

Lise Meitner Leaves Berlin

Born into a Viennese Jewish family, physicist Lise Meitner helped to discover nuclear fission in Germany before fleeing the country in 1938.

I'm taking off my lab coat
for the last time.
Each piece of apparatus stands in place:
cloud chamber, electrometer,
a web of wires to trap lightning.

Today I'm saying goodbye
to Frau Professor,
the Jewess with the worthless brain.
Tomorrow I'll leave my flat
with nothing but a jacket,
an address in Holland
I might never find.

For too long, Otto, I've worn the white
of this sanctuary for science,
possessed, like you, by the prize,
my head filled with atoms.
Do we know, even now,
what demons' eyes we've lit?

One neutron and a chain reaction,
one word to turn a crowd
and shatter the world.

When I could take the tram home
I'd see young women in the Tiergarten
pushing prams,
boys chasing round trees
waving wooden guns,
girls with ropes,
men reading newspapers.
Even then I could guess the headlines.

They say Vienna waltzed after the Anschluss.
Everywhere people are dancing
to the music of broken glass.

I'm saying good night, Otto.

My lab coat hangs lifeless
behind the door,
notes on my workbench
a muddled epitaph,
the electrometer's needle
back to zero.

VICTOR TAPNER