Invention of a Language

Wolfgang Kohlhaase

Ten numbers have been called out on the loudspeaker—the tenth is his. Straat feels neither fear nor hope. He steps out of his row, stumbles between faces and backs to the end of his group, turns right, and walks with painful steps up to the man who called his name and who is standing on a platform behind a table with papers and a microphone on it.

It is April of the year 1944. Straat, the tenth in a line of men who take their places with their faces toward the wall, is dead-tired although it is early in the day, and although he is so young. The sky that he sees when he casts a glance over the roof of the guardhouse hangs low and wet. Farther beyond, past these clouds, a small part of the way around the world, is Holland. They brought Straat from there with five others a hundred days ago, a long, long time ago. Why? So that he could sweat, so that he could freeze, so that he could carry rocks, receive blows, lie in filth, sleep on boards, eat rotten vegetables, and finally cease to be. But before that, still breathing and still seeing, he would forget who he was. He has already almost forgotten. It is unbelievable that beyond that piece of sky there is still a place where he was born, and earth and water, his parents, evenings, the different smell of the girls' class in school, the scientific instruments behind the glass door of

the cabinet, and physics—six semesters of it—unbelievable! Because the law of conservation of energy isn't really true anymore. It isn't true for those who carry rocks up the big ramps, guarded by clubs and sniperscopes from darkness to darkness. Six students of physics, five of them already done for. The last one, dead-tired, is Straat, who isn't going to the quarry today because his number has been called.

Ten men, but where are they going? To isolation cells? To the infirmary? Ahead of them is a Kapo[1] in a white jacket, and he leads them to the kitchen. A stone building, tiled on the inside. Six shiny boilers in which the stinking soup is cooked. But they haven't been brought here to make soup. They're here because of the potatoes.

The commandant is having a "comradeship evening." On such occasions the guards, the executioners, the paymasters, the work crew leaders, the supply officers, the torturers, the office personnel, and the doctor sit pleasantly together at long tables. And the evening has three main attractions: first the comradeship, second the beer, third the pork roast with potato salad. And that's the reason why ten stools have been put in the camp kitchen with ten baskets of potatoes next to them, ten basins for peelings in front of them, a metal bucket in the middle, and Straat on one of the stools.

It is warm and quiet in the kitchen. The nearby stone quarry seems far removed. In an enclosure next to the door an SS-man is sitting and reading. The Kapo comes and stands by the potato peelers occasionally and looks on. No malice, just professional interest. And yet, Straat's fingers begin to twitch, he's not used to this, his peelings become too thick, it's not easy for him in the shadow of a Kapo who has his eyes on him. The Kapo goes away and then returns. Straat works faster but it doesn't help, and he hears the question:

"You, what did you do before?"

"Student," says Straat and doesn't look up and doesn't stop peeling with his quivering hands. He expects a kick at anytime. The SS-man behind the pane of glass will look up from his book. And then? But the Kapo just says:

"Studies are over, huh?"

At noon they get a bowl of soup, steam rising from its surface where a few shreds of meat are floating. Then a second bowl, filled to the rim.

Straat is outside now, leaning against the wall of the mess hall with all that soup in his skeleton, contented. Suddenly no hunger any more. No stone quarry. No yelling. Far away, behind the electric fence, where nobody can go, he discovers a shimmer of green and he remembers that it's April. The Kapo watches him and strolls over and asks:

"Hey, what did you study?"

"Physics."

"I see," says the Kapo in the tone of somebody who knows what it's all about.

That afternoon Straat is less afraid when somebody comes up to him. A little sun slants into the kitchen, the potatoes plop into the water, the regular kitchen personnel, in white aprons, are slicing bread for the next day—who would believe that here and there someone is dying, now, in the sand, not far away? The Kapo is standing next to Straat again and feels an urge to talk.

"Damn it, when I get out of here," he said, "after the war, I'm going to Persia."

The Kapo explains that he has a brother in Persia who just got out in time, in '39, and now he's sitting there, a big businessman, while the Kapo sits here like an idot.

"You're a Dutchman," says the Kapo. "What do you think—is Persia a good place to be?"

