end.

He’d begun writing the sonata for Helga the night they met. Putzkammer completed it entirely in his mind, not a single stave, clef, or note penned. The score was as incorporeal as the connection he shared with Helga. He composed his mental music between raids into Poland, England, France, and Norway, protecting the Luftwaffe bombers as they delivered

ordinance on targets military and civilian. The music detached him from the onerous task he performed, deafening him to the real and imagined sounds of destruction.

British and American bombs rained down on Hamburg for eight days and seven nights in July 1943, creating a tempest fire from which few escaped. Putzkammer received Helga's last letter two days before the bombing commenced.

Ebba moved from behind the dressing screen, smiling as she held the hem edges of the bias-cut dress out to her sides. Putzkammer motioned for her to twirl. She obliged by spinning several times in the middle of the room, clearly delighting in the delicate silk as it floated out from her and settled gently when she stopped. "You look lovely," Putzkammer said.

"How did you become deaf?" he asked.

She cradled her arms as if holding a baby, then pointed at Putzkammer, giving a faint stiff-arm salute. Then with her finger she touched imaginary spots all over her face and arm. "German measles," he said.

Putzkammer turned the crank on the gramophone to set the turntable spinning; he lowered the tone arm with its dull steel stylus into the initial groove of the recording. The music emitted from the gramophone was scratchy and difficult, but ultimately it didn't matter. Putzkammer heard the music as he wished it to be. He offered his hand to Ebba.

Ebba set her hand in his and stood. "Just follow my lead," he told her. "Helga always said I was a good dancer. She was lying."

Ebba smiled easily, and nodded as she rested her left hand on his shoulder. He pulled her close. Putzkammer stopped dancing when the recording scratched to its miserable end. She jerked her head forward several times to coerce him into another dance. He guided her around the room again, humming a nameless tune at a slower tempo, concentrating on the rushing sound of Helga's dress as it accommodated her movements, her thighs brushing against his.

Putzkammer slowed to a stop. Ebba pulled closer, placing her flawless cheek against his war-weary face. She moved from side to side, creating her own rhythm, cradling Putzkammer in the safety of her magnificent silence.

Ebba withdrew a small sketchpad from her straw pouch handbag. She flipped it open to the middle section and handed it to Putzkammer, sitting on the edge of the bed. She settled next to him, pointing at a drawing and then at Putzkammer. Ebba flipped the page. Another drawing of him, this time smiling. She flipped it again—Putzkammer sporting a fedora at a rakish angle. He laughed. “You’re very good,” he told her. She shrugged her response. “You’re very talented. Do you only draw portraits?”

Ebba flipped to the front of the sketchpad to a skillful rendering of a fishing village. “Is this your village?” he asked. She nodded, and proceeded to take Putzkammer on an artist’s visit to her village—landscapes, boats, and the handsome Danish folk—as he rested her world in his hands. “Wonderful,” he told her.

It was just after midnight before Putzkammer set the violin case on the bed and opened it, pulling out the violin and bow with practiced reverence.

Ebba opened her arms and fluttered her fingers to coax Putzkammer to play. He rose from the bed and moved to the middle of the room, assuming a ramrod straight playing position. He settled his chin into the rest and raised the bow to begin. Finally he would play Helga’s sonata from its beginning to its end.

She moved behind Putzkammer, placing her right hand fingertips on his back between his shoulder blades. He knew Ebba could hear through him—through the vibration, the life of his music. He caught their reflection in the dresser mirror—ashen specters in the muted light. With the Danish girl’s fingers pressing gently into his back, he made real the music of his mind.

Putzkammer felt an unfamiliar peace as the sonata filled the room. It was Helga's voice and haunting laughter, her arm entwined in his as they walked, the sweet fragrance of her hair, the gentle rise of her hip, and the fullness of her breasts.

He came to the end—a lifetime lived in an interlude. He relaxed the violin and bow. And then the tap of Ebba's fingertips on his back to keep the music coming.