A scenic view of a railway track winding through a valley. The tracks are in the foreground, leading the eye into the distance. The valley is filled with green trees and shrubs. In the background, there are large, rugged mountains under a clear blue sky. The overall atmosphere is peaceful and scenic.

Peter de Chamier

**OCCIDENT
EXPRESS**

Peter de Chamier

Occident Express



TWIN TREE™

Occident Express

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Important Note

This novel is set in 2006, and was written in the course of the following years. The reader should see people and story from that time perspective and not in hindsight. The historical mantle of this book follows historical facts; the plot itself and its possible implications are fictitious. In other words, this book is a work of fiction; the story is in essence a fantasy. The characters are products of the author's imagination. The author has exercised a novelist's right in taking a few necessary liberties with the weather at certain times and places, modern history, and the staff structures of the civil services and armed forces of different countries. Nobody in this story is based upon an actual person; and, hopefully, the administrative bodies in today's Germany and elsewhere are staffed by people different from those described herein.

Honi soit qui mal y pense.

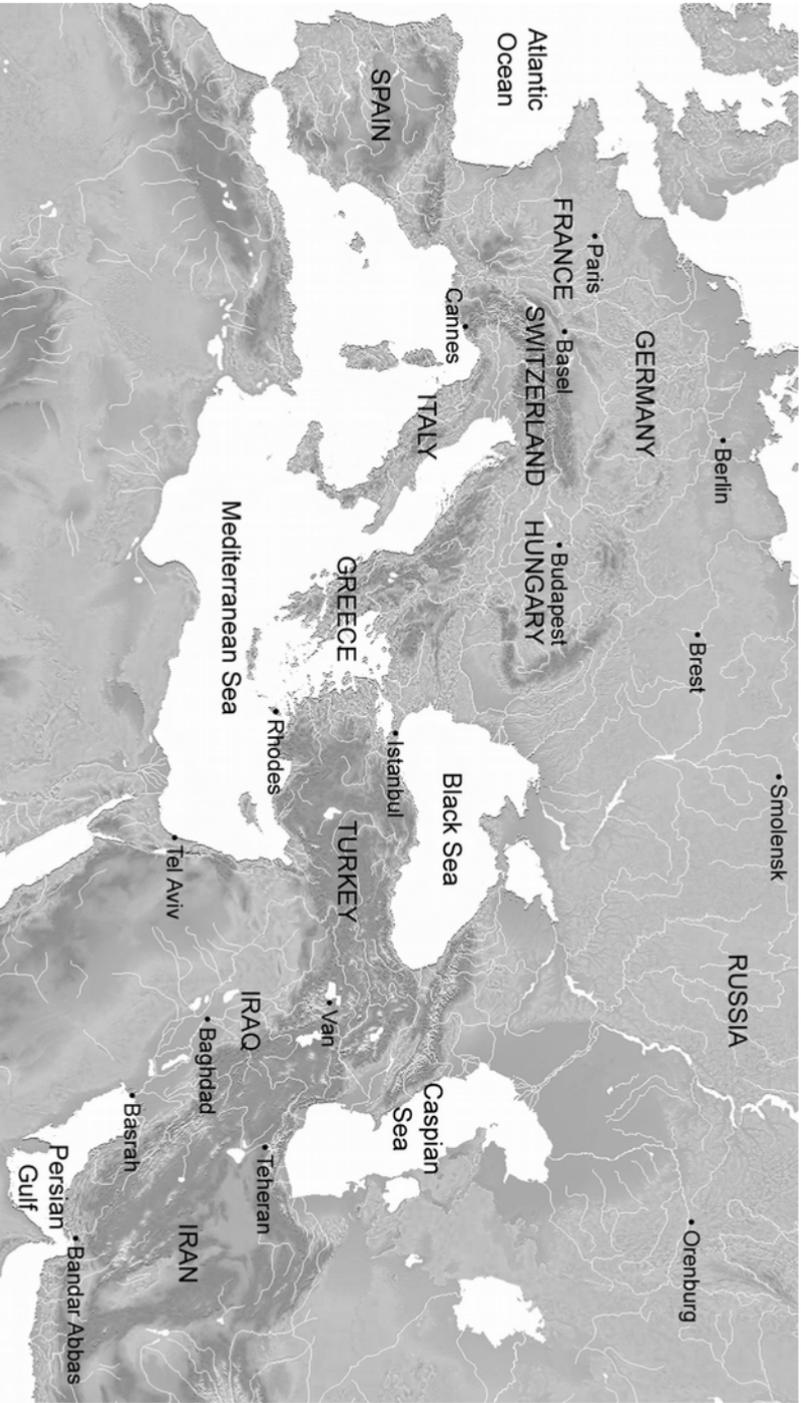
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Atlantic Ocean

SPAIN

FRANCE

• Paris

GERMANY

• Berlin

SWITZERLAND

• Basel

ITALY

• Cannes

HUNGARY

• Budapest

Mediterranean Sea

GREECE

• Rhodes

Black Sea

• Istanbul

TURKEY

• Smolensk

RUSSIA

• Tel Aviv

IRAQ

• Van

Caspian Sea

• Orenburg

• Baghdad

• Basrah

IRAN

• Teheran

Persian Gulf
• Bandar Abbas

Some Words in Advance

So many intelligent persons misinterpret the novelist's trade
that I feel I must explain that not only are
all the characters and events in this story imaginary,
but that the narrator is too and that his creator does not always
share his views or commend his conduct.

Bruce Marshall. Foreword. *The Divided Lady*. London 1960.

I hate things all fiction ...
there should always be some foundation of fact for the most airy fabric –
and pure invention is but the talent of a liar.

Lord Byron in a letter to his publisher John Murray — London 1817.

Προαρεῖσθαί τε δεῖ ἀδύνατα εἰκότα μᾶλλον ἢ δυνατὰ ἀπίθανα.
Probable impossibilities are preferable to improbable possibilities.

Aristotele. *Poetics*. 1460A; c. 335 BC.

Abbreviations

BFI	Bundesfinanzinspektion – (German) Federal Finance Inspection Services (<i>fictional</i>), part of the Federal Ministry of Finance.
BKA	Bundeskriminalamt – (German) Federal Office of Criminal Investigation.
BND	Bundesnachrichtendienst – (German) Federal Intelligence Service.
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency (U.S.A.).
DAK	ДАК Бизнес DAK Business – Russian multinational company (<i>fictional</i>).
FHO	Fremde Heere Ost (Foreign Armies East); military intelligence organization of the High Command of the German Army during World War II. The BND is its global successor organization.
FIU	Financial Intelligence Unit, Germany – Central Office for Suspicious Transaction Reports (money laundering).
FSB	Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation – Федеральная служба безопасности Российской Федерации.
GDR	German Democratic Republic – official name of East Germany between 1949 and 1989.
InAsRa	International Association of Railroads (<i>fictional</i>).
MBA	Master of Business Administration.
MfS	Ministerium für Staatssicherheit – (former East German) Ministry of State Security; also known as <i>Stasi</i> .
NSR	New Silent Relief (<i>fictional</i>) – a relief organization for arrested, condemned and fugitive former members of the Stasi and the East German communist party.
NSH	Neue Stille Hilfe (<i>fictional</i>) → NSR.
OdeSSA	Organization of the former members of the SS – a purported umbrella relief organization for arrested, condemned and fugitive former members of the Nazi SS paramilitary group.
SVR RF	Foreign Intelligence Service of the Russian Federation – Служба внешней разведки Российской Федерации.



Prologue

Errors, like straws, upon the surface flow;
He who would search for pearls must dive below.

John Dryden (1631-1700). *All for Love*. Prologue.

The woman went first. She was sitting near the outer edge of the yacht's gunwale and wore a snug black wet suit with two breathing gas cylinders on her back. She checked her equipment a last time, ensuring that everything was working properly, put the mouthpiece into her mouth, inhaled twice.

That done, she looked up, and one of the two male divers standing on deck nodded. She pushed her chin down on her chest so that she wouldn't hit the tank valve and pressed her feet and knees together. Then she leaned backward and let her body gently roll into the water. She was swimming nicely. Looking up to the boat she pounded her fist twice on her head indicating that she was all right and ready to dive.

The two male divers looked at each other, stepped onto the gunwale and made a giant step into the water. One of them took the lead, the woman followed, the second man brought up the rear. They went down the side of the cliff and went straight to a huge limestone slab that must have broken loose from the cliff centuries ago forming a several meters thick roof on dozens of huge rocks. It was covered by a carpet of high green seaweed swaying silently in the current of the foot of the cliff.

Invisible from above, there was a hole under the slab, perhaps a meter in diameter. The men knew exactly where it was. It was clear that they had scouted it out before. The first man entered it slowly and cautiously, waiting for the woman to follow. Very carefully she slid into it.

Meanwhile the first diver had arrived in a pitch dark underwater cavern and switched on his diving torch. For the two others he was now a black floating shadow. He slowly moved on, following plastic arrowhead markers hooked onto a white cave line on the wall, apparently fixed there not too long ago. The others switched on their lights too.

Very slowly, kicking their fins only slightly, they proceeded without stirring up the silt on the bottom of the cavern. Soon they reached its end and continued in a small tunnel for some two hundred meters. Once the first diver's breathing cylinder touched the ceiling and he got stuck. He bent and shook a little bit, some pebbles fell from the ceiling and he freed himself.

The tunnel ended in a water-filled cave. Filtered sunlight fell in through a narrow crack. They pushed through it and were in the middle of a cliff some ten meters below the surface.

A fourth diver, sitting on an underwater scooter appeared from the sandy ground. They couldn't see his relieved smile, but he lifted his hands above his head as a welcome. Then he gave a tow leash clipped to his scooter to the woman and started pulling her slowly, then faster, out to the open sea where a small ship was anchored. The other two divers watched them disappear and returned into the mountain.

