

Season Two Episode 2 - Seven Years in France (1933-1940)

- KK: Welcome, 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, everybody. Welcome to episode 2 of Season Two of our podcast. I'm Chris Godwin, and I'm here with Katie Kavanagh.
- KK: Hi, everybody. Well, I am excited to get going with episode 2. So Chris, what is episode 2 all about?
- CG: Well, our first episode only covered three days in the life of the Döblin family. Bui today we'll be looking at *seven years* in France.
- KK: Gosh. Seven years. So, in the last episode, episode 1, we left them in Switzerland.
- CG: They had just arrived in Switzerland. But then Döblin immediately sent back two of his sons to finish their school year. So the family first of all had to gather again in Zurich. But then it turned out that in Zurich, the teenage boys wouldn't be able to get work permits and so on, which was going to make life difficult. And the family decided they'd better move on to Paris.
- KK: Okay. So who exactly went to Paris? Because obviously they had four sons, right?
- CG: Yes. The family was pretty complete for that move. Wolfgang had joined them in Zurich, I think in April. He'd finished his Abitur just a few weeks after Alfred's escape.
- KK: How old is Wolfgang now?
- CG: He's 18. He immediately enrolls at university in Zurich, to do a Mathematics degree. Then Klaus came along a month or two later, when he'd finished his secondary schooling. And then Peter took until September. He had to be smuggled across the border between Germany and Czechoslovakia and then turned up in Zurich. So by the time they moved to Paris, all four sons were with them. The fourth son being Stephan.
- KK: How old was Stephan?
- CG: Only seven years old at this time?
- KK: Okay. So we've got Wolfgang who's 18.
- CG: Peter whose 20. Klaus was 16.
- KK: And Stephan is seven. It's a big thing moving everybody across borders then.

CG: Yes, all very disruptive. But I think Erna was quite keen to get away as far as possible from Germany.

KK: Understandable!

CG: Yes. She was extremely disappointed in the way Germany was treating them.

KK: You mentioned Wolfgang reached Zurich in mid-April. So now I'm confused. Why couldn't they stay in Zurich?

CG: As I said, because the the boys wouldn't be able to work.

KK: Oh, sorry, I think I missed you saying that part. So they moved to Paris in the autumn. And was life easier there?

CG: Well, it took a lot of a lot of settling in, obviously. And the first place they lived was called Maisons-Lafitte, which is a little town on the banks of the River Seine, in the farthest suburbs of Paris. I suppose if you were in London, you'd be thinking Twickenham or Staines, a long way out and quite expensive to travel into Paris where quite a lot of the other exiles were gathering in the centre of the city. But they had this nice house with a garden. And lo and behold, their possessions from Berlin turned up!

KK: Oh, wow. How did they manage that, then?

CG: It must have been an enormous relief to them. I mean, Alfred's library had taken 20, 30 years of building up. So ever since 1924, Alfred had been engaging with an organization called ORT, which started in Russia and its mission really was to try to reorient the Eastern European Jewish communities towards self-sufficient agriculture and making things, you know, craftsmanship and so on, making things the community needed so that they wouldn't be so dependent on the Gentile societies around them.

KK: I see.

CG: This fitted in quite well with Alfred's view of the big problem that the Jews had had all through the 19th century, where the Western Jews were told the only way to survive is to assimilate and become more like the host societies. Well, now look where this had got them to. They assimilated, they lost their Jewish heritage and they were told oh no, you're still Jews and we don't like you and we're going to persecute you.

KK: Oh, sad.

CG: It was a leading figure in the ORT called Aaron Syngalowski, who was quite important in aid missions all through the 30s and during the Second World War. He had an exit visa for South America, apparently. So he was able to drive a truck

with his possessions all mixed up with Döblin's possessions and get out of Germany that way.

KK: Yes. So what a relief for them.

CG: But, you know, Döblin wasn't able to practice medicine in France, because like every other country you have to be licensed for that particular territory. And he'd lost his German reading public.

KK: Yes.

CG: So of course, being so energetic, he was constantly searching around, he's got to be doing things. He's got to be Döblin the activist. But perhaps, we'll talk a bit in a minute about this because we still haven't talked about, for example, language.

