

Season 2 Episode 3

Fateful Journey 1940 – The Escape from France

KK: Welcome all you adventurous readers to the epic worlds of Alfred Döblin, where we explore the life and works of this fascinating but little known early 20th century writer. Brought to you by the website Beyond Alexanderplatz.

CG: Hello everyone . We're here today with season two, episode three of our podcast Epic Worlds of Alfred Döblin. I'm Chris Godwin., and I'm here today with my producer and interrogator, who is Katie Kavanagh.

KK: Hi, Chris. Hello, everybody. Yes. Episode three of our second season. Now. Would you like to just give us an overview of the main topics we're going to cover, or maybe give us the title first actually.

CG: Well, I think we could call this The Fateful Journey episode, because Alfred wrote a whole book about this. [NOTE: The English translation was *Destiny's Journey*], about the several weeks when he and his wife and youngest son were fleeing from France and ending up in Hollywood.

KK: So if we do a quick recap, we left Alfred in episode two still within France.

CG: Yes. We ended episode two just before the outbreak of war. So that was seven years in France. We tried to cover that period through three lenses: of Alfred the family man, Alfred the activist, and Alfred the writer. So really, we're going to focus now on the several weeks in the summer of 1940 when we basically have Alfred the Fugitive.

KK: Perfect. Okay. And I believe we're starting with, um, well, you tell us, Chris, where are we starting today?

CG: Let's see. War was declared by the UK and France on Germany on September 3rd of 1939. Just about this time, Alfred was expecting the first volume of *November 1918* to be published, and it actually came out in late October, early November after war was declared. So, of course, nobody got to see it or read it. He volunteered his services. He tried to volunteer as a medic, an Army medical doctor. But they turned him down. But he got taken on by a new propaganda section of the Ministry of Information, which was preparing counter propaganda against the Germans. This was during the months of phoney war between September 39 and May 1940, when the Germans were very busy in the East and were leaving the West for a little bit for dessert later on.

KK: So we could say, this is the calm before the collapse.

CG: Yes. Not terribly calm, of course, because everyone was on tenterhooks wondering when the thunderstorm was going to burst upon them.

KK: Okay.

CG: But he was taken on to this propaganda ministry where a motley crew of French and expatriate, sort of refugee people were thinking up all sorts of clever ideas to demoralize the Germans if they should invade. So, for example, they were working up sort of comics, propaganda comics that would be dropped from aeroplanes onto the German troops. And Alfred had the bright idea of writing scurrilous lyrics to popular opera tunes and getting them recorded onto 78 rpms by a famous Parisian diva and orchestra. And goodness knows what. How they expected these scurrilous, altered lyrics to actually reach the ears of any Germans.

It's hard to say because, you know, it's not like the First World War where you had front lines just 50m apart.

KK: Right. So that would suggest one reason for their ineffectiveness is the distribution of the propaganda.

CG: Well, there's all sorts. I mean, they ended up with warehouses full of printed matter, which was never actually distributed anywhere. And then those 78 rpm records ended up at the bottom of a river. They just threw them away as they were escaping from Paris.

KK: Oh, no.

CG: Yes. So it was a very strange sort of time, all these very learned, very major figures of literature and graphic artists and so on.

KK: But how at this time then did Döblin balance his literary work with his government propaganda role during this phoney war?

CG: Well, I think he was actually spending most of his time at the ministry. Erna and Stefan were moving around a bit, spending a couple of months in this suburb of Paris and then moving a couple of hundred kilometers away from Paris for a while and so on, because nobody was quite sure what was going to happen and where would be safe. And was Paris going to be bombed? You know, where was going to be the safest?

KK: So they were renting.

CG: Yes. And Alfred arranged for their furniture and effects, his library, etcetera, to be put into storage on a two and a half year contract. So he wasn't expecting things to be over early, but in fact, he underestimated considerably.

KK: Can I just take you back very quickly to where he tried to enlist as a medical doctor. What does that suggest about his sort of psychological state, then, or sense of duty at this stage?

CG: I think he wanted to practice his profession in a way which would help his adopted country. He'd been a military doctor in the First World War, and so he knew how to deal with soldiers, the wounded or sick, and so on. But I guess because he was over 60 at this time –

KK: And the language issue would have been a problem?

CG: Possibly. So the propaganda ministry was probably a better place for him to end up.

KK: Right. Well obviously, with his writing, that makes sense. Though, what was he working on?

CG: Well, he was just finishing volume two of *November 1918*, just after the Germans began their westward march into Belgium and Holland and then France. And he actually carried this very bulky manuscript around with him for several weeks as he was fleeing, and as I said the first volume *Citizens & Soldiers* was just published, but with no chance for anybody to see it.

KK: I see.

CG: But also in the spring of 1940 he had a contract with Longmans in New York to edit and introduce a selection of sayings from Confucius.

KK: Oh really?

