

German Short Stories of the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries
Ernst von Wildenbruch (1845-1909)

Archambauld

A Leaf from the Tree of Life

Arnavutköy – do any of those who read this know the place? One may advise those who do not know it: have a look there, it is worth your while.

It is situated on the broad, magnificent waterway which connects the Sea of Marmara and the Black Sea, on the Bosphorus, on the European side, halfway between the Golden Horn, the harbour of Istanbul in which the mosques are reflected with their minarets, and Terapia, where the ambassadors of the Great Powers had their summer residences and have them still today. Opposite the bank is the coast of Asia.

The coast of Asia – in the beginning, the sons of the Prussian Ambassador who lived with his family in Arnavutköy, still little boys at that time, had difficulty wrapping their heads around this: Asia – they had learned from their private tutor, was really a different continent – one must be able to tell by looking at a different continent that it *is* a different one, must one not – and now this Asia did not look the least bit different from the Europe in which they lived.

But from their private tutor, who was a rouser of young souls, they knew not only that the land over yonder was called Asia, but also what a dark shadow this Asia had once cast over Europe: he told them of the great Persian king, Darius, who had lived more than two thousand years

before and passed over the Bosphorus with an army of many hundreds of thousands of men to subjugate the peoples of Europe. Not far from Arnavutköy, somewhat more towards the Black Sea, is a spot where the Bosphorus narrows. Old watch-towers, built by some old sultan or other, stand there. The place is called Rumili-Hissar. He took them for walks there and told them that, when somebody builds a bridge over a body of water, he looks for where the water is narrowest, and so this was, without a doubt, the spot where King Darius once came over into Europe from Asia. Then it seemed to the boys, as they listened to his words and looked down at the sea, which no bridge lay over any longer, that the ancient things came to life again, that they heard the stamping of the innumerable steps which caused the bridge to bend, the snorting of the horses, the rattling of chariots; and the history of the world rose up before them like a colossal spectral figure.

But one day, when they came home from such a walk, they were to learn that the history of the world is no spectre but rather something alive, which lives on with people. It was like this: on that day, a visitor had come to their father, the Prussian Ambassador, a Russian general called Menshikov,¹ and they were brought into the room to him because he wanted to give them his hand. And when he had left the house, their mother took them to one side, and their mother's face, which was normally always cheerful like a spirited woman's, was now full of care, and she said: "There will be a war, a terrible one, between the Russians and the Turks,

¹ Prince Alexander Sergeyeovich Menshikov (1787-1869), Russian Commander-in-Chief during the Crimean War.

the English will come and the French, and they will fight with the Turks against the Russians.” And as she had told them, so did it come to pass, and now, for weeks and weeks, for months and months, the warships of the English and the French came, giant three-deckers, for there were not yet any iron ships in those days, up from the Sea of Marmara to sail to the Black Sea. And because the house of the boys’ parents lay directly on the shore of the sea, all the mighty vessels sailed directly past them. So there they stood and opened their eyes wide when they saw the ships shimmering and shining from the countless soldiers with whom they were filled, English soldiers in red coats, French ones in blue coats and red trousers, and when they saw the soldiers sitting on the decks of the ships and in the rope ladders up to the yards of the masts. And when they inquired whither all these men were going, the teacher opened the atlas for them, showed them a peninsula in the Black Sea, the Crimea, and a large Russian fortress on the peninsula, Sevastopol, and all these men were going there to beleaguer this fortress and take it by storm.

Now everybody knows that a siege requires not only men but also cannons and tools of all kinds. In order to manufacture these, workshops were thrown up at the rear of the departing troops in Constantinople and on the banks of the Bosphorus, and one such workshop for the French was very close to the house of the boys’ parents, in the village of Kurú-Tschesme situated beside Arnavutköy. At the head of this workshop were French officers, artillerymen and engineers, and among these, there was one who was an Alsatian by birth. Now these officers, polite and sociable as the French are, paid visits to the house of the Prussian Ambassador,

their neighbour, and were amiable fellows and always friendly to the boys. But when people began to realise that the Russians had no intention of giving Sevastopol up so lightly, but rather meant to defend it with blood and bone, and that the war was going to last a long, perhaps a very long time, then they had, those of them who were married, their families come from France to join them.

But only one of the officers was married, the Alsatian engineer, and after some time his wife arrived in Kurú-Tschesme and brought their boy with her. That was her and her husband's only child and he was called Archambauld.

