# If the War Continues

Ever since I was young, I used to disappear from time to time to reinvigorate myself, and I would lose myself in other worlds. People would search for me, and when they could not find me, they would report me as missing. Then after I returned, it was always a pleasure for me to hear the conclusions that so-called scientists would invent to explain who I was and the conditions of my absence or twilight existence. While I did nothing but what came naturally to me and what most people will be able to do sooner or later, I was regarded as a kind of phenomenon by these peculiar men—as a possessed person by one of them, and as a blessed person with miraculous powers by others.

To be brief, I had been away again for a while. After two years

of war, the present had lost much of its charm for me, and I disappeared for a while in order to breathe some other air. In my customary way I left the realm in which we live and was a guest in distant parts for a long time, speeding through people and eras, and I became unhappy because I saw nothing but the usual tribulations, trade, progress, and improvements on the earth. Then I withdrew into the cosmic spheres for some time.

When I returned, it was 1920, and I was disappointed to find that people were still at war with each other all over the globe, and that there was still the same senselessness and obstinance. Some of the borders of countries had shifted; some select regions with ancient high cultures had been carefully destroyed, but all in all nothing much had changed on the surface of things.

Of course, great progress had indeed been made in the cause of equality in the world. At least in Europe, so I heard, the prospects were the same for everyone in all countries. Even the differences between the belligerent nations and the neutral ones had almost completely vanished. Ever since they began shooting the civilian population mechanically from air balloons that were fifteen to twenty thousand meters high in the sky and let their shots fall as they moved, ever since this time the borders of countries, although sharply guarded as before, had become somewhat illusory. The scattering of these random shots from the air was so great that the dispatchers of these balloons were satisfied if they could just keep the bombs from hitting their own territory. They no longer cared how many of their bombs fell on neutral countries or ultimately even on the territory of their allies.

This was actually the only progress that the institution of war itself had made. To a certain degree, the meaning of the war had

finally been given its clearest expression by this random bombing. The world had been divided into two parts that sought to annihilate each other because they both desired the same thing, namely the liberation of the oppressed, the elimination of violence, and the establishment of permanent peace. Everyone was prejudiced against a peace that could not possibly last eternally—if eternal peace could not be obtained, then one certainly preferred eternal war, and the negligent manner in which the balloons with explosives let their blessings fall on just and unjust people from enormous heights fit the meaning of this war exactly. Aside from this, the war continued to be waged in the old way with significant but inadequate means. The limited imagination of the generals and the technicians had led to the invention of a few more weapons of annihilation. However, the visionary who had conceived the mechanical balloon that sprayed bombs had been the last of his kind. Since then, the intellectuals, the visionaries, the poets, and the dreamers had gradually lost interest in the war. The war was left up to the generals and the technicians and thus made little progress. The armies were to be found everywhere and confronted each other with tremendous perseverance, and although the lack of materials had long since led to awarding military medals that were made only out of paper, there was no sign anywhere that the bravery of the soldiers had abated.

I found my apartment partially destroyed by bombs from some planes, but I was able to sleep there even though it was cold and uncomfortable. Later the rubble on the floor and the damp mold on the walls disturbed me, and I left to take a walk.

I went through some streets of the city that had changed a great deal from the way they were before. I was struck most by the fact that there were no shops to be seen. The streets were without life. I had

walked but a short time when I met a man with a tin number on his hat, and he asked me what I was doing. I told him I was taking a walk.

His response: "Do you have permission?"

I did not understand him. We exchanged words, and he demanded that I follow him to the nearest precinct.

We came to a street lined with buildings that all had white door plates hanging on them, designating the offices with numbers and letters.

"Unemployed Civilians" was stamped on a door plate, and the number 2487B4. That was where we entered. The usual offices, waiting rooms, and corridors smelled of paper, damp clothes, and stuffy air. After some questioning, I was taken to room 72D and interrogated there.

An official stood before me and examined me. "Can't you stand straight?" he asked severely. I said no. He asked: "Why not?" "I never learned how to do it," I responded coyly.

"So then, you were arrested as you were taking a walk without a certificate of permission. Do you admit this?"

"Yes," I said. "That's correct. I didn't know it was necessary. You see, I had been sick for a long time—"

He waved his hand. "You must be punished, and for the next three days you'll be prohibited from walking in shoes. Take off your shoes!"

I took off my shoes.

"My God!" the official exclaimed with horror. "My God, you're wearing leather shoes! Where did you get them? Are you completely crazy?"

"Perhaps I'm not absolutely normal. I'm not exactly the best judge of this. I bought the shoes some time ago."

"You know that the wearing of leather in any form whatsoever by civilians is strictly forbidden. Your shoes will stay here. They will be confiscated. Now show me your identification papers!"

Dear Lord, I didn't have any.

"I've not experienced anything like this for at least a year!" The official sighed and called for a policeman. "Bring this man into office 194, room 8."

I was forced to walk barefoot through some streets. Then we entered another administration building and went through corridors, breathing the smell of paper and hopelessness. I was pushed into a room and was interrogated by another official, who was wearing a uniform.

"You were found on the street without identification papers, so I must fine you two thousand guilders. I'll write the receipt for you right away."

"Forgive me," I said timidly. "I don't have that much with me. Couldn't you lock me up for a while instead of fining me?"

He laughed loudly.

"Lock you up? My dear man, how can you think something like that? Do you think that we'd like to feed you, in addition to all this? No, my good man, if you cannot pay this small amount, you will be given the hardest punishment of all. I'll have to demand the provisional deprivation of your license to exist. Please give me your license-to-exist card!"