"I'm sure it's good," says Straat. He peels and peels, but he isn't peeling so fast anymore. The Kapo, in the mild afternoon light, nods like somebody who feels himself understood, and he sighs.

"What a waste of time, precious time. If a person could at least learn Persian here."

He has a worried look, with an honest good-fellow frown on his face, a man close to forty and quite well-fed compared to those human wrecks sitting there in a circle. Fate had first thrown him down and then raised him up again, but he still gets crapped on. That's for sure. Then Straat suddenly hears himself saying:

"I know Persian."

The Kapo gives him a long look out of his pale eyes, first unbelievingly, then doubtingly, then almost tenderly:

"You know Persian?"

Straat nods with frozen features.

"Come with me."

The Kapo goes ahead; Straat stumbles after him into the little office enclosure.

"So tell me now how you came to know Persian."

There was no retreat now for Straat. You don't play jokes on a Kapo, especially when all you need is one more push to knock you over for good. And Straat doesn't want to play jokes either—he just doesn't want to go to the quarry anymore—that would finish him off—he wants to stay in the kitchen where he can sit on a stool like a human being and peel potatoes and where he can get soup to eat. Although he's afraid his voice will fail, it doesn't betray him—it's just very soft. He says:

"I was in Persia before the war."

"You know what'll happen to you if that's not true?"

Straat's eyes are so full of terror that the Kapo is convinced that he does know.

"All right, how do you say 'hello'?"

"*Dalam*," says Straat.

"And 'shit'?"

Straat ponders too long, and the Kapo immediately becomes impatient.

"But there must be a word for 'shit'."

"*Tupa*," Says Straat.

"*Tupa*," the Kapo says with feeling. Then he says:

"Now peel as if your life depended on it."

That's the gist of their conversation. It accomplishes a lot. For example, the Kapo Battenbach pays a visit to Work Crew Leader Roeder, who has returned from a lengthy stay at the dining table. He explains to him that he has long since needed another man in the kitchen crew and has never been able to find the right one, but that now someone has turned up who impresses him with his special aptitude. The crew leader nods in reply: He has no objection to taking a look at such an outstanding person. With Battenbach in tow he marches over to the potato peelers and examines the half-starved Dutchman, formerly a physics student, but of what interest is that to Roeder? What interests him can be seen at a glance and that is the fact that this man doesn't have the slightest notion of how to peel potatoes, however desperately he tries. But this is not the main point, because twice a week the crew leader gets to take some sausage along, and on Sunday a roast, and occasionally some margarine. All of which comes from Battenbach. So Roeder nods a second time and goes back to his office and writes a name and number on a card. And on the same day this name and number are added to the duty roster. From there to the labor supervisor, and, in the light of the next morning that shines

dampIy upon the drill field, Straat is the only one of the ten potato peelers to be returned to the kitchen, where Battenbach gives him a friendly pat on the shoulder.

For Straat is now Battenbach's man. He is not going to be burned to ashes, he's going to get soup and bread to make him strong again. "Such a mind should not be wasted," Battenbach says to himself, and rubs his hands together. "They locked me up for pimping—unpolitical—but they can't stop me from learning Persian." Of course, Roeder doesn't know that—Roeder, who hangs around Straat the first few days and tries to figure out what's going on—no, he can't know that the well-fed Kapo and the hungry Dutchman are joined together by a special language. But what even Battenbach doesn't know is that this language doesn't really exist. Only Straat. He alone determines the rules and the words. How many words will he need, for how many days?

At noon, as soon as Crew Leader Roeder has eaten and left, Battenbach calls Straat into the office and sits down calmly at the table with crinkled paper and a pencil stub in front of him, ready to learn some Persian. On the first day he wants general information about Persia. Straat says it's hot there, and the women beautiful, the poor are poor and the rich are rich. Battenbach is satisfied—that's the way he had imagined it. He himself is in the "entertainment" business, do they have that sort of thing there too? Bordellos? Straat isn't sure at first what he means, and Battenbach explains. Why of course, absolutely, says Straat. And Battenbach nods—that's what he thought. But now he wants to know some words: schnaps, police, thanks, please, table, chair, bed, canteen, cutlet. Straat doesn't dare to hesitate, not on the first day. He names them all in order: *alan, monato, laps, nam, toki, sol, oltok, runidam, kotelett*. That last one is a borrowed word, says Straat, it's international. With a clumsy hand Battenbach writes down everything.

