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Inga Iwasiów: *Bambino* (2008)

TRANSIT vol. 14, no. 1

Excerpts from the novel, translated by Karolina Hicke and Karolina May-Chu¹

ULA, BORN 1930

Ula is of course a Polonized name. Ulrike, that's what it said in her papers, before she buried them deeply. Father never called her anything else, not when he was on leave, which ended long ago, and not before that either, father, who was hardly ever there. He didn't like diminutives. As an engineer working in the shipyard, an expert at building beautiful ships, he just never used them, except on a Sunday afternoon, after returning from his visit to mama. For mama, he had plenty of diminutives. Affections. Presents. Ideas for the future. Faith in the plans of the National Socialists. That everything will be good and fair. Disbeliefs? Plans! Plans for a good future, it's important to be engaged, not just to stand by.

Other than that, no. Very few diminutives. Times are tough and serious, soon things will be better, of course, but it's not good to spoil children. Not even girls. The buying of toys, trips to the sea, sandwiches prepared at home and taken along to eat on a spring-, summer-, or fall-time stroll through the suburbs – there was supposedly, mama said, plenty of this. Ula did get this, as the youngest, from her father, plenty of it. Especially in the very beginning, before '33, of course, and later too. Up until '39. Even when they were small, she was still younger, after all. The youngest in the family, with two brothers. But somehow that seems to have ended quickly, sandwiches, dolls, expeditions, father's relaxed face, mother's cheerful laughter, because the girl doesn't really remember any of it. She does remember not to disturb daddy. Well, once he is in Stalingrad, it's no longer necessary to worry about upsetting him. Far away. Too bad mama doesn't feel that way. It will turn out, also, that even when he is God-knows-where, in his own way, he is now the one disturbing them. And there is no use scolding, no use talking in an empty room, in a cold bed, which is what mama does.

Her brothers are also pretty much children when they get their mobilization papers. They are supposedly ready, prepared by all those wonderful organizations that shape bodies and spirits. Mother doesn't even try trying not to cry. Mother sobs loudly or looks straight

¹ The chapters are translated from the original Polish: Inga Iwasiów. *Bambino*. Świat Książki, 2008, 32-43 and 64-67, respectively. An excerpt of the beginning of the novel, translated by Antonia Lloyd Jones, is available on the author's website: <https://ingaiwasioiw.info/books/bambino>.

ahead. She arranges the pillows on the large, wooden, marital bed. The others, the richly embroidered ones, she arranges on the white windowsill, she looks outside, and could do so all day if it weren't for the neighbors. She is looking out for them too, at the same time taking their opinion of it into account. Normally one would be looking out with the neighbors, that's how it was done before the war. After everything had been cleaned up, laundry done, meals cooked, children – they remained at home, after all – little girls and little boys, neatly taken wherever they needed to go. Not all of them were lucky and still, during the war, had something to do. Some of them had all their sons in this fickle war. A war that was victorious, proud, uncertain, protracting, and, certainly, a complete defeat, which no signs on earth and in heaven had foretold. In this secular heaven, full of German glory. God, resembling both a Wehrmacht² soldier and Mr. Stoff from the café in the park, was supposed to watch over the distribution of glory and happiness, consisting, among other things, of returning what is owed to those who were owed, but that was probably propaganda. There is no one, not even in a window, to talk to about this. Other women are much more gullible. And quiet on certain issues. On others not so much. Such as recipes and the one in number ten and her new dress. Or how the one in fifteen carries herself, and the apple harvest from the trees growing in the yard. Plenty of things to talk about.

Pillows in the window and the neighbor from across could see that everything had been done in a timely manner. She waved sometimes, from across, the neighbor. The street was wide here, one apartment building far from the other, talking was possible at best by looking onto the balcony to the left and to the right, not with the neighbor from across. But one could see the hairdo and the blouse, and most importantly, it was obvious that there, in her place, the chairs were positioned around the dining table evenly, the kitchen fully mobilized, dust wiped off, everything arranged meticulously in the closet. And then one could afford a little bit of respite. Without complaining, that simply isn't done, about the ration-cards regime or about the fact that lately letters from the front – the führer praises women for their faithfulness and strength – have become rare. One could catch a breath before the day's shopping (or after yesterday's?) and cooking. So, without exaggeration, not for long. The kitchen can't be left empty. That's how time passes for women between the window and the kitchen. They have yet to receive their mobilization papers.