Then shortly afterwards, the engineer's wife appeared with her boy and paid a visit to the Ambassador's house, and through this the boys made the acquaintance of Archambauld, a handsome, slim boy with dark, curly hair and large brown eyes, and learned that he was just the same age as them. At first, however, they were somewhat embarrassed on both sides, for Archambauld spoke mainly French, and a little German also, but not very well, while the boys spoke mainly German, and a little French also, but not very well. And so they limited themselves initially to showing him their toys, in particular their tin soldiers, of which they had many, and when Archambauld saw them his eyes shone, for he had few toys in general, but naturally almost none at all here in this distant foreign country. Then they played with him, arranging their tin soldiers as two opposing armies facing each other, and rolling paper bullets and walking to both sides of the table, each party behind one army, and shooting paper bullets at the other side. This gave all three of them – for there were two boys,

and with Archambauld there were three of them – great pleasure, and when Archambauld managed a successful throw which knocked over ever so many tin soldiers, he cried out loud in delight, “oh comme ils sont – tum-bled – est-ce qu’on dit comme cela?” (Oh, how they tum-bled – is that what you say?)

Then both of them laughed and said, “oui, oui, on dit comme cela.” (Yes, yes, that is what we say.)

Nevertheless, as stated before, they did not establish a close relationship with the little French boy because it was preferable and easier for them to associate with their German friends, the sons of a German merchant who lived with their parents in Bebék, the neighbouring village of Arnavutköy, on the other side of Kurú-Tschesme. They got together with them several times every week, whether they went to them in Bebék, or these boys visited them in Arnavutköy; and every time that the latter happened, they went out into the garden which lay behind the house, and then every conceivable game was played. You see, the garden was wonderful, it rose up in terraces on the banks, and these terraces were interconnected by stone steps. You could run and jump there. In addition, there were large trees in the garden, so you could climb. But the garden was loveliest right at the top, where it reached the crest of the hill and it changed into a kind of wilderness, a wilderness of oleander bushes and gorse bushes. Between the bushes were chestnut trees and pine trees. With the chestnuts one could have battles; the pine-cones you could roast on the fire, which you lit yourself with crackling gorse, and take the delicious kernels out and eat them. Oh yes, that was the life!

But now something singular and sad happened: the Alsatian engineer, Archambauld's father, departed this life quite suddenly one day. He had been a man in the prime of life, in perfect health; nobody had heard anything about him being sick – so whence his sudden death? His comrades, the French officers, looked pensive and spoke of the matter with an expression as if they wanted to say, "Do not talk about it too much." As it happened, the report gradually spread that the man had perished by his own hand. What had driven him to this was not ascertained and has not been to this day.

Now that was a heavy blow for his wife, who was now in the distant, foreign land as a widow with her boy, and her sole consolation in misfortune was having the wife of the Prussian Ambassador nearby, who took care of her as only a good, strong, clever woman can take care of a distressed fellow human.

"Just think," she said to her boys, "how sad poor Archambauld must be feeling. Now you will be very good and friendly to him as long as he remains here, won't you? – I am going to visit his mother today and you shall accompany me. Wouldn't you like to do a little something to please him and give him some of your toys?" – They then went into the room where their toy soldiers were and each boy took a box of them, of the finest ones, and put it in his pocket. And when they had come to Kurú-Tschesme with their mother, their mood became very solemn, for, the funeral having taken place only a short time before, the dwelling was still completely draped in black, and the widow sat in the dark drawing-room, dressed in black, and beside her stood Archambauld, also clad in black,

and because his pretty face was pale, one could see his brown eyes gleaming very darkly in it. Then the boys went up to him, and because they did not quite know, in their embarrassment, what they should say, they quickly reached into their pocket and fetched out their boxes with the tin soldiers, handed them to him, and said: "Poor Archambauld, we've brought you something." And when Archambauld had taken the lids off the boxes and caught sight of the handsome tin soldiers inside, which had pleased him so much at the time, a bright glow passed over his distressed face, he ran to his mother and showed her his treasures and said with elation, "oh Maman – ils m'en ont fait Cadeau!" (Oh Mama – they have given me these as a gift!)

Then he came up to the boys, shyly, but with beaming eyes, and reached out his hand and said: "oh that – be nice – that be very nice – oh merci! Merci bien!" (Thank you, many thanks!) And while he said this, his eyes became moist, and suddenly big tears were running down his cheeks, and then he threw himself at their breast, first the one, then the other, and embraced them and kissed them and said through sobs, "ah que Vous êtes bon! ah comme je Vous aime! ah comme je Vous aime!" (Oh, how good you are! how I love you! how I love you!)