Greek Tragedy
Early May 2006



Dies Iræ

Dies iræ! Dies illa · Solvet sæclum in favilla.

The day of wrath, that day · Will dissolve the world in ashes.

Thomas of Celano (1200–1265). Part of the Office of the Dead.

Yesterday my wife drowned. It was another beautiful and sunny Greek island morning. Every day she had gone snorkeling some kilometers away by the cliffs with the underwater slopes covered with green algae and the deep black water, a place of weedy patches full of fish.

When snorkeling, she went alone or with me; but scuba diving was one of her unfulfilled dreams; thus, the two French sailors who were the crew of our chartered sailing yacht had taken her with them for her first scuba dive by the cliff. They were expert divers.

As always, we anchored out there. I stayed on board. Down by the bottom of the cliff the two men saw her being taken away by the strong current and disappear in the darkness. They remained down in the water for quite a while and tried to follow and save her, but in vain.

After an hour they surfaced, crestfallen and forlorn of all hope.

My wife is dead!

A rescue team from the island couldn't recover her body; she remained lost in the deep, perhaps pulled into one of the interconnected underwater caverns, they supposed; she might never be found. The people who live here had warned us; they knew of fish-

ermen who had fallen overboard and disappeared without a trace: “There is a monster in the deep.”

In the evening I called my parents-in-law; they live in Berlin. I told them what had happened, and could hear the desperation in their voices. I told them that I would stay here and wait to see if my wife would be found – and that I wanted to stay here alone.

Despite the circumstances and the suddenness of the dreadful message they said that they understood me – they are good parents-in-law.

This morning, the locals arranged a memorial service in the small chapel of the island's cemetery – granting a foreigner benevolently a place in their hearts, without further ado. Their hospitality reached beyond death.

Cemeteries on the Greek islands smell differently from those in the north, of rosemary growing wild, thyme, marjoram, lavender, and – on this island – of sympathies; not of wet soil, drizzling rain, sanctimoniousness, and graveyard administration.

I still have the scent of those dry herbs in my nose; everything else is hazy, blurred by tears – the small compassionate mourning congregation, the old woman who led my way, the abbot from the monastery on top of the mountain, the mayor who propped me up, our new Russian friend from the huge white motor yacht lying at a mooring just outside the harbor who touched me gently and gave me a sad smile of compassion when we left the small chapel.

Here I sit on the deck in between the two masts in front of the cockpit, as on so many evenings before, my back to the pier; a glass of ouzo next to me on a little folding table.

We wanted to grow old together; I would leave before her – according to all calculations of statistics. However, in the meantime we wanted to enjoy the decades ahead, make friends like us or at least resembling us; hopefully we would only suffer and weep a little; but enjoy the little things of life, be glad. You live and learn, and I had learnt from my bad experiences of the past years.

The boat is empty without her: I see her, but it's only a mental reflection. My life is crushed. Within a day my dreamy Arcadia was destroyed, our personal sheltered paradise – *et in Arcadia ego*. We had talked about *carpe diem* – during the time given to us. The fu-

ture looked comfortably sunny making one repress invisible grim clouds beyond the horizon.

We had given up our apartment when a friend in Berlin had proposed the charter. He knew somebody on Cyprus and arranged it. "Santa Claus" was a beautiful and well maintained schooner, a two-mast motorsailor, built in Finland before the Second World War, forty years older than we were. It was close to fifty feet long with mahogany planking and a teak deck and had three cabins with six berths. It could be managed easily by just two people – but we had Roland and Serge from France, to take care of sailing – and, sometimes, cooking. We helped, but also enjoyed our days.

My wife and I had liked Roland and Serge at first sight when we picked up the boat in Cyprus and met them. Both were muscular, small men, most likely in their late thirties. Roland had blueish eyes and a wide, flat nose. He was from the central or northern parts of France, white-skinned though suntanned. Serge was a southern type, dark olive with brown eyes. Both were cordial and warm, and we soon talked about our travels and lives. They always wanted to come to this region to sail and dive, and make a living out of it.

The evening calm has arrived. Still, the scent of pine resin wafts from the copse by the shore. Its parasol pines stretch up the hill. My eyes follow the grove and pass over to the walls around the cemetery. We have often talked about it; how comforting and reassuring its looks were: soothing, free of pain, eternal. We said how nice it would be buried in this cemetery, with its views to the south across the vastness of the sea.

Her death has defiled this peaceful innocence, because she should live, I want her to live. Why is she dead?

I know that neither Roland and Serge nor I were to blame. It was an accident. But I feel guilty though helpless in the aftermath. I should not have let her diving in these waters.

In the calm of the sunset, the blue-white Greek flag hangs limp and lifeless on the starboard spreader of the forward mast.

The sun's glowing orb is about to sink into the western sea. The harbor lies on the lee side of this small island north of Rhodes; we are well protected from the brutal meltemi – winds, which rage over the Aegean Sea, thundering year after year during the sum-

mers since time immemorial. The waves on our side of the island rather ripple in the wind; on the other side, in the north, the storm rages day in, day out for weeks, the waves are high, short, mercilessly slamming and pay no attention to the calm blue sunny sky.

The port in its small bay behind the mountain range drew us into its protection and attracted us; we entered.

The plane trees at the end of the long quay were enchanting and backed the decision; tree-lined places are rare on the Greek islands. Troughs of red, orange and pink oleander and hibiscus interrupted the dazzling whiteness of the houses – small and picturesque.

"*Là, tout n'est qu'ordre et beauté, luxe, calme et volupté,*" Roland said when he saw the harbor, standing barefoot on the mahogany deck.

I looked at him. He translated although I had understood.

"There, there is nothing but order and beauty, splendor, peace and pleasure: Baudelaire, my dear, Baudelaire. Perhaps no particular splendor and certainly not *volupté* in the sense of lust – but here we are protected from rough seas and seasickness. We can move on when the summer storms subside – or whenever we are done here, whatever comes first."

A handful of foreign sailing yachts and local caiques moored at the quay, the latter plump, colorful wooden vessels rigged for sail, but with an engine; behind them, on the bulwark of huge carved stones, a few *kafeneions*, restaurants and shops cowered into the protective mountain slope like backdrops for an adventure film, next to them a lonely general store selling everything from bread to tomatoes to tools and hemp ropes.

"The coast and country store of life," I commented once – and it stuck: Papadopoulos, the coast-and-country trader.

On the south-side of the harbor, a huge white mega yacht moored at the wharf. It dominated the small harbor, flying the white-blue-red Russian flag. We were invited to take a look at it one day after we had met the owner at the coast-and-country trader's. But first he wanted to visit us, if possible immediately.

I guess he would have preferred to travel on a small wooden boat like ours.

His name was Rejngold Gustavovitch Nejgauz, usually called Daktari by his employees, as he explained to us. He was a Russian entrepreneur, chairman of DAK Business, art collector and one of

the not well-known Russian oligarchs, as we found out later. He didn't have anything Slavik about him, but inconspicuous Central or Northern European looks, dark hair flecked with a beginning gray, and was a lovable character, full of humor, smooth, uncomplicated, warm and friendly.

Throughout the day we were part of the theater of promenade, boats, sea, fishermen and tourists. The fishermen sat in the cafés with their small round tables, men only, the tourists behind the blue and white checkered tablecloths of the restaurants, men and women.

Hardly anyone from one group spoke with anyone from the other, and if so, then a tourist woman with one of the fishermen.

The fishermen let their *koboloi*, their worry beads, glide dozily through their fingers, pearl by pearl or even two pearls, by pairs; the tourists, quiet shadows of life, stoically tried to look non-touristic – socially alert travelers from the superior north, who find nothing to get worked up about.

Everything is tidy, perhaps a little poor but clean, dazzlingly white painted by the women of the island in spring. Snobbish dress fashions and electronic toys of the passing foreigners make no impression on the locals.

Who is superior to whom?

They measure each other only from the corner of their eyes, otherwise the glances remain at their own tables or go nonchalantly straight ahead to ships and the sea.

We sat in the auditorium and looked at the stage – not conceited, but rather thoughtful, self-reflecting. The fishermen remained the same, we bought fish and seafood from them; the foreigners moved on. We were tourists too, on the tour – yes, but where to? In reality we didn't want to find out, it was an unspoken taboo.

Now I knew.

It didn't stop at a glass of ouzo, I emptied the bottle; it wasn't full at the beginning, but still recently opened – and I drank a lot of water. Then I took myself to bed.

Her smell was in the pillows.

The next morning I woke up at daybreak – the mountains in the east covered the rising sun, but dawn's rosy fingers reached behind them into the sky, then touched the mountain peaks as in the verses of the Odyssey. I am not a cunning Odysseus, although like him I

have seen many people's cities and learned their customs and languages.

What use is that to me now?

Aimlessly I dawdled around the deserted promenade. The cafés were closed. Then I came to a decision and got the leather rucksack we used for our hikes, two bottles of water, some cookies, and set off.

The footpath meandered between the olive trees to the north, up the mountain. The terrain was rough and the olive groves seemed endless, hiding my goal on the peak – it was not open country. Glistening morning dew accompanied me the first hour of my march through reddish rock roses, blue periwinkle, and yellow gorse. Their sparse beauty stood against dry barrenness. Occasionally a light breeze carried a warm air filled with the scent of thyme, myrtle bushes, sage, rosemary and oregano and the sound of the humming of bees.

The slopes were streaked with stone terraces, cultivated with vegetables and corn – the olives were still green and small, the figs ripe, the vines would soon follow, the grapes were already bursting, full of sweet juice. Occasionally the desire overwhelmed me, I tore off a bunch and ate it, slowly, one grape after the other. It is not theft; the Bible says the wayfarer may take a handful of grapes.

When I left the shade of the olive trees, the heat hit me. The air became redolent with the scent of sage and thyme. Once I looked back, down to the harbor. The sea was blue as flowering flax.

Our Russian friend stood on the deck of his yacht and seemed to gaze after me with a pair of binoculars. I waved my arm.