But no one knows where father is, mother also doesn't know. Not always does she know where Ula's brothers are. In the end, no one knows where anyone is, and how all this will end, who will be able to find whom where and when. No doubt, this can be called women's mobilization. For now, it's a bit static, this mobilization. Anyway, it's not the first mobilization either. Women in this country performed important duties. This time around, they must learn humility. Suddenly merely waiting for the men, for this, is not enough. Meanwhile there are no ideas for other duties or anything else. There are no possibilities whatsoever.

That is, until mother takes up work. She gets rations. How often can someone possibly watch our soldiers at the Ufa Palast, on the screen? In the end it's just a reflex. Every woman, being a woman, is a woman. She gets to work on foot, it's really close by. On the first day, she gets up way too early, arranges the slices of bread on the plates for too long, her heels clink down the stairs too quickly. And she talks too much to not notice, after a few days, a change in her voice. And a change in the fact that at first, she brings home

² Nazi Germany's unified armed forces from 1935 to 1945.

things, almost new, and then she stops bringing them. And in that Ulrike is no longer required to wait for her at the corner to walk her home, and it becomes harder to ask for permission to finally be able to visit her at work, in the small office, where she occupies a desk with a nice view of the street.

Ulrike, of course, does visit her there. She helps her count something, she doesn't know what. She adds up rows of numbers. And only a conversation between mama and a neighbor clarifies things somewhat. The nature of these numbers, their, so to speak, point of reference. The place of work is the backroom of a store and warehouse, where female prisoners from the semi-open camp come to shop, entitled to a set of clothing in accordance with the season, once every six months, and sometimes they can buy something extra at the regular price. The state cares even about them. Besides them, Germans can, and gladly do, shop here. They rummage through piles, flip through hangers. What an odd, odd, democratic approach. It helps that the store is big, divided into two parts by a shelf. On one side the scared ones, with scarves on their heads and clogs on their feet, with armbands. On the other side, preferably in pairs, the chatty ones, looking at the former indulgently, and sometimes even. Sometimes it so happens that some thread, purchased with the other, the good vouchers, or the more easily obtainable marks,³ some thread is relinquished to one of the others. And in the back, behind the store, on the side and in the basement – some other women, also with armbands, are engaged in some sort of sewing-unraveling, sorting. All these things are numbers, bookkeeping items, to which mama is assigned. Pieces of underwear, fingers engaged in unraveling, marks, vouchers. Conversion units. Kilograms and numbers of bags. Names of places from where things are brought in. Finally a letter from father about a doll and Semitic features. A sentence spoken to the neighbor, whispered: – I don't want to wear this after all, you know, hygiene. – Oh, don't you worry, it's all been disinfected – advice also conveyed in a whisper. And then mother, washing Meissen cups for so long, so long, as if she was trying to wash off their floral pattern.

She got used to it, mama got used to it; it was a very good job, in the service of the fatherland, it no longer seemed like, while husband and sons were trying their best, she was only taking care of herself and the pillows. It wasn't for nothing that she had finished school, before the war, before she got married, in a different era. Still, she tends not to bring home clothes, tends to. Sometimes she stays after hours, streams of fur, dresses, sweaters. Putting things aside, for the manager, for other, better clients. Everything is recorded, assigned a value. Sometimes it gets emptier, almost empty. Sometimes a special task is ordered, girls of Ulrike's age arrive in the side room to tear bedsheets into bandages, but it's not necessarily clear what is to be done with them, they must be packed, labeled, shipping must be arranged. Sometimes there are so many numbers, clothes flood the storage room, and later the boss orders them to take inventory. Leftovers, pending a delayed, in the end never incoming, transport. Mama gets better and better, automatically counting and calligraphing the results.