But it made a quite curious impression on the boys, who were not at all used to such a thing, for with their German friends they shook hands but they did not kiss each other, when the handsome, dark-haired boy, who looked so completely different from those others, clasped them so passionately and affectionately in his arms and kissed them, and when they saw him crying so, they too were moved and began to cry likewise.

In the meantime, the widow had spoken with the boys' mother and told her that she would be returning to France with her boy, but that would not be for weeks yet, for she had first to break up the household she had established only a short while before, then she would, because she was poor and the journey was too expensive for her, wait for the French Government's dispatch boat, which sailed from France to the Crimea and then back to France every six to eight weeks, because she would have free passage on it. But it would be a long time yet before it next came back down from Sevastopol, the last one having gone to France very recently.

"So as long as Archambauld is still here," the Ambassador's wife thereupon said to her boys, "he can come to you, as often as he can, and play with you in the garden, can't he? And when you play with Ernst and Ferdinand" – those were the names of their little German friends from Bebék – "will Archambauld always be there as well?"

And because Archambauld, though he did not speak German very well, was yet able to understand it quite well, he had understood what the mother said to her boys and looked at them with expectant eyes, waiting for their reply. But the two of them, when they perceived his eyes fixed on them so anxiously, were again so moved by this that they both walked up to him at the same time with their hand held out and said, "poor Archambauld. Just you come as often as you want to." Then Archambauld, in spite of all his sorrow, shot up like a bolt which is slung from a coil spring, and clapped his hands in delight and ran to his mother and kissed her face, and then to the boys' mother and kissed her hands, "oh merci Madame, oh bien merci Madame!" (Oh, I thank you, Madam, I thank you

very much!), and then he came to the boys, leapt in between them and hooked his arms in theirs and hung in their arms, so that he hung between the two of them as in a swing, and swung and laughed and was happy, so that both the boys, who had never come across such effervescence before, also began to laugh and raised their arms higher so he could swing the better. And then, when they said goodbye, they came for their part, and went quite red with embarrassment while they kissed him for their part, and from the way in which he returned it, they realised that he was not only a handsome boy but also a dear, delightful fellow, and from then on they were good, good friends with Archambauld.

On the very next day he came, and then every other day at least, but frequently day after day, and when he appeared the first time and caught sight of the garden, which rose up with its terraces before his eyes, he was utterly dumbfounded and said, “mais que c’est beau! que c’est beau! que c’est beau!” (How beautiful it is! how beautiful! how beautiful!)

The boys let him stare in wonder for a time, for it made them proud that their parents’ garden pleased him so much, but then they said: “come now – we’ll go into the fig-tree.”

You see, there was a fig-tree in the garden, and this tree was as magnificent as anyone could imagine. To the two boys it appeared almost as if it were a person, a forbearing, generous, kind person, so patiently did he let himself be kicked when they climbed around in his branches, so plentifully did he donate his fruits at the time when the figs ripened, large green figs, from each of which, when the last moment had come, he hung a drop of honey, as if he would intimate: “You must pick now.” But more

than the figs, the two boys liked climbing, and Archambaud did likewise. So as soon as they reached the tree, it was up the tree with a “Hooray!”, the two boys first, with Archambaud coming after them, and there it could be seen, what was admittedly only to be expected with his slender limbs, that he was a capital climber. Then they sat there, right up in the top of the tree, all three of them, while the old tree murmured over their heads, and if they had understood, they would have heard him saying to them: “Love each other, little people, when humans grow up and become adults, the love between them ceases.”

Then later, when Ernst and Ferdinand came from Bebék, they were introduced to Archambaud, and then they all went up into the garden-wilderness together, and there was no end of playing up there among the gorse-bushes and oleander-bushes. All the games one could think of: Hide-and-Seek with a base, Cowboys and Indians, but, above all, the storming of Sevastopol. And in all these games, one of the most skilful was Archambaud. When he charged forward between the bushes, with streaming locks, he looked like a feathered arrow; when he came running up to storm Sevastopol, brandishing a gorse-bush or oleander-branch as a weapon, there was a fire in him that made him look like a hopping flame. And he was so amiable with it: when, in the heat of the battle, he hit one of his two friends – for he had formed a true friendship only with the two boys – rather roughly, he came up immediately afterwards and stroked him, “oh mais, cela n’a pas fait mal? n’est-ce pas? cela n’a pas fait mal?” (It didn’t hurt, did it? Isn’t that so? It didn’t hurt?)

