

BARBICAN

A STERLING McQUEEN SPY STORY

Also by Phil Valentine

THE GOD PLAYERS
THE FIRST FACE OF JANUS

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A STERLING McQUEEN SPY STORY

A NOVEL BY
PHIL VALENTINE



Oxley Durchville Publishing

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And to all the great writers of spy fiction who have come before me. Your work has brought me many hours of pleasure and inspiration. Sterling McQueen stands on your broad shoulders.

~Phil Valentine



Chapter One

Brussels, Belgium

Worry occupied a special place in Professor Franz Gerber's mind. His slender frame paced the floor like a caged tiger, stopping to ease back the heavy curtain of his hotel room and steal a quick peek out the window to the street below. He wasn't cut out for the spy business. He tried to tell them as much. A wise man once said that worry is interest paid on trouble before it's due. Trouble had just called the note.

He looked down at the cell phone in his hand as if by staring at it he could will it to ring. He ran trembling fingers through his gray hair then reached for a handkerchief and mopped his brow. Once he made his deal and delivered the information he was getting out. He had vowed to his wife. He had vowed to himself. He was going back to his peaceful, mundane life. How he longed for the excruciating boredom of the classroom.

Although it was impossible to know what he knew and not get involved, he had managed to do just that until three months ago. What Gerber knew was absolutely radioactive. It couldn't stay contained within his head, of that he was sure. It had to be told, and once he had passed it along he would try to forget it. He wished he'd never learned it. The information had ruined his life, but to the people with whom he was meeting it was espionage gold. The faces had changed over the years, but the basic goal had not. It was all about information.

"Please excuse me if I cover territory already covered by Herr Hoffman," the German man said at the debriefing 25 years prior. "You were born in Lebanon, yet you are a German citizen?"

"Yes," Gerber said. "Because my parents were German citizens. I believe the legal term is *jus sanguinis*. It is Latin for 'right of blood.'"

Gerber had become used to being asked the same questions over and over again, but in a slightly different way. They called it cross-questioning in the spy game. He was never sure if the person across the table was an intelligence officer or a psychologist. They all looked the same. They all talked the same.

“And what was your father doing in Lebanon?” the man asked, lighting a cigarette.

“He worked for the Lebanese University, but I believe he was also working for the German government. My parents moved to Beirut with my older brother and sister. I was born shortly after they arrived.”

“You say your father worked for the German government. What did he do?” The man took a drag from his cigarette.

“I do not really know. We never talked about it. *He* never talked about it.”

“You have said your father was terrified of Nazi images.”

“Yes, swastikas, iron crosses, old footage of Nazi parades. He would make us turn the channel if it came on the television.”

“Why do you think that was?”

“I do not know.” Gerber scratched his chin. “He was obsessed with this notion that Hitler had escaped the bunker and was living in Argentina and that a Fourth Reich would rise. He had nightmares about it.”

The man exhaled smoke. “Interesting. Your father decided to move his family back to Germany when you were 13?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I am not sure. Maybe because he got another job. I know my mother had been ready to go for some time.”

“But he never made it home.”

“He went on ahead of us.” It was a painful memory placed in a box with old photographs. “He had some things to do before we could officially move back. Papers to fill out and such things.”

On the last leg of his journey, Klaus Gerber was traveling from Zurich to Munich. Out his window a powdery fresh coat of February snow blanketed the moonlit rooftops of the cozy Alpine village of Feldkirch. In a few hours Klaus Gerber would be in Munich. His

appointment was for 9:30 in the morning with an official at the immigration office. The mountains and snow were far removed from the Mediterranean refuge to which he had become accustomed.

His eyes had just closed when he first detected something was wrong. A sudden jolt forward as if the train were stopping, then the sudden sensation of acceleration. The odd tilting of the train car at first felt like a mountain turn, but it became obvious it was something much more serious. The screeching sound of metal on metal, bending and twisting as it was never meant to be contorted. The screams were in unison, much like a roller coaster ride. But the terror of this ride was real. The lights of the train car were extinguished. It rolled over on its side. The front dipped down slamming bodies into one another and against the hard ceiling then into the sides of the car. Windows smashed under body weight. The cold night air rushed in. The train car followed the ones before it down into the icy grave of the Ill River. It was the worst train accident in Austrian history.

Gerber wiped away the memory and peeked out the hotel window again. He had tried to explain to the man 25 years prior. The West had a hard time understanding the Middle East. Gerber knew one could not fully appreciate the Arab people unless one had lived among them. He understood their culture and he could see the world from their point of view. In fact, he had tried to explain that point of view yet again at the Middle Eastern symposium he was attending in Brussels that very morning.

