

**Yann Stephan**  
**AN OLD TOWN TALE**

**September 1897, Wola Zamkowa street, Toruń.**

Hans Götze started his morning observation of the street by watching closely the first women going out for grocery shopping. The reason why he had to keep his eyes wide open was the fact that Hans was a German soldier serving his duty for Toruń's governing body. After a year of political rumble between the German and Polish factions of the city, the Deutsche Heer was strongly reinforcing its authority over the local population. In other words, Hans had to act tough.

The women would come out of their homes in the morning sun. The men, husbands for the most part, had already set out for work before sunrise. One of them was Salomon Rosenthal, a 34-year-old Jewish jeweller and also a widower after the death of Tereza Hannemann, who passed away three years ago in mysterious conditions. He opened a jewellery store on Wola Zamkowa Street nine months ago and despite a relatively low number of shoppers, he was still earning a large and prosperous income. Both the Poles and Germans were always contemplating his store in a dubious way, as if wondering how rich Salomon was and if that was the case, how he made so much money with so few customers. Such questions also troubled a Pole named Pawel Obraniak, a 42-year-old stonemason originally from Czernikowo, a small village on the outskirts of Toruń. Pawel had moved to Toruń twelve years ago in pursuit of a better life and had managed to do so. However, Pawel was not quite the average stonemason from around the corner. Despite possessing strong hands and a healthy body, he was also in possession of smart brain. Pawel was a polyglot, able to speak four languages fluently without a taint of an accent. On top of his

native Polish, he was able to speak German, Yiddish and Ukrainian. These qualities will prove to be very useful in the near future.

On that bright morning Pawel was working by the Vistula River on the Bulwar Filadelfijski. With four co-workers, he was sharpening stones for the reconstruction of the wall circling Toruń's Old Town. After sweating for two hours, Pawel reached for some water and marked a pause in his duty. While watching the street ahead of him, he glanced at a graceful silhouette gliding along the red-bricked pavement. In fact, he was observing Anna Zubrowka, the only real Anna in town. Miss Zubrowka was a 21-year-old Polish student and daughter of an aristocratic family from Toruń. She was walking towards Wola Zamkowa street with a grocery bag, and Pawel was observing her with the same enamored eyes as on the first day. Nevertheless, despite an open fire burning inside him, he was well aware of the fact that she was on her way to Tsirung Place, the shop owned by Salomon Rosenthal. Anna would visit Salomon every morning but Pawel had so far not been able to figure out the reason of her visit. As a result, upon seeing her silhouette disappearing in the distance, his physical attraction to her turned into deep anger and repulsion, and he resumed his stone sharpening duty unhappy and ashamed of himself.

In fact, Anna was simply paying a visit to Salomon's young daughter Ella, a 10-year-old bright young girl who saw Anna as the mother she was missing so much. Such daily visit was always a pleasure for the father and daughter. Anna, as per usual, came with some fruits and vegetables from the market and in that way contributed to the healthy feeding of the young girl. Salomon, however, tended to see Anna as the wife he was missing so much.

Living on the outskirts of the city because of his religion and the passing of his wife had impacted him enormously. After the usual morning greetings, Anna sat on a chair behind the desk and Salomon brought a book from the storage room. He was teaching the Hebrew language to Anna, who was fond of anything regarding Jewish culture. Such passion was also kept secret from her family as they held strong opinions regarding the Jews in their city. Her language skills

were in fact fairly poor but it was the chance for her to stare and listen to Salomon for at least half an hour. Since there were almost no customers looking for jewels in the morning, Salomon had all the time in the world to practice such activities with Anna. Ella brought them tea with sugar and some Jewish biscuits before retiring to the storage room to play with her toys. Once the Hebrew lesson was finished, Anna stood up and as Salomon was walking her out of the shop she stopped, stared at him and kissed the man, unable to restrain herself from her inner feelings. Salomon was not so surprised; he knew such a situation was awaiting them and for the first time in three years he blushed and felt loved. They kissed again and said goodbye with Anna unsure of how to act after revealing her feelings towards him so openly.