- CG: Which was still being republished until quite recently actually. Um, and this led to a very welcome royalty check which awaited them when they arrived in New York eventually at the end of this arduous summer. This was a \$500 royalty check, which was quite a princely sum in those days.
- KK: Yes, to help them set themselves up in America.
- CG: Right. So then in May, the Germans started moving westward with the Blitzkrieg. You got refugee streams pouring through Paris. The authorities are in a bit of a panic. They're rounding people up. Anybody who's not a proper French person was being rounded up and held in the Velodrome and other convenient locations.
- KK: So how prepared were intellectuals and officials like Döblin for the sudden collapse of France?
- CG: I think it was a big surprise how quickly France was overrun. There had been big problems in French morale all through the 30s. There was none of the kind of vigor that had shown itself during the First World War when all the taxi drivers of Paris were ferrying soldiers out to the eastern suburbs to hold the Germans around the Marne River.
- KK: Right. So, people were thinking, God, we're going to be overrun. You know, what can we do?
- CG: Anyway, as the Germans were crossing borders and invading, and he had just finished that second volume of *November 1918*, his friend Robert Minder advised them that the family should flee as soon as possible, get out of Paris as quickly as possible.
- KK: So, I'm imagining taking the manuscript – did you say he's published it, or is he still –
- CG: No no, this is just the handwritten manuscript.
- KK: That's so completely different from today, you know, everything's in the cloud.
- CG: Yes. And if you look at facsimiles of Alfred's handwriting, he had these enormous high rises and deep descenders and so on. You know, it goes across the page like that, you know, ten lines to a page perhaps.
- KK: So enormous amounts of paper, gosh.
- CG: Hundreds of pages, hundreds of pages.
- KK: A real commitment to flee with that manuscript then. What did it symbolise to him then? Is it like hope going with him? Or is it a burden, or is it an obsession?
- CG: At one point, he hands the manuscript to Robert Minder, who's heading off to somewhere down in the southeast on the Mediterranean coast. But Alfred didn't want to join him there because he still hasn't met up with Erna yet, which we need to get to in a minute, get around to all the complicated movements during these few weeks. But he'd handed the manuscript to Minder. But then, later on, a few weeks later, Minder I think it was in Marseille, gives him back the manuscript. And so Alfred looked at it and later he says that he didn't feel any kind of emotional attachment to it, not now, after the dreadful weeks he's been spending on the road.
- KK: Right.

CG: But, anyway, he took it off to America and wrote two more thick volumes [of *November 1918*] and nobody would publish it. You know, that's a story for a later on.

KK: It had sort of becomes a ball and chain.

CG: Yes. But through Minder, a contact he had in a town right in the middle of France, in the mountainous areas in the middle of France, a place called Le Puy, a young lady called Mlle Schmidt lived, and she offered to put up or find a lodging for Erna and Stephan.

KK: Remind us of the other two?

CG: The teenage boys are both in the French army at the moment. So there was just the one, the youngest child. Peter is in America following his career as a printer.

KK: So, he's still working in the ministry.

CG: Yes. It was 25th May when Erna and Stephan left for Le Puy. And it was 9th June before the government ordered the ministries to evacuate Paris. Alfred found himself in the back of a lorry, along with colleagues and piles of boxes, of papers and whatnot, which they hadn't managed to burn in the ministry courtyard.

KK: So this lorry – it's the propaganda material that they're transporting?

CG: I guess all kinds of stuff. I've got no idea. Just piles and piles of stuff, and a lot of it was being burned, and other stuff, for some reason, they were carrying along on these lorries.

KK: Okay.

CG: And the, uh, the first destination for these ministry people was Tours, which is about 250km to the southwest of Paris. It's where the French government had relocated to during the 1870 war with Prussia. Um, so they reached Tours around midnight. And then a couple of days later, they were told that the government was relocating to Bordeaux, which is a very long way even further to the southwest.

KK: Right.

CG: So all the lorries were loaded up again. The officers set off comfortably in cars, and the other ranks were somehow taken off in completely the other direction, down to the southeast to Moulins, which is sort of on the way to Le Puy. So in a way, Alfred was probably content to be in the back of this lorry. And he, uh, he manages to send a telegram to Erna that he's on his way.

KK: I see.

CG: And then next day, during that trip to Moulins, the ministry is dissolved. The government is basically just disintegrating. And so Alfred buys a train ticket to Le Puy, but when he goes to catch the train, the station is closed!

KK: Oh, no! There are no trains. So how does he make it to Le Puy in the end? Oh, this is awful.

CG: You know, we could spend a whole hour discussing the criss-crossings.

KK: Okay, let's just do that.

CG: Yes, we can give the gist of it, and how exhausting and demoralizing all of these weeks must have been. So then the next day, the government resigned and Marshal Pétain took over as the collaborationist, the Vichy government. The ministry staff were loaded into cattle wagons, 40 to a wagon, and they were told they're heading off somewhere south. Nothing very definite.