It was all too easy for the uninformed to become prejudiced against the Arabs, he told them, never knowing the political differences. The commonality of their religion and culture did not fully reveal the innate and deep-seated incongruity which boiled beneath the surface. Gerber not only understood it, he grew up with it.

It was because of that background and knowledge that he was anxious about revealing his secret. If the world thought it understood the complexities of the Middle East, Professor Gerber’s revelation was going to turn that world and its understanding completely upside down. He was eager to rid himself of his secret, to let someone else worry about the consequences. But there was more. There was the information he just discovered that caused his stomach to churn.

The three masked men worked undetected on the hotel rooftop. Two of them strung a twenty-foot span of steel cable about chest high. The other focused all of his attention on connecting wires in a box just a few feet away at the top of the elevator shaft. With the steel cable in place, one of the men pulled a black mesh net from his rucksack. The other man assisted him in spreading the thin netting underneath the cable. On each side they attached hooks into eyelets in the thick cable and pulled them taut making sure each was secure. Each man wore an earpiece, and they stopped dead in their tracks when the cell phone rang.

Professor Gerber knew he was taking a chance making an intelligence contact in Brussels. It was hard to know whom you could trust. The ring startled him even though he had been pacing in anticipation of it. He immediately engaged the phone and held it to his ear. His heart was pounding. The palms of his hands were sweating.

“Hello?”

“Professor Gerber?” the familiar German voice inquired.

“Yes.”

“Are you ready?” Gustav Wagner asked.

“Yes, I am ready.” Gerber shifted from foot to foot. “Let us get this over with quickly.”

“Professor, there is no need to be concerned. We are taking very good care of you.”

“I will feel a lot better when I have passed the information—”

“Say no more, Professor. There is a taxi waiting for you downstairs. The driver has the number nine on a sheet of paper on his passenger side window. Get into that cab and only that cab. Do you understand?”

“Yes. Number nine. I understand.”

“We will talk more in a little while.”

“I am on my way.”

“Auf Wiedersehen.”

The professor hung up the phone and returned it to his pocket. He tried to put his apprehension behind him. He had debated whether or not to reveal his knowledge to his handlers, but recent circumstances left him no choice. As uneasy as he was about the whole affair, that ship had already sailed. There was little he could do but play it out to

the end. The images of his wife and grown son filled his mind’s eye. He paused a second to savor the memory.

The masked man by the elevator control box motioned for the other two men to take their places. The two men slithered down the ladder into the elevator shaft. They waited in the dark for their next orders. The lights strapped to their heads made them look like miners, the black masks like soot on their faces.

The cable television repair truck parked across the street from the hotel blended into the background of a typical busy day in Brussels. Passersby paid it no attention whatsoever. Inside, elaborate electronic equipment lined the walls. Serious looking men sat in silence listening intently to what was going on in their headphones. Gustav Wagner unwrapped a flat circular cherry sucker and popped it into his mouth. It was a nervous habit exacerbated by the fact that he was out of jurisdictional control. As the team leader on this project from German Intelligence, he had to defer to the Belgian General Information and Security Service, or GISS. Chief Inspector De Vos was in charge. Making sure all the men in the truck were ready to go, De Vos pulled the microphone which was attached to his headset down to his lips. Gustav Wagner listened in his own set of headphones. No microphone.

Although the language of commerce in Brussels was French, De Vos understood the complexity of this particular operation. He had French-speaking officers but also Dutch, and his guests from German Intelligence, of course, spoke German. For simplicity’s sake, the operation would be conducted in English and he reminded his officers.

Professor Gerber had rejected the idea of an escort. He didn’t want to be seen in public with anyone official. Maybe a bit paranoid, but he didn’t want to take any chances. Neither did Gustav. He was intent on seeing to it that the professor made his appointment.

“Yorick, he is coming your way,” De Vos informed the gentleman pretending to run cable at the end of the hallway. “Mathias, make sure you do not lose your place,” he barked to the cab driver idling out front of the hotel.

“I am ready and waiting,” Mathias casually talked into the microphone hidden behind the sun visor.

“Seppe, when he comes off the elevator take him.”

Seppe, sitting in the hotel lobby looking over a newspaper, nodded slightly to himself.

“Make sure he gets into the right taxi.”