At first, she calls her "Ulrike" to make it more serious, after all, she is a serious person, waiting in vain, a wife and mother, housewife and worker. Later even more so, she doesn't want to leave, waits, all neighbors, even the one from across, say it is time to go, or no, better to wait. They change their minds often, unless they have family in a known place of residence, where, expected by their families, they can go. There is no way, here,

³ Referring to the currency of the Reichsmark.

in this place, that you can sit in the window now: – Ulrike, come here. Close the window. Come. Mama is waiting. – She’s not working, doesn’t go to the closed warehouse, only collects vouchers, then there is no place to pick them up anymore, waiting, only waiting.

All around, there’s rubble, rubble, it’s unclear whether the neighbor managed to escape when the building was hit. Their home, in the very center, remained almost untouched. That’s what it looks like from the front. As if the pilots had really detailed maps with addresses of the good Germans, who didn’t know about anything bad. Of the good mothers waiting for their properly raised sons. Mothers who worked with numbers. Ula goes, after one of the air raids, into the depths of the apartment, into the part occupied by Dr. Krause, who had suddenly disappeared and apparently wasn’t good. As a person, because as a doctor, he was. Just round the corner in the hallway the front door, the untouched office. A dental chair, Ula takes a seat, she had always wanted to try. To sit there on a dry run, without a toothache. The scheduled visit was an ersatz for this imagined one, a poor substitute. Even when the doctor was drilling her teeth, she imagined playing here, touching the cold instruments, and was not afraid at all. Now they are here, covered by a layer of dust, non-sterile and unsecured. The instruments remained. The back wall of the building had been hit. The office has something like an additional window now, not covered by blackout paper. A painful hole. She takes the instruments, wraps them in a cloth, hides them, covers her tracks. She has something now, some capital.

Ula doesn’t feel like playing. She sits down in the chair and thinks that she would rather leave. They won’t find her here, she can calmly think things through. But mother starts addressing her in the diminutive form, to not let them intimidate her, to not sink to that level. She has a child. Another decision. Ula-Ulrike-Ula. The little girl, girl, young woman, thinks that mother calls her that in order to truly have someone again. That’s what she feels. Mother has more of her now than when her older brother went missing. Initially, there was no news, a temporary difficulty to establish contact with the front, later they were sure, and then they were assured: it was more than a temporary difficulty. “Declared missing” gave some hope, but mother did not seem to treat it as such. Something blocked her hope. She had no intention of listening anymore. Fairly soon there was no one to listen to anyway. No one tried to appeal, encourage, or scold. Father wanted resourceful women, a respectable family. No diminutives. Maybe he’ll hear? Wherever he is, he’ll intervene. This insubordination had to be tried. Since everything else had already failed. They turn, the wife turns – what betrayal – his daughter into a useless doll. Meanwhile dolls aren’t children, they are toys for children. Father promised his daughter one, had a very pretty one for her. He promised, even though she had abandoned her own long ago. Even though he spoke without diminutives. He wrote to his wife about dolls, but it didn’t make a whole lot of sense. Did he have a doll? But he had to leave it in the ghetto. It turned out to be insufficiently Aryan. That’s what dad wrote to mama when letters were still arriving. Mama understood the remark, but she wouldn’t say whether it meant that there wouldn’t or would be time allowed for dolls. Why was a doll supposed to be Aryan? What was dad trying to tell mama? Why did mama, what kind of premonition, tear up the letter? What did dad need Ula for? A doll for her? The world had clearly gone mad if this serious-minded father, engineer, officer, was writing stupid stuff about Aryan dolls. And mother cried about it. And mother suddenly remembered that she wasn’t all that Aryan either. That she did, at some point, have some family in Poland, but had long since decided to forget.