I had none.

Now the official was completely speechless. He called for two colleagues, whispered to them for a long time, and pointed to me frequently. They all regarded me with fear and great astonishment. Then he had me taken to a jail until my case could be fully discussed.

Many people were standing and sitting there. A soldier stood on guard in front of the door. It struck me that, despite my lack of shoes, I was by far the best-dressed person in the cell, and the others were somewhat in awe of me. So they made room to let me sit down, and immediately a small, shy man pressed up next to me, leaned over carefully, and whispered into my ear, "Listen, I'll make you a fabulous deal. I have a sugar beet at home! A perfectly good sugar beet! It weighs almost six pounds. You can have it. But what will you offer me in return?"

He leaned over and put his ear close to my lips, and I whispered, "Make me an offer yourself! How much do you want to have?"

"Let's say a hundred and fifteen guilders!" he answered.

I shook my head and became absorbed in my thoughts.

I saw I had been away too long. It was difficult to accustom myself to this life again. I would have given a great deal for a pair of shoes or socks, for my bare feet were terribly cold, and I had been forced to walk through wet streets. But there was nobody in the room who was not barefoot.

After some hours had passed, they came for me. I was led into office number 285, room 19F. This time the policeman remained with me. He positioned himself between me and his superior, who seemed to me to be a very high official.

"You've managed to get yourself into quite a bad predicament," he began. "You're here in this city and living without a license to exist. I'm sure you know that this calls for the most severe punishment."

I made a slight bow.

"If you'll permit me," I said, "I have just one request to make of you. I completely agree that I can't handle this situation, and that my predicament is bound to become worse. So would it be possible for you to sentence me to death? I'd appreciate that very much!"

The high official gave me a mild look.

"I understand why you're saying this," he said gently. "But if I granted it, then everyone could eventually come with such a request. In any event, you'd have to buy a death card. Do you have the money for it? It costs four thousand guilders."

"No, I don't have that much. But I'd give all that I have. I have a great longing to die."

He smiled strangely.

"I believe you. You're not the only one. But it's not so easy to die. You're a citizen of a state and are obligated to this state with body and soul. I'm sure you know this. By the way—I see that you've registered yourself as Emil Sinclair. Are you the writer Sinclair?"

"Yes, I am."

"Oh, I'm very pleased. I hope I can be of service to you. Officer, you may leave now."

The policeman left, and the official offered me his hand.

"I've read your books with great interest," he said courteously, "and I'll try to help you as much as I possibly can. But tell me, dear God, how did you manage to get yourself into this terrible predicament?"

"Well, I was away for a long time. I had taken flight into the cosmos for a while. It may have been two or three years, and quite frankly I had hoped that the war would come to an end in the meantime, more or less. But tell me, can't you obtain a death card for me? I'd be extremely grateful."

"Perhaps I can manage it. But before I can arrange anything, you must have a license to live. Without it, any step I took would be hopeless. I'll give you a letter of recommendation for office 127.

With my guarantee you'll at least be able to obtain a provisional license to live. Of course it's only valid for two days."

"Oh, that's more than enough time!"

"Very well! After you have it, come back to me."

I shook hands with him.

"One more thing," I said quietly. "May I ask you another question? You can imagine how badly informed I am about current events."

"Please, please."

"Well then, I'd be interested most of all in knowing how it is possible that life can go on at all under these circumstances. How can the people put up with all of this?"

"Well now," he responded, "you're in a particularly bad situation as a civilian and entirely without papers! There are very few civilians left. Whoever is not a soldier is a civil servant. This makes life more bearable for most people. Many are even very happy. And they have gradually become accustomed to the deprivation. When we gradually had to give up potatoes and become accustomed to wood pulp—it's lightly charred, which makes it rather tasty—everyone thought that we would never be able to bear this. And now it's worked out well. And that's the way it is with everything."

"I understand," I said. "It's actually no longer astonishing. But there is something I don't entirely understand. Tell me, why is the whole world actually exerting such tremendous energy this way? These deprivations, these laws, these offices and officials—what is it actually that people are protecting and maintaining with all of this?"

The gentleman looked at me with astonishment.

"That is some question!" he exclaimed, and shook his head. "You know, don't you, that there is a war, war all over the world! And

that's what we are maintaining. It is war. Without these enormous efforts and accomplishments, the armies could not remain in the battlefields one week more. They would starve—they would not be able to endure."

"Yes," I said, "that's certainly food for thought! So war is the good thing that is being maintained by all these sacrifices! Yes, but—permit me to ask a strange question—why do you place such high value on war? Is it really worth all this? Is war really a good thing at all?"

The official shrugged sympathetically. He saw that I did not understand him.

"My dear Mr. Sinclair," he said, "you've become very ignorant of the ways of the world. But please, just go through one street. Speak with the people. Just make a little effort to think and ask yourself: What else is left? What is it that constitutes our life? Then you will immediately have to say: War is the only thing that we still have! Pleasure and personal gain, social ambition, greed, love, intellectual work—all this no longer exists. War is the one and only activity for which we are grateful. It still gives us something like order, law, thought, and spirit in the world. Can you grasp this?"

Yes, now I understood, and I thanked the gentleman very much.

Then I left his room and mechanically stuck the letter of recommendation for office 127 into my pocket. I did not intend to make use of it. Nothing now was so important that I had to bother another one of those officials. And before I could be noticed again and taken to task, I spoke to the tiny blessed star within me, shut off my heartbeat, made my body disappear into the shadow of a bush, and continued my previous voyage without thinking about returning home ever again.