I reached the ridge before the heat of the day got worse and followed it further up. My shadow was getting shorter and shorter.

A thin monk in a dark frock awaited me at the end of the path with a jug of cool water and a tumbler – he must have followed my slow and arduous ascent from the monastery.

The monastery was centuries old, not very big; six cypresses shielded the forecourt of the chapel in the middle of the buildings. The monks had planted a fig tree and an orange tree into their circle, a thick pair in the middle of the six serious, slender trees, like a fertile couple of farmers who have fallen among emaciated but upright monks. A stone bench stood in between, in the shade, a large round stone table in front of it.

From the height of the mountain ridge a magnificent view opened up to me, an amphitheatric semicircle, opened to the south and descending, filled by thousands upon thousands of green-gray-silverish olive trees, in between the bronze summer colors of withered-yellow grass and bushes and the brown tones of the rocks and the earth, dark blue water and a light blue sky running blurred into the sea.

Down by the sea, the village appears like heaps of white lumps of sugar. Far in the distance the neighboring islands swim in the haze.

There is silence in the heat of noon; or no silence at all – the wind rushes, slightly modulated, monotonous and incessant; the cicadas sing and insects buzz past.

I stayed with the monks; they had sent someone down to the village to inform the French crew that they should take care of the boat. The pain of mourning ate me. They understood it and protected me through their presence, their quiet attention, taking care that I had to eat and drink, and gave me an empty cell with clean sheets and a pillowcase on a hard wooden bed.

I spent the days in the chapel and at the stone table in front of it, eating in the community of the handful of monks and re-building my life – taking it apart stone by stone and then putting it together again. I needed two days to venture out of myself and let my life run before my inner eyes.

I looked at the olive trees. They were so old, small, stocky; decades had passed them as months had passed us, and one can see patience, strain, effort, and dignified restraint. Lost in dreams, they suck food from the barren ground to grow their fruits and feed people with their oil for thousands of years.

Their existence proves to the observer that time is not a uniform force which flows evenly through our and the lives of our ancestors and descendants in a wide channel, but flows like a river which has meandered into many branches, forming a new river and many shallow run-off channels. In the new water courses it flows quickly and perhaps even hectically, in the old cutoffs leisurely and peacefully; sometimes the water almost stands still.

For me, time stood still.

The days went by, evenly, uniformly, indiscriminately, but I did feel a development. My grief remained, but it subsided. I breathed

freely again, my head was clear. I thought about life and death, suffering and pain – my life had been good, I had no fear of my own death, but suffering and pain frightened me. I wanted to escape them.

I thought about the behavior of people I knew, their cruelties, hidden and open, their generosity and their pettiness, raising children and what happens to them, the death of my parents, good manners, wine, life – or at least a life – after death. I longed for love.

The monks were tactful and kept a reasonable distance, did not impose themselves, let me digest her death and my life – but they became passionate when they argued among themselves, not about religious issues, but about the grape harvest and Greece's superiority over Turkey and Macedonia. And the goats. And football. There was no television, no radio, no newspaper; I wondered where they got their news from, but they were always up to date.

I didn't understand everything they said, but I understood enough to realize that life goes on, going around in circles, like a merry-go-round: birth, life, survival, death. And goats, of course.

One evening at dinner, I asked them: "What is paradise?" Does she go to paradise? Certainly. No doubt about it. They didn't even know her. They knew me. I was good. That's why she was good. What is paradise? What does it look like? Green. Full of plants. Warm. But not too hot and windy. Springlike. Beautiful, big, without shady sides, but with shade. Full of flowers and benign animals. Glowing red wine, cold drinking water. Enough to eat. Lamb meat, no mutton. Women? I asked. That confused them.

Maybe like in restaurant toilets, women left, men right? Yes, they nodded. Maybe. I was slowly getting better.

After a week, four visitors arrived on donkeys, Roland and Serge, the Russian, and my sister-in-law, Frederike, robust and rigorous. She did not reveal to me how she had found out what had happened – and where I was. She had a kind of sixth sense for when something in the family went wrong.

She looked around, recorded everything and then made decisions that didn't allow for contradiction:

"You're young, you have to take care of yourself. Get on your boat; you can't stay here any longer."

She was right. The next morning I thanked the monks, left a gift and walked down the mountain.

I met Frederike on the boat in the afternoon. She had been busy cleaning up what she thought she had to clean up without removing my wife's personal belongings; she arranged them, but she put them back where they were left.

In the evening the Russian turned up again. He seemed to have developed a liking for me; he was not old enough to be my father, but he showed a protective instinct. He hinted that Roland and Serge had sounded out whether he could take me under his wing, at least for a while – until I would be able to stand independently on my own two feet again.

When I offered him an ouzo he looked into my eyes and said:

“I like strong women. What your sister-in-law told you is right: You are young, get a grip of yourself. I like you – do you want to work for me for some months, a year, perhaps two?”

I could see that he took pleasure in this offer. The pleasure made him smile, and his smile was like a child's smile. He looked appealing and handsome and, perhaps, a little vulnerable and in need of affection.

But I was sure that he had a strong hand and mind. He had not become a billionaire by watching for an easy-pie miracle or some fortuitous lottery prize. There are people who inspire blind trust. He belonged to this cast. One just believed him.

Yet, he was also compassionate and humane, the spiritual kinship that accompanies the knowledge that others are in a situation similar to that which he had coped with earlier in his life and, perhaps, being worse off than himself. He understood and suffered with me.

He was a fixer:

“I'll fix it.”

He put a hand around my shoulder and hugged me. He saw that it made me feel better. The friendliness flooded down on me like a warm rain, refreshing, uplifting; only that I always waited for it to change into a cold shower; I did not trust this friendliness. But it was real – and I was terribly ashamed.

He even had given a small donation to the mayor and the parish priest for their kindness.

Everybody had swallowed my tragedy, hook, line, and sinker. Nobody put it in doubt: My wife was dead and I was left – a broken, deeply sad and mourning widower.

However, to tell the truth, I am not German, Annabel, my wife is not dead but very much alive – and safe in Switzerland with our

baby son, and she did not accompany me on the sailing trip. The entire story was playacted and planned in advance for many weeks – for the sake of forming some strategic ‘diplomatic, semi-official’ alliance.

Reality and truth are sometimes different.

Bourgeois Comedy
February - March 2006



Swiss Apples

You'll see a smiling face, a fireplace, a cozy room;
A little nest that's nestled where the roses bloom.
Just Mollie and me and baby makes three;
We're happy in my blue heaven.

George A. Whiting, Walter Donaldson. Blue Heaven. 1924.

Even in retrospect, one never really knows where a story has its beginning or when it's over and done with – in particular if it has several separate strands. This one was simple – in the beginning. It started on a Saturday in late February.

Annabel had moved in with me and we were about to build up a long lasting togetherness and a common family and community life.

Our son was nearly three months old – and beautiful. Of course, I had not invented the procedure, but I was proud of the outcome. We called him Nicolas, and then we got married. The sequence of events was not exactly according to established Swiss rules, but rather how things developed. Life and daily routines have to be adjusted when you are father of a boy, owner of a baby-buggy and head of a family. Perspectives change. I was just re-training myself.

My name is Jack Boulder, age 38, not single any more, height six feet two or 1.85 meters, weight 80 kilos, black hair on my chest, light brown on my head. I live in Switzerland, as a Canadian subject. I travel with a Canadian passport, and earn my bread as a con-

sultant – usually for clients interested in clear and unquestionable results in delicate and subtle affairs, among them the German Foreign Office and, in recent years, a German government agency.

Handling some little matters for the Germans was a part-time occupation. Annabel knew of it and despised it – but she also was attracted by it.

Annabel was working at a bank, one of the major ones in Basel, the Swiss Bank for Commerce and Credit.

Some of her female colleagues had also gotten pregnant and taken maternity leave – pregnancies seem to arrive in waves. To widen our social horizons we had invited two couples with their infant offspring for dinner.

As many of her colleagues, they were German MBAs, recent newcomers to Switzerland from the north, happy to earn more than at home, rooted in the fun society of the late 1990s, as were numerous young Swiss bankers – mentally there was no national contrast.

They just spoke German with a different accent – I thought.

The conversation took off slowly and remained painfully laborious. The men accepted an aperitif, the women did not: However, the men had brought two swing top bottles, premixed beer and carbonated lemonade – for their own consumption. I wouldn't have drunk it anyway; for me it was a kind of obscene mixture.

Both couples talked to each other and considered me part of the furniture. It was easier for Annabel, who knew the two women from work and had met their husbands earlier. I couldn't find the fitting wavelength. Usually I have no problems to meet new people and make small talk. It had always been one of my assets.

Once, early in our relationship, I confessed to Annabel, under a vow of secrecy, that one of my free-lance jobs was negotiating the release of minor-important hostages, such as tourists, for the German Foreign Office.

“I thought you are a consultant?” she said.

After a short moment she nodded, then asked me: “You have that knack of making people feel at ease. How do you do that? Somebody must have taught you how to negotiate – or you imitate somebody who was good at it.”

I had and did. But most of it had just come naturally and the connection to the Foreign Office was a happenstance – and since I was successful the first time, and the second time, they continued calling me in. I became their consultant for special minor cases.

That Saturday my talent seemed not to work.

From the basement I had brought up some bottles of wine from Chile, produced at the vineyard of an uncle of mine. Having uncles in Chile was already suspicious, offering wine from Chile was even worse.

“Why not Swiss or German wines? Germany is the world leader in organic farming and organic wines,” I was told. “Does your uncle produce *organic* wines?”

“Yes, *La Oveja Negra* and *Leche de Nuestra Señora Adorada* are exquisite wines, specially bottled for export to the United States, Germany, Scandinavia – and the Vatican; but that's confidential,” I replied. “They have that typical full taste of biodynamic organic farming.”

They did not even realize that I pulled their legs.