KK: Right.

CG: They spend the whole night in these wagons without moving out of Moulins. And then the next day, France asks for an armistice from the Germans. The cattle wagons actually get moving, and he's in this wagon for three days and nights with little food and little water. And it keeps stopping somewhere out in the wilderness. Nobody knows where they are. So everyone's getting very exhausted and fearful by this stage.

KK: Of course.

CG: A brief stop on 18th June in Clermont-Ferrand, which is quite a big industrial city just to the north of the area of Le Puy. And Alfred wonders if he should leave them and make his own way to Le Puy. But eventually he decides to stay, and then the train heads southwest, which is the wrong direction.

KK: Oh no!

CG: And then it reaches Cahors, which is to the north of Toulouse. And the ministry people are given lodgings in a girls' school. In the morning they spend a lot of time burning more documents. Um, then the convoy is told: You're on your own now, the convoy is dissolved. Each of the officials is given 2000 francs travel money. But they also need an official duty pass to, to show authorities and police that they're not spies.

KK: Right.

CG: Alfred gets one of these passes; but it designates Toulouse as his destination. Which is the wrong direction for getting back to Le Puy.

KK: Yes. And was he able to get word to Erna during these days?

CG: That, again, is a very complicated saga. But we'll get there. We'll get there.

KK: Okay.

CG: Anyway, he learns that the following day, early in the morning, there's going to be a train to Le Puy. Um, so he decides to take it. But just at that same time, Erna has decided that they ought to leave Le Puy, and head for Bordeaux.

KK: Oh no!

CG: So anyway, 6:00 the next morning, Alfred's on this train supposedly to Le Puy. Meanwhile, at 9 a.m. that same day, Erna has gone to the station, but finds that her two helpers who are liaising with the police to get passes and so on – that they've disappeared. And so, with Mlle Schmidt's help, she applies to the police for a permit to get to Bordeaux in some sort of official vehicle.

KK: Uh-huh.

- CG: Meanwhile this train to Le Puy stops when they're only about a third of the way there, and it's not sure if the train is going to go on. And then the police start checking everybody's papers and so on. It's all getting a little bit fraught.
- KK: It's not easy to get anywhere, is it?
- CG: No, no. Of course nobody knows what's going on. So are the Germans here, other Germans there? They don't know.
- KK: Also, there's so much bureaucracy like, oh, I need a pass for this ...
- CG: . Oh well yes. But you know, you've got to watch out for spies. Um, anyway, the train does move on a little bit and it gets to the next, a few stops down the line, a place called Rodez, which is less than halfway to Le Puy, and all the hotels are full, so he has to spend the night in a refugee camp.
- KK: Right.
- CG: Meanwhile, Erna has obtained the travel passes, so she and Stephan have quit Le Puy in a car with two policemen. She, could only take the most essential items, like basically just a handbag. She had to leave letters and jewelry etcetera, behind with Mlle Schmidt. But this train that Alfred is on has stopped with no sign of moving on any further. And so he takes the bus to the next town, and starts looking for transport onwards. But no drivers will take him, because the Germans are too close. But in the afternoon, he's on a train heading sort of in the right direction. It stops at some station, but the station is closed for the night. He has to spend the night, it's raining, and he's on a station bench. So you can just imagine how exhausted this poor elderly –
- KK: How old is he now?
- CG: He's 63 years old. But later on, he starts rationalizing these torments in sort of Biblical terms, you know, that God has a plan for him, uh, which was quite a lot of the message in the book he wrote called *Destiny's Journey*, which was latched on to by lots of Christian folk to say, ah, good, a lost soul has returned to the true faith and so on.
- KK: So how does Döblin's personal story then reflect the broader refugee crisis within France at this time?
- CG: Well, an awful lot of French people were refugees at this time. I mean, you've all seen the films of these wagons and little cars and things with mattresses on the roof and children clinging on and so on, these convoys being strafed by Stukas and whatnot. So there were, thousands and thousands of French people on the roads. He is obviously foreign because he doesn't speak very good French, but he's got a French passport and he's got his ministry pass.
- KK: Right.
- CG: The police come to check everyone. But he's got these bona fides so he can clear the check.
- KK: So he's on the platform on a bench.
- CG: Yeah We left him in the rain. But meanwhile he's made it to the next town. Erna and Stefan have reached Rodez, where he had been the previous night. And they spend the night in the same refugee camp where Alfred had been the night before!
- KK: If only they could have called each other!

CG: Yes. And another dreadful event happened that day, because this was the 21st June, which is the day their son Wolfgang shot himself rather than be taken prisoner.

KK: Oh, goodness. So sad. How old was Wolfgang when he committed suicide?

CG: 25-ish.

KK: And are we going to talk about Wolfgang?