In the evening, under his ragged blanket, lying shoulder to shoulder with the neighbor who shares the cot with him, Straat tries, despite a debilitating headache, to invent words and, above all, a system to help him remember them. The heavy breathing of exhausted men surrounds him, the one next to him groans in his sleep, Straat's lips form words that no one has ever heard: *or, tal, mel, met, meb*, which mean: I, you, he, she, it.

Now Battenbach is punching him in the face with his fist, kicking him in the shins, slamming him against the wall—Battenbach, who is quivering from rage and disappointment. It's all because of *runidam*, the Persian word for "canteen." Straat had made it up the first day; later, when Battenbach asked him for it, he couldn't remember. Straat was aware that something had slipped his mind, but Battenbach wouldn't let him look at the notes. Battenbach gave him two days, in the meantime writing down the next words himself and having them spelled to him so Straat couldn't look over his shoulder. Now Battenbach is flailing at him with his fists and is determined to turn in this swine of a Dutchman before the noon hour is over. Straat screams in despair that it's been ten years since he was in Persia, and he was still a child, and *runidam* is a very rare word, and it just occurred to him accidentally. "Canteen" is actually *mardam*, but if he doesn't get some paper and pencil, he can't refresh his memory after so long a time.

"I'll see that you rot," says Battenbach. Then they are silent. Straat leans against the wall and watches the Kapo with anxious eyes and Battenbach stares at the forehead of his "boy," whose skin is taut and pale; he sees the veins in his temples beating, he curses—if he could only look into that head. A doubt slips into his mistrust, a doubt that he would like to surrender to. Because already in just a few days, this language has won a place in his heart. During the empty evenings, when he looks from his window out over the drill field, filled with a dull hate for the world, tormented by memories of women, he has, with the help of the difficult Persian words, all at once become a man who makes use of the hours and looks forward to them and has his secret far-reaching plans.

"I just hope you aren't cheating me. If you really don't know Persian . . ." says Battenbach, and the enormity of this thought makes his voice quiver. "I know Persian," says Straat. "I do! It was just a long time ago." From then on Straat has a pencil and paper to use. These are valuable items that can put you in a cell. If they catch him with them, Battenbach will claim to know nothing. Straat hides the pencil in one of his shoes and the paper under his cap. He carries his language over his brain, between the shorn hair and the cloth of his cap. At roll call he has to be careful, especially at the command "Caps off!" His language might fall out. It can be discovered and taken away from him. Then he'll be done for, whatever happens; the guards or his student will kill him. Every evening he also hides bread or a few potatoes in his clothes and brings them to his bedmate, an electrician from Groningen,

quarry detail—who weighs only ninety pounds.

Straat works on his language at night. He twists letters and syllables to make up words. The special German things that surround him find a place in his language. When he can give them a sound that carries him away, not to Persia but into a strange and quiet world—at such moments he can escape their horrible meanings. *Rium, rema, matori, muro, kemato, ikre, tame, muir, rotam, kretum, orite, mekor, kumo, emati, katu meri, tamku, taritora.*[2] All of these words come from the German *Krematorium.* And it's the same with "arrest" and "barracks," with "quarry" and "barbed wire," and even with the name of Battenbach, his protector, who in this fashion can learn from himself. From the fat, black smoke (*Rauch*) comes *hacur,* the wind.

Straat writes down words on his paper in the dark, as small as possible. He hides the paper in his cap and puts the cap under his straw mattress. He doesn't invent more than five words a night, thirty a week, which is also enough for Battenbach. They leave Sunday out. Straat eats two bowls of soup each day, he is getting stronger, he notices how summer is approaching, the smell of blossoming lupines comes from distant fields. Another Dutchman, from the work crew, is waiting for him in the latrine.

"What are you doing with the Kapo in his office every noon?"

"What business is it of yours?" says Straat distrustfully.