No plastic bottles, no smoking, no wine except biologically produced, no fun, no pleasure, no fresh vegetables from the garden.

I like the Swiss way of recycling. Recycling collection points for glass, plastic, aluminum, paper, textiles, and batteries are all over. It's organized down to the last detail – although sometimes you don't know where to throw away what. But after some weeks you understand the system. And then it's efficient. I like efficiency.

As for our visitors, it was different: Let's be protestant, let's brood over how we will be ecologically and politically correct.

We only eat Swiss apples, no apples from other countries.

“Swiss apples have rosy cheeks and a natural sweetness – or they are green and crunchy. We keep our apples in a huge bowl, see them every day and know, we are healthy. They are part of our life style. Apples are healthy, we are healthy,” one of the women said impetuously. “Apples protect against cancer of the intestines, especially the Swiss apples because they come from this healthy country. Transporting apples from other countries or even continents – it's such a waste of resources.”

That was more health than I needed; an apple a day keeps the doctor away – perhaps. But all year around Swiss apples? There are seasons, aren't they? What about eggs? Or oranges and lemons? Swiss eat Swiss lemons?

However, she continued – a potpourri of lessons, a missionary giving unrequested advice and lifestyle counseling.

Let's send our child to an aseptic kindergarten where they have a swimming instructor for infants who, at the same time, teaches them Mandarin – the original Chinese with a Swiss-German ac-

cent. We will not have a sandbox in the garden where our child can play because a cat may pee into the sand at night.

The mother had an academic background but had not learned to use her brain to think and find a balanced approach to daily life.

The other one of Annabel's colleagues had just converted to veganism, that extreme form of vegetarianism; but she hadn't told anybody. Thus the choice of steaks topped with a garlic, tomato, and rosemary sauce, fresh green salad and beautiful small buttered potatoes was a *faux pas*, or *procedural error*, as Annabel called it in her analysis of the evening after the guests had gone home.

The vegan friend only ate salad and popped huge pills with food supplements for iron, vitamin D and B12. "Since early during my pregnancy I get vitamin B12 injections by my GP – once a month. Vegan mothers need to take care of their children."

By taking pills and getting injections? I didn't say it out loud. Undisturbed, she sermonized and drove home her points wagging her forefinger at me – talking with a strong moralizing undertone.

"Last night we grilled some vitamin-fortified tofu burgers over hickory chips; they tasted like home-made hamburgers. I used one of those oriental-flavored cooking sprays, it makes all the difference. And to accompany the burger we have healthy diet soft drinks."

I wondered. Why not live on a natural and biologically correct diet? Why not buy good meat and prepare a tasty hamburger? Why strictly refrain from meat – but then insist on meat taste? Why paying good money for preparing ersatz hamburgers, steaks, or schnitzels with chemically enhanced flavor? And buying soft drinks full of artificial sweeteners and appetite enhancers? Why don't they drink water or fruit juices?

Some women are attractive when they toy with their dumbness – this one wasn't. She was serious and thoroughly convinced of her opinions.

"What about fish?" I asked. Before I could draw breath to continue she cut me short. "Fish are such sensitive animals."

No fish either. It was the response of a more simple soul.

To contribute to the dinner – "I always do my bit" – she had brought a bottle of organic red wine from France, unfortunately – for her – with a plastic cork. The wine had a truly organic taste.

We had tap water in carafes on the table. Nobody touched it – because of the fluorine and chlorine in it. Of course we also had sparkling water – therefore we had an interesting discussion about

the reason for importing water from France and about plastic bottles. I was told that there should be a deposit on plastic bottles – as in Germany.

When I asked: “What about a deposit on plastic packaging for mixed vegetables, red cabbage, and milk at supermarkets?” she was not amused. She should have laughed, but she didn't grasp it. Instead she answered gravely: “We wash all leftovers off plastic pots and bottles before we throw them away.”

The modern sale of indulgences requires expensive means of payment. However, I didn't understand the reason for doing that. It was a waste of water, energy, and time. Some minutes before she had claimed that we should save water – although we had more than enough water in Switzerland; we live in moderate climates with more than enough rain – and water in general.

I come from a down-to-earth background in Canada. Somewhere all this was grotesque and absurd, at least for me.

“Of course we don't eat honey. It's produced by animals.”

She was one of those women. She was naïve and out of touch with the world's reality. She had never collected mussels at low tide – or tried to milk a cow. She had never seen somebody dying of hunger or been shot because he was in the way, except perhaps on pictures. We did not reach a common wavelength. I should have known from the beginning, when I greeted her; she gave me a clammy, wimpy handshake. How dare she judge me, they judge me, cloaking themselves in moral righteousness?

Every so often we all make fun of the *petits bourgeois* of our societies – conventional and conservative, those of the late 19th century, those of the different periods of the 20th century, the lower but nowadays higher middle class. Then a new generation was born, those standing up against their fathers, and mothers, the 1968 fighters. They turned out to become the most boring petty capitalists of the century in Europe.

And then what: here there are their spoiled kids and grand-children. The age difference was barely ten years. Tonight we had them for dinner and the women were worse than the apathetic men. Or weren't they?

The men compared their ‘smart’ cell phones, treating them with a loving tenderness they hadn't shown to their children when they arrived and unpacked them. I would have called them self-absorbed ‘smart’ guys.

There was no intelligent exchange between the male guests and the host, but worship of their blinking little portable altars and discussion which smart god was better and bigger and faster. They checked their ‘social networks’ – how many friends were on-line?

I asked myself if they had impregnated their wives by on-line masturbation.

They didn't enjoy their meal; flavor doesn't count. Their pleasure was virtual and they didn't state: “This was a real treat, thank you,” – even gratitude was unknown to them. Why not eat and drink and – try to – be happy?

We had two bouquets of beautiful flowers on the table, Peruvian lilies – from Colombia.

“From Colombia? By plane? What a waste of energy!”

“Yes,” I said. “But the Colombian coffee came by boat. As did your Japanese car. And the gasoline in your car's tank from Libya or Iran.” I didn't get a reply.

I glanced at Annabel and she returned my incomprehension with a warm grin. Neither she nor I are hedonists striving to maximize net pleasure – which is pleasure minus pain. I believe in honorable public-spirited hedonism, a kind of respectable intelligent egoism – a little selfishness with brakes applied.

Our visitors drove hedonism without brakes at full speed and an empty brain. At the same time they had turned into paragons of the new virtue: social autism, a kind of obsessional protestantism with all its unpleasant collaterals. Calvin and Zwingli and their side effects had been replaced by handpicked “green” sustainability – to enjoy, in the future, a quality of life equal to or greater than our own – in a park-like environment.

Still, they lived nonchalantly, free from worry, in expensive apartments in downtown, buying organic food in expensive organic shops, vegetables, herbs, “country-style” bread, cheese from happy goats, bio-lemonade – even organic shampoo, tooth brushes and wet toilet paper. They had children to give a meaning to their life. They despised you if you didn't share their religion – and would crush you if they could because you were a foe.

The vegan mother looked like the personified bad consciousness, pursing her lips disgustedly and breathing hard from her nose. She pulled back her shoulders and exhaled. I wondered why she didn't or didn't want to enjoy the evening. Vegan diet and malnutrition had already taken a toll on her health.

However, she didn't stand alone. The others were on her side. They watched us with self-satisfied and innocent faces, a façade of egotism, callousness and ignorance, taking the moral high ground, trying to generate a sense of guilt in Annabel and me. At Christmas, they would donate a hundred Swiss francs to a good cause which would grant them absolution – remission for the few pardonable sins they might, perhaps, have committed during the year. They had a subscription to *The Daily Navel Gazer Gazette* and watched only culturally high-standing soap operas on television.

Ignorance is bliss.

I was happy when they took their strollers, packed their children, and went home.

The dinner invitation was no success – basically, it was a plain fiasco; and the conversation had deeply upset me. I wondered whether I had lost contact with the world. My ideas and values were different.

I didn't sleep well.



La Ronde

Tourment, tourment beaux paysages, la terre tourne nuit et jour.
L'eau de pluie se change en nuage et le nuage tombe en pluie.

Waltz and turn, beautiful scenes – just as earth turns night and day.
Fallen rain drops turn into clouds, and the clouds return as rain.

Max Ophüls, Oscar Strauss. La Ronde. 1950.

A lonesome girl was riding a white wooden horse, partly lost in her dreams, partly anxious on the carousel, staring out into the rainy darkness, searching for her parents. From the roof of the carousel a disembodied tinny sound crawled through the winter rain:

“Love is just like a merry-go-round – with all the fun of a fair.”
The loudspeakers needed an urgent tune-up.

I had the feeling that I needed a tune-up too.

It was drizzling out of a sullen sky, a cold, dark and miserable late Sunday afternoon on the day after our evening dinner invitation gone awry. To take our minds of it Annabel and I had decided to go for a stroll with umbrellas and the baby carriage.

We had asked our neighbor Laszlo and his lady friend Malcsi to accompany us – and they liked the idea.

During our stroll I told Laszlo the story of the day.

“It beggars belief,” I concluded.

Laszlo frowned and shook his head in disbelief. He shrugged: “The world doesn't really change. It merely keeps turning. History

bends and loops and twirls and repeats itself. You hear the same phrases, people express the same sentiments and conclusions, show the same unyielding and uncompromising belief in their cause. The younger generation never changes the world or makes it a better place.”

The fairground bustle did not cheer us up; it was more dreariness than joy. We were silently freezing and went back home soon.

I asked myself what's the point of it all. Wouldn't it be nice to live in a green, undulating landscape, with humming, warm nights where life would be sweet? We talked and the idea of emigrating to Chile came up again. But Annabel liked her job at the bank, her parents would be sick at heart if she left and took Nicolas with her. At present our place was here and my duty was to provide a nest in Basel.

