

Golden Paint by Dina Rubina
Translated from Russian by Julie Zhuk

This piece starts out with a tale going back to WW2, that has to do with the author. The author's name is Dina Rubina. The title for this piece or at least the first line in this piece is "golden paint". We still don't know the name of a person, who introduced the story. He was a typical beer-house regular. He had a red face. He was tall with a thick neck and had a victorious belly.

In short, he was, what you want, imagine the German beer cattle. And he clung to us in the beer hall, it was a huge hall located in the city of Munich. It stretched for almost hundreds of meters. Our local friend, a native of Dnepropetrovsk, actually, but now a patriot of Germany. This friend of ours, persuaded us to take a mug of beer - here, they say, a special place and the beer is brought from some special brewery. We began to discuss varieties; we raised our voices to shout over the smart Bavarians wearing hats that had feathers on them. There was a trio in the center of the hall that was playing music.

They used a violin, a double bass, and a drum. They were thrashing around, without a break. It was a brave thing to do while people were drinking ruddy beers out of mugs. The mugs made a joyful noise and then there was the noisy company at the next table. At that table, there was a cliff that detached itself. From where we were sitting it seemed especially tall. There was a man with a wide smile who was looking in our direction. If it had not been for his smile, it was not a clear message of having good intentions.

Something needs to be clarified here... This meeting took place about twenty years ago, on our first trip to Germany. It lasted about forty minutes long at most and the conversation was poor due to the lack of knowing the German language. Sometimes we found each other shouting over each other, if the trio entered with fresh enthusiasm. In fact, the first trip to Germany with a stop in Heidelberg, Berlin, Frankfurt, Nuremberg, and Dresden.

There were a dozen performances in front of a new audience. There were museums, incredible parks, and palaces. These places had such strong impressions that now one can only wonder: what made me write down the same evening, the story of our random drinking companion?

What made me from time to time remember him and think about him, and most importantly - that forced me now to extract it literally from the ashes of the disintegrated into a handful of dilapidated pages of a notebook and take their rightful place in the chain of these short stories?

Lord, he could hardly speak Russian! Our friend had a hard time herself speaking or understanding German. Out of all the students in her German class, she was the best one. I have no idea why it's eaten into me: a smoky dim beer, a red-faced lump nearby who attempted to connect naughty words... Of course, I will not literally portray his language attempts.

He turned out to be from East Germany. He was born before the war and after the war he taught Russian language. He sat down with us after hearing what he thought were familiar words. He kept repeating enthusiastically the word, "Russia, Russia, Russia" as if he spent some part of his life, somewhere in Leningrad. Seeing and hearing this man, my husband turned to me saying he is obviously a fool.

What kind of enthusiasm can a man such as him have, for a country that crippled his childhood? And, as if out of stubbornness my husband interrupted Wilbert and corrected: we are not at all

from Russia. We are from Jerusalem, the capital of Israel. This freaked him out, he was admired by the fact that we are from Israel and not Russia. His panic was familiar to us, I thought - the joyful participation of the Germans in the well-being of a country that was created for the cause and in the wake of crimes. But this one was different.... I took a closer look. He had a pretty face of a workaholic. He immediately reported that he was a truck driver by profession.

He was currently resting between flights. And tomorrow morning... he was planning to return to Dresden, Germany in his trailer. He began telling us the real story of his life. He began to tell his story straight off the bat, without any preambles.

It was as if he was in a hurry to dump everything and return to the comrades. This was how I remembered him: disheveled, with a sweaty red face, from time to time he would brush off with a large palm the calls of drinking companions to return for the people stuttering at the table, every now and then to find the correct Russian word. I am retelling this literally as twenty years ago when I wrote it in my notebook almost concisely. For some reason it seems like my writing was poor and I had been in a hurry. The syllable most truthfully appears fateful the power of his simple story.

Wilbert's father's first marriage was to a Jewish woman. At the time, they were in love and everything seemed normal. It didn't take much time for them to discover, they were not getting along. They were very different from each other and they separated. You never know, it happens!

Wilbert's father remarried, this time it was to a German woman. One year later, Wilbert was born. As he was speaking, we turned towards him and said, "Yes, it's nice to meet you". Now when Hitler came to power and it all began, things got really bad fast. One night, his father went out silently. When he came back, he was not alone.