KK: Okay. I mean, in Zurich I'm assuming they all spoke German. And I'm assuming because they were very well educated, they would have spoken a bit of French?

CG: Well, the thing about Alfred is, yes, he could read French. But he was very wary about immersing himself too much in a foreign language, because his creative wellsprings were all fed by the German language, in particularly the Berlin vernacular.

KK: I see.

CG: So if he was diluting it ...

KK: Muddying the waters so to speak ...

CG: Yes, with English and so on, he would be weakening his creative powers.

KK: Okay. What about Erna?

CG: Erna went headlong right into taking French lessons soon after they got to Paris. She was determined she was going to be able to survive in a French environment. But there's a sad little story. Döblin met James Joyce on one occasion.

KK: Really?

CG: Yes. You remember everyone had accused Döblin of copying James Joyce, that *Berlin Alexanderplatz* was just a ripoff of *Ulysses*. Which, of course, is total nonsense.

KK: Yes.

CG: Yeah. But anyway, Döblin met James Joyce in Paris, and the two men sat there and looked at each other and – said nothing.

KK: Oh, no!

CG: Oh, yes! And friends in Paris introduced him to Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre and so on, who'd been very impressed with *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. And Alfred was completely unable to talk to them about it or about the way that they received it.

KK: Did Alfred speak any English then?

CG: Well, yes. A little bit later in the decade, he attended a congress in London by a particular Jewish activist group, and he actually delivered the closing address in English. I'm not quite sure how much that was sort of writing it out and delivering a script.

KK: Maybe he was able to say something to James Joyce. Just not a full on conversation.

CG: Well, yes. But tongue-tied when it came to talking about intimate things, you know, things that really touched him personally. It was much too difficult to do that with his lack of the language.

KK: Okay. And then how did the boys fare in Paris?

CG: Well, Peter actually went off to England for a while to go to printing school. And I think I'm going to stick my neck out here, and say this printing school was operated by the Unwin publishing company, and the Unwin publishing company went on to publish Tolkien. So we could say that Döblin is only two degrees of separation from Tolkien!

KK: Oh, excellent. Very good, very good!

CG: Yes. So. And Klaus got a diploma as an interior designer and show window dresser. So this gave him openings into the job market in France. And Wolfgang enrolled at the Sorbonne. He started in Zurich, but then transferred immediately to the Sorbonne.

KK: And did you say we were going to do a separate episode on Wolfgang and his tragic end?

CG: I think it's worth doing a separate episode on Wolfgang, because we've got a very thorough biography of him, by a French writer, which came out soon after the embargoed Wolfgang papers were opened up by the National Library.

KK: That should be really interesting.

CG: So that'll be a bit later in Season Two.

KK: Okay. And what about Stephan?

CG: Oh, Stephan was still in school.

KK: Oh, of course.

CG: But the thing about the boys – and this had, in one case, a fatal, but in both cases, quite dire consequences for later life.

KK: Oh yes?

CG: When Alfred and family became naturalized French citizens, it was a condition that of course the two teenagers – Peter by this time had gone off to the USA, so he was out of out of it. But the two middle boys

KK: Peter was the oldest or the youngest? Sorry.

CG: Stephan is the youngest.

KK: Stephan. I keep getting them confused.

CG: Peter had gone off to America to pursue a career in printing.

KK: But you said Peter was in London?

CG: Yes. Well, he did some printing training, and then came back, and then went off to America. But – Wolfgang and Klaus would have to do military service when their time came.

KK: Right.

CG: And of course, their time came roughly around the time that the Second World War was gearing up.

KK: Okay. So that was quite a momentous kind of condition.

CG: Yes. And it also turns out that nobody's ever been able to discover Alfred's name on any list of those who were formally excommunicated by the Nazi government. So it turns out technically he could still have been a German citizen. But he and his sponsors, including the French ambassador to Berlin, they obviously believed there was no hope whatsoever that he would really be able to retain his German citizenship and still lead a free life. There weren't many emigrés from Germany who were granted French citizenship. I think it was because of the sponsorship of this ambassador in Berlin, François-Poncet, that kind of tipped the scales and said, well, you know, this is a celebrated writer, and France is a nation of intellectuals and writers and whatnot. So we'll allow them to become French.