I – or since recently, we – live in Basel, under the roof of an old building close to the Wettstein Bridge. My apartment is small, narrow, winding – and homey. During the summer months it gets hot at times, but in the winter it is not cold. The attraction of the place is the two small terraces, facing the street, sunny for most of the day, but not exposed to any prying eyes from the neighbors.

The problem was to carry boy and buggy all the stairs up, but we didn't think about it too much – it would be only for a few years.

Then, one day, we received a letter from the house owner that he was going to have an elevator installed on the back of the building, out of sight but hopefully very useful for the tenants. The rent would go up a little bit, of course.

On Monday morning it had not stopped raining; fortunately we could stay inside and would not get wet and cold through again; in the apartment the weather contributed to the mere atmosphere – the rain was spattering on the windows.

The last years had taught me that it is senseless to ponder upon fundamentals of life and the future – before or during breakfast. Still, I needed somebody to talk to.

There are very few people in one's life one can consult and trust. Laszlo was a good friend, but I wanted somebody younger.

I thought Schall could give me some advice, he was in his late fifties and had had a baby boy as I some years ago. We both were young fathers.

I had got to know Schall some time ago. His real name was Dr. Rauch and he worked for one of the smaller German secret ser-

vices, innocuously dubbed the Bundesfinanzinspektion, BFI, or Federal Finance Inspection Services.

I had only an inkling as to what their assigned tasks were, although I had traveled for Schall and his company. After the last time I was so appalled by what had happened and had made it clear that I wouldn't ever work for him again. Still, by then he had become a very good friend.

He seemed not corrupted by power, but being firm and resigned to the inevitable – if he could decide what was inevitable. I should have disliked Schall, given the differences in our outlook on life – and yet, I didn't, perhaps I even shared his views unconsciously.

I called him in Germany and we had a chat.

Schall made his diagnosis: “Post-partum depression in men ... I know. You'll overcome it. You just need a distraction.

“By the way, watching you for some time, you have assumed some of a spy's cardinal skills – being hard when necessary, self-reliant and resourceful and keeping yourself hidden while moving in plain sight in any surroundings.”

So, in his opinion I was a spy. I sat appalled, stammering out the first objection that came into my mind: “But I am not a spy. I am an advisor or consultant, sometimes a specialist investigator for elderly widows when they were cheated by Swiss banks. But not a professional secret agent.”

“Aren't you? In our case that's a honorary profession. Like being a good scout.”

“I don't want to be a spy nor do I feel like one.”

“I see.” He fell silent for a moment.

“No, you do not see it,” I answered.

“In effect I do. You misunderstand me – it's difficult to explain.”

He broke off, feeling to be on the wrong way. Then he continued: “Anyhow – I believe you need a change of scene and we should talk a little more. Why don't you come to Berlin for some days and we walk and talk? Bring Annabel and the little one.”

We rented a big room in a floating pension on a retired barge on one of the lakes in Potsdam – a romantic hideaway. There we met Schall one early afternoon and went for a walk through the tree-lined streets.

“You should escape that milieu you described to me at least for a little while. I can see that it gives you the blues. I guess you need a solid and honest task to prove to yourself that life can be different.”

“Oh no,” I cried, “not one of your tasks again!”

“Why not? I got a relaxing assignment for you, a breeze of a job. This time not through the German Foreign Office as those before, but still a nice, amusing diplomatic mission, opening an unofficial channel for informal talks with a foreign dignitary.

“You are the perfect go-between for this purpose; you got this faculty of relaxing and easing people by being friendly and good natured. We all know that you can handle such persons. You were often successful in dealing with kidnappers. You have the smattering of languages – or even speak them perfectly. This one is a piece of cake for you – and you have some days off in the sun, definitely worth your while.”

Once again he tried hard to butter up my vanity. Strictly speaking I wanted to be left alone and suffer. So I looked at him and explained my regrets:

“I am a married man now and will take care and protect my family. That means protecting myself too.”

It sounded stilted and phony – I realized it immediately.

And surely, it made no impression on him. He studied me for a moment, doubtlessly enjoying my bewilderment. He smiled and insisted:

“As I said, it’s just a diplomatic job that – for political reasons – the diplomats in the Foreign Office cannot carry out themselves. A little pleasant traveling will be included. And you will receive a decent consultancy fee to feed your son for at least one year.”

I kept quiet. He went into details:

“We want you to be our contact with a Russian businessman. His name is Nejpgauz, Rejngold Gustavovitch Nejpgauz – or in German, Reinhold Neuhaus. He has a German background, a centuries-old Russia German though; and he has a terrible family history.

“During the Stalin terror in the Soviet Union his grandfather was arrested in 1941. Both the grandfather's wife and a daughter died in Soviet concentration camps for Russia Germans in the years that followed. The grandfather himself was imprisoned from 1942 to 1944 in a labor camp for Russia Germans to build railroads. He was severely emaciated, covered with scurvy wounds, written off as a so-called ‘goner’ and released ‘for convalescence’.

“Unexpectedly he survived, as did his son Gustav. The grandfather was rehabilitated by a Soviet court in the late 1950s; father and son could settle down in Moscow with relatives. The son married and had a son, too: Reinhold, born in 1961. By now, the son is

forty-five. He is well educated, clever and extremely rich, among the ranks of the first 200 billionaires in Russia – an outstanding manager, well-connected, with a genius for playing the Soviet and then the new system, without trying to get into politics or severe corruption.

“And, he stays modest, keeps his distance and shies away from social contact, especially after his wife died in an accident a few years ago. They had no children. He is a very discreet billionaire, he hardly ever gives interviews and there are very few pictures of him.

“He owns a yacht, but it’s only called ‘yacht’, it’s a small cruise liner. I have seen the plans, the ship was built in Germany. It’s quite something – but not outspokenly megalomaniac – no golden faucets. He loves sailing the Greek islands and the rest of the Mediterranean.”

He looked at me, checking if I had understood and got his message. I was not sure. Not at all. Why did he brief me on the life of a Russian businessman? Why should I contact him? Did Schall want me to write his memoirs?

No, he wanted me to become friends with the Russian.

“I wouldn’t like to return to Russia to carry out one of your jobs there. Russia is not my favorite country.”

“You won’t go to Russia, but to warmer climes,” Schall responded.

I perceived that I had made a tactical error.

He had trapped me. I should have refused outright. Saying ‘no’ to Russia could only be interpreted by him that I meant ‘yes’ to the rest of the world. He smiled and I told him to take that silly grin off his face. Now he really grinned.

I grinned too. Then I repeated, this time not meekly or defensively: “I have a family now. Sorry.”

Annabel had followed our discussion, watched us and listened in silence; now she joined in: “I know that you don’t like to be caged in, and I can feel it for some weeks. Some days alone in the sun would do you good. And some safe little adventures – you seem to need that.”

She had given her green light. I was happy about her altruism and threw her a kiss – with a little bad conscience.

Now it was her turn to smile. For some minutes we continued walking through Potsdam’s Berliner Vorstadt district without a word, lost in thought, checking the mansions and their gardens,

watered by shifty network connections and hidden bribes. A tour bus passed by with some tourists trying to get a glance of the famous and mighty living here.

After a while we passed by Theo Tullhude's house. Tullhude was the editor-in-chief of the leading yellow journalism newspaper in Germany: sensations, crime, scandal, malicious gossip and fake news supporting the political agenda of Tullhude's own – a master of accelerating the downward spiral of the quality of German journalism.

I wondered whether Schall had chosen the way on purpose. Once we had been in this house, Schall, Malesi and I – without Laszlo though. It was an illegal, or paralegal visit, and as most of Schall's operations resourcefully planned. Tullhude wasn't at home and had never found out. But Schall had found what he was looking for: two big rooms, the walls densely covered with impressionist paintings and a safe. He had taken pictures, even of the safe – from the outside because it was locked. He would have liked a look inside.

Schall muttered, more to himself: "I finally should take care of him too. Perhaps I will ask our friend Laszlo whether he has a good idea. If he has one I might borrow it – although his solutions are sometimes a little bizarre."

There was a collusive relationship between Schall and Laszlo in which I was the unwitting third partner; in the beginning there was no discussion of the topic between the two, they understood each other without saying anything directly. No formal decision existed to take action against Tullhude or his collaborators – it was a tacit conspiracy. And it was a long-term plan, over years – the infrastructure was brought in by Schall, the subtlety of the plans and the personal connections added by Laszlo.

Officially Tullhude was a journalist working for a communist party newspaper in East Germany before he made for the West where he climbed up the career ladder very fast. He continued the same way first at a minor left-wing, then a major right-wing mass-market tabloid and afterwards a popular news magazine. According to him, all major news should be boiled down to two paragraphs and 'the facts had to be fitting'. He ironed them and had the knack for generalization and exaggeration that people like to read.

Schall broke our silence: "He has also learned a valuable lesson: it pays to fabricate stories. Feeding misinformation he slowly poi-

soned the brains of his readers with lies; he did it in a subtle way and most people were unable to judge the outcome.

“I really wonder what makes him tick and how he got first a job with a left-wing slightly pornographic daily, and some years later as editor-in-chief of an anti-Communist 'kill-the-reds' newspaper. Somebody must have helped to install him. I guess he has more than only a journalistic background; he must have been trained in economics, business and administration. Communist style.”

He fell silent again as we walked along and seemed to change the topic:

“I am getting old. I feel it. My daily grind is plain stress. I can't escape it – if I don't resign. I don't want to resign, because from the place I am at I can change things – within limits though. I have access to information and can find ways to break or practice obstruction.

“I realize what you pointed out earlier on. I, too, have a young son, I have a good wife. I have to protect them. Anyhow, I want an end to Tullhude and his gang. He is evil and bad for the country – and he writes sloppy prose.”

I found Schall's last observation amazing. It made me think: “Do you mean that he was sent as an agent provocateur to cause trouble in western Germany?”

“He is definitely not an agent provocateur; perhaps one could describe him as a sleeper agent or a kind of agent of influence.”

I wanted to know more. “But you want to fight him and take the law in your hands?”