CG: Yes, I think we're going to do a whole episode on Wolfgang's life and his sad end, and how Alfred and Erna actually found out about it, and so on. There's quite a saga there.

KK: OK.

CG: But as I said, later on Alfred was putting all this together to rationalize some kind of God's plan. But the day after that, the French sign an armistice with the Germans. Alfred found a train at dawn which headed just one stop further on towards Le Puy, where, of course, his family are not anymore.

KK: I see.

CG: Erna has meanwhile found a taxi heading west to Bordeaux for 1500 francs. And she only has 1800 francs in the world at the moment. And in the afternoon Alfred took the train to the next town along called Mende, but he's still 100km away from Le Puy. He spends a night in a school. Meanwhile, Erna has arrived at Bordeaux in the evening, and bumps into some Parisian friends, including a French officer who had once visited them in Berlin.

KK: Oh, fabulous. Quite useful.

CG: So he was quite helpful to them later on. But she and Stephan have to spend the night on a mattress in the labour exchange. So, you know, the refugee situation is quite general, these public offices are all being opened up for emergency lodgings.

KK: Yes.

CG: But then the next day the railway station at Mende is closed, and no cars will agree to take Alfred on towards Le Puy. Erna is desperately seeking more information. People keep telling her to leave France as quickly as possible, and this is when she devises her plan that the only suitable place to head for is the United States.

KK: Right.

CG: So she recalls that Alfred spent the night in a school at Cahors. So she phones the school to see if she can find out any more information. And this is the first time she learns he's now heading towards Le Puy. But Alfred is still in Monde, he goes to the prefecture and is given a travel pass for Cahors and Toulouse. Again, the wrong direction for where he thinks he needs to be heading to, and he's too dispirited to react to this absurd situation. But he manages to send a telegram to Erna at Le Puy. Which is actually useful because Mlle Schmidt is still there.

KK: Right. Great. Okay.

CG: But then he reports to the refugee camp. He spends a night in the refugee camp. But in the afternoon, after his papers had once again been checked by the police, he manages to get a bus heading in the Le Puy direction. But it ends up halfway, at a hilltop spa town full of

holidaymakers. They can only give him a servant's room in the attic. And the next morning, very early, he actually reaches Le Puy. Only to learn that Erna left three days ago.

KK: Oh, no.

CG: He has to obtain another travel pass to go back to Rodez. He finds a car, but it only drops him halfway back in Mende. He has to go back to the refugee camp, which is where he's going to stay for two weeks.

KK: Meanwhile, where is Erna?

CG: Meanwhile, Erna has gone to the prefecture to try to find what she can do. An official tries to find her some financial aid, because she's down to her last penny, basically. A friend sends a telegram to Mlle Schmidt in Le Puy, which I would say is quite a useful point of contact. But meanwhile, Alfred's in this refugee camp. He's very dishevelled. He's got a very foreign look. He's a very, you know, suspicious type of person. Effectively he's in detention there.

KK: I see.

CG: But all his papers are all in order. Still, they open his letters. I'm not quite sure how many. It's amazing how the Postal Service was still working. You know, we can see a few times where letters have actually reached people, maybe many weeks late, but still.

KK: Yes. That always amazes me. Fantastic.

CG: So it's the 26th June. The day after he starts his two weeks in the camp, it's declared a national day of mourning.

KK: Right.

CG: Because, you know, the country's been defeated. So Alfred's among the crowd at the cathedral and is very much affected by the the crucifix. Just as nearly 20 years before, he'd been very affected by the crucifix in the cathedral at Cracow when he was doing his tour of Poland. But he feels, he says, empty and apathetic. And he's even thinking of killing himself.

KK: Oh, gosh.

CG: Yes. Meanwhile, Erna has got in touch with an aid organization. And the head of this organization will shortly arrive in Lisbon, where he's very helpful in obtaining steamer tickets for the Döblin family.

KK: Uh-huh

CG: Meanwhile, the Germans have reached Bordeaux. Erna is urged to flee via Spain, and she learns that the only route out is to Toulouse. The prefecture put her in touch with a local newspaper editor, who gives her a lift in his delivery lorry. So at 3:00 in the morning on the 28th, Erna arrives in Toulouse, spends the night on a bench in a hotel lobby. But she's got a letter of introduction to the director of a local hotel school.

KK: And obviously, she is still, we keep saying just Erna, but actually, she's still traveling with Stefan, who's just entering his teens at this time?

CG: Yes. So that afternoon, Alfred receives a telegram from Mlle Schmidt, giving him a contact of the friend in Bordeaux who'd been helping Erna. And this friend in Bordeaux can put him in touch with Erna.

KK: So they're getting closer together.

CG: Yes, but you know, Alfred is all a bit helpless by this point. He actually goes to the police headquarters in this town where the refugee camp is, and asks if they would phone this friend in Bordeaux, but the police refuse.

KK: Right.