The next day, Anna went out as usual but without stopping at Salomon's place. Instead, she bumped into Hans, the German soldier, who was patrolling Wola Zamkowa Street. He greeted her with a smile, a rather unusual trait as smiling was to be forgotten at all costs towards the local population. Anna tried to avoid eye-contact with the Deutsche Heer soldier. Whenever she looked at his eyes, she remembered that night in July when she found herself trapped in the basement of his home on Fryderyka Chopina Street, raped and beaten up until morning. Hans abused her again and again until exhaustion. The soldier turned into some form of a wild animal, cracking a whip leaving on her waist marks still visible on her skin. The young lady was, therefore, in panic at the mere shadow of Hans lingering about. The soldier was well aware of the fact that she could have told the entire city about what took place in his home two months ago. But deep down, he knew she did not, and that she dared not to since the German faction of Toruń was in such a powerful position that almost all crimes committed by their members were, if not unnoticed, absolved almost instantly. The Poles, however, were walking on thin ice and had to be extremely cautious about their actions, and so were the Jews.

Pawel Obraniak, the stonemason, was always using his language skills to get out of uneasy situations. He met Hans for the first time a few months ago, as he

was sitting inside one of the numerous city taverns. Pawel was overhearing a conversation between Hans and some of his Deutsche Heer colleagues. One of the German soldiers was bragging about how one day he broke the arm of a Pole who was allegedly trying to break into a German bakery shop. They were all laughing like maniacs on hearing such a sad but realistic account of daily life in Toruń. Pawel then got up, briefly glanced at the table where the soldiers were sitting, and stepped out of the tavern to light up a cigarette. He was smoking illegal tobacco from Ukraine that he obtained each month from a small ship stopping only for a few hours on the bank of the Vistula River, on the opposite side of the Old Town. The ship's crew only spoke Ukrainian and since Pawel mastered the language, it was easy for him to interact with them. As he was about to throw his cigarette butt on the ground, Hans reached for him and asked "*Was passiert Steinmetz? Alles klar für dich?*". Pawel was startled at the idea that Hans was aware of his profession and therefore replied after what appeared to be a long silence for him. He replied in German, saying that everything was fine and offered Hans a cigarette. The soldier declined, declaring health concerns and quickly rushed back inside the tavern. Pawel then lit up another cigarette and tiptoed his way back home, only stopping from time to time to watch behind his back.

Salomon Rosenthal had not seen Anna for three days. As he was closing his jewellery store before heading home, he noticed how unusually busy the street was. Some people were either rushing their way home or running in any possible direction. He firmly held his daughter's hand and reassured her, "Let's go home *kleyne meyd!*" and as they were trying to escape from the disorientated throng, Salomon heard someone shouting in Polish "German soldier murdered, German soldier dead!". Such news came as a huge shock for the local population. Any non-German person could potentially be accused of murdering Hans Götze, the 42-year-old soldier originally from Rostock in northern Germany. His body was discovered and retrieved from the Vistula River, floating, indicating that the murder had happened minutes before the finding.

His eyes had been removed in what appeared to have been a gruesome torture act. Hans's limbs had also been amputated, his right arm missing, the one that was always carrying his machine gun. Furthermore, after the three Polish wood workers who retrieved the body analyzed it, they found that his tongue had also been removed. It was the act of a madman, as everyone thought. But a German soldier? Why? Salomon was in a state of shock as he quickly realised that he could be a potential murderer according to the German authorities. There was no time for him to ponder on the situation standing still in the middle of the street, so he and Ella quickly disappeared into the horizon, towards home.

A knock on the door, then a loud bang in Tsirung Place. Salomon knew who was asking and showed no emotions when he was handcuffed by two German soldiers taking him to the Rathaus for questioning. He had spent the previous evening praying, over and over again, for the Lord to have mercy on him, in vain. He believed there was neither a Lord nor angels for the Germans. As a Jew, Salomon had to face discrimination on a daily basis and take it like a man, as any form of protest would have most probably been welcomed with a rope around his neck on Toruń's main square. En route to the Rathaus, he remembered the few occasions he had encountered Hans Götze. The German soldier came to the jewellery store every afternoon, asking the same annoying questions. "How much have you been selling today? Why are you rich? Are you trafficking something?". In fact, the basement of Tsirung Place consisted of a large area with a round table in which at weekends the Jews would gather and bet on any possible sport or activity. The German authorities knew nothing about that. When the soldiers watched the congregation of Jews entering the jewellery store on Saturday evenings, they were persuaded that the gathering was intended for religious celebrations as that was the day of Shabbat. No Germans ever wished to enter and check it out, since the mere thought of being among a crowd of Jews was a disgusting notion for them. As a result, Salomon was going to the Rathaus for a reason that could have been legitimate, but

instead was transported on the grounds of a different matter. Not for betting, but for murder.