KK: And so, because of that, Wolfgang and Klaus had to do military service with France?

CG: Yes. They had to join the French army, but a bit later on.

KK: OK.

CG: In fact, Klaus was called up in 1938, I think. So his two years actually finished just at the time the Germans were invading. He was demobbed just at the time of the ~~German invasion~~ French surrender. But Wolfgang, because he was completing his PhD, was a year later, and he was caught right up in the German advance.

KK: OK. So at the moment then, we've got the family living in a distant suburb of Paris.

CG: Yes, but after a year or so they thought: this is not really working, we need to be more in the centre of things. We need to be able to have closer contact with other German emigres, and the social life and so on. So they moved to a small and rather dark apartment in a little alley just south of Montparnasse. And if you look at the map of Paris now, this looks quite a pleasant little cul de sac. It was much closer to the centre of Paris, and Döblin's friend Robert Minder, who we'll be talking about at various points in this this series, gives a very nice little description. He says:

“We would stroll for hours past corner shops, food stores, itinerant hawkers, and take a seat in one of the unremarkable cafes where, 30 years earlier, Lenin had hatched world revolution. For or against Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, Marx, Hegel. Such discussions took place, too, in Döblin's apartment with German emigres. He needed conversation and communication. He loved interlocutors like Manas Sperber, Arthur Koestler, Joseph Roth. Like them, he was combative, open minded, dismissive, rapturous. Sparks flew.”

KK: He'd always enjoyed – we heard in Season One a lot about how he would host these parties or ...

CG: Oh yes, even right to the last month in Berlin. Still hosting these kind of gatherings, evening seminars, with likeminded people.

KK: So then this is probably a good time for us to segue into Döblin the Activist. We've talked about him as a Family Man.

CG: Yes.

KK: Yeah. So as the activist, what was he most engaged with at this turbulent time?

CG: It was quite interesting. He actually told Thomas Mann that all his activism with Jewish groups at this time was a substitute for his lost medical work. You know, this was engaging all his energies.

KK: That makes sense, doesn't it? I mean, when you stop doing something you need an outlet.

CG: You need an outlet, yes. But of course, Jewish organizations at this time were very divided. You had the Zionists on the one hand, who were determined that

taking over Palestine was the way forward. But you had another major group called the Freiland, the “free land” organization.

KK: What was that about?

CG: Well, they were thinking there must be some spot on the Earth's surface where we could all emigrate to, and develop agriculture and industry and so on, and have our own state, you know. How about Peru? Shall we have a look at Peru, or what about, um, Namibia? And the German government, of course, was talking to Jewish leaders in Germany about why don't we send you all to Madagascar? This was all pie in the sky.

KK: Really?

CG: Because you know pretty well everywhere on the Earth's surface was already claimed by somebody, was under the control of some state or other. So this Freiland movement spent two or three years exploring possibilities and ideas and batting around the best way to develop plans, you know, get people on board with their ideas. In 1935, Döblin published a fairly substantial book called *The Flight and Gathering of the Jewish People*, which was based on this. He also was co-editor of a journal for the Freiland movement, which actually produced one of its issues in Yiddish. And Alfred had been learning Yiddish as well as well, presumably, trying to learn French. Um, which is quite interesting because...

KK: Am I right in thinking, did you say Erna would write in Yiddish? Or was it Döblin's mother?

CG: He remembered his mother writing letters in Yiddish.

KK: Using the Hebrew alphabet?

CG: Yes. But until he went to Poland in 1924, he'd not really spent much of his emotional life thinking about being Jewish. You know, he was assimilated.

KK: Yes.

CG: But when he went to Poland he realized there were these real communities with a real culture which is being passed down by very poor but very learned men, who know the history and have read the books and have thought about the religion and the culture and so on. He realized there really was a living, vibrant culture there, which was in in some danger of being lost. And Yiddish was the kind of lingua franca, you could speak Polish and Yiddish or Russian and Yiddish or German and Yiddish. So now Yiddish is a sort of a dialect of German in some respects. But it's interesting that he felt the need to plant his feet in that soil.

