

From Breslau¹⁸

Breslau, August 2, 1917.

My dear Sonichka,

Your letter, which reached me on the 28th, was my first news here from the outer world; so you can readily imagine how glad I was to get it. Your affectionate anxiety on my account makes you take too tragical a view of my removal. . . . You know that I accept all the turns of fortune with a fair amount of equanimity. I have already settled in here quite comfortably. My book boxes turned up to-day from Wronke, so it wouldn't be long now before the books, the pictures, and the modest ornaments that I like to carry about with me will make my two cells at Breslau just as homelike and comfortable as were my quarters at Wronke, so that I shall be able to resume my work with renewed pleasure. Of course I lack here the comparative freedom of movement I had at Wronke, where during the day I could go wherever I liked within the fortress. Here I am simply locked up, minus the glorious fresh air, the garden, and, above all, the birds. You can't think how much I had come to depend on the society of those little creatures. Still, one can soon learn to do without things, and before long I shall forget that I was ever in better surroundings than these. The whole position here is much like that of the *Barnimstrasse*, except that there I had the lovely green infirmary garden in which every day I could make some new little discovery in botany or zoology. There is no chance of "discovering" anything in the great paved courtyard where I take exercise. As I go to and fro, I keep my eyes riveted on the grey paving-stones to spare myself the sight of the prisoners at work in the yard. It hurts me to see them in their ignoble prison dress, and there are always a few among them in whom the individual traits of age and sex seem to have been obliterated beneath an imprint of the extremity of human degradation—and yet these very figures always draw my gaze by a painful sort of magnetism. It is true that there are others upon whom prison dress can wreak no ill, and who would rejoice the eye of any painter. For instance, I have seen a young working

woman in the court-yard here whose slender trim figure, and whose sharply-cut profile set off by the kerchief she wears on her head, remind me of one of Millet's¹⁹ peasant women. It is a delight to watch the grace with which she carries burdens. Her thin face, with its tightly-drawn skin and its uniform pallor, recalls the tragical mask of a pierrot. But I have been taught by painful experience to shun such promising encounters as widely as possible. In the *Barnimstrasse* there was a prisoner whose aspect was queenly, and I fancied that her personality must fit the part. Shortly afterwards she took up the duties of cleaner in my section of the prison, and within a day or two it became plain to me that her lovely mask hid such a mass of stupidity and baseness that I had to turn away my eyes whenever she crossed my path. It occurred to me, in this connection, that it may only be because the Venus of Milo²⁰ cannot speak that she has been able for all these years to preserve her reputation as the most beautiful among women. Were she to open her mouth maybe the spell would be broken.

My window looks upon the men's prison, the usual gloomy building of red brick. But over the wall I can see the green tree-tops belonging to some kind of park. One of them is a tall black poplar which I can hear rustling when the wind is strong; and there is a row of ash trees, much lighter in color, and covered with yellow clusters of seed-pods. The windows look to the north-west, so that I often see splendid sunsets, and you know how the sight of these rose-tinted clouds can make up to me for everything. At eight o'clock in the evening (summer time, 7 o'clock really) the sun has only just sunk behind the gables of the men's prison; it still shines right through the dormer-windows, and the whole sky has a golden tint. I feel so happy then, and something—I know not what—makes me hum Gounod's²¹ *Ave Maria* (you know it of course). Many thanks for copying out the Goethe poems. *Die berechtigten Maenner* is really very fine, although I had never been struck by it before; we are all open to suggestions in our judgments of the beautiful. If you have time, I wish you would copy out for me *Anakreons Grab*²². Do you know it well? Hugo Wolf's setting first enabled me really to understand it. The music gives it an architectonic