The other looks at him with forbearance. He says: "You didn't accidentally get the potato-peeling job. We put you down for that because you were the last of the students. So that you could rest for a day."

He pauses and says: "And then Battenbach made use of you. Why?"

Silence, except for the buzzing of the green-glistening flies. And Straat sees in the eyes of the other man a suspicion mingled with anxiety and sympathy, but also severity and hardness. He senses in this moment that the language which only he knows can not only protect but also destroy, because it raises him above those closest to him. But he is afraid to reveal his secret, not even to someone who might be a friend, because who is really his friend? Most likely the boy from Groningen, who shares his cot, and whom he provides with bread, potatoes, and courage, but he doesn't even tell him.

Summer 1944.

The bombers draw lines of silver across the German sky.

Straat makes a word for life, he calls it: *sawal.* And a word for apple tree, as a joke—*pollimolli.* But not as a favor to Battenbach, who, at his own request, is learning numbers and idioms and words having to do with the world of entertainment. When Battenbach has bad moods, Straat makes up words in revenge. One of them is *sulidduladornatlam.* Battenbach doesn't want to accept that one, but Straat explains to him that it's the customary word of greeting in that country—no door is open for you in Persia if you don't say *sulidduladornatlam.*

"*Tupa,*" says Battenbach like a real Persian.

While Straat's mind, schooled on physics and no longer weakened by hunger or dulled by fear, invents the structure of a language, men are dying around him, about fifty every day, week after week, their flesh burned, their brains hissing into nothingness as their souls pass into the heaven of their religious faith. Before their death, their mouths have perhaps spoken a last word that then starts upon a long journey through lands and peoples, and finally may reach those who are waiting for it.

Straat's language will reach no one except Battenbach—it will carry no message and represents nothing but itself; it saves the one who is inventing it and makes another, who is laboriously learning it, more gentle—he is still a "dirty dog" but not a bloodhound. Otherwise the language is useless. But for it Straat needs the imagination to make great discoveries, the courage for great hypotheses, the ambition for great undertakings. And Battenbach, kitchen Kapo, pimp from Hamburg, needs to regain the eager simplicity which he once had, long ago, as a schoolboy.

One August morning they carry Straat from the drill field, where he had fallen, to the infirmary—his face is spotted, his tongue swelling out of his mouth. For three days he lies delirious on the straw and on the floor; the male nurses hear him speak a series of words without sense. Then it becomes apparent that he will pull through; he is stronger than others but is he still sane? The camp orderly goes through the rows with the needle. With an injection of air he heals all pains; after all, when you're dead you're no longer sick. When he hears Straat screaming he will declare him insane, will note his number, then push up his sleeve and look for the vein. The attendant pulls Straat by his feel into an adjoining room where the dead are lying; nobody will hear him or search for him there. Then Straat regains consciousness. In the warm sunlight that shines through the two windows he sees

others of his own kind, rigid, in the ridiculous contortions of their last moments, the pupils of their eyes fixed forever, mouths opened wide without a scream. Is he himself alive? He has a voice with which he can howl like a wolf and with which he can say words which surprise everybody except his silent companions here. Does he belong among them?

Before the zinc-plated burial van comes and backs up to the building they take Straat, still thrashing around in his fever, and put him in a bed. The next day he is quieter. The nurse, a German, is watching him and shaking his head:

"Say, buddy, those were crazy things you were saying. We thought you'd really had it." And he taps himself on the forehead.

Straat is very weak and forgets to be cautious.

"It is Persian," he says, "but it is not actually Persian. I make it all up."

"What do you make up?"

"A language," says Straat.

But then the nurse thinks that this man is crazy after all; well, fate is blind, great minds go kaput—this Dutchman is lucky. And he really is lucky, because the Kapo uses his influence and sends him bread several times. Straat recovers, and, when the nurse asks him again about his language, he pretends that he remembers nothing. And Straat also conceals his fear, his fear over the fact that he has lost his cap. He goes back to his building like a man raised from the dead; he sees new faces, also a new man on his cot. He waits for the chief prisoner who comes and shakes his hand.

"Come along, I have something for you."

In the chief's room there's a floor tile that has been loosened, and from underneath it he fishes out a dirty piece of cloth—no, not a rag but a cap; Straat twists it in his hands and feels the pieces of paper that his language is written on.

