The Glass Room

Simon Mawer

High on a Czechoslovak hill, the Landauer House shines as a wonder of steel and glass and onyx built specially for newlyweds Viktor and Liesel Landauer, a Jew married to a gentile. But the radiant honesty of 1930 that the house, with its unique Glass Room, seems to engender quickly tarnishes as the storm clouds of WW2 gather, and eventually the family must flee. But the house’s story is far from over, and as it passes from hand to hand, from Czech to Russian, both the best and the worst of the history of Eastern Europe becomes somehow embodied and perhaps emboldened within the beautiful and austere surfaces and planes so carefully designed, until events become full-circle.

Oh yes, we’re here.

She knew, even after all these years. Something about the slope of the road, the way the trajectory of the car began to curve upwards, a perception of shape and motion that, despite being unused for thirty years, was still engraved on her mind, to be reawakened by the subtle coincidence of movement and inclination.

‘We’re here,’ she said out loud. She grabbed her daughter’s hand and squeezed. Their escort in the back of the car shifted on the shiny plastic seat, perhaps in relief at the prospect of imminent escape. She could smell him. Damp cloth (it was raining) and cheap aftershave and old sweat.

The car – a Tatra, she had been told – drew in to the kerb and stopped. Someone opened the door. She could hear that, and sense the change in the air. Faint flecks of water on the wind and someone opening an umbrella – like the sail of a boat snapping open in the breeze. She recalled Viktor on the Zürichsee, the little dinghy pitching out into the waves, black trees rising from the blacker water beyond their fragile craft. ‘Like riding a bike,’ he had cried, bringing the dinghy up into the wind, deliberately letting the little craft heel over. ‘You get the sense of balance.’

‘It’s not a bit like riding a bike,’ she had replied, feeling sick.

Viktor should be here. Physically here, she meant, for in some way he was here, of course. His taste, his vision enshrined. She slid across the seat towards the blur of light that was the open door of the car. A hand gripped her arm and helped her out onto the pavement. There was a brush of rain across her face and the rattle of drops on the umbrella above her head. She straightened up, feeling the light around her, feeling the space, feeling the low mass of the house just there across the forecourt. Viktor should be here. But Ottilie was, coming to her left side.

‘It’s all right, darling. I’ll manage on my own.’

A strange hand grasped her elbow and she shook it off. ‘Do you think I don’t know my own house?’ She spoke sharply, and immediately regretted the comment for its brusqueness and its pure factual inaccuracy. It wasn’t her house, not any longer, not in any legal terms, whatever Martin might say. Stolen, with all the solemnity of legal procedures, at least twice and by two different authorities. But it was her house in other, less clearly defined terms. Hers and Viktor’s. The vision. And it still bore their name, didn’t it? Any amount of juridical theft had not managed to expunge that: Das Landauer Haus.

Someone opened the door. She could hear that, and sense the change in the air.
The Landauer House. *Vila Landauer. Say it how you will. And Rainer's too, of course.*

Tapping with her cane she walked forward across the space, across the forecourt, while footsteps fell in beside her and tactfully kept pace, like mourners at a funeral walking along with the brave widow. ‘The paving is the same,’ she said.

‘Remarkable how it has survived.’

The answering voice was that of the man from the city architect’s office. ‘But it is a work of art,’ he added, as though works of art of necessity survive, whereas in fact they often don’t. A fire here, some damp infiltrating a wall there, the random falling of a bomb, pure neglect. ‘See the manner in which von Abt framed the view of the castle,’ he said, and then fell silent, embarrassed by his lack of tact.

‘I remember exactly,’ she reassured him. And it was true, she could recall exactly how it was: the space between the main house and the servants’ apartment, Laník’s apartment, framing the hill on the far side of the city. ‘The future frames the past,’ Rainer had said. She could see it in the only eye she possessed now, her mind’s eye, so much a cliché but so vividly a fact, all of it projected within the intricate jelly of her brain to give her an image that was almost as real as seeing: the wooded hill – the Špilas fortress – and the cathedral with its hunched shoulders and its black spires exactly, Rainer said, like hypodermic needles.

She walked on. The bulk of the house cut out the light around her as she came nearer. There was a freestanding pillar at that point, supporting the overhanging roof. She remembered the children swinging on it, and Liba calling them to stop. She reached out with her cane and touched the pillar just to make sure, just to locate herself in the open sweep of the forecourt, just to delight in the small intake of breath from the man at her right elbow that told her how amazed he was at the way she could orientate herself. But of course she could. She knew this place like . . . like the inside of her own mind. She knew exactly how to walk around the curve of glassed wall and discover, tucked behind it, the front door.

‘A photograph,’ a voice called. The small procession halted. There was a shuffling and manoeuvring around her, contact with heavy, male figures. ‘Ottile, where are you?’

‘I’m here, Maminko.’