Now one day, the parents of the two boys had devised a really

special amusement for them and their friends: they were to play at bivouac. On a lovely summer evening, a large tent was put up on the topmost terrace in the garden, where there were two tall pines and an old tamarind tree, straw was laid inside it, and they were to sleep in the tent that night. Now that was a delight for everyone, but for Archambauld in particular, in whom soldier's blood was stirring almost impetuously. Pieces of firewood were piled up beside the tent, and when it grew dark, they were lit. That was the watch-fire. In the ashes of the fire they roasted potatoes, which they ate so far as they were not burnt, and then everyone sat round in a circle, for the friends from Bebék had brought yet other friends with them, and drank a little mulled wine and talked.

In the conversation, which naturally centred on the war, it now came out that each one of the boys had sided with one of the warring peoples: this one was for the English, that one for the Russians, while this other one was for the French and that one for the Turks. One of them – but the others laughed at him – was even for the Tunisians, who had arrived on a Turkish ship of the line the previous day and had made a fearful impression with their big red caps and the wild brown faces underneath. Archambauld, who sat between his two friends, kept very quiet all the while – on whose side he stood, well, nobody even needed to ask. But the one who was for the Russians said that the Russians might be standing all alone now, but the Prussians would come and help them some time soon. When Archambauld heard this, his eyes opened wide, so that the fire was reflected in his brown eyes, and he laid his hands on the knees of his two friends and gently pinched them, as if he wanted to say, “Did you hear

that?" But one of the sons of the German merchant from Bebék replied, "No" – their father, who had his office in Istanbul, had come home this afternoon and told how it was now decided, and the Prussians would not help the Russians, but they would remain neutral. This was then confirmed by the boys, who had heard the same from their mother. When Archambauld heard that, he sighed with relief and placed his arms around his two friends and quietly said, "Ah que c'est bien! que c'est bien!" (Oh, that's good! that's good!)

But now, because the fire had burned down, everyone stood up. One of the boys, who had a drum, drummed something on it, that signified the tattoo, and then everybody went into the tent to sleep on the straw. Archambauld, of course, would not sleep anywhere else but with his two friends, and he so arranged it that he lay between them and slipped his arms under them and nestled in between them and up to them, and they really felt what an affectionate heart the boy had.

Later, when it began to be very quiet in the tent, because some had already gone to sleep, and the others were going to sleep, Archambauld began to whisper; from this, his friends realised that he had been lying awake thinking, and they woke up also. "Écoutez," (Listen!) he said very quietly, "I – when I have grown up – will make myself a soldier – you too?" To this they replied, they had heard that in Prussia everyone had to become a soldier.

After he had been silent a while, he spoke again: "But the French and the Prussians have never fought each other – isn't that so?"

The two boys really had to laugh at this, and they did so as quietly

as possible, because they had learned how little Archambauld knew about history, and they said, “But Archambauld, they certainly did, very much, don’t you know that?”

“But in future,” he went on, “they would never do it again, n’est-ce pas?” (would they?)

They replied to this that they hoped so too, for they liked the French very much, but one really could not know something like that. But then Archambauld, who had placed his arms under them, suddenly pulled them both towards him so that their faces lay by his face, and all of a sudden they felt that his cheeks were quite damp with tears, and heard him say, quietly sobbing, “ah que cela ne se fasse jamais! jamais! jamais!” (Oh, may that never, never happen!) And because they had absolutely no idea what they should say to that, they kept silent; Archambauld fell silent also, and shortly afterwards all three of them went to sleep.

But meanwhile, the time had now drawn near for Archambauld to leave with his mother. On the last day, they both came to Arnavutköy one more time to breakfast with the boys and their parents before departing: so Archambauld sat there for the last time between his two friends and spoke not a word and was very pale, and he held his friends’ hands in his.

Then they all boarded the Ambassador’s three-oared caique – that is the name for the rowing boats there – and sailed out, and they soon saw the French dispatch steamship coming down the Bosphorus. The steamship stopped to take on passengers. And now when the last moment had come, Archambauld embraced his two friends one more time and kissed them, and tears ran down both his cheeks and his voice broke because he

sobbed so.