“I am not a politician. I am a civil servant. I will stay within the law. On the other hand it is my duty to enforce the articles of the constitution. Then again, I cannot stand the trampling of my values any more, of everything I respect, of what I consider just, of what I and my service are expected to do: keep this country democratic and free.”

He swallowed. “Only a team effort can be successful. A small group of people who trust and complement one other, usually men.

“The trust must be all-embracing and they mustn't have any personal ulterior motives. There is no splitting of a loot, there is no loot. If there should be a profit it will be re-invested into the endeavor – the profit doesn't belong to the group but is used to support Tullhude's victims.”

He looked at me to check if I was listening and made a sound, half a sigh, half a growl. “Whom can I trust? It's not only a single

rotten apple, it's a slow-growing, deep-seated tumor. The most atrocious betrayal doesn't come from the enemy, but from your own side. People in the secret services are like any other state employees; even if they are good performers, they will be stuck at some time in their careers – they will not get any further, others will be promoted. If daddy pays or has connections, the really good ones are replaced by his sons, nieces or nephews. But those replaced are easy catch by outside competitors offering more money or opportunities – to serve two masters.

“I feel so disgusted by the dirty politics behind the scenes. Governments come and go, but some of the wiser and perhaps more honorable civil servants stay and will try to prevent the worst – and do what they believe is right.”

“C'mon,” I said, “you are dreamer. You'll never find a trustworthy group like this.”

“Yes, I will. You sooner or later make out people who would secretly join such a team if they see that there is no egoistic aim and they are financially and socially secure. Everybody will contribute and will be proud. It's a life's challenge for them. Their performance and their bond within will be outstanding and indestructible from the outside. Opposing regimes would fear them as their worst enemies.

“Of all the people, you understand the stakes. We are such a group, you, Laszlo and I. We are loyal to each other – or, at least, we have similar aims or goals in life. And Laszlo and I are realistic; sooner or later you'll learn realism too.”

He walked, stared at the cobblestones of the street, and pondered. There was a tiredness in him that came from more than traveling and short nights.

“I will do it your and Laszlo's way – to take him down.”

“Which way?” I asked.

“The manner you got rid of that American crook four years ago. You set up a trap and his partner had him killed. Although I don't want Tullhude killed. I want him to live and suffer, as he made other people suffer.”

“How do you want to do it?”

“I don't know yet. Laszlo might be able to help me – and you, of course. Why don't we arrange a 'brain-storming' session in Basel?”

I knew pretty well what he was talking about. Laszlo had this kind of ideas: Vengeance is mine. Of course, he would never admit it.



Travels of a Lifetime

It is reasonable to believe that a change of climate would produce very sensible effects on the living body.

James Clark. *The Sanative Influence of Climate*. London 1848.

Laszlo Nagy was around seventy and occupied the apartment underneath mine. He was a gentle, mild-mannered man, trustworthy at first sight, yet unfathomable – one had the feeling as if he was withholding some impenetrable, darker past – which didn't make him unlikable. He was of medium height, trim and dapper, losing his hair and, on and off, growing a gray mustache.

He had told me much about himself, his youth in Hungary, emigration to Germany, then France; and his final cut with the past when he settled in Basel and opened a store for antique maps, old prints and rare books. I had concluded that, when he was younger, he must have made money with forgeries. Then he changed his name, moved to Switzerland, and lived the honest life of an upright citizen.

Laszlo's personality was a mixture of discretion with casual nonchalance, dignity with wide culture. In the course of our friendship, he had given me good advice, but he did not poke his nose into my business nor did he meddle with me, pushing me into doing things his way. There was a closeness and confidentiality, but there was a line we never overstepped. I liked his insight into human nature – his balanced and polite character, and his philosophy of life.

Until recently I had been sure that he was a confirmed bachelor, when, suddenly, a nice lady happened to show up – his friend Amalia Nádasdy. As he, she was Hungarian, or ex-Hungarian, now Swiss, and known among friends as Malcsi.

She was an art expert, and good at it. More so, she was famous in her field. There was something endearing about her that defied explanation; she radiated affection and goodwill, was orthodox in her opinions as was Laszlo, with a dash of heresy.

Laszlo once showed me how to most deceptively imitate a signature; the whole of that scene has been photographed on my mind ever since. He knew his craft.

“One does not rewrite the name, but turns the sheet over on which the original signature is written. Then you practice drawing the abstract lines you see. With a little practice, the result will be more authentic than a rewritten signature.”

At his seventieth birthday, he summarized the present rung of life's ladder he was standing on now:

“I am your age – if I were younger.” He smiled at me. “But my – old – world has largely evaporated. I feel a little bit alienated from today's social mores.”

His voice was soft, his remarks were measured, and he usually succeeded in reining his sometimes wanton and blunt sense of humor. “Wine,” he once told me with his typical canny smile, “wine helps you to maintain a sober relationship to reality.”

There was a close bond between him and Malcsi. She described her affinity for Laszlo to me:

“Hungarians are lonesome and they are dreamers. They have a language nobody else understands. They are a small nation, their country has been cut into pieces and parts added to neighboring states, whose citizens basically hate Hungarians, and Hungarians try to forget their history because it is rather unpleasant for them. They love myths and sagas and rhetorics, and they dream about the greatness of their country. But it remains a small country.”

I wondered and asked: “I know how and why Laszlo arrived in Basel. What about you? How did you integrate into this society? How is your life in Switzerland?”

She stopped, hesitated, and came out with it.

“Swiss society has changed drastically during the last forty years. When I arrived in the country, there was still a well-educated and stable middle class and the financial and military aristocracy. The class structures have not changed much, but the general level of ed-

ucation and behavior has deteriorated. I never tried to mingle with Basel's aristocrats or socialites; I was not interested in them. They like to live in a world of their own although they are very open to the outside. This corner of Switzerland has always been full of foreigners, many of them settled here.

"I like Basel, although it's not one of this world's dream cities. But it's international. People speak – a kind of – German, and French, and English, and Italian ... and anything else, if necessary. It's Swiss, with the limited horizon of the Swiss – and, at the same time, their wide horizon. The local Swiss can be open, the numerous foreigners here are open. It's a prosperous and rich city. Money was brought in by the nouveau-rich chemistry and pharmaceutical industry. They also have destroyed parts of the environs, mostly by the Rhine; but you have all the hinterland, the Black Forest in Germany, the Alsace in France ... all green and empty. It's a city of culture, because the burghers gave money for museums, theaters, ballet, and opera. I feel at home; with Laszlo, it's like Budapest a long time ago."

Now she smiled again.

Two days after I had returned to Basel, Schall arrived for the get-together with Laszlo. We met in the Brasserie Orphelin down the street from our apartments, our favorite watering hole in town.

Schall had already hinted to Laszlo on the phone what he was interested in. Cautiously he summarized it again to the two of us:

"You might ask: What's the reason for this plan?"

"For a long time East Germany, the GDR, was run by a tight-knit camarilla, nearly omnipotent at that time. They controlled with bribes – privileges, regular remunerations or simply cash. With the downfall of the country they tried to ensure the survival of their networks in the new bigger German state.

"It's a similar situation as after the Second World War, when for instance OdeSSA, the organization of the former members of the SS, arranged practical and financial aid for arrested, condemned and fugitive former members of the Nazi SS paramilitary group. There were several such organizations, both overt and covert.

"Even before the Berlin Wall came down East German equivalents existed in Europe and overseas; for us, the most important one is Neue Stille Hilfe – New Silent Relief. When the GDR ceased to exist, some of the brains behind the network had for a long time left the country and settled down in West Germany, Aus-

tria, Switzerland, and South America. They were cunning and skilled in the planning and organization of the investment of former East German assets.

“In my opinion Tullhude is the beating heart of the entire organization, a highly visible and influential socialite and public figure, even if he is not the head of their entire business network. There is also a more or less independent Austrian branch, the ‘Vienna Connection’ led by a woman. She got her money and ran – to Israel. Tullhude and New Silent Relief seem not to be connected to the Vienna Connection – they seem, but one never knows.

“We should deal with them. The way to destroy the influence and financial power of the follow-up networks of the East German state mafia is to dissolve its cohesion, fragment it, and then deal with the pieces, one by one. We already have taken out two persons, Obermann, who was their head of business, and Tal, the mole in my agency.”

He paused and cleared his throat.

I thought for a moment, then asked: “Sorry, I can’t follow you. I know about Tullhude. But who cares? The Germans don’t. Nor do the German media. They adore him.

“What’s the best toehold to get more and substantial information about Tullhude and his New Silent Relief? Who has detailed knowledge about the entire operation?”

Schall said: “For me, that’s the most important question today. Many of those in the know are either dead such as the right-wing Bavarian politicians who helped them or they are too deeply involved and scared to say anything. We also believe that some of the Russian secret services are involved.

“Most of the members of New Silent Relief are elderly and parochial, but there is an enormous amount of money stacked away – formerly in their own Swiss bank, but most likely also in Delaware companies in the United States. North America is a major refuge for black and illicit money.

“But we lack detailed information on how this spider web is spun. Only if we get that we can act. And for this purpose I need a brain storming with people I can absolutely trust.” He looked first at me, then at Laszlo. “You.”

Laszlo and I were staring at the table in front of us.

Silence.

Then Laszlo groaned softly and said:

“Red wine or champagne?”

I looked at Schall: “Champagne?”

He cleared his throat and produced a series of sounds. I finally understood: “Champagne.” He nodded. The waiter brought a bottle. I gave Schall a glass. He sipped, staring at Laszlo.

We remained silent until we all had slowly finished our first glass. Then I asked: “Where is the money or where are their assets now? Is there somebody one could ask?”

Schall shrugged. “We do not know for sure. Perhaps in a country in the Middle East.” I could imagine where.

“Is Kantor involved?” I asked.