She was aware of others – shapes, presences – crowding in behind her. The door closed. Home. She was home. Thirty years. A generation. She knew the walls around her, the rosewood panels facing her, to her left the stairs turning down into the living room. Sounds, the mere whisper of hearing, gave her the dimensions of the space. She put out her left hand and found the balustrade that guarded the stairwell. People were talking – the architect fellow extolling and explaining – but she declined to listen. Unaided she made her way to the top of the stairs and walked down carefully, knowing the moves but having to lift them out of memory, like someone being able to play the piano without looking at the keyboard, recalling a tune that she had last played many years ago. Twelve steps to the curve, and then round and down nine more and the space opened out around her, visible even in the blankness. The lower level of the house. The Glass Space, *der Glasraum.*

‘Ah!’ A faint sigh, organic, almost sexual, came from somewhere deep within her. She could feel the volume as though it had physical substance, as though her face were immersed in it. Space made manifest. She could feel the light from the expanse of plate glass that made up the south wall, smell the Macassar wood, sense the people standing there between the glass and the onyx wall, between the plain white ceiling and the ivory white floor, people she knew and people she didn’t know. The children of course, running across the carpets towards her, Viktor looking up from the chair where he sat reading the newspaper, her brother there, although he had never known the place, her friends, her parents, all of them there.

‘Are you feeling all right, Frau Landauer?’

‘Quite all right, thank you. Just the . . . ’ she cast around for the right word: ‘pictures.’

‘Pictures, Frau Landauer?’ There were no pictures. Never had been, not in this room. She knew that.

‘In my mind.’

‘Of course, of course. There must be many.’

Many. For example, when it was dark and Viktor left the curtains open so that the windows became mirrors casting the whole room in duplicate, the chairs, the table, the onyx wall, reflected out there in the night. And his mirrored image walking back and forth, back and forth, suspended over the lawn that had itself become ghostly and insubstantial in the reflection. Refraction of the daytime become reflection of the night. That was how Rainer himself put it. He had even used the English words, for the euphony. Euphony was a quality he loved: *der Wohlklang.*

Snow. Why did she think of snow? That peculiar bath of light, the sky’s light reflected upwards from the blanched lawn to light the ceiling as brightly as the clouded sun lit the floor. Light become substance, soft, transparent milk. Birds picking the light around her as she came nearer. There was the blanched lawn to light the ceiling as brightly as the expanse of plate glass that made up the south wall, smell the Macassar wood, sense the people standing there between the glass and the onyx wall, between the plain white ceiling and the ivory white floor, people she knew and people she didn’t know. The children of course, running across the carpets towards her, Viktor looking up from the chair where he sat reading the newspaper, her brother there, although he had never known the place, her friends, her parents, all of them there.

‘We’ll freeze!’

‘Don’t be silly.’

The slow slide of the pane downwards as though to remove the barrier that exists between reality
and fiction, the fabricated world of the living room and the hard fact of snow and vegetation. There is a pause during which the two airs stand fragile and separate, the warmth within shivering like a jelly against the wall of cold outside. And then this temporary equilibrium collapses so that winter with a cold sigh intrudes, and, presumably, their carefully constructed, carefully warmed interior air is dispersed into the outside world.

Someone was coming towards her. She could sense the form as much as see it, perceive the nucleus of shadow against the light. She knew. What was it? A sense of motion, that particular movement, the sway of her hips as she walked? Perhaps even the perception of her scent. Or the sound of her breathing. Somehow, she knew. She said the name before anyone spoke, said it as a statement more than a question:

‘Hana.’

‘Liesi! God, you recognised me. How the hell did you do that?’

‘You don’t forget things;’ she said. ‘You store them up.’ She felt arms around her, a smooth cheek against hers. Tears? Perhaps there were tears.

Honeymoon

They left the city immediately after the wedding and drove to Vienna, to the Sacher Hotel, where the manager met them on the steps. Minions scurried round to the back of their car for suitcases. There was much bowing and scraping, much bestowing of compliments. They were gnädiger Herr, gnädige Frau, and were to make themselves completely at home. It was the first time that Liesel had heard herself addressed like that, gnädige Frau Landauer, tied for life in one way or another to this man at her side, who seemed, for that moment when he was acknowledging the welcome, no longer her beloved Viktor but a stranger, someone she had encountered only a short while before and now saw as calm and detached and somehow admirable. This was how he would be at the factory, she guessed; how he would be with the workers’ delegations, with the foremen and the managers. A kind of detached graciousness, as though dealing with a tiresome but respected relative.

The suite they were shown to was elaborate and ornate, the walls silk and the plaster mouldings gilt, the sort of thing Viktor loathed. ‘It is exactly the kind of nonsense that we need to throw off, all this romanticism, all this . . . this clinging to the past. This is everything our new house will not be!’