“When we – will grow up – peut-être que nous reverrons” (we may see each other again). “We shall say – Arnavutköy – rien que ça, rien que ça” (nothing more, nothing more). “We shall know – everything – everything – everything!” Then he had to go up the steps which had been lowered from the ship with his mother; their luggage was handed up. Then the steamship got going again, and a little white flag waved from the ship’s deck, that was Archambauld waving farewell to his friends with his handkerchief, farewell.

Farewell – goodbye forever. It was not all that much longer before the sea which had carried Archambauld back to France also bore the boys home to Germany. And then there came life, that hard old schoolmaster, and he took out his exercises, the first and hardest of which is known to be: forget that one has been a child. Then the old house in Arnavutköy sank away, and the garden with its terraces and its lovely gorse and oleander wilderness, the large, generous fig-tree – all became a dream, and the dream became dimmer and dimmer.

New people came, new faces rose up, while other, old, dear faces went down, and among these was the one whose extinction man does not overcome, because, when it passes away, the sacred person goes out of his life, the countenance of his mother. Did Archambauld hear anything about the death of the woman who had been so kind to him also? No news came from there, no news went there – nobody heard anything about him and his mother in distant France, so his face also became a fading childhood dream and went under with all the others. –

But after all of this, almost two decades afterwards, the history of the world rose to speak again, to show everyone who may have believed she had become a wraith that she was a terribly alive being. Again, as at that time, the French were in the field, but not, as formerly, against the Russians, but against the Germans, and against the Prussians above all. So what Archambault had implored in the bivouac tent that night had not done any good: “Ah que cela ne se fasse jamais!” (Oh, may that never happen!)

And whereas they had assaulted Sevastopol and the Malakoff redoubt in those days, the French were today, on the 18th of August 1870, entrenched and barricaded on the hills of Metz, in Saint Privat,² and letting the Prussians charge at them.

On the treeless plain which the attackers had to run up, machine-gun and chassepot bullets rattled. It was as if an iron wall were whooshing over from the heights which took your breath away before it crushed you. And as soon as one such wall had swept past, a second one came, and a third, without end. You saw nothing of them, you just heard how they, howling, hissing, whistling, pushed the air ahead of them. Then you heard bullets striking human limbs with a thud, abominable screams, bodies crashing down and slamming against the ground. And all this for hours, without a pause, without a rest to catch your breath, on and on, all the time of a long, endlessly long, summer afternoon. Until at last, in spite of everything, the terrible nest from which the leaden birds of death came

² Also known as the Battle of Gravelotte. It was won by the Prussians but at the loss of over 20,000 men.

flying, Saint Privat, was reached and the Prussians, as many of them as were still alive, stormed their way in.

The last French soldiers were in the walled-in churchyard, and when the faces of the Prussians, covered in blood and sweat, appeared over the wall, and the Prussians began to climb over the wall, they turned their rifle butts upwards – “Surrender! Surrender!”

An officer came at the head of the Prussians; he was still a young man, his coat torn by bullets, but he himself unwounded. On the other side, not far from the wall, leaning against a grave-cross, sat the officer who had commanded the French, also still a young man; his face was deathly pale, an old sergeant stood beside him and pressed his handkerchief to his breast, from which blood was pouring out.

And now something remarkable took place:

While attacker and defender, victor and vanquished faced each other for a moment, silent, panting, the Prussian officer walked over to the young Frenchman who did not see him coming because he had closed his eyes, and indeed seemed not to hear or see anything more of all that was happening, because he was wrestling with death. Like someone who wonders, “Is it he?” the Prussian looked into the other’s face, then he bent over him and said one word to him. And when the Frenchman seemed not to have heard it, he repeated the word very loudly, as loudly as he could, and it was a word that neither his men nor those of the dying man understood, because it was not German and was not French – “Arnavutköy!”

When the dying man heard this word, he opened his eyes, large,

brown, handsome eyes, and an expression passed over his pale face like a questioning amazement, like a last, increasingly fuzzy earthly thought. He turned his eyes to the Prussian, his lips moved as if he would say something, but he could no longer speak. He let his head fall so it lay on the other's breast, and the young Frenchman died in the young Prussian's arms.

All of this was so astonishing to see that both parties, Prussians and French, stood as if spellbound. For a moment there was silent peace over the bloody place, as if a murmuring had come – nobody could have said where from – almost like the murmuring of a tree from the far, far distance, as if a voice had spoken – nobody could have said who was speaking – “Love each other, people; people, love one another.”