He came back with a woman. She was young and had black curly hair. Another thing that made her stand out was her huge green eyes. She was wearing a shiny black raincoat. When they came in, they were both pretty soaked. The rain was strong and was coming down hard! When Wilbert's mother met this woman, she instantly accepted her. Wilbert's mother was a wonderful person, although she was overly straightforward. Back then, Wilbert was quite small. He was four years old. He wasn't following his mother's face. Thinking about this now it is a pity because it would have been interesting to see the contrast between the way both women viewed each other.

Wilbert's father helped this woman with the huge green eyes downstairs into the cellar. And you know what? This woman stayed in the attic until the very end of the war. This woman, her name was Esther. During the war she didn't come out of the cellar, she sat in the cellar throughout the entire war! Throughout the entire war, Wilbert's parents, both mother and father were hiding a Jewish woman in their home.

Wilbert's father had a brother whose name was Klaus, was a Nazi. He knew about the Jewish woman being hidden in his brother's cellar. Klaus was serving in the Gestapo. Even though he was aware that Esther was being hidden, Klaus didn't want to betray his brother.

As Wilbert was growing up, his parents started trusting him with bringing food down to Esther. The stairs down to the cellar were steep, but he was becoming an adult. He was almost a man. It was hard work to bring her food, but somehow, he coped. He was not afraid of the steepness or the darkness. In addition, there in the cellar, a lightbulb was burning.

When he would reach the bottom of the stairs at the cellar, he saw that Esther had turned pale as death. He was surprised to see her huge eyes shining so strangely in the half darkness. One would think he was afraid of her, but it was quite the opposite.

He felt terribly attached to her and they became friendly with each other. Now that he was retelling this tale years later to myself, my husband, and our friend, he shared how he felt closer to Esther than his own mother. Earlier in Esther's life, when she was young, she graduated from the Academy of Arts. Growing up she participated in many exhibitions. She painted small landscapes, until in a word... before this shit started.

Being in this cellar, she felt extremely homesick. She said that it was the most difficult thing: hands without being able to work, really hurt. Then Wilbert decided to do something, he stole gold paint just for her. He just stole, G-d forgive him. He stole the paint from his church that was nearby where his family lived.

There was a handyman in the church, who worked in the backroom. He corrected this and that, some curls on the altar, on the wooden choir stalls. When this worker took his lunch outside of the church, he left everything. Wilbert came by and saw this, he felt like it was necessary to steal the utensils this worker had.

As Wilbert looked around, he didn't see many things. He mostly saw cans of gold paint. He didn't want to rob the worker. Still, he wanted the gold paint and was racking his brain as to what would be the fastest way to get what he wanted. He took off the lid from a bucket and scooped it up in a jar. He didn't notice right away that the paper was in bulk!

He remembered that before the war, his grandfather owned a stationary shop and a lot of the things there still remained in good condition. There was wrapping paper that was very thick. He remembered Esther writing with gold paint, her landscapes: had golden trees, a golden lake, and there was a golden bridge over a stream. And you know what? The best part was that Esther outlasted the Fuhrer! When the Soviet troops arrived, she crawled out of the cellar. She started receiving ration cards and she was able to feed the whole family using these.

Wilbert's family survived on these food cards. Wilbert shared that his parents died early on, Esther on the other hand survived that horrible war. She lived to see eighty-nine and died quite recently after that. He told us that as he looked back to this war this woman was the closest person to him.

Of course, she worked to the last. She wrote using watercolors creating mostly landscapes. She was a famous artist, but you know what? She never used gold paint again. What was it for? The others were all different. All of her landscapes were so transparent, there was light downright angelic. In a word, art historians and critics knew Esther precisely for these weightless landscapes.

After her death, Wilbert, of course, was the only heir, after death, experts from museums and galleries. Hearing Wilbert's story, I was so happy that my husband, our friend who was with us, and myself got to see this cellar. We saw where Esther stayed throughout the whole war.

Out of this horrible tragedy, we got to see her art that was covered in gold. These landscapes she created, we thought she had gone crazy. She never put her work out for anyone to see, she

didn't want to. She said it was very special and an unusual stage in creativity. They grabbed it, gave a lot of money, but still I refused.

Then all the letters were sent with museum seals and coats of arms. They sent some of their messengers, tried increasing the amount of money they were willing to give. They kept trying to persuade me, but I put my foot down and said NO, I wouldn't sell. I hung her artwork all over the house, let her work of art shine with its gold. There was the golden forest, the golden lake, and the golden cathedral.

He added, "I'm a truck driver", and the mug in his red-haired paw felt like a small cup. I won't be home for the next five or six days. When I come back and enter my room, especially if it is noon and the sun is in the windows, facing towards me I will see waves of golden light!