Nevertheless, Salomon always had something against Hans that was not related to the daily irruption in his store. He would see him on mornings and catch his attitude towards Anna. He could not prevent himself from thinking that there was a history between the two. Those thoughts tore his heart out. However, they were cut short by a bullet fired through his brain. Salomon had been shot while being transported by the German forces and was now lying dead in the middle of Szeroka Street, a couple of feet away from the Rathaus. A German officer had shot him, as a way to show the local population that the killing of Hans Götze was a serious matter.

In less than ten days, the Germans had killed around 200 people, mainly Jews, as a retaliation for the soldier's murder. Anna had heard the news of Salomon's deliberate assassination and she was unable to leave her room, let alone her home. She could not be mourning in peace as she was in a state of pure wonder. "How did we get there?" she sometimes asked herself, looking through her window and observing the excessive number of German soldiers parading about. Among the army men she noticed a familiar shape.

Pawel Obraniak was on his way to Bulwar Filadelfijski for work. Anna suddenly remembered that every morning, upon reaching the Bulwar, she felt observed. Additionally, she noticed how Pawel was using his eyes in a furtive way, always on the lookout, as if uncomfortable.

Her observation of the Pole was cut short by her father's voice asking Anna to come down for breakfast. She kept on staring at the window before gingerly turning back and heading for the stairs. That vision had left her in wonder. Amidst all the bloody and violent context, he was the one acting the most fearsome. Anna then realised her answer was perhaps in the question. Was Pawel acting in this way so as to leave suspicions aside?

The next day, Anna was resuming her daily walks in Toruń's Old Town. She had changed her usual path though, and upon passing the Rathaus she saw a

poster advertising the public hanging of a young man going by the name of Adam Bednarek, a 21-year-old Pole and a Greek philosophy student. Such hanging would, in fact, mark the end of the mass killings as the culprit for the murder of Hans Götze had now been found and convicted. But there was something running deep down Anna's mind that made her still unconvinced of Adam's guilty crime. Although most Poles and Jews were somehow relieved of such finding, nobody was in fact quite sure whether the Germans got hold of the actual culprit.

Doubt was everywhere. And Pawel Obraniak was aware of this. Pawel had actually found out about Anna having been raped by Hans. A few weeks ago, as he was working on another construction site on Rabińska Street, he recalled a conversation with a Ukrainian acquaintance, a plumber, Sasha, who had told Pawel of loud shouts coming from his neighbour's house. At first, he thought it was another argument between his neighbours but he was surprised to see Anna leaving the house the next day and realised that probably the German soldier was involved in some unsavoury sex act. Hans Götze unfortunately was infamous for his sexual activities in Toruń and his taste for Polish ladies. Anna was not the first and most probably not the last of his preys. Pawel felt repulsed and started to grow profound hatred towards the man and the entire Deutsche Heer. How could anyone force a woman to engage in sexual intercourse? Besides, how could anyone force such a voluptuous woman as Anna?

Unable to sleep, his brain paralysed with visions of Anna and Hans in bed together, Pawel Obraniak went for a late-night brew on Fryderyka Chopina Street. That talk with Sasha had disturbed him so much. He went to drink on the street where Hans Götze lived and there was a bar there selling quality German draught beers. Pawel ordered a large glass of Bitburger, his favourite beer. The bar, "Dom Chopina", attracted a large number of young Poles, students for the most part. On the stool next to his sat Adam Bednarek. Pawel recognized his face but was unable to put a name to it. He waved at the young man, introduced himself, then shook his hand. Adam was a bright young fellow, however very