CG: They say that the government is all moving inland. You know, the new Vichy regime is being set up inland. There's no point phoning Bordeaux. But Robert Minder is still being helpful. He's had several messages from Alfred saying how desperate the situation is.

KK: I see.

CG: Alfred keeps going to the cathedral. He's really malnourished at this point. He's unhealthy. He's almost hallucinatory. But that afternoon, the 1st July, Erna receives a telegram saying where Alfred is. And she sends him a telegram. Meanwhile, Robert Minder has told Alfred that he can't trace her. So all these crossing messages.

KK: Oh dear. So. Can I just stop you very quickly? I know we're going to talk about faith and religion separately at some point.

CG: Yes

KK: Yeah. So Döblin, he was obviously making recurring attempts to find some sort of religious meaning or clarity in his cathedral visits. So how does that fit in the context of his near suicidal kind of position that he's in?

CG: Well, he's in a spiritual crisis, isn't he? You know, brought on by the nervous tension and the malnourishment and bad sleep and so on.

KK: I see.

CG: Anyway, on the afternoon of 3rd July, at last, the, the telegram comes with Erna's exact address. So Alfred has to go along to the prefecture to get an extension to his official travel pass. And that evening there's actually a little bit of an uprising at the refugee camp complaining about the bad food. And the police have to be brought in to restore order. Alfred, meanwhile, because of all these telegrams that have been sort of crisscrossing to him in the camp, he's interrogated by the camp command. They're very suspicious about all these messages, but luckily his official papers are enough to let him go.

KK: Gosh

CG: A few days later, he buys a rail ticket for Toulouse and lets Erna know. He has to change trains halfway. But there's a hotel there that can actually offer him a real bed the first time in several weeks. He actually has a comfortable place to sleep. And on 10th July, he arrives in Toulouse and he's met at the station by Eleanor and Stephan.

KK: Yay!

CG: So that afternoon.

KK: At last!

CG: Oh, it's not over yet. Oh, no, it's not over yet. You mentioned bureaucracy earlier on, just to get to the next bit. So, that afternoon, Erna sends a telegram to Peter in the US, saying that he must help them obtain visas and tickets to get to the US. So Peter gets moving. He contacts all the various aid agencies and refugee help organizations, and so on.

KK: Great.

CG: Alfred bumps into an old friend there in Toulouse. But he's still very depressed, very anxious. He's feeling very guilty. And at this point, he says he feels contempt for his lapse into religion. So, when we come to talk about his time in Los Angeles, we'll be getting into the religious issue in a bit more detail.

KK: Good.

CG: So it's at this point that Alfred tells Robert Minder that he's met up again with his wife. So Minder is now able to send back this very bulky manuscript that he's been looking after for a few weeks. Do you think?

KK: Do you think he's happy about that? What do you think?

CG: He's like, I just want to get rid of it. Much prefer to have left it with Minder. The work seems a burden to him now.

KK: I see.

CG: Then in the middle of July, some friends in New York telegram them to say that they've got US visas that they can pick up in Marseille.

KK: Great.

CG: And – at this point, Alfred finds that his and Erna's French passports have expired!

KK: Oh, no!

CG: Oh, yes. So he has to go to the prefecture and the police to get them extended.

KK: How easy was it?

CG: Well, he went to the police on 18th July and 19th July. Two acquaintances in Toulouse have given favourable reports about them to the police. And so the police are happy to help. And then it takes half a day for the prefecture to do all the paperwork.

KK: Okay. Ah, so their passports are okay. Sigh of relief!

CG: Yes, and on that same day, one of these aid agencies in New York has secured Alfred an employment offer from MGM in Los Angeles.

KK: Wow. The film studio. So that's his year in Hollywood, which will come to you in the next episode.

CG: Okay. Um, so now the weekend has come up. On the Monday, the military office provides exit visas from France – valid for one week only, no renewal.

KK: So they have to get out within – .