“I think so. But he is in his late eighties, nearly ninety. We have unsuccessfully tried to re-build a contact with him. I was told that he is senile and completely shielded from the outside. Tullhude seems to be the treasurer now, and he seems to want to invest the money elsewhere I heard through the grapevine.”

Laszlo knew Kantor; he became acquainted with him in Budapest in the 1950s and met him again in East Berlin twenty years later. Schall and I only knew him from hearsay.

Kantor was born in Constantinople in 1919. He grew up in Turkey, and left with his mother for Palestine in the 1940s. He stayed through the Israeli War of Independence and the first years of the statehood of the new country, then, after the death of his mother, he moved on, this time to Hungary.

As Laszlo had described him to me: “He had a gift of tongues, as one says. I was overwhelmed when I found out that he spoke Turkish, Hebrew, Yiddish, English, German, French, even halting Hungarian. He was gentle, handsome and entertaining.”

Kantor continued traveling and became a more or less independent commercial big shot in communist East Berlin, deeply involved in dirty inner-German business. There was no Iron Curtain for him; he traded and moved from East to West and from West to East. In the early 1980s he emigrated first to Munich in West Germany and then, for a while, he settled on the island of Majorca for 'health reasons'. His emigration happened with the favorable permission of the Stasi. He also had influential friends in Bavaria, in politics and in the banking business. They protected him.

He was an adventurer, associated with a hundred shady transactions; a man who lived on the fringe of high circles and had powerful friends in the most amazing places.

Some years ago Schall had sent one of his best agents, Helmut Tal, to talk to him and sound him out, but he returned none the wiser. He reported back that Kantor was too old and his mental abilities were declining rapidly. Soon afterwards Kantor moved to Israel. Tal was a double agent, working for New Silent Relief. He died in a car accident in France some months later.

Laszlo groaned again and shook his head: “One of my mottoes during my long and tortuous life was: Don’t tell anybody everything, in particular not your lover. But since you said that you trust me and you are not my lover, I ought to confess something.

“I have been in contact with Kantor over the years. From time to time he calls me, usually at the shop. We talk a little bit about art and the weather – no politics, no personal details. He lives in a small apartment in Tel Aviv and must be extremely lonesome. I feel sorry for him – although he is a crook and master of crime.

“I wonder if he still has a German passport.

“I remember his first call; I wonder how he had found my number. Only after a while I realized that it was Kantor in person – and it was an outcry, a cry for help.

“He told me: ‘You never wanted to work for me – that makes you an honest and trustworthy man. I am getting mad here in Tel Aviv. Would you come and visit for some days?’

“At that time I declined. But he continued calling.”

Here Laszlo interrupted his story because Annabel and Malcsi had arrived with our offspring Nicolas. They had been walking by the river and wanted to join us for a cup of coffee. Malcsi adored Nicolas.

“Champagne in the middle of the afternoon? Are you celebrating something?”

“No,” Laszlo said. “Jack and I are embarrassed. We try to laugh it off, or better drown it.”

“What?” Malcsi asked.

“Champagne has a side effect,” Laszlo answered. “You forget things immediately.”

“I see,” Malcsi smiled. “Why don’t you order another bottle? We want to forget too.”

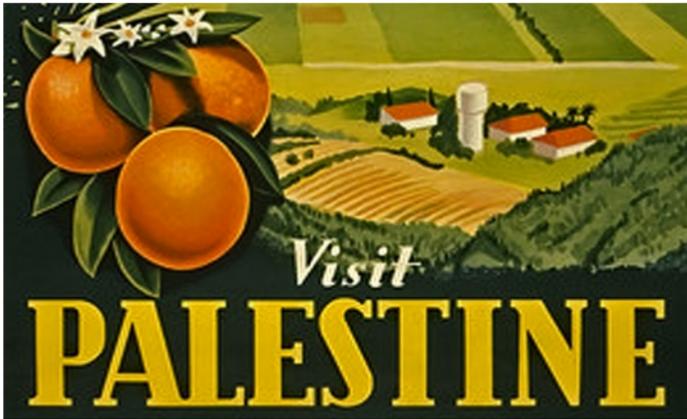
He did, and then explained: “Men, when they get older, and,” Laszlo was turning towards Malcsi, “ageless women like you sometimes feel that it’s about time to visit the Holy Land. It might be good for body and soul to see some of the ancient sites, think

about religion and, perhaps, with some luck, one might also meet some acquaintances and friends.”

“But how do you want to find your friend?” Schall asked. “Apparently Kantor has changed his name and got a new identity by another German secret service.”

Laszlo looked at him, smiling, his chin resting on clasped hands.

“As I said: no problem. I got his telephone number at home.”



The Place of Milk and Honey

Where my pessimism comes from?
From my observations.

John le Carré. *Les Nouvelles Littéraires*. 1965

Some days later Laszlo and Malcsi took a plane from Zurich to Tel Aviv. They had booked a package tour “See the Holy Land in a Week” – fittingly in Business Class. They were, unofficially, invited by their old friend, Herr Schall of Berlin.

However, they didn’t tell this to the young and inquisitive immigration officer at Ben Gurion Airport. They were just another old well-off Swiss couple bringing dollars to Israel. Still, he didn’t welcome them.

Kantor lived on Mendele Street, next to the beach in the ‘white’ German Bauhaus district of Tel Aviv – close to Ben Yehuda Street. Laszlo visited him alone; Malcsi had gone to the museum shop of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art to poke around and get some presents for friends at home.

After his return to Basel Laszlo told me and Schall, who had immediately come from Berlin, what he had seen and heard and found out.

Kantor’s place was on the top floor, full of light, with a highly walled-in terrace brimming with bougainvilleas and small olive trees in huge white flower pots. Furniture and carpets were few but

chosen. The walls of the apartment were white, the façade of the building too, as many apartment houses in the Bauhaus district built by Germans in the 1930s.

Contrary to all reports about him, Kantor was sharp and aware of what was going on in the world. However, his wife had died years ago. He had no visitors, no trustworthy friends or relations, and he had been on the run. The only place where he could live without being chased and persecuted was Israel. They would not extradite him.

He was old, bitter, lonely, rich but too advanced in years to enjoy his money – his material desires had shriveled. He was helpless in Israel, deposed elsewhere and forgotten by his former collaborators.

As he described it: “People forgive almost everything – except success.”

He told Laszlo a lot of stories, he nearly couldn't stop talking, and his stories were often funny without being refined.

“Israel isn't a sight for the gods. The climate is unpleasant. There is also a smelly taste of fascism in the air – as Albert Einstein already predicted during the War of Independence.

“I am a prisoner here, I cannot leave the country – but that's my fault, I have to admit, the punishment for my sins. Not the little sins of the body, they are unimportant. One should sin or have sinned a little more, but I am too old now.”

He zigzagged with his stories and sometimes with the explanations for what he had done during his life.

“I learned the ropes in Budapest in the early 1950s. If you want to be successful, you have to think unconventionally. This is how the Japanese did it in the Second World War. They built up a real espionage market in Europe that offered secret information in ring swaps. Japanese intelligence centers were in Belgrade, Vichy and Stockholm. The Japanese also supplied the Soviet and British secret services. The British secret service sold news to the German Gestapo until 1939.”

His topic changed: “Earlier in life I never read the Book of Books. Now I have. The Old Testament is moralizing entertainment and a behavioral manual for petty archaic desert tribes – phalocracy, showing a preoccupation with sex, magic, spies, whore houses – without any claim to objectivity or historical reliability. It's like *One Thousand and One Nights*, but more brutal because the Jewish God is cruel. The Greek gods and goddesses had charm

and a sense of humor, qualities that the Christian, Jewish or Muslim god completely lacks. Safe in god's hands? I consider it a rather discomfoting place to stay.

“The Hebrew Bible sets dietary laws at one place, some paragraphs further down it demands that homosexuals be stoned to death. It's about making war and taking away fertile land – Canaan – from other people who live there. They want more and better ‘Lebensraum’ – offered to the Jewish people from the hand of God. When you read it, you understand why people dislike Jews. And there are so many streams of Judaism; they hate each other, they are the most quarrelsome people I have ever met.

“But I don't believe Arabs are better. Purl two, knit two: they are knitted in the same pattern. It's the characteristics of Israeliness – rudeness, aggressiveness, violence, lack of consideration, a failure to recognize the existence of the other. Like the Arabs they can hold two opposing opinions at the same time – and defend both if it's to their advantage.”

His hopelessness welled up: “A lot of aggression. People here say: Children in the Middle East are born with a penchant for throwing stones, not only children of Arabs, but also children of oriental Jews. Orient apparently has something to do with throwing stones, perhaps because there are so many here.”

He nodded to himself and agreed with himself – yes, this is how it is. “I share their view – it's true. Don't think I am meshugga. No, I am not off my head.

“Which Central European Jew would have emigrated to Palestine? Only those who were refused entering the United States. Poles, Germans – you name them, and the Altneuland zionists. Most German Jews would have preferred to stay in their home country – Germany.

“As I, they remained permanent emigrants in Palestine and Israel.

“On the other hand, never forget that not only the British, but also the Jewish administration in Palestine returned old and sick people to Nazi Germany; they wanted young and healthy men – and they didn't want Jews from Arab countries; Zionism needs hard, well educated and reliable workers. As ‘our’ first Prime Minister said: Israel is meant to be a ‘European’ country. But today it's Middle Eastern, the orient.

“Nowadays, the younger Israeli generation emigrates again: to Germany – if they can't make it to the United States, the paying

Alter Ego of Israel. I wish I could do the same. Young Israelis are more interested in blonde women and shopping than in kubbutzim. I am too old for blonde women. And I don't admire American Jewish criminal monsters such as Meyer-Lansky and Bugsy Siegel – even if some people believe that I am a criminal. I did some illegal things, but I am not a mass murderer or a negative character.”

He was the outstanding local example of the grumpy and disillusioned old man – an elderly Central European of Levant extraction not understanding the modern orient – or the modern world at large.