opinionated and a tough man to talk politics with. Pawel was simply engaging in conversation, when a group of young men surrounded them and greeted Adam with smiles. Those were Adam's classmates, as he told Pawel he was a Greek philosophy student. The conversation turned more engaging and serious in tone. The group of students and the stonemason then quickly changed topics and were now talking about their own accounts of the Deutsche Heer. Pawel, the eldest, thought there was no harm in asking the group who had already met or seen Hans Götze. Most of the young students' faces nodded positively before Pawel simply asked why. Adam then took the lead and explained that a few female acquaintances had some unfortunate tales to tell. Pawel needed no more explanations. He then went on to explain how he heard a similar story involving a woman he claimed he did not know personally, but whom the students were quick to realise he was fond of. The young students were in fact gathering twice a week in Dom Chopina. The previous meetings had been held in order to set a plan to trap Hans Götze, to catch him red-handed. It was a difficult task as the German soldier was in fact the nephew of Toruń's mayor, Wilhelm Friedrich Götze. But the students had now a new ally and counted on his participation. After three hours of intense planning and more than a few more beers, everyone agreed on sending the soldier a letter explaining that a woman would beg him to come and meet her on the other side of the Vistula River for a romantic dinner. They had no idea as to whether or not Hans would fall for the clever trap, but they sent the letter to his house anyway. The gang agreed to meet on the other bank of the Vistula River at 7 o'clock in the evening the next day.

Everyone gathered where the boat coming from Ukraine with illegally imported products moored. Such a plan was in fact a big risk, if Hans came and the plan failed, he could not only continue his rape rampage, but he could also reveal the location of the boat to the Deutsche Heer. Pawel was nervous, his right arm was shaking anxiously. To their amazement, Hans Götze made the trip and appeared on the horizon, his army silhouette reinforcing their loathe of



the man, and he was carrying a machine gun on his right arm. Hans had no idea that he was onto his final journey. Before he started wondering where that woman was, a rope was tied around his neck and the crew drew him closer to them. Then the questions started. As Paweł Obraniak spoke flawless German, he was in charge of dealing with Hans face-to-face and ask all possible questions. The soldier was resisting and said nothing before Adam Bednarek joined Paweł and started punching his face. Adam broke the soldier's nose. He was still resisting. A mad spirit started to grip around the place and Adam used his knife to take one of the soldier's eyes. Hans screamed and was bleeding intensely. Paweł was still asking questions but the soldier could not prevent the screaming, so Adam then cut the soldier's tongue. Hans fell to the ground unconscious, he had fainted as the pain was impossible to bear. Paweł asked Adam to step away from the soldier but the young philosophy student was unstoppable. He removed both eyes from Hans and his tongue. Another member of the gang then used an axe to amputate his right arm. Paweł could not believe the scene he was witnessing.

Hans died within minutes and the students then gathered again, unable to plan their next move as the events unfolded in a very unexpected way. They were looking at each other as if calling for help, but no help came. Adam, as if waking up from a bad nightmare, then took hold of the soldier's body and threw it in the Vistula River. The gang then contemplated the river, speechless, mesmerised by their own actions.

Adam's arrest had put the city at rest from the mass killings by the Deutsche Heer. Paweł Obraniak was not able to resume work, and pretended to suffer from a condition that would keep him out of work for a few months at least. In fact, Paweł was waiting for the Ukrainian boat to come to Toruń and escape from the city. He planned to move to Warszawa and rebuild his life over there. Additionally, Adam had not yet been killed and Paweł was afraid that the Germans would torture the man to see whether he acted alone or not. As he was sorting all his belongings and choosing what he would take with him, he

heard a knock on the door. It was Anna. Taken by surprise, Pawel opened the door and ushered her in. They spent the first few minutes staring at each other, with Pawel aware that Anna knew about what happened on the bank of the Vistula River. He told her nothing regarding his involvement in the murder of Hans Götze, but Anna then revealed that she was extremely sad for Salomon Rosenthal's death, accused of a crime he did not commit. Pawel did not actually know about the Jewish man's death. He then felt guilty and confessed to Anna, his confession bringing tears to the woman's eyes. They were both crying. The stonemason cried as he realised that Anna was in fact in love with the innocent Jew who paid the highest price for his own crime. Anna, her heart in pain, left Pawel's apartment and the man quickly packed his bag before heading towards the Vistula River. He made a terrible mistake in confessing to the crime. Anna, despite being in his dreams, was also a complete stranger who could just as well tell anyone about the murder. As he was walking in a rather fast pace, getting closer to the river, he felt a hand reaching his back. A man sliced his throat with a knife and Pawel fell on his knees, his neck spitting blood like a fountain. He died while Adam Bednarek's neck was broken by a rope on the main square in front of a large crowd. It was over.