Professor Gerber opened the door to his twelfth floor room. He first double-checked his reading glasses in the left breast pocket of his suit then the hotel key card in his right pants pocket. Satisfied, he closed the door behind him and struck out nervously for the elevators. The cable repairman whistled under his breath pretending to go about his work. Professor Gerber inspected him with suspicion then pressed the button to call the elevator. Convinced there was nothing distrustful about the repairman, he turned his attention to tracking each of the six elevators, three to either side of the hallway. After a moment, the soft bell above the elevator dinged. The doors parted and the professor rushed inside alone. He pressed the lobby key more times than was necessary.

As soon as the doors were closed the cable repairman swiveled to make sure the professor had boarded. He then said into the cuff of his shirt, “He is on the east elevator, far left.”

“Got that, Seppe? East, far left,” De Vos repeated from the van.

“Got it,” Seppe replied almost inaudibly under his breath.

Gustav rattled the sucker from the right side of his mouth to the left with his tongue.

The two men in the elevator shaft looked at one another in the darkness, their headlights illuminating each other’s masked faces. They then scurried into position. The third masked man at the top of the shaft readied himself at the makeshift control panel. Attaching clasps to the elevator cable, the two in the shaft held fast to handles at the end of the clasps and swiftly descended.

Seppe folded his newspaper and headed for the elevator. He checked the location of his subject. Tenth floor, now ninth, eighth, seventh. Seppe refocused his attention on the people hurrying into the next elevator so as not to arouse suspicion when the professor disembarked. As he glanced back up he noticed Professor Gerber’s elevator appeared to have stopped on the seventh floor.

The professor reached forward and pressed the lobby key again. Evidently there was a glitch. His pulse began to race. Why wasn’t the

elevator moving? What could possibly be wrong? Every muscle in his body contracted. He quickly scanned the control buttons in search of the emergency bell. Just as the terror was about to overtake him, the elevator began to move again. Anxiety flowed from his body like an opened dam. He unclenched his fists and playfully wiggled his toes which, just a moment ago, seemed to dig through the soles of his shoes. He sighed and smiled to himself at his silly overreaction. He wiped his clammy hands on his trousers.

A thud drew his attention to the ceiling of the elevator coming from just above his head. The professor had no chance to cry out. Like a bolt of lightning two men swooped down upon him. Black masks, black turtle necks, black slacks, and black gloves concealed their identities. They said nothing. They roped the professor around both arms. They duct-taped his mouth, hoisted him back through the tiny hole in the ceiling, and replaced the ceiling panel. Gerber lost consciousness from the needle that one of the men stuck into his neck.

Before Seppe became too concerned, the elevator continued on its way. Sixth floor, fifth, fourth. He pulled his paper from underneath his arm and pretended to scan the folded front page. Third floor, second, lobby. The bell and light over the far left elevator on the east side rang and lit concurrently. Seppe kept his eyes on the middle elevator, but his attention was fully focused on the doors to the left. Anticipating their opening, he turned slightly, positioning himself to head back out into the lobby after the professor.

Just before the doors below opened, the two masked men atop the elevator simultaneously hopped aboard the middle elevator in the darkness with the now very limp professor in tow. They looked back over their shoulders at the rapidly shrinking image of the elevator roof below. The cool breeze whisked through the eye holes in their masks. They gently laid the professor down and crouched beside him to steady themselves.

The east far left elevator began to open. Seppe glanced over. He did a double take. No one emerged from inside. The doors began to close. He dashed over lodging his left arm between the doors just in time. The elevator was most definitely empty. Seppe’s eyes darted all over the small elevator car. The professor had vanished into thin air.

He pulled his cuff to his mouth. "I thought you said east, far left," he whispered with grave concern.

"I did!" Yorick replied defensively.

"Control, we have lost him," Seppe informed the men in the van.

"What the hell is going on in there?" Gustav demanded.

De Vos ignored him. "Attention! Seal the hotel! Seal the hotel!"

Yorick dropped the cable and bolted into the stairwell heading for the roof. He scaled the steps two at a time. He drew his pistol from the holster in the small of his back underneath his work jacket. In a moment, he was at the top. He slammed through the metal door leading to the rooftop. His feet hit the gravel roof. Pop! The bullet hit him squarely in the chest. The velocity of the impact launched his body backward through the doorway he had just crossed. His feet shot out from under him. His lifeless frame tumbled like a sack of apples down the half-flight of stairs and settled in a heap against the concrete wall. The masked man by the control panel paused a moment and watched the metal door slam itself shut. He ran to the door, opened it, and aimed his gun to make sure his target didn't move. Smoke leaked from the silencer. One look down the stairs told him all he needed to know.