The friendly exchange between the two continued, a good natured give-and-take. They gossiped about old times, about people they had known, without stepping on each other's toes. They were cautious not to hurt each other.

In the meantime Kantor's housekeeper had brought coffee and some small strawberry tarts.

Kantor changed into Hungarian – that secret language, as he called it – and commented: “The tartlets are good, but definitely not as good as at Gundel's in Budapest fifty years ago. I had my best meals in Budapest and my best business time in East Berlin – bygone days. As many of my co-religionists – *je suis un Juif Errant*.”

Finally they reached the topic of Tullhude.

Laszlo felt that Kantor hated Tullhude like poison. He wanted revenge, without mentioning in detail what for, but didn't know how to arrange it. “I do not like much what I see.”

Kantor explained that Tullhude wanted to re-invest the money of New Silent Relief:

“The funds, or let's say so: the team kitty, left by the top *nomenklatura*: they stashed away gold and foreign currency abroad. Part of it used to be hidden in a former Swiss bank in the south of that country, run by some Swiss, but owned by NSR. It was officially liquidated and they urgently need a new nest for the money. Tullhude is in charge, but some Russians want a cut of it too – and are hot on his trail.”

This was no news; Schall had known that before. The Financial Intelligence Unit of the German custom service had hinted that they had received warnings about money laundering schemes of the Stasi bank.

Kantor relaxed slowly and began to go into detail.

“I guess he wants to establish a new bank or take over an existing one somewhere, because banks commonly control themselves or can largely avoid outside supervision of their business affairs.

“The two major aims of the leaders of New Silent Relief are investing and hiding their funds, both for their own enrichment, but also to finance their second goal, the slow infiltration of society and administration by a stealthy ‘long march through the institutions’. Tullhude’s New Silent Relief disperses its assets with rather agreeable gain in smaller and in bigger investments – gain in money and gain in political influence.

“In Berlin, for instance, they are on the way to replacing the entire leadership of almost all security agencies and brought in their people or sympathizers. At the police, the general prosecutor’s office and at one of the German secret services, the Office for the Protection of the Constitution – even at the fire departments.

“There are large and numerous public institutions run by New Silent Relief apparatchiks. Some are neo-Stalinists, the new Left. They arrange for massive ‘social transfers’ from taxpayers’ income, allowing the promotion of left-wing institutions tied on their apron strings. It’s their magic formula that makes non-left majorities in big cities and in small countryside towns impossible for years, if not decades. Thanks to massive subsidies, left-wing district or town governments are cementing structured majorities here. They want to retake the power in the country.

“Meanwhile there are tighter money laundering laws. Thus the real estate market increasingly attracts dubious assets. For these buyers, the purchase price is secondary. If you own or control a bank it would be quite possible to support the transfer of black money via real estate funds.

“Through middlemen, New Silent Relief owns hotels in Germany and abroad; it’s a perfect way to have meeting places. They just copied the logistics of the Mafia – and were successful, on a smaller scale.

“They are also in gastronomy, ideal investments for money laundering. They don’t commit evident crimes, and Tullhude has powerful friends covering him, for instance in the Federal government, but also a number of other politicians, the state media and the public prosecutors. His new contacts in the German establishment, the new elite caste, open doors and gain contacts for him; he would always find somebody to organize dinners or a weekend with government politicians and big bankers.

“He is befriending people, creating very shrewdly social or even emotional ties. They, in turn, soon tend to fear him as a powerful force. Journalists, politicians, and businessmen court him so that he won't disclose or invent and publish anything about them. He is socializing with them, but being caught in his spiderwebs might be deadly for them because when the political wind changes, Tullhude's attitudes change too, he follows the direction of the wind.

“But he has lost any attachment to decency and is immoral, nefarious, dirty – and guilty. His informers have warned him of danger but he has dismissed their warning with a shrug.”

Kantor sat on his armchair, his body and head tilted forward, focusing on his folded hands, as if he was inspecting his fingernails: “During my long and lonely days – and nights – I have permanently brooded over a way to get rid of Tullhude and his confidants in harm. He is cautious like a magpie and suspicious like an old rat when being approached by outsiders. He will check them out and he has a web of informers. East Germans from old times, West Germans he can blackmail into supplying information, and first and foremost Russians of both major secret services. He has also contacts in the American and the Israeli services, but to a lesser extent. He doesn't trust the Americans nor the Israelis.”

“How do you know about this?”

“Well,” he shrugged his shoulder and smiled, “simply because I was his superior. Tullhude has a passion to weave plots. I used to run the entire organization until, through Tullhude's intriguing, I was put out to pasture and shunted off. Some daily routines were taken care of by a guy called Obermann, but he wasn't a creative thinker and disappeared last year; apparently the Americans abducted him because he sold weapons to the Middle East. He just disappeared from somewhere in Italy.”

Kantor was leaning back, his face haggard. He faced Laszlo directly and return to the earlier topic. “The best way to catch Tullhude is through his vanities – he is vain. He would have liked to get an academic degree. He would be happy to be recognized as a grand art collector and connoisseur, but he is fundamentally a dilettante with a rather superficial knowledge of art and has to hide all his impressionist paintings because their sources are sometimes dubious. He would like to be looked up to and accepted by the powerful of this world on equal terms. At present nobody knows about his background and he is considered a parvenu from the East.

“One could tee off here, but I haven’t the slightest idea how.”

He fell silent. He had gotten tired. He was not used any more to full days with visitors, recounting stories from his life. And – his spirit was broken.

“Let’s meet again. Please – come again to Israel and see me. I would really appreciate it. It’s is so pleasant to talk to you.”

Laszlo’s narration ended. Malcsi and he had flown back to Switzerland two days later.

Into the ensuing silence Schall’s cellphone rang. News from Berlin: he stepped out of the brasserie to listen and talk on the street. It gave Laszlo and me time to let things settle down. He tried to digest what he had recounted and I what I had heard. When Schall came back he looked concerned.

“Bad news,” he said, “I was informed that Kantor is dead. He committed suicide by jumping from his terrace. He didn’t leave a note.”

Laszlo was flabbergasted and looked shocked.

“How can he jump from his terrace? The walls are one and a half meters high. He was an old man and had difficulties standing up from his armchair and walking to the kitchen. How could he climb up this wall?”

“Well,” Schall said, “maybe his two visitors helped him.”

“Which visitors?”

“Two men who left the country some hours later on a flight to Moscow.”

“Why weren’t they stopped and interrogated?”

“The local authorities were not interested. They declared it a suicide. They have only informed the German embassy that a German citizen has died. The funeral has already taken place.”

Schall had his eyes focused on the ceiling and cursed: “My fault.” Then he added: “We got our figures wrong. Kantor was under observation. Perhaps his apartment was bugged, although I doubt it. Most likely somebody, perhaps his housekeeper, has tipped off whomever.

“I don’t think that they will find out that Laszlo visited him, even if they find Laszlo’s telephone number in his address list; they won’t be able to pin a name on the visitor.”

Then he dropped the topic, forlornly.

For a while he seemed to day-dream, then woke up: “But first things first. I would like to take care of a more important task: How

can one establish a close, perhaps confidant relation with a slightly eccentric, reserved, Russian multi-millionaire, a billionaire, who lives reclusively on a huge yacht in the Mediterranean? ”

He didn't answer his question, but immediately stood up, said his farewells and disappeared – back to the airport to return to Berlin: “I want a weekend with my family.”

Annabel and little Nicolas spent the weekend with her parents and left me to sleep as long as I wanted. I did. On Saturday I got up after nine, had breakfast and shortly later a long siesta. I woke up, toying with the idea of a short walk by the river. But after a minute I stood in front of the doors of the Brasserie Orphelin. I went in. Although it was late for dinner, Laszlo was sitting at his usual table, an empty glass of red wine in front of him, making notes on the margin of a newspaper.

“Feel like a nightcap?” “Yes, why not.” He folded his glasses and put them away in their case. Then he looked at me and said: “We seem to be caught between the devil and the deep blue sea. But I just remembered a story I really liked when I was younger, and to which I warmed up because it taught me to wait and see.

“If somebody does you harm and you want to teach him a lesson, don't do it in a rush. Think about it twice. If you still want to strike back after two weeks or a month or a year, start planning. Take your time: looking forward is the best part.”

Then he told me his little story.

“For many years, until their death, Mr. and Mrs. Jones remembered a German prisoner of war who was sent each week to do their garden. He was repatriated at the end of 1945. He always seemed a nice and friendly guy, but when the crocuses came up in the middle of their lawn in February 1946, they spelled out ‘Heil Hitler.’ It was a very elegant way to say farewell to his British hosts. Well planned, surreptitiously done, and then the rogue disappeared into thin air.

“At three o'clock in the morning, when you wake up in darkness and cannot fall asleep again, problems appear insurmountable and new difficulties turn up – an infinite hurdle race. Then you wake up to a sunny morning and all problems are solved easily, they disappeared like the morning mist, as the crocuses did after a while. This gardener is one of my shining examples of how to deal with such misty issues.”

Developing Screenplays

March - mid-May 2006



Taking a Dive

One can be absolutely truthful and sincere
even though admittedly the most outrageous liar.

Henry Miller. Reflections on Writing.

After the weekend Schall launched ‘my’ project. He and his subordinates had done some research and come up with an idea. Schall invited me to Potsdam once more, this time alone.

Once more, we went for a walk in one of the Potsdam parks. Apparently he didn’t want me to meet him at the seat of his *Finance Inspection Services*.

Put in a nutshell, he needed someone for the ‘perception management’, or rather ‘deception management’ of the project, since his secret service was too small for such a venture and thus would have to rely on various independent partners that under no circumstances could be allowed to be let in on the project in its entirety.

So there had to be a public – *white* – part of the operation and an internally manageable *black* part, both of which were to intertwine perfectly. To whom could one outsource some logistic parts of such an operation?

Read
Occident Express
to find out what happened next ...