

PETER MILTON



Notes on: *Interiors VII: The Train from Munich*

I suppose *The Train from Munich* is a print for my wife, Edith, and her making it out of Germany in 1939.

The image started with a photograph by Eugène Atget of a girl looking out of a Parisian café window. Who was she? While I was in Bellagio I did a drawing of the piece, repeating elements of the window to suggest an entrance. I was thinking of James's *Aspern Papers*, which I was working on, but this drawing kept luring me back into the unfinished *Interiors* series. I knew I needed a seventh print to complete the series' symmetry.

When I started on the image again, I found that the scale of the girl in the window had to be reduced in order to suggest a greater scale to the architecture. But where was this café? The idea of the stairs going up at the right and going down in front came very quickly, as did the young woman coming up the stairs, a figure borrowed from the tête-à-tête pair in *Hotel Paradise Café* 1987, in turn borrowed from the 1925 André

Kertész photograph of the Café du Dôme in Montparnasse. Originally I intended the print to be *her* story. I knew she should be coming from a train, and I knew that as she headed toward the farther steps she would never get past the entrance of the café, which I was already calling the Café Dante.

The train suggested a train station, which I rather freely improvised from photographs I had taken years earlier of the train station in Budapest. The choice of Budapest strangely foreshadowed a much more significant direction the image later took. With the train I wanted a repetition of windows echoing the repetition of the station's glass roof and walls, in turn echoing—in the insistence on geometry—the impersonality and relentlessness of the war machine building up in Europe.

Trains began to suggest deportation. And in that context, the steam—which I had introduced to relieve the relentlessness of the geometry—began to take on the weight of smoke and furnaces. The steam becomes even more like smoke and dust as it meanders through the café and toward the steps. I play it up to obscure the Café Dante sign, which had soon begun to seem to me pretentious and inflated. I keep the Hôtel Metropole sign as a more subtle reminder of an Underground.

The doorman is modeled on Marcel Duchamp. This is partly unfair revenge. I wanted an obsequious and appeasing man at the entrance, welcoming an unknown—and unseen—personage coming down the stairs. The revenge is for the escapades of Dada, the Mona Lisa moustaches, urinals-as-sculpture that heralded the Pop art of the sixties and the general trivializing of art that today is so ubiquitous. This figure is my moustache on Duchamp.

On a more serious plane, the elegant butler, the artist, and the intellectual are epitomes of European culture all about to be swept away by the juggernaut in the tunnel. Already Duchamp is becoming transparent.

Around the doorman are various Duchamp puns: the figures descending the staircase, the images transparent as if on glass. The figure of the doorman did not work for me for the longest time—it was not until I had added the smoke gathering over his head and the white gloves that I could finally accept him.

I seriously considered more than a few people as participants in this image, some of whom were actually put in and then taken out: Jean Cocteau (twice); René Magritte;

Magritte's back; many versions of Duchamp; Kertész's wife, Elizabeth; Kertész; Tristan Tzara; Hitler's dog Blondi; the collector Albert Bender; the photographer Hippolyte Bayard; Ernst Ludwig Kirchner; Robert Mapplethorpe's hand; and James Joyce. Cecil Beaton's Lady Diana Cooper did make it in (lower left corner), as did Paul Klee (farthest sleeping man) and a Josef Koudelka gypsy above the sleeping dog. The sleeping man on the bench is from an image in Kertész's volume *On Reading* (1971). I put the man to sleep and gave him a bowler hat in honor of Magritte.

In the upper corner a tiny cityscape with a parade of banners holds echoes of Leni Riefenstahl. Three men have crossed over from *Hotel Paradise Café* and another three from my 1967 print *Julia Passing*. Albrecht Dürer's soldier from *Knight, Death, and the Devil* has turned into a statue, and from the same source I have borrowed the dog that rushes down the steps and snaps at a flock of doves. The birds were added very late, to leaven the increasing density of the image. It was then that I made the dog vicious. He is on a leash. The unseen owner has an umbrella, an attribute of self-protection. I now give him a cane. He has become blind.

The man next to the window, who is also holding a leashed dog, is Raoul Wallenberg—the savior of thousands of Hungarian Jews who himself disappeared into Stalin's darkness. I didn't think of him at first and it now seems eerie how the setting was already derived from Budapest long before his likeness suggested itself. It was not until after the image was completed that I realized the connection and wondered to what I owe the poignant coincidence.

The figure derived from Wallenberg is the heart of the image. He has turned to see the commotion coming down the stairs, as has his dog. They can see what we cannot. The dog in the terminal, however, is asleep. Three children peer intently at a group of people standing on a platform. No one pays any attention. They are all asleep.

In the window, my Atget girl, the original impulse for the image, has turned into Edith at the age of twelve; Edith still has photographs of herself in England at about that age, charming the photographer and us all. Between her and a standing man is a tiny portrait of the younger of our two children, Naomi, repeated from the 1984 *Family Reunion*. In that print I used a double exposure of Naomi as a stand-in for my younger sister, with whom I was very close in childhood and whose subsequent history has had

more than its share of troubles. Do I intend the portrait, here, to suggest survival? At the right of the window, the figure from *Interiors I* still broods about things that, as of *Interiors I*, were still unclear. They are clearer now. This figure had my hairline, forehead, and glasses, but basically the face was taken from Arnold Newman's 1963 photograph of Alfried Krupp, the German munitions industrialist. Did I really think, in 1984 when I was working on *Family Reunion*, that my choice was based solely on Newman's striking lighting effects? *The Interiors* series seems to have had an ultimate destination from the start.

At the right of Edith stands a man whose daughter did not escape. He is derived from Arnold Newman's eloquent portrait of Otto Frank. For many of us the blackness that fell during the Third Reich has redefined the boundaries of humanity. It revealed a depth that, once seen, is always there and informs everything. *The Train from Munich* is specific and in some ways personal. But I intend its images of smoke, descending steps, disappearing figures, of sleep and blindness to have a much more general application. They not only evoke the historical past, which has by now assumed mythic dimensions, but point toward any time in which we allow darkness to prevail through our own free choice to be blind.

I see the train from Munich as the headlights in the tunnel. It seems poised in time, unmoving. But only for the moment.