Ula is simply a little girl again, although she doesn't want to play dentist. But mother decides to have a younger-than-it-is child, because the war had robbed her of the other ones. But mother doesn't know yet (in '45) that it will get worse. That the time will come to also pay for the children who are presumed dead. For the sons who turn out to be criminals, even though she was supposed to have been proud of their service in that legal, grand army. And for a husband, the biggest criminal of all, who will be found only years later, living with a different family in Berlin, later Berlin-West – not bad for a criminal. Ula's mother isn't helped much by Ula, a child who must be raised. Before she is allowed to continue with the decision, that a little girl has the right to be a little girl, she doesn't have to grow up right away, now that there is no Fatherland anymore, now that one doesn't need to immediately serve, step in, voice loud support. Childhood – that's for example a diminutive form of a name, which also sounds a bit Polish – while they are waiting here, meanwhile it is already '46, they are a bit late, for the return of the men, and they don't really know where the multitude of cousins, aunts, other relatives, lives now, strong prewar ties, but now one somehow often speaks Polish and hears about the Poles. Poles could be useful for the resumé, but who knows where they could be now? They don't want to leave because mother likes to wait and knows here... Right, it doesn't make sense. Everyone is just waiting for special trains. Ula's mother is not helped by Ula, with her silence and penetrating stare. Nor the lack of any kind of question on her part. Even if asked in Polish. Even those she would try to answer for her child. She remembered the language while listening to the women sorting clothes for her bookkeeping.

Women try to walk in large groups. The remaining men, boys, wounded, old men surround the women in small cordons that are easy to break through. The women's suitcases are packed, no post-Jewish property. Well, maybe a fur, turned inside out, and earrings, hidden in the underwear. No one is showing it off now. No one is galivanting past a front of neighbors in threads sent during the good times (or the criminal times, as it turns out) by their husbands. It's better to hide, sell, trade, whatever you can. Leave it for those who are staying. Hope that it's a temporary evacuation. It's better not to talk, to think, to talk too much. Stay together, hold by the hand the suitcases, fate, and the little girls.

Mother doesn't want to leave, she doesn't take Ula to any suburban train station. The little girl, rather, a young girl already, sees people headed there from a distance. She hides Dr. Krause's instruments, still believes, in '45, that the doctor will return. Maybe he'll allow her to work in his practice? No one has any intention to play anymore. The fifteen-year-old girl does not play pretend. Ula is grown-up, knows that she, too, no matter the fact that her mother suddenly stopped calling her Ulrike, must hide, just like the grown women. The diminutive of a name doesn't achieve anything right now. No one passes over the young girl just because her mother considers her a little girl. Whoever falls into their hands must be treated like a woman. Mother and daughter. Both hide, but there really is no place to hide. Suddenly, Russian soldiers are everywhere. It would be smarter to leave, but mother is unable to make a decision. Mother is waiting for who knows what. So then others, of course, will make decisions for her. And for Ula, too. Because a mother wife aunt daughter is also pretty much a criminal. Women take part in it all. They receive packages and letters. They listen to the stories about victories. They are out on the street during the parade. They wave their hands high up from their raised cork-sole shoes. They prepare better meals for their son's return. They cook for these monsters degenerates little boys. For the Johanns and Klauses they met in 1923. Johanns, with whom they have sons named

Klaus, soldiers just in time for the führer. They give birth to those genocidal bandits camp commandants. Convert with them to another faith. The faith in power. They stop going to church, their church is at home. Their homes, so tidy, polished, full of goods. They sign up for various forces, auxiliary and main. They make sure not to buy from the Jew. They comfort those conquerors murderers. They go to bed with them, to hell, when they're home on leave. So, it's not good when later they have daughters who can be treated accordingly. They had forgotten about their daughters, and now they must share their guilt with them. They don't quite understand the essence of this guilt, but they understand well, that this is what's happening. For the daughters, the fathers brought dolls, unless they didn't make it or didn't want those from the ghetto (why suddenly so sensitive?). K***s⁴ had pretty dolls for their daughters, and oddly enough, in this case, the matter of hygiene is ignored. Being a daughter is also burdensome. One must try to lock oneself in and hide.

Don't try to resist. That's what they say, although they don't talk about it much. Obviously, it's better not to fight it. If they aren't terribly drunk and in not too big of a group, it's possible to make it through. Just hide the child, so they leave the child alone. They have a daughter of the same age at home, they always say, but that doesn't mean they couldn't play winner and loser or gentleman and doll with that of a stranger. And so, mother hides Ula this and other times. She even tries to be nice. Indeed: besides doing what they do, they don't do any other harm. One can make it through. The hospitals are full of women who weren't so lucky. They definitely won't be able to make it out anymore. But the most important thing, now and years from now, is to not talk about it. The margins of war. Women. Then everything changes in yet another way. And after withstanding so much, there is no reason to run away. Just be quiet and wait it out.

Ula's mother is taken to a camp outside of a town not far from Szczecin, a camp that's not on the maps. It's not being called anything. To the point that the girl never says its name out loud. She doesn't want to know the name and having been there, even on visits to mother, which never happened anyway, was nothing to brag about. They take her there to find out where the men of the family are. Women never talk about it afterwards. They don't have much opportunity. Suddenly the thread is torn. Those who wanted to cut ties before, are cut loose from all ties by others. Ula has no opportunity to rebel. She is not annoyed by her mother's caring possessiveness, because... It is horrible in the camp, but it's not a death camp, at least not for everyone from there, and it isn't called that for sure. She comes out of it, after all. And like a dog, a German bitch, she returns to her familiar grounds in Szczecin, which is what it is called now for good. Mother returns to Ula, who was taken in by the neighbor and who, by the way, has long stopped being a child. Maybe she took her in because taking someone in gave her someone to take care of. Ula caresses the neighbor's head, sings to her quietly, lips moving slightly. Dear neighbor, I won't talk about it in front of the child. And it's better not to go back there. Yes, we should have left in time. Yes, but I didn't have an address. She is worried, coughs. She doesn't arrange any pillows. Shortly thereafter she ends up in the hospital with tuberculosis. The girl dislikes the hospital.

The hospital is full of very sick people, but no medication. She dies soon after, probably from tuberculosis. Just like many other women, men, children. She doesn't say anything that could be called a message. There is nothing to remember. A narrow bed in a

⁴ As translators, we chose not to verbalize the antisemitic slur the narrator channels here in the original.

narrow corridor, Lysol. Stench and moans. Ula does not see her death. All that remains is an empty bed. She stays there for a while. Mutti. One last time. Mutti, mama. She takes home the book, the towel, the sweaty garment. If anyone were to ask, she didn't see this death any other way than something that never existed. She was simply left alone when she was supposed to be Ula. The extension of childhood turned out to be a game, but someone had marked the cards.

They still ask her sometimes about her father and her brothers, but finally they give up. Sure, a hitlerite, but maybe she doesn't know. Too young. They were trained to become hitlerites from early on, but maybe her mother didn't tell her everything. The old woman certainly knew. Ula, even as an adult always Ula or even Urszula now, decides to stay. She doesn't know the address of her relatives in Germany. Of relatives, alleged, in Poland. She probably doesn't know any other address. She arranges the pillows, is meticulous like her mother, at least on the surface. Inside, she wants to be completely, completely different. She wouldn't have known where to go if the neighbor from below hadn't claimed her as a relative. She arranges the pillows for her, just like mother had done for herself. She doesn't have to depend on the new country to take care of her in the State Home for Children, although she is almost of age anyway. She is, truly, fully grown up. The decision to stay is her own.

Source: Inga Iwasiów. *Bambino*. Świat Książki, 2008, 32-43. Translated by Karolina Hicke and Karolina May-Chu.

KNOTS

This is how they could be. In a large, but not too large, nutshell. Rather like in an annotation to a literary character, shelled out of oblivion, transplanted onto faces, bodies, words of some people, who are brought up by a ravaged imagination, which can only tell us that it all begins with random gibberish, and this is how life begins, which we then take on, although it would be better to retreat in time. Damn it, this is how it begins.

Where did they meet? Each of them comes from a different direction, takes a different way. Three by train. One of them, Ulrike-Ula, is already there. Her way is to give up on the journey, not buy a ticket, not pick the road or the means of transportation. Her way is a text, a note, a word. Because Ulrike... that one, becomes Ula... this one. Just like that, her way is a coincidence dramatized by History, which no one sees on a daily basis. Ula undergoes a transformation on paper. She chooses a way through words. She digs up vague statements, which show that she has just the right amount of the right blood. That she could almost be called Kowalska. Someone helps her with it, arranges something, provides the right means. She stays, gradually stops "staying," "not going," starts "being" even more deeply, because she sees no other way. No one calls for her, calls her over, guides her. No response to an entry, formulated over the course of the entire war, in a letter, officially stamped. Ulrike, as Ulrike, has no return address, all she has is a place of permanent residence, here. There's one other thing: she cannot keep up with thinking about it all. It is over her head, steps over her, all of it. All that remains is a gut decision non-

decision: life. She doesn't make the decision, the decision makes her, let's call it that. Although one day she could describe it as a decision, let's not deceive ourselves. The decision makes her, on the way to do other things, not always admirable.

Janek wants to be himself without having to explain it to others. He wants a job and a suit. He doesn't go to see his mother, who makes him such a non-binding offer, stressing the needs of husband and daughter. He comes here to work and study. Industrial Equipment Manufacturing Plants. This is the place that becomes Janek's lair. This new Janek's, the non-bastard's. By now done with elementary school, soon to be a specialist. A lair far away from mother. A lair without a woman's touch, without grandmother, who still visits him in his dreams, says things meant for his ears only. Yes, of course, without useless talk. When the time comes, the boy packs a small suitcase. Bids farewell to his people, closes the gate, and leaves the village as a man. An ordinary thing, an ordinary road. Turning the corner is a rite of passage. I see it like a scene from a film. There should be no sequel, but there will be. A sequel of a man's life.

Anna needs to get an education. The promise that in the Recovered Territories there is a fast track turns out to be an empty one, but she will get what she wants anyway. It will just take longer. More hours, more books, less of the good light. Useless declensions, scattered French words, cold school buildings. A lot of greenery among the ruins, a lot of people, who should be avoided. Mamusia⁵ wouldn't approve of such acquaintances. But since there are no others, they should be maintained. Company is useful on the way to the library. Ruins and large trees in parks. Deep water. Really, dark, murky, deep water. It's necessary to belong somewhere, to sign up for something, contribute something. And to remember about the secular commandments.

The last one to arrive will be Maria, Marysia.⁶ Almost when everything is ready. At the last moment. Without a warning. Having made the decision at a repatriation point. There's school here instead of a daughter's duties. So that she can fulfill them better later. Marysia is close to me, I delegate her to do an internship as progenitor. I announce this fact because it might not be possible to keep up her appearance.

The fifties will continue, but soon time will come for some relaxation. This relaxation does not cover tight-waisted dresses and skirts. This relaxation will prove to be a premature promise for each of them. Barely a powder that covers the wounds, which they are not looking at in the mirrors in their not-very-comfortable bathrooms, varnished for the first time since the war, without scraping off the old layers. But sometimes relaxation is something more. Really, French champagne.

In such a city, people meet by chance, in new constellations. People made up by chance. Let's say, most often at work. Anna and Ula's workplace is "Bambino," where they end up after several other milk bars. Bambino, bambino, bambino. Janek, sweet upon first sight, but still a man, is their customer, Marysia Ula's tenant. Bambini, bambino. It is a chance arrangement. The set will expand later. By an essential element. For life. They have something in common: they don't have here, in this city, any family. They build their lives, connecting only skin-deep with the people from here, making covenants, swearing oaths.

⁵ Diminutive of *mama*. Term of endearment. It is used by little children addressing their mother; English *mommy*.

⁶ Marysia is the diminutive form of *Maria*.

They are one of the little knots one can try to untangle. Each one of them inside, within themselves. Between one another. With other people. They and those they have left behind. People are like knots: nobody knows what gets caught up in them and whether they can be untangled. Whoever thinks that this is material for myths or sagas is mistaken. Knots are knots. Nothing less, nothing more. Knots. Plates, at times full of pierogi, at times clean. Tangles. Knots. Jumbles. Given the maritime flair of the place - let's add: lines and bollards.

Source: Inga Iwasiów. *Bambino*. Świat Książki, 2008, 64-67. Translated by Karolina Hicke and Karolina May-Chu.