"The man who shared the cot with you, the electrician, brought it back from the drill field."

"Where is he?" asks Straat.

"He got sick after you did," says the chief. "He's not coming back."

The chief breathes with a whistling sound, as if something in his nose were broken. He says:

"Keep bringing things from the kitchen. There are many men here who need them."

So the situation returns to normal. Straat goes back to the

kitchen detail, and Battenbach's blue eyes sparkle with satisfaction, and he refrains from sending anybody to his death. At noon when Crew Leader Roeder has gone, he sits down at the table, with the pencil stub in his hand, on his face the look of humility of a person who is learning something. The word for "learning" is *lifu*. And Straat smuggles paper and pencil and bread and potatoes through the bellowing of the rollcalls and, in the evening, shoulder to shoulder with another bedpartner, he thinks up idioms and sentences and constructs a conjugation and a declension. It's no longer just for Battenbach, for whom the customary assignment is enough. Now it is the language itself which drives him on. Once more he is threatened with exposure. Battenbach has found out that a Persian has been brought to the camp—a live Persian, of all things. For two days Battenbach prowls through the camp, trying with the help of all the tricks he knows, to find him. When he finally locates him, he turns out to be an Indian. Battenbach spends another whole day cursing.

"This is a lousy camp. There's not even one Persian in the whole damned bunch."

"The Fuehrer hasn't got that far yet," says Straat consolingly. And he thinks: 'That poor lonely man from India!'

Fall comes and winter. An icy wind blows over the drill grounds and whirls the light snow over the frozen ground. Columns of people in rags move through the gates, infinitely slowly, foot by foot, step by step; they come from other camps, have survived the march and now move into the tents, surrounded by barbed wire, to die quietly in the night under high, bright stars, or in the day under swiftly moving clouds—sometimes when the sun is shining.

Within the mess hall, where it's warm, Straat practices with Battenbach an imaginary scene in Persian:

"I am a gentleman from abroad. I am a business man. May I dance with the lady? *Ta muli asa okadır. Ta muli lem basarmelko. Neli ta ramadamda donga?*"

A day in May will come when the gates are opened, the chestnuts will be blooming in the streets, whoever is still alive will go where he wants to. Straat will return to Holland, will finish his study of physics and become a teacher. For the rest of his life he will become easily tired. Never again will he do anything as great as what he accomplished here: he invented a language . . . which he is gradually forgetting.

Battenbach will go to Persia, to the Empire of Iran, amazed at the strange language which is spoken there.

Notes

[1]Kapo: a prisoner put in charge of a work party composed of other prisoners

[2]I have retained the original words, all formed, as the author says, from *Krematorium*. Some of them, at least, can also be seen as partial or complete anagrams of other words relevant to the times: *Ruhm* (fame), *Reich*, *Amt* (governmental bureau), *Mauer* (wall), *Mord* (murder), *Kretin* (cretin), *Terror*, *Amerika*, *Territorium* (territory).

A Certain Date[1]

Christa Wolf

Communists? If she knew one, it would be the shoemaker, Sell, from the village of G. When she assigned him, or rather, his wagon, to labor corps work just as she did with everybody else, he came to the municipal office, threw his cap on the table and shouted: Always me, that's strange, maybe the rich farmers greased your palm, Fräulein? Then she took the list she'd made out carefully and fairly, and threw it down next to the greasy cap and started shouting too, and then Shoemaker Sell stormed away and slammed the door behind him. But the mayor, whose term of office was limited because the higher-ups wouldn't accept permanently the fine distinction he made between being a member of the National Socialist Workers' Party and being a Nazi—the mayor taught her what fairness is: You see, it doesn't mean equal treatment of all, but only privileges for those in power at the moment—it used to be the rich farmers like Otto Müller, nowadays it was people like Sell, the shoemaker. A list is a list, she said, and a horse is a horse; but the mayor said: You may be able to speak a foreign language, young lady, but there are a lot of other things you still have to learn.

Then there was the other one, a dead Communist, a driver of a beer wagon, whose son turned him in to the authorities. Listening