- CG: They have to get out. And this is going to be important later on when we come to talk about the Klaus problem. So at midnight, they're on a train to Marseille. They arrive in Marseilles on the morning of 23rd July, and off to the US consulate, where "Oh, we've got no file for you." Alfred produces his documents: he's got letters from New York, he's got information about his spring 1939 visit to New York for this PEN club conference. And he's told, "come back in two days." So they have to find a hotel. And they have to go to the Portuguese consulate, of course, to get visas. But first they need the US visa and the boat tickets.
- KK: Right
- CG: So in the afternoon, Alfred heads for the local Thomas Cooks office. But it's already closed for the day. But the next day, they get their US visitor visas, valid for six months. Then off back to Cooks. He has to deposit 3000 francs with Cooks, hoping that this will help to obtain the boat tickets. And so now they don't have enough funds to travel to Lisbon. So they have to send to New York, pleading for people to remit some money to them.
- KK: And of course, the exit visa is running out by the day.
- CG: Uh, so they have no time to wait for the US funds to reach Marseille, and they're going to have to wait till they can pick them up in Lisbon. So the next day, Portuguese visas are issued, day after that, Spanish visas are issued. They've got no travel money. His bank account has been blocked. Erna tries various ways to raise the travel money, but without any luck. So on the last day of their French exit visa, 29th July, they're in a deep depression. In the afternoon, Alfred has a contact for the local technical school director, who checks with the friendly French official from Bordeaux, who is now in Vichy, and he's received glowing references for Alfred from Robert Minder. So this technical school director gives Alfred 4000 francs, flat out, no receipt needed. Not a loan and so on. And that was at the very last minute. The office door closed behind them as they left.
- KK: Oh my goodness.
- CG: So at dawn, they're on a train to Perpignan. And Peter, the son in America, is told by telegram about their journey. Then in the evening on to Barcelona. Then at the frontier, they find that the maximum foreign exchange they're permitted to take into Spain is not enough to buy tickets to Lisbon. So that's another little complication.
- KK: Oh dear.
- CG: They arrive at Barcelona at midnight. Oh., and another little, uh, wrinkle here is that, when they were buying tickets for the train to Barcelona, the ticket agent had asked how old the child is. And Alfred had said "Treize".
- KK: Oh, that's 13 in French.
- CG: The ticket agent heard "tres" which is 3 in Spanish. So he said "Oh, three. Three doesn't need a ticket." Remember Alfred's French was not very good. He thought he was saying 13 and the agent thought he was saying 3.
- KK: I'm so confused! No wonder everybody was confused.
- CG: Yes. Of course, the inspector on board the train takes one look at Stephan and says, oh, he needs a ticket.
- KK: Oh, right.

CG: Anyway, the next day they have to go on to Madrid.

KK: Oh, so they have to find a room for the night?

CG: And this is the end of July. And Claude/Klaus, their son, has just been demobilized near Bordeaux, and has no idea where they are.

KK: And Wolfgang has committed suicide? Does Claude know about Wolfgang?

CG: No, no. He's very worried about that. We'll, um, read a bit of a letter Claude wrote.

KK: OK. And so I'm assuming Claude doesn't know where Erna and Alfred are.

CG: No,

KK: And how old is Claude?

CG: He's the third son. I think he was born in 1916. So he's 25.

KK: OK.

CG: And Wolfgang, will have been 27 at the time. So the next day, they managed to change enough money to continue their journey, and celebrate their first lunch in three days.

KK: Wow.

CG: And then in the afternoon, they're on a train to Lisbon. They're at the frontier the next morning, there's a frontier official who invites them to join his family for a meal. Then, in the afternoon, they're on to Lisbon. There's a French speaking Portuguese fellow passenger who phones ahead to find a cheap lodging for them. So, you know, people have been very, very helpful.

KK: Really helpful. The kindness of strangers. Yes. And that must be quite overwhelming. Not overwhelming, but just, like, compassionate.

CG: Yes. And such a relief to find friendly strangers who are not trying to, you know, harm them in any way. So they arrive in Lisbon at 2:00 in the morning on 3rd August, and their friendly Portuguese fellow passenger guides them to a lodging, and he's very helpful to them throughout the whole month that they spend in Lisbon. So in the middle of that month, middle of August, they have a telegram from Peter saying that three boat tickets are on the way, for the Greek line, and it will leave on the 30th August. And several aid agencies have pulled together the funds for these tickets. One of the agencies was also trying for first class cabins on a different line, but Alfred opted for the for the Greek line. So on 5th September, there they are on the *Nea Hellas*, heading to New York, where they arrive on 12th September. And we'll pick the story up there, next time.

KK: Gosh. So exhausting! Just going over this list of missed connections and goodness crossed paths and telegrams that don't reach and role Fate is playing –

CG: Yes, but, note who was the most active agent was in this whole saga?

KK: Erna.

CG: Erna. Yes..

KK: Taking control, which is good.

CG: Yes. Now, I thought for our reading, I would first of all quote some paragraphs from a very long letter from Claude that actually reached the Döblins in Lisbon somehow, you know, letters being forwarded on from address to address across frontiers and so on.

KK: Again, wonderful postal services.

CG: And then we go to a little kind of retrospective that was published in 2011, giving some factual information about the kind of sequels to some of these events. So the first reading is some paragraphs from this letter from Claude, who was still at that time in his last days as a soldier. In his book *Destiny's Journey*, Döblin introduces it, saying: "In Lisbon, a thick letter reaches us from our son Claude. It contains a long moving, simply factual report in French. This excerpt comes near the end. How things went with him in those June weeks."

READING 1: FROM CLAUDE'S LETTER

At night we stop in B. [CG: *No full place names, for censorship reasons*] and hear news of the Armistice of 25th June.

I could howl.

We tried so hard, only to come to this defeat. We're all so sad, and that evening in St F., where we've been quartered, we learn of the harsh conditions of the Armistice. I'm worried about the future; many of my companions seem unclear what the conditions mean for their home *departement*. Very slowly they start to realise: their life will be greatly changed. I'm impatient for news from Mama, Papa and Vincent [i.e. *Wolfgang*]. I'm dreadfully frightened for Papa, if only he didn't stay in Paris.

Next we're off to P. [CG: *the letter 'P'!*] where we stay several days. Occupation troops are 500 meters away. We move on to D., a hamlet of 20 houses. Then to D., a small village. Now we rest. Later I receive there a letter from Mama, and then the first postcard from Mama. I'm glad to hear that they're all together in Toulouse. I hope we'll soon have news of Vincent, I'm just worried he might have been taken prisoner. [CG: *Several paragraphs omitted.*]

I'm waiting for my cohort to be demobbed. I hope someone can send my civilian things on from St Germain. I have nothing else to wear. I want to be free, to be joined with my parents, and find work. I really want to work after these almost three years when I couldn't do anything. My head is full of ideas for show windows – when can I put them to good use?

I think a lot about the parents and what they might be doing now. Soon the day of freedom will come and a new life can begin. I hope it will be an uneventful life, happy and fruitful.

I trust in the future. It will be better than this sad past. Let's await the day of release, and then to work.

KK: Oh, he's really thinking about his family. And he's optimistic.

CG: Yes. Yes, he'd finished his artisan course as a show window designer. So he really wants to get to work on it. It's been a three years hiatus, just doing fairly useless things in the military. But there was a longlasting consequence to the fact that the exigencies of the situation meant

that, uh, Klaus didn't meet up with his parents before they left for America. And this comes in a letter from Stephan, written in 2011. He's in his late 80s by then. He's correcting several errors in the enormous biography of Döblin that was published around that time.

KK: I see.

CG: Now, the original letter was actually written in English, but with a French accent. You'll hear the French accent as I read through it.

READING 2: STEPHAN'S LETTER

11 novembre 2011

Dear Professor W. Schoeller,

Again I must first apologize for not being able to write to you in German. I hope however that you will be able to read this letter without difficulty. I understand that you are presenting your biography of Alfred Döblin in various locations in Germany. I sincerely hope that this gives you new readers and a significant reward for your accomplishment!

I regret that I must however let you know that your text on page 711, where you narrate the days in Nice in 1948, does not reflect correctly the facts. It is very important to understand what really happened in August 1948 as it had a very significant impact on my parents. It marked deeply the relationship with Claude (Klaus) and is one of the explanations of the dramatic weeks leading to my mother's suicide on September 15, 1957.

In a few lines. My mother and I had agreed that my parents, Nathalie, (*with an h*), and I would take advantage of a few days of vacation in Nice (where Nathalie was born in June 1923, and where still resided her mother), to at the same time feast on the 10th of August, the 70th birthday of father as well as to celebrate, that same day, the catholic baptism of my son Francis. My parents had a great desire to use this double feast to have, for the first time since 1940, a family „reunion“ with Claude and his wife. (*Please note that contrarily to what is written on page 711, Claude has never had a child*).

Claude and his wife did not attend the ceremony for the baptism nor did they come to the anniversary luncheon for father. This, you can well understand, was a shock and hurt considerably my parents. In order to try to bring back peace in the family, father went alone to Claude's home, bringing with him a bouquet of flowers. Lilou opened the door to him, but pretexting that Claude was ill, refused to let him in, this even though father argued that he was a doctor and could possibly be of help. When father returned, we were all still together waiting for him, he was completely „destroyed“, not understanding the cause of this attitude. Obviously the reason was that Claude and his wife did not forgive the fact that the parents in July 1940 had not waited a few days so that he could join them for their flight to Spain, Portugal and the USA, nor had done in the following years the necessary steps, so he thought, to get him out of France and come to the States.

In April 1945, after my return with the French army to France, I took a week-end leave from my military duties and went to Nice to meet Claude. This was the first time I saw him since 1940, (*and not in 1948 as is written in page 711*). He was extremely friendly with me and took the occasion to introduce me to his fiancée, (I attended their marriage a few months later). His friendliness did not hide the fact that he clearly expressed his reprobation to what had happened in 1940, up to the point to tell me that this was an act

that he could never forgive. He also went so far as to say that mother would have, if needed, done the same thing with me. (I must add that this remark touched me greatly, as on two occasions in June and July 1940, mother effectively envisaged to continue her flight without me but did not have the courage to do so in front of my tears.). The relationship between Claude, his wife and mother, thereafter never got back to normal, and this definitely contributed to the total break up in a normal relation with mother after my father's death. This pushed the despair of mother. So as you can note, 1948 was indeed a very important period acting as a revelator of a broken family. I hope these few lines will permit to give you a more factual description of this period.

I have not yet completed the lecture of all you text, my limited German sadly makes this a very tedious process! I have however noted a few points: On page 368 you write Arthur W.Riley. It should read *Anthony W.Riley*. On page 617 you write Simone Tonnelat, this should read *Marie-Antoinette Tonnelat*. On page 899 is written Doblin, Natalie, geb. Lemesle (Frau von Claude). This should be *Doblin, Nathalie, geb. Lemesle (Frau von Stephan)*.

Another subject which concerns me is your „theory“ about my father's fading faith. It is true, and I have said this several times in public, father was in continual search of God and the „roads“ leading to Him. It is certain that in the last years of his life, he had „doubts“. But who in his life has not had doubts. Even Saints have doubted. What certainly he missed upon his return to Germany and of course in particular when hospitalized, were the frequent discussions and conversations he has had with Jesuit priests, in Los Angeles and in Paris, which nourished his reflections. But I can vouch that when I went to see him in his so sad moments in the clinics of the Black Forest, God was still very present. There, it is only a little example, questioning me about my children, he always wanted to be informed about my taking attention to their going regularly to Mass and to my oldest boy, Francis, participating in the Catholic scout activities.

I will, if you so permit, communicate further if I find other subjects needing clarification. I very sincerely regret that we have never had a chance to get together or communicate prior to the publication of your so significant contribution for the better understanding of the works and the life of my father.

With all my respect, Very sincerely yours.

Stephan Döblin

KK: Oh, that's sad.

CG: Yes. But there are two things to consider here. I mean, the fact that they were under this enormous time pressure because of this one week only exit visa, where they had to run around collecting all other kinds of tickets and exit visas and entry visas and so on. And then Claude was in his mid 20s at this time. So, you know, one would think he was able to stand on his own feet.

KK: Yes.

CG: But it's indicative of, something about his personality, perhaps. Because in the 1980s, I think it was, he brought a prosecution against Robert Minder for revealing family secrets or intruding on family autonomy, or something. You know, something like something like this. And the case began to be heard. But before it could finish, Minder actually died. So Claude

seems perhaps I should say not to have been the most stable of the four sons, but that may be unfair. I don't know. I mean, I'm sure I'd have been, initially, very upset to find that my parents had sort of skedaddled without me. And he did survive the war. He was in Marseilles for a while, and then managed to cross the border into Switzerland for the rest of the war.

KK: I think I think that if you knew where they were, then you would obviously be expecting them to say, how can we help you flee as well? How can we help you join us? Or. will you come and join us?

CG: Yes, but that letter that reached them in Lisbon, it's the last they heard of Klaus. When they got to America, they had heard nothing of Klaus and nothing of Wolfgang. And they were really worried about, what's happened to these two. And Klaus says, you know, he's worried about his father in particular. So that would have led him to think, well, okay, it's annoying, but they were under these enormous time constraints. They really had to leave before they could let him catch up.

KK: Yes.

CG: And then of course, getting extra tickets for the boat, extra exit visas. And the money.

KK: You know, there's so many telegrams and whatnot flying backwards and forwards during that time, that I can't imagine that when Erna and Alfred and Stephan got to America – I just can't imagine that they, that Erna especially wouldn't have tried to make contact somehow.

CG: Oh, I'm sure they tried. No, they were asking. They were asking around. But they didn't manage to get into contact until after the war.

KK: Oh yeah. And it's so sad that the same thing replicates itself today, in wartime, with other refugees today.

CG: Yes. But with mobile phones and suchlike, it's easier.

KK: Yes, it's a lot less frustrating.

CG: Anyway, that was the tense, dramatic escape from Europe. And in our next episode, we'll be looking at their five years in the United States.

KK: Oh, brilliant. Well, that was a show! We've been going for 58 minutes!

CG: Crikey.

KK: Well, I hope our listeners have stamina for this one. It's a big one.

CG: Yes, but there's a lot of this information that's not readily available in English. So this is kind of the first time that people will be aware of a lot of the details, the nuances.

KK: Okay. Thank you so much, Chris. That was a fact-filled episode!

CG: Yes. Well, thank you, Katie, for keeping us on course. A lot happened within a short period of time.

KK: Yes. Brilliant. All right, well, let's say goodbye and we'll see everyone next time.

CG: Well, thank you, everyone, for listening up to this far. And we'll have an exciting episode – I'm not sure if we'll need more than one episode, actually, for the five years in America.

Maybe we'll have to break it down, I think. But we'll certainly be looking at Alfred's year in Hollywood.

KK: OK. Perfect. Thank you so much. And we will speak to you again. Wonderful.

CG: OK. Bye, everyone.

KK: We hope you've enjoyed this episode of the Epic Worlds of Alfred Döblin. Join us next time to explore more about this fascinating writer's life and works. Meanwhile, visit the website beyond Hyphen Alexanderplatz for posts about Döblin and some of his unjustly neglected contemporaries, as well as downloads of translations. So until next time, happy reading!