Seppe took off for the back hallway. He hit the rear exit, and plainclothes officers were springing from unmarked cars screeching to a halt. Seppe began barking out instructions and pointing with his drawn pistol.

The two masked men from the elevator shaft hauled the limp professor to the middle of the net. Laying him down, one of the men pulled a black nylon strap from his rucksack. He wrapped it around the professor's waist. He then fastened the strap to the net. The two masked men sat down on either side of the professor and fastened themselves to the net. The third masked man tucked away his gun and sat down with the others inside the net, fastening himself in as well.

Because of its speed, the officers didn't hear the helicopter until it was just over the roof. A huge metal hook hung from its belly. Blasting over the rooftop, the hook caught the steel cable in the middle. In an instant the three masked men and the professor were hoisted up like a school of fish. The net twisted from side to side as the chopper cruised just above the skyline of Brussels.

Two officers ran past the dead officer in the stairwell and through the door to the roof just in time to see the helicopter in the distance. The situation inside the hotel was mass confusion. Everyone was talking into their microphones at once in three different languages.

"Nous l'avons perdu," the officer yelled above the confusion informing De Vos that they had lost the professor.

Gustav didn't need a translator. He snatched the headphones from his head. Crunching down on the sucker, he yanked the stick from his mouth and threw it to the floor.

"Scheisse!" he shouted, the miniature high-pitched sound of chaos ringing from his headphones.

Chapter Two

Twenty-Five Years Ago

A young boy's heritage is easily cast aside by thirteen years of shaping and molding an impressionable young mind in a foreign land. Franz Gerber was officially German, but his emotional ties were with Lebanon. The friendships he had cultivated and the roots he had planted were all Lebanese. The vision of returning to his adopted homeland had never left him. Professor Gerber's dream came to fruition when he accepted a teaching position with the Lebanese University in Beirut, the very institution that employed his father. But it was never quite the same.

Lebanon had become a battleground for the entire Muslim world. Beirut was a keg of dynamite waiting to explode. Most around him were hopelessly trapped. This hell was the only home they knew. For them, moving was unthinkable. For Gerber, it was paramount. He knew what must be done, but merely picking up and leaving was not so simple for him now. He had the responsibility of a family.

She was a beautiful young Lebanese woman with flowing black hair and large chocolate eyes. Her name was Alisashad. Gerber simply called her Lisa. She had grown up in Hadath, just south of Beirut. Her father was a carpenter and her mother took care of the home until her untimely death when Lisa was only seven years old. Her father moved to Beirut in search of work two weeks after Lisa's twenty-second birthday. She had found part-time employment in the library at the Lebanese University. That's when she met and fell in love with Professor Franz Gerber.

"She was fascinated with my stories of the West," Gerber told his German debriefer twenty-five years ago. "She longed to see these

wonders of the world first hand.” He looked down then back up. “I sometimes wondered if she was in love with me or if she simply found solace in my tales of another land, a land which might deliver her from that tormented country. Frankly, I did not care.”

“But you did not leave with her immediately. Why?”

“Her father. The bond that forms between a father and his daughter in the absence of a mother is almost indivisible. She filled a void in his life.”

“But you divided that bond.”

“I did,” Gerber said. “Her father never liked me very much, but it became quite clear that he had set himself up to lose. In the end, he reluctantly agreed to our union.”

“And then your son, Erich, was born.”

Gerber smiled. The mere mention of his name brought joy to his heart. “Yes. Just ten months after our wedding day we were blessed with a son. And something changed that day. The violence and political upheaval had been intriguing, even thrilling, for a political science professor like me, but for a husband and a father they were terrifying. There were now two lives that depended on me for their very survival.”

“Why did you not leave then?”

“Her father. She would never leave Lebanon without her father and her father would never leave Lebanon.” Gerber’s mood turned solemn. “But, of course, that all changed on that horrible day.”

As odd as it may seem to the uninitiated, construction immediately following a terrorist attack was commonplace. Like ants rebuilding their hills after a summer downpour, these Arabs diligently set about the continual task of putting their lives—and their buildings—back together. Even in times of unrest, life must go on. The dark irony was the terrorists kept Lisa’s father employed. His construction team was usually the first on the scene to start the rebuilding process. Such defiance in the face of disaster bolstered the spirits of the locals.

That day two men on motor scooters weaved slowly around the stalled traffic on the crowded street. They were dressed in khaki pants and white sneakers. Their heads and faces were covered with the same white material that covered their upper bodies. They wore

dark sunglasses. They stopped just meters from one another, set their kickstands, and surveyed the area.

A worker tossed bricks up to another man on a scaffolding. He stacked the new batch of bricks on the wood plank at his feet. A man mixed sand with masonry cement and water. Lisa’s father pushed a load of sand in a wheelbarrow up the sidewalk toward the construction site.

The two men from the scooters pulled the coverings from their faces. The man on the scaffolding wiped his brow with a handkerchief. In that moment of rest when he looked out over the crowded street he immediately recognized the danger. He yelled a warning in Arabic. What followed was a mixture of chaos, confusion, and screams of sheer terror. The concussion blew pedestrians backwards up against buildings. The vehicle closest to the construction site was engulfed in flames. Bricks, sand, and metal rained down on the street. A large plume of smoke billowed from the construction site. Motorists far enough away from the blast bolted from their cars and ran. It was an all-too-familiar scene of gruesome savagery.

“When he did not come home for dinner we knew something was wrong,” Gerber said. “We turned on the television. I remember Lisa covered her mouth in horror. She knew.”

Leaving the country Gerber loved, in and of itself, would be fairly easy were he alone, but a Lebanese-born wife and son made for a different predicament altogether. It was not simply a matter of walking across the border. Mounds of paperwork had to be filled out. Miles of red tape had to be overcome.

Immigration from the Middle East in that day was difficult even if a German citizen was involved. Gerber pressed his case again and again intent on moving his family back to his native land. With each stall and delay he became more desperate. He tried to carry on as usual, but every waking moment was consumed with thoughts of removing his family from this dangerous city.

The last few students trickled out of his classroom and Professor Gerber packed his briefcase with the day’s lesson. The voices trailed off down the hallway leaving behind the still silence of the room. He erased the chalkboard. The voice a few feet behind him startled him.

“Professor Gerber?” the man inquired.

“Yes?” Gerber swung around to face him.

“You have been quite busy,” the German man said.

“Do I know you?” He put the eraser down.

The man smiled slightly. “You have written quite a few letters to the German authorities.”

“Are you with immigration?” Gerber asked.

“Let me get right to the point, Professor.” The man produced identification from his breast pocket. “I am Agent Hoffman with the BND.”

Gerber recognized the insignia of Germany’s Federal Intelligence Service. He closely examined the card then handed it back to Hoffman. “German police? What brings you to Beirut?”

“You do, Professor.” Hoffman returned the ID to his pocket. “You have something we want.”

“*I* have something?” Gerber asked in disbelief. “What could *I* possibly have that you want?”

“Knowledge, Professor.” He walked slowly dragging his index finger along the top of the desk as if checking it for dust. “Insight. Perhaps even the key.”

“The key? The key to what?”

“Let me back up to the beginning.” The stranger rested himself on the edge of Gerber’s desk. “We have become quite frustrated with the events in the Middle East. We searched for ways to resolve the conflict, but matters only seemed to worsen. Then your letters began to arrive on the desks of various dignitaries. These letters each found their way to other branches of government concerned with resolving the problems in the Middle East. The immigration authorities shared these correspondences with us in an effort to help you with your plight. We were intrigued. Your background was thoroughly checked and it was determined that you were in a unique position to help us.”

“Help you? How?”

“The decision to bring a civilian into a covert operation is not taken lightly, Professor. There is the potential of leaking vital information which could prove to be detrimental to the entire operation. Many inside the organization were adamantly opposed to your involvement for that very reason. I, on the other hand,” he pulled himself up to a

sitting position atop the desk and drew closer to Gerber, “I thought it worth the risk. So, this is an exploratory visit.”

“An exploratory visit?”

“To see if you would be willing to help us with your knowledge and experience in exchange for expediting your family’s immigration to Germany.”

Gerber’s eyes widened. “You can do that?”

“We can and we will, Professor, but you first have to agree to help us.”

“Well, of course, but I am not sure how helpful I can be.”

“I suspect you can be very helpful. You know the customs of the Middle East. You know the culture. What we need is insight. Insight that only one who is of the West but has grown up in this culture can give us.”

“I do not know any terrorists, Herr Hoffman.”

Hoffman smiled, “I did not expect you to. If you did, this would be a visit of a very different nature. We are not asking you to spy, Professor Gerber. We are asking you to help your country.”

Gerber pondered the offer.

Hoffman removed himself from the desk and stood upright. “So, we have a deal?” he asked matter-of-factly, extending his hand.

Gerber hesitated, then shook the offered hand. “I suppose we do, Herr Hoffman.”

With that, Hoffman turned and walked away. Little did the professor realize, but he had just bought his family’s safe passage for a price. He had traded his soul to the most private club in the world—the secret society of international espionage.