Liesel laughed at him. When he got onto the subject of the new house he spoke with exclamation marks – that was how she put it to herself. She could picture them punctuating the air, small pulses of energy. Often talked about, this new house did not yet have shape or form. It merely existed as an abstract, written with capitals and punctuated by exclamation marks: The New House!

Liesel’s parents had given them a plot of land on which to build, and that was to be Wenzel’s wedding present to his daughter and son-in-law: a house of their own. ‘Something good and solid,’ the old man had said, while his future son-in-law had smiled. ‘Good, yes, but solid? No! We don’t want a house that looks like a fortress, all turrets and towers and Gothic windows, nor one that looks like a church. Good God, we’re living in the twentieth century, not the fourteenth. The world is moving on.’

And once the porters and the maid had left them alone in their suite in the Sacher Hotel the world certainly did move on, for Viktor went up to Liesel and carefully removed her spectacles, and then the silk jacket she was wearing, and then the dress she had on under that. Removal of her spectacles had rendered the world around her a mellow haze of colour, as though she had been plunged into a foggy day. ‘What are you doing, Viktor?’ she asked, rather nervously. Standing there in her underwear, in the fog, she felt defenceless.

‘My darling Eliška, what do you think I am doing?’ Viktor replied.

So it was that, rather to her surprise – she had expected to wait until evening – they made love for the first time at four o’clock in the afternoon, on a heavy Biedermeier bed, with the light flooding in through the tall windows and their clothes strewn on the carpet. The experience was curiously dispiriting but it was, she supposed, rather a modern thing to do.

The plan was to spend two days in Vienna, before setting off south. They were to motor through Austria to northern Italy. Alone. Viktor had resisted all pleas that they take a driver, or send a maid or a valet ahead on the train. What happens if you have a breakdown? people had asked. Which only brought laughter. ‘We will be driving a Landauer, won’t we? Don’t they have the greatest reliability of all the cars of Europe? Isn’t that the boast on all our advertisements? And – the final blow this – don’t I make them?’

So they drove alone, in a Landauer 80 cabriolet, the very latest in the range of cars produced by Landauerovy Závody (formerly Landauer Autofabrik), a touring convertible that advertised itself as the Mount of Princes despite the fact that princes and Kaisers had been cast aside with the ending of the Great War. The car was painted cream and powered by a V8 engine that delivered, as Viktor was proud of explaining, the power of eighty horses. They drove through Carinthia and crossed the mountains into Italy near Villach, where he had been stationed during the war. There was much waiting around at the customs house while Viktor argued over whether he should pay an import duty on the car, and much frustration when he had to change to the left-hand side of the road to proceed. And then they were out of the Teutonic world and into the Latin, and the sun was brighter and the breeze softer and there was a quality to the light that Liesel had never seen before – as though it was denser than the same thing north of the Alps. “Kemn du das Land wo die Zitronen blühn?” Viktor quoted. Do you know the land where the lemon trees bloom? And Liesel continued the poem, and then they completed it together so that
they laughed delightedly at their unity of mind and body.

The only small blight on their happiness during this journey was a self-imposed one: after Udine they made a short detour to the war cemetery on the Tagliamento river, and after searching among the graves found a cement tablet with Benno’s name on it. His body was not there of course, but muddled up with his comrades in the ossuary nearby. Thinking of her own happiness, a happiness that Benno had not lived to witness, Liesel wept. Viktor, who by one of those coincidences of fate had been the last person from home to see her brother alive, put his arm round her shoulder and hugged her to him. ‘He is surely with you in spirit,’ he said, which she knew to be a great concession to sentiment on his part, for he believed in nothing like the spirit and certainly not the continuation of the spirit after death. Then he kissed her on the cheek and told her she was the most wonderful woman in the world – but on the third evening they were invited by an acquaintance of Viktor to a party in an ancient palazzo on the Canal Grande. Beneath faded frescoes by pupils of Tiepolo, ancient Venetian nobility mixed uneasily with young men and women of sleek and dangerous good looks. One of these creatures trapped Liesel in a window seat and, in English as broken as her own, extolled the virtues of Fascism and the merits of modernity. ‘One day all this will be swept away.’ He sounded like a parody of what Viktor said when he was in one of his political moods. ‘Sweep everything away! Out with the old, in with the new! But Liesel realised with some amazement that this Italian was referring to the whole city, and more than the city: the whole country in fact, this treasure house of art and history. Anything that wasn’t a product of the twentieth century, in fact. ‘That’s absurd.’

He shrugged, as though her opinion meant nothing. ‘For example, the Grand Canal drained and turned into a motor road. That is the future.’ ‘Then the future is peopled with barbarians.’ ‘Are you suggesting that I am a barbarian, signora?’ ‘I’m suggesting that you sound very like one.’ It was then that someone interrupted them, a voice speaking English with a German accent, but speaking it far better than either she or the Italian. ‘Is this person filling your head with nonsense about how wonderful Il Duce is, and how the forces of modernity are being unleashed by Italian Fascism?’

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