KK: I'm interested that he's embracing his cultural heritage and obviously wanting to support everything that's going on. And yet we're still in France at the moment. He's about to leave and go to America ...

CG: But he doesn't know that yet! He doesn't know about those big life changes.

KK: It'll be interesting to get on to that later.

CG: It'll be interesting to get on to it in the context of his conversion to Roman Catholicism.

KK: Exactly, yes. Interesting. That's not very many years away.

CG: But they don't know that yet. They know that rough times are coming, but they've got no idea how history is going to unfold or when. And they're trying to sort of adapt to circumstances over which they have no control at all.

KK: OK

CG: Anyway in 1936 Döblin really threw up his hands and said, he's done with these, pie in the sky ideas, about the Jews going off and colonizing somewhere. And he should put more of his energy into his writing.

KK: And so what was he writing? I'm assuming that most of his energies prior to that were then around his book *Flight and Gathering of the Jewish People*.

CG: Well, no, that was a sort of a byproduct. I mean, he was, as Gunther Anders said, he could never turn off the tap.

KK: But then what creative writing was he producing during his time in Paris?

CG: Well, the first the first book he published after emigrating was *The Babylonian Exile*, which we read an extract from in Episode 1.

KK: Yes.

CG: He wrote most of that in the library in Zurich, surrounded by piles of books and atlases and histories, and so on. So that was published in 1934, in Amsterdam by a firm which had come to an arrangement with his German publisher, Sammy Fisher. And according to one source, this firm was actually providing Alfred with a small monthly stipend, around 250 francs or guilders or something, quite a small stipend. Which must have been helpful to the family, which didn't really have a major breadwinner.

KK: And have you, have you translated any of these?

CG: Oh yes. *The Babylonian Exile* is up on my website. And once copyright expires on Dublin's works in 2027, I'm hopeful that the so-far unpublished translations that

I've put on my website will see the light of day between printed covers. But we'll have to wait and see.

KK: Download them now while you can!

CG: Yes, but the interesting thing is that after moving to Paris in August of 1933, Alfred went back to Zurich for several weeks to finish off *The Babylonian Exile* in a German language environment. R

KK: Really?

CG: Yes, because he felt he really couldn't settle down to it in Paris with all this foreign interference going on in its mind. So he went back and finished it off in the Zurich library.

KK: OK.

CG: Anyway, that was that was just, you know, about six weeks, I think he was there to finish it off. But then in 1934, he – well, he talked in a quite sort of denigrating way of it, “Oh, it's just a little Berlin novel. You know, it's a little thing with some family background that, uh, you know, I just dashed off.” In fact, it's a substantial sort of social realist novel which condenses German history from the time of the founding of the Reich in 1871, down to the then present day, in the 1930s, through the medium of one particular family, which had several echoes of his own family situation, because here we have a widow who was bankrupted by her spendthrift husband, and he died suddenly leaving huge amounts of debt. And they had to take the train to Berlin with the two children and put themselves at the mercy of her brother, who was quite an unfeeling sort of man, he ran a furniture factory and didn't want anybody sponging off him. But it's a difficult situation, a reflection of Döblin's own childhood when at the age of ten he had to suddenly go off to Berlin with his mother and four siblings to throw themselves on the mercy of relatives. But this “little Berlin novel”, which I translated last year and is up on the website, titled as *Expect No Mercy*.

KK: What's the title in German?

CG: *Pardon wird nicht gegeben*. “Pardon will not be given.” Which actually is a quotation from the Kaiser who was seeing off some troops to go to China and deal with those murderous Boxer rebels in China in 1900. You know, there will be no mercy. There will be no prisoners taken. Utterly bloodthirsty stuff from the Kaiser. This novel was translated back in the 1930s, but the translation only had one printing and has never appeared again. And the translation was, I thought, not very good. So I decided to do it all again. So it's only the second of Döblin's novels that's been translated twice into English.

KK: Fabulous.

CG: But the first translation of the title was *Men Without Mercy*, which was completely wrong, because the most merciless character in this book is the Mother.

KK: I see.

CG: But what's interesting about it is there's not a single place name in it. There's not a single surname in it. There's not a single date in it. And yet we are unmistakably in Berlin, in Germany, going through the periods of German history since 1871, although the First World War is entirely left out. But you have boom times and then you have a big crash coming. But this is done through the, it's all dealing with these things through the kind of the personal psychology and psychological interactions of one family, and how one person, the Mother managed to damage her son so greatly that the damage goes down even into the next generation.

KK: Generational trauma?

CG: Yes.

KK: So I am assuming he embarked on his next big epic after that.

CG: Indeed. Once he'd got the Freeland activity out of the way, he spent a lot more time in the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris. And he came across some big atlases which had gorgeous full colour maps of South America and this enormous blue line running through it of the Amazon River. And he was fascinated by the Amazon. And he developed this new epic of 500 years of European involvement in South America.

KK: So this is the Land without Death.

CG: *The Land without Death*, also called *The Amazonas Trilogy*. Which really only cohered as a trilogy some years after his death, because its publication history was so fractured, you know, because of the circumstances. The first volume was published in 1938. The second volume was published in 1939, with no indication of its relationship to the one published a year earlier and only available to, you know, German readers in exile.

KK: Right.

CG: And even the first postwar edition came out in dribs and drabs in the 1940s, again with no indication that this was a coherent trilogy. And then the editor, the first editor who was selected by the family to bring out a selected works after Döblin's death, he decided that the third volume was not up to scratch, and just left it out. And this caused this caused a huge row in the German literature

community and the literary press said, how dare you interfere with a great writer's work like this? And so the shamefaced publisher decided that they must bring it out again with everything complete.

KK: Ah, tricky, tricky. Well, Chris, we've spoken about this before, haven't we? In the translation process, you yourself have edited sections.

CG: Yes. And made the edited bits available on the website!

KK: OK. Right.

CG: And in fact, there's a nice video review of *Mountains Oceans Giants* on YouTube, where he specifically agrees that those bits should have been cut, because they really would have slowed down the reader. But he says it's good that we've got these available to have a look at.

KK: OK.

CG: So, you know, I'm not too guilty.

KK: OK!

CG: And the other one, of course, was the Prologue in *The Three Leaps of Wang Lun*. Which has never been published with *Wang Lun* in German, even though it sets the scene for what follows and links up with the very end of the novel, which we did a reading of back in Season One, and makes the whole thing a nicely closed circle. But that Prologue was cut out from the first edition and it's never been restored in Germany So I put it back in, and I think it was the right thing to do.

KK: Oh, very much so. OK. So have we made it to 1938 yet?

CG: Where have we got to?

KK: *The Land without Death*. So what happens now?

CG: Um, this fellow Robert Minder, I'm never sure which way to pronounce his name, either German or French. He was from Alsace. He went to the same school as Albert Schweitzer. You know, Albert Schweitzer?

KK: I do not know.

CG: The doctor who went off to – I can't remember which country in Africa, somewhere in West Africa, where there were no medical services at all, and set up a clinic there for many years. He was also a very good organist and composer. But anyway, Minder wrote a long article about the Berlin novel *Expect No Mercy* in a French magazine. And that way got to know Döblin, who was delighted that somebody had taken the trouble to look deeply into the background to this novel. And the two men hit it off and were very close friends right up until

Alfred's death 20 years later. But in 1938, they set off on a little tour of eastern France, because Alfred was developing this idea for his next epic, which was to be about the tumultuous end of the First World War and the collapse of the German Empire. This eventually came out as *November 1918*. So Döblin wanted to go and refresh his memory. He'd been stationed in Alsace during the war, and he wanted to refresh his memory of places and incidents and buildings and so on. And he wrote the first volume, *Citizens and Soldiers*, which was published about three weeks after France declared war on Germany. So you can guess how well that managed to circulate.

KK: Not so well.

CG: Not so well. And then after the war, the French censors – Alfred at that time was working in the French censorship office in southwest Germany – they said, no, you can't publish that because it will just stir things up in Alsace and Lorraine, which of course had changed sides twice in the previous century. So *November 1918* only appeared after the war in German without the first volume. And then when it was translated into English in the 1980s, the translator was working from that truncated German edition, and missed out the first volume entirely. So I translated the first volume, and it was published last year by Galileo as *Citizens and Soldiers*.

KK: Right. So that's now four Döblin epics published by Galileo in very handsome, paperback format. So please go to the Galileo Publishing website and have a look and I'm assuming you've linked to them from your own website, Chris. Is that right?

CG: Oh, yes. Yes, but I probably need to do a bit more publicity about what's available.

KK: Were there any other notable writings? I know in the past we've mentioned "Prometheus and the Primitive. Was that around this time?

CG: Oh, right. Yes. That was published in 1938, I think. It's a really interesting look back over 3000 years of, of Western Civ, through the lens of two different angles. You had on the one hand the Prometheus – Prometheus stole fire from the gods, and that was the beginning of technology. And then you have what Alfred called the Primitive. So it's Prometheus and the Primitive. And really, the way I summarize it to myself is that Prometheans see the world as a source for *plunder*, while the Primitives see the world as a source of *wonder*.

KK: Interesting. So it's the technocrats versus the people of spirit, the religious people.

CG: I'm not sure if you've come across Iain McGilchrist, who's been much in the news or on websites, blogs and so on. Recently he published two enormous books where he's gone very, very deeply into left brain, right brain issues in the way that humans deal with the world. His view is that in the last century or more, couple of centuries, the West has been led by its left brain, which is instrumental, sort of immediate reaction. Don't think too much about consequences. Just deal with things now and you know that it's short term thinking, not held back enough by the more rounded, contemplative approach of the right brain.

KK: Right.

CG: So I thought, McGilchrist's notion fits really well in with the Prometheus versus the Primitive kind of angle and the way that these two approaches have dominated at different times during history.

KK: Um, after that, I think we've probably covered it. We've had nearly 40 minutes. I wonder if there's anything else you want to touch on.

CG: Well, we haven't talked about Alfred's New York trip in spring of 1939. The PEN Club, which was a big kind of international establishment society of writers, you know, lots of top down approval and sponsorship and so on. It had a big Congress in New York. And so Alfred went along to be a representative. And Eleanor Roosevelt arranged a reception at the White House for all these delegates. So Alfred stepped on hallowed ground in Washington, right? Um, so he wasn't, you know, so he wasn't entirely strange to New York at the time which we'll be talking about in the next episode, escaping from France. And we should mention his 60th birthday party, where several notable emigres attended the party, but probably three or four times that number were scattered all around Europe and just wrote back saying we'd have loved to be there, but we're in Stockholm or the south of France or somewhere and we just can't travel there. Anyway, we should get on to the reading.

KK: Yes. It's been quite a meaty episode today. We've had a lot to talk about. So let's get to the reading.

CG: OK. So this is from *Expect No Mercy*. We have Karl, the teenage country bumpkin who's been brought to the big city by the Mother. And she keeps saying, "you must go out and earn money, my lad". And he thinks, how on earth? You know, I can earn money back in the country, because I know how to lift hay bales and feed horses and do all these things. But what am I going to do in this city? And he's been hanging around the big wholesale markets where he gets taken up with a chap who's mixing with, well, what we would call juvenile delinquents, I suppose. Anyway, this is an incident of his life there.

KK: OK. Right. So here's the reading.

Ep. 2-2 READING from *Expect no Mercy*

One afternoon Karl came away from the market along with a bunch of other boys by a corner exit onto a suburban plaza. Apparently they were off to a council of war. They were a gang of youths, they didn't mind Karl tagging along. We're off, they said, to see Ma Bertha. They proceeded a quarter hour down big streets, and came to open ground where on the far side new houses were being built. The site was partly fenced, parts were overgrown by grass, parts even pegged off and planted with vegetables and sunflowers. But close by the construction site a row of sheds and hovels stretched away. It seethed with people. Booths of lath and crate slats had been slapped together, stovepipes stretched black tin throats through the roofs. Some of these sheds were nothing but old wagons, the wheels buried in the debris that formed the ground.

The boys, and a couple of girls their own age who'd attached themselves to the gang, marched through unchallenged until they reached a rather secluded fantastical structure proclaimed by a tin sign to be a "Hotel" promising "Fresh Beer and Tea". Wooden steps led to the entrance; at the top was a vicious shaggy hound. A lad collected a few pennies from the others at the foot of the steps, walked slowly up whistling, and fondled the beast's neck as he passed. He soon reappeared in the doorway, the hound was held back by a slatternly woman who emerged from the depths of the wagon. All eight of them (counting the two girls) passed through the "restaurant" – a bare low-ceilinged space with two tables and some stools – across a duckboard that spanned a foul-smelling chasm, into another narrow space that was the interior of a second wagon wedged close to the first. A wide window opening was covered by paper. They remained standing, or squatted on stools and the table edge. The rickety iron bedstead was reserved for the two girls and the captain of the gang. They all lit up. The proprietress set mugs of beer on the table, which they paid for on the spot. Karl couldn't stay for long at this remarkable gathering, they gossiped about business, sang rude songs, some whispered together, the captain had important matters to discuss with his ladies, one of whom piggybacked on him for a while until down she went, legs in the air, and quarrelled with the other girl.

On the second occasion – his mother was most reluctant to let him go – Karl sat quietly, again he had earned little, maybe he would hear something. Someone had hung a jacket over the "window", a kitchen lamp burned on the table, ten lads and the girls all together.

Then Karl realised he was attending a formal club meeting. A debate strewn with objections dragged on endlessly, on a topic broached by one of the bigger lads. He was to be inducted into the society today, and had to demonstrate extraordinary strengths. Karl – they treated him kindly as a country bumpkin – understood little of it. What was that thickset boy with the puffy lips and big bulging stupid-looking eyes talking about? About an old woman who had once been rich but then she lost it all, probably because she lost her looks – "She couldn't do it any more," one of the girl's shrieked – and then of course she fell ill, but she still had rich relatives, and now she takes morphine, injects it. The band of young smokers nodded knowingly along. Now no one will give her enough

morphine, she doesn't know any pharmacists, but she steals, she knows how, not morphine but clothes, books. So now someone has to sell them for her.

A general "Aha!", whispered discussions, similar stories, then a test of strength, a wrestling match with the leader that in the end none of them was able to witness, the lamp had to be taken to the entrance for safety, and the table had already been dumped on the bed. Then the fury of battle drove them all from the entrance back across the duckboard, and most of the council of war found itself in the restaurant between the two tables, which were now fully occupied by rather elderly women, fat and thin, made up as young ladies. Crashing sounds from the meeting wagon; the proprietress listened unfazed as she squatted in the doorway beside a locked cupboard from which now and then she removed glasses and colourful schnaps bottles. Then the noises abated, they all crowded back, the lamp was carried back in over all the heads, the owner shuffled in, and without bestowing a glance on any of them she checked the inventory: bedding, chairs, table. The two warriors, sweating, wearing only shirt and trousers, bowed: no damage, we took care, whereat she shuffled back over the chasm to her trusty cupboard. And now at a signal from the president – he had reclaimed the bed along with his two girls – the candidate stripped off shirt and trousers in two swift moves, and as he paraded there naked as a boxer – two lads guarded the door – one of the girls minced up to him, he grinned, sweat dripped down his bronzed body. Karl, appalled, wriggled his way out on the excuse of fetching a beer.

THE END

KK: Crikey! I think that's probably replicated up and down the country now with groups of youth, um, in the countryside as well. So we always have wifi, like I live in the countryside in a small village, and there's so little for teenagers to do or young teenagers.

CG: It was just the same when I was a young lad.

KK: That's it. It's just the same, exactly the same as that.

CG: But very vivid, isn't it? Y

KK: Yes, very vivid. Very good. Okay, so I guess we're looking for the exit, like

KK: Great. And that's going to, of course, lead into five years in the US. Looking forward to that.

CG: Yes, there's going to be a lot to talk about.

KK: Well, today is a really long episode compared to some of our other ones. The time seems to have flown past. Thank you so much, listeners, for staying the course, and we'll see you again in episode 3 as we venture out of France.

CG: Yes, thank you everyone. And please do have a look at the website Beyond Hyphen Alexanderplatz dotcom.

KK: Yes. You'll see that in the show notes as well. So, we'll see you next time. Thank you so much. Bye bye, Chris.

CG: OK. Bye, Katie. Thanks for your help.

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!