

**Peter de Chamier**

**BERLIN  
EXPORT**





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Published by TwinTree™, an imprint of TRTF.

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## Important Note

This novel is set in 2004, 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. Hopefully, administrative bodies, political organizations and the media in today's Germany and elsewhere are staffed by proud, honest, and well-educated people different from some of those portrayed herein.

The author has exercised a novelist's right in taking a few liberties necessary for the flow of the plot with incidents and the weather at certain times and places, and the staff structures of the diplomatic, administrative, intelligence and civil services, and armed forces of different countries. The business relations between the former East and West Germany were simplified. At the same time, the author has improved the beauty of Egypt and the former East Germany.

*Honi soit qui mal y pense.*

ISBN: 978-628-01-2720-0 (international)

ISBN: 978-3-7583-1414-8 (distribution by BoD in the DACH countries)

This paperback edition was manufactured and is distributed by Books-on-Demand GmbH (BoD), Norderstedt, Germany. Printed in Germany. Impreso en Alemania.

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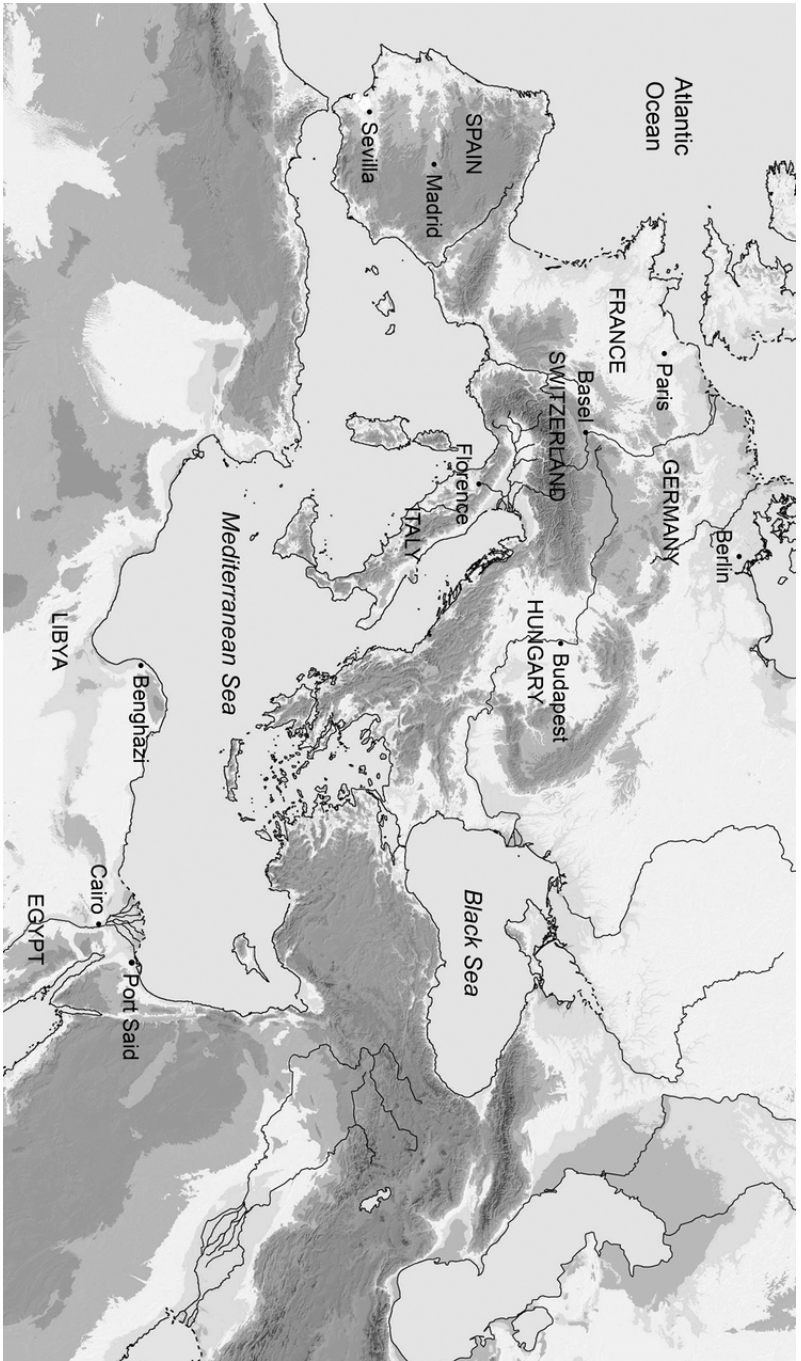
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## Some Words in Advance

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.

Difficile est saturam non scribere.

It is difficult not to write satire.

Juvenal. *Saturae* I, 30.

You may not be able to change the world,  
but at least you can embarrass the guilty.

Jessica Mitford

## Abbreviations

- BFI** Bundesfinanzinspektion – (German) Federal Finance Inspection Services (*fictional*), part of the Federal Ministry of Finance.
- BKA** Bundeskriminalamt – (German) Federal Criminal Police Office.
- BND** Bundesnachrichtendienst – (German) Federal Intelligence Service.
- CIA** Central Intelligence Agency (U.S.A.).
- DHS** Department of Home Security (U.S.A.).
- DIA** Defense Intelligence Agency (U.S.A.), secret service of the US Department of Defense.
- GDR** German Democratic Republic – official name of East Germany between 1949 and 1989.
- MfS** Ministerium für Staatssicherheit – (former East German) Ministry of State Security; also known as *Stasi*.
- 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.

**Breakfast**  
*April 2004*





## Oysters

"It's a very remarkable circumstance, sir", said Sam, "that poverty and oysters always seem to go together."

Charles Dickens: *Pickwick Papers*. Chapter 22.

**I** like oysters, not every day, but occasionally, in leisurely, slow moments. Eating oysters means relaxation to me, like smoking a pipe or having a bottle of a pleasantly robust red wine. You need to take your time to enjoy such moments, and you have to be in the right mood – or you have to wake up in the morning with a hangover. Then a dozen oysters and half a bottle of chilled white wine are a great asset, better than Alka Seltzer or aspirin.

The opulent food emporium of the shopping temple on Berlin's Tauentzien Strasse was virtually empty. Tuesday mornings in April seemed to be a sluggish period not attracting too many customers, more so, because on this particular Tuesday pre-noon the sun had given way to April showers. Within minutes a front of gray-black clouds had taken over the blue spring skies, piled up to high and angrily threatening mountains. Like a herd of galloping horses they raced over the city, loose vapory clouds pushed swiftly by the wind.

Then the rain drifted in. The first fat drops splashed on the ground. Seconds later rain squalls washed over the city. Or as the weather report after the morning radio news had put it: "Westerly winds and occasional heavy showers." A thunder clap stressed it like an exclamation mark.

Laszlo, Malcsi, Annabel and myself had come to Berlin to spend some days seeing the sights and enjoying ourselves. We stayed in a small hotel off Kurfürstendamm, in one of the tree-lined streets that have kept some of the Sally Bowles prewar charm.

Breakfast was served in a glassed-in sidewalk patio with wide bay windows looking out onto the street. We leisurely woke up sipping our coffee while watching the slow-moving morning passing by.

After breakfast we decided to go window shopping on the side streets. We just eluded the looming storm, taking refuge to the entrance of Kaufhaus des Westens, KaDeWe, Berlin's most luxurious department store.

My male travel companion was my neighbor Laszlo Nagy. He was around seventy, occupied the apartment underneath mine in an old tenement building in Basel and engaged in trading with antique prints and books. From what he had told me once 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.

The last time Laszlo had been to Berlin was some twenty-five years before, decades after he had fled Hungary during the uprising of 1956, and years after he had begun to build a new life in the former American zone of occupation of Germany.

Laszlo's personality was a mixture of discretion with casual nonchalance, dignity with wide culture. In the course of our friendship, Laszlo got protective toward me. I guess I had become the son he never had. He gave 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. 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 Swiss ex-Hungarian, and known among friends as Malcsi. She was an art expert, and good at it. 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.

The fourth member of our quartet was Annabel. She was my girlfriend for the better of two years; for some time now we lived together in sin harmonically and cheerfully. She was ten years my younger and worked at the Swiss Bank for Commerce and Credit in Basel in a junior management position. At work, she was diligent, efficient and reliable, but less of a career woman. At home, she was charming,

debonair, sincere, and – like most Swiss – unaware of the terror that the real world holds. