War is not a game for children

Autor(en): **Armor, Gilles**

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War is not a Game for Children

by Gilles Armor

«On earth, a happy memory is perhaps more true than happiness...»
(Alfred de Musset)

and then again:
«One loves fully only once, the first time; the loves which follow are less involuntary.» (La Bruyere)

I was hardly fourteen when my parents, returning from flight, found their small house in the suburbs of Paris occupied by four Germans. Mother, in the face of this new disaster, broke into tears. Father clenched his fists, and I studied the enemy closely with a mixture of curiosity and fear.

Following several trips to Headquarters and several nights spent with some of our luckier neighbors, the departure of three of the Germans enabled us to reoccupy our house. Only one of the rooms still remained under requisition, putting it indefinitely at the disposal of a Lieutenant Hanfstaengl, whose name my mother considered it her sacred duty constantly to mispronounce, and who represented to my father a stark symbol of humiliation and defeat.

The Lieutenant had selected my room on the ground floor, which meant that I had to have a collapsible bed installed for me in one corner of the living room. Mother, who believed the circulating rumors of slit throats fully, had been anxious to put me up on the first floor instead, but Father convinced her I was too old to share their bed room. In short, I slept apart from my family, stranded alone on one floor with the German Lieutenant.

My parents always made it a point to limit their contact with him to some icy greetings, dismissing his own friendly advances as the orders of the propaganda office. I too followed my parents' example for several months, and might perhaps have followed it throughout the Lieutenant's two years stay with us, had it not been for Theseus.

Theseus was our household's darling, a magnificent blue persian cat who simply could not be made to understand that the room on the ground floor was henceforth out of bounds. In the habit of sneaking in through the always open window and remaining there for days on end, he would remember our existence only when he got hungry.

Mother would have preferred never to see Theseus again, rather than to stoop to asking the Lieutenant about him. Yet my own pride being less touchy, or else my love for the cat being greater, I decided, when left alone in the house one Thursday afternoon, to enter the German's room in quest of my erstwhile playmate.

I found him sleeping, curled up on the bed as usual.

It was a bit painful to see my place upset through the preferences of another; my little table was strewn with German books, one of them a huge volume on painting, full of beautiful color reproductions. On the night stand I saw the small radio which evening after evening filled the house with the symphonic music which so exasperated my father. And from the mantle piece two unfamiliar faces were looking down at me: an elderly lady whom I presumed to be the Lieutenant's mother, and a soldier in his early twenties, probably, I felt, his younger brother. The latter photograph bore an inscription: *«Für Erik und auf immer. Kurt.»*

Suddenly, my knees turned to water, as I heard the clicking of boots against the tiling of the entrance. I had hardly time to recollect my wits before the door opened and Lieutenant Hanfstaengl, clad in a striking uniform, entered the room. I don't know whether I blanched or purpled, but I do remember changing color and stammering out some excuses in a voice that I had so wanted to sound firm, and which was barely audible.

I must have been a pitiful sight, for he burst out laughing (he seemed much less formidable after that). «Yes,» he said, «your cat visits me quite often. You see, I do have a friend in this house after all.»

He spoke French amazingly well, with hardly a trace of an accent. I had never really observed him very closely; now, he seemed so very unlike those blond head-shaven giants that I ran up against in the streets and subways every day. His tall frame was trim and slender, his eyes were the blue of the sea — as blue almost as the ink which was the rage in school then —, and his carefully combed hair was as brown as my own. He looked about thirty years old.

Seeing that I was about to flee, he stopped me. «Now that you're here,» he said, «won't you stay a moment and let us get acquainted?»

Considering the situation I was in, I could hardly refuse. I turned down the cigarette he offered me, but couldn't resist the piece of chocolate.

He wanted to know what I did with myself all day, so I explained to him that I was attending high school in Paris; I had just started my third year.

He in turn told me about himself. He had been a journalist in civil life, working for the art department of a big Munich newspaper. As an officer, he had participated in the battles against Poland, Belgium and finally France, where his fluent knowledge of the language had secured him an enviable position with the Bureau of Information.

«I had studied in Paris,» he said, «quite a few years ago, and I'm so happy to be back. An extraordinary city, Paris!» He handed me another piece of chocolate and went on. «This was your room, wasn't it? You see, I've changed very little in it, just added a few personal things: Some books, my radio, and the pictures of my loved ones. This,» he explained, pointing, «is my mother. The soldier — he used to be my secretary on the paper — is my best friend. Right now, he's in Warsaw; he didn't have my kind of luck.»

I felt ill at ease. Knowing my parents would be back soon, I could just imagine their horror if they found me in the room which, according to mother, needed disinfecting, listening to Lieutenant Hanfstaengl's life story and cramming down German chocolate.

Finally he let me go, but added: «You must come back and see me, I'd enjoy talking to you. I'm in every night: I go out so seldom. We can listen to music, and maybe you might need some help with your German home work.»

Again he smiled. I thought in all fairness that he was most likeable. I could hardly refuse him my hand when he offered me his, and when he asked, «We're friends now, aren't we?» I simply hadn't the courage to say no.

The two of us became conspirators even before we became friends, for I said nothing to my parents about our meeting. Still, I did not comply with his request to visit him again. He symbolized for me too strongly the regime against which I felt rising from all sides, more and more blindly as the days went on, the hatred of an entire nation.

That first winter under the occupation was a bitter one; it dawned on the

French people that their trials were going to be prolonged and painful. Monotonously, depressingly, the months crawled by.

At last, on a bright summer day, when the weather alone was enough to rekindle some optimism in the heart, events took a sudden turn for the better: Hitler's army had attacked the Soviet Union. Strangers smiled at one another in the street; dozens of comforting tales were whispered from ear to ear, all concluding that «he» was no stronger than Napoleon. French hopes turned to the East.

Vacation time was meanwhile approaching, and my parents, unwilling to leave our house once more to the caprices of the occupation, decided to send me by myself up to my mother's sister. She owned a large estate in Sologne, deep in the woodland where, in the absence of any entertainment, I was sure to benefit from a consistent diet of overeating.

If some of our actions seem impulsive and incomprehensible to us, it may be because we are not conscious of the slow evolution of our being which has been leading up to them for a long long time. When on the eve of my departure I suddenly decided to say goodbye to the Lieutenant, it seemed as senseless to me as throwing myself into the waters of the Seine; still, I wonder even now whether it was only shyness that had made my heart pound so loudly when I knocked on the door of his room.

He did not seem the least bit surprised. «It was wise of you,» he said, «to have taken time out for thought before coming back. Of course it did take you a little bit long, but I always knew you'd make it in the end.» Then, and without any transition, «My name's Erik. What's yours?»

At that sensitive age, when I wanted so badly to be taken for a man, the use of the familiar by an older person would annoy me terribly; yet coming from him, it pleased me.

It was in the course of that evening that everything which had separated us, everything which had prevented me from coming back sooner, appeared suddenly devoid of all importance. As I sat watching him, listening to him, the truth dawned on me at last: I wanted, I needed his friendship; I longed to gain it and keep it, no matter who or what.

When it was time to say goodbye, he stood holding my hand in his. «We're going to see a great deal of each other, aren't we,» he asked, «when you come back in October? But,» he added, «there's one rule we must observe: You and I must never speak of the war. We shall pretend that the war does not exist.»

My vacation was boring beyond words. In spite of my aunt and uncle's prodigious efforts to make their home and grounds attractive, I had soon exhausted the charms of the forest which I considered morose and far too quiet. Need I add that already there was someone I missed?

I wrote my parents a month before I was due back, reminding them that I was about to enter senior high school, and suggesting that, for the sake of enabling me to prepare a careful schedule, I return earlier. Delighted with my unaccustomed zeal, they consented.

The trip seemed interminable and when I arrived home at last, our meager little garden looked lovelier to me than the big forest.

That evening, I knocked on Erik's door.

Happiness is difficult to describe, but I shall never forget how happy the months were that followed, how the loneliness of an only child had suddenly been dispelled by this so unexpected and clandestine friendship.

Every evening, after leaving my parents, I would spend an hour in Erik's room, and come away quite dazzled. I never tired of listening to him; he would speak to me of the books he had read, of the many things he had learned. We would examine his «History of Painting», as step by step he introduced me to the plastic arts. We would listen to the radio together, while he founded the groundwork of my previously quite neglected musical education. It was thanks to him, that names like Goethe, Bach, Grunewald attained their value in my eyes — a value they were never again to lose.

On other evenings, he would tell me of his travels through Europe, of his home town, of the Rhine Valley which he preferred to any other part of Germany, of Greece and Italy which would have been the most beautiful countries in the world, had they only contained Paris. He would tell me of his mother whom he worshipped, and of his friend Kurt who was now stationed in Russia and who wrote him often; still on the latter he never dwelled very long. Was it that he wanted, in accordance with his own rule, to avoid any subject which could even remotely remind us of the war? Or had he guessed that secretly I was not at all pleased when he talked to me of Kurt?

The deep admiration I felt for the man who knew everything, had read so much and retained so much, who had a personal opinion, either amusing or deeply felt, on every subject, proved to be an excellent stimulant, scholastically. I ceased being the conscientious, rather dull student of past years, becoming animated in my studies by something more than ardor — a veritable rapture for learning.

Everyone was quite astounded at my progress, even if my essays, having become audacious, were not always approved by my literature teacher.

Erik, quite often, happened to be free on Thursday afternoons and, on the pretext of a visit to the Louvre organized by my history teacher, or a trip to the movies with friends (I soon learnd to lie with an ease that overawed me), I would rejoin him in Paris.

Through the eyes of this alien I discovered, at so early an age, the touching beauty of the city that was mine and that he loved so well. I used to amaze my classmates by expressing my admiration for the apse of Notre-Dame when it was transformed by the twilight into a mysterious medieval forest, or for the unusual view of the Champs-Elysées, or the touching poetry inherent in the flower girls of La Madeleine.

We had fun, as well, and when spending time at the zoo, Erik would be young and gay, laughing at the follies of the bears or the monkeys. Out of uniform, with his fluent French, he could have been taken for my elder brother.

How well I remember the Paris of those days! I think that anyone who had known the city, must have experienced the same thing; must have felt that this city of light, the city of gaiety, futility and luxury, thrown into darkness, graveness and any number of materialistic difficulties, had never been more beautiful. Less brilliant its beauty undeniably was, but more profound, more human, more captivating — just as a truly beautiful woman is more beautiful still without the artifices of make-up and jewelry, in the most severe garbs of mourning. For Paris suffered, and remembered, and waited, and if Erik and I had forgotten the war, we were soon to find out that it was not a game for children.

My parents gave me permission to spend an evening in Paris, where I had pretended to have been invited by a class mate. Actually I went with Erik to

the opera where «Die Walküre» was being presented with the plain objective of a Franco-German conciliation under the banner of music.

I suspect that German propaganda had encountered few failures quite as resounding. The huge poorly heated hall was attended only by German officers and some gaudily gowned collaborators in the orchestra, and a few fanatic music lovers up in the balconies. The rest of the theatre was empty; the Parisian public had their grudge against Wagner.

My feelings were divided. The ban which my compatriots put on the composer amused me, and since Erik had been so considerate as to wear civilian clothes on my behalf, I was very sorry that we were there. Yet, on the other hand, my friend's disappointment pained me. He had even remarked that the opera had been poorly staged, that the musicians and singers hadn't given it their best. For his sake, I wished that the house had been packed and the performance a triumph.

We went on foot down through the black out darkness of the Avenue de l'Opéra. When we reached the Comédie Française the public was just coming out of the theatre. The crowd was quite large and one could read on the playgoers' faces the kind of elation which a successful performance will evoke. Erik glanced at the posters. They were giving «Hamlet». — — — —

For the sake of caution my parents had placed our radio in the bed room where they listened secretly every night to the British broadcasts.

From the Arctic Ocean down to the Black Sea the Germans were advancing only slowly, while from all sides, by and by, came Russian counter attacks, some of them successful. The Parisian newspapers stated that one of these, in the vicinity of Leningrad, had claimed the lives of about one hundred Germans. Mother, her ears glued to the loud-speaker, heard, through the interference, the official communiqué of the «Pravda»: The number of German soldiers who had been encircled and, through battle, cold, and hunger, completely anihilated, was estimated at two thousand. Mother always received that kind of news with the same phrase: «They'll never kill enough of them.»

When I entered Erik's room that night, I found him lying across the bed. He turned towards me a face that was weary and full of grief, and said quite simply, «I've had a letter from Kurt's sister. He was killed in battle near Leningrad.» Then without waiting for me to speak, «be a good boy, leave me now. Tonight, I want to be alone.»

I ached at that manly sorrow, so restrained and so silent; I fumed at my inability to find the words I wanted to console him with; I felt that the death of Kurt was the price of the Russian victory which had so delighted my mother: «They'll never kill enough of them.» My good, gentle mother who wept when the red posters of the Headquaters announced the execution of hostages.

That evening, perhaps for the first time, could I really fathom the meaning of war, the havoc it left behind, and the tempest it stirred up within the hearts of men. — — — —

By the end of spring an abrupt growing spurt completed my transformation: My body reached its full height, my voice became deeper; I exchanged the parting on the side of my head for a crew cut, and the knickerbockers for my first pair of long trousers. Once a week, I had to borrow my father's razor.

At night it now took me a long time to fall asleep, and mother would be astonished to find my bed all tumbled up in the morning. A host of images had

invaded my mind and out of them I created strange fantasies whose endings were forever denied me through slumber, but whose hero was always Erik.

Since the death of Kurt his behavior towards me had changed. He would observe me sometimes, silently, for many minutes, or ask me questions most of which would embarrass me: Did I have any close friends in school? Was there a particular one I preferred above all others? Had I ever kissed a girl?

He made plans for us, too: The war was not going to last forever; whichever way it should end, he would come back to France as a journalist. Nothing was going to stand in the way of our friendship.

I no longer listened to his every word as though he were the oracle; my attention would wander from what he said and concentrate on his face. I would think how handsome he was.

Then summer arrived, and with it my sixteenth birthday.

Mother, upon that important occasion, had invited about a dozen youngsters, the various offspring of friends, neighbors, aunts and uncles — the boys all carefully groomed, the girls all simpering — even then already, I felt an outsider in their midst.

Erik, on the eve of my birthday, had given me «The History of German Painting» which we had so often admired together. That sumptuous volume, which I was forced to hide for years for want of an explanation as to its source, always seemed to me the symbol of our friendship.

Once the guests had departed and my parents retired to their room, I went, as usual, to spend some time with him. Under a slack robe I was wearing nothing but my briefs, for the heat was stifling: I found Erik in his pyjamas, their tops wide open over a chest of dense brown hair.

He had to laugh when I described my party. He was very gay and, I even felt, laughed somewhat excessively.

When I was about to leave, he drew me close to him and kissed my forehead. «Happy birthday, my dear.»

I had no idea what suddenly possessed me. I was sixteen and it was summer; I had some wine, and could feel the warmth of his half naked body so close to my own. My face barely reached up to his shoulders — I had only to bend my head to press my lips against his chest.

His reaction remained a mystery to me for a long time. He pushed me brutally away; in his eyes there was a strange expression I had never seen before.

«Go now, that will do.» His voice was trembling. «What do you know about me anyway, little Frenchman? Nothing. You're just a child and our countries are at war; can you understand that? But don't look at me so stupidly. Don't you understand anything?»

He was right. I did not understand until years later that he had wanted me that night with all his being; that he had known my trust in him was such that he could do with me whatever he pleased; but that he preferred to destroy everything rather than affect what he did not know to be my true nature; and above all, that he had wanted to leave intact the purity of a memory which was to brighten the rest of my life.

«Go now,» he repeated, «you won't hate me forever; but tonight, go. Please! Go!»

He was almost shouting, at the risk of waking my parents, pulling me towards the door, shaking me. I think he would have hit me if my amazement

had not abruptly given way to anger. I threw at him the first obvious insult that came into my head: «Filthy German!»

Like a cold slap in the face the door slammed shut behind me.

The days passed and, I shall regret it as long as I live, out of pride and rancor I avoided Erik, and left to spend my vacation with my aunt in Sologne without seeing him again. It was there that I received a letter from my mother, announcing with undisguised joy (in spite of the fear of censorship) that when I got back I would no longer find the German with them; having volunteered for the Eastern front, he had bid my parents goodbye, reassuring them that he would never forget his stay in France.

Immediately, I had to declare my happiness at the thought of getting my own room back; to denounce the war hungry elements of the German spirit, and to drink, from a bottle of champagne which my uncle had solemnly opened, a toast to the victory of the so far away Russians.

But when I found myself alone that night, when, to muffle my sobs, I could bury my face unseen under the blankets, I gave full vent for hours to the last sorrow of boyhood and the first sorrow of man.

I never saw him again. I do know that he was killed that summer, somewhere over in Russia. Like Kurt.

Not as often anymore, but with a deeper meaning, I still like when I'm alone some evening, to leaf through the book that he had given me — the only souvenir I have of him. My fingers slip over the rough grey linen of the binding, then turn the pages one by one. Somewhere across the portraits of Dürer or Holbein, I sometimes think that I can see his finger-prints; something then tightens in my throat, something that hurts and will no longer flow.

On the title page he had written my name and his; then the date, July 23, 1942.

(Translation by Bern Hard)

(This story appeared under the title: «On ne Badine pas avec la Guerre» in 'The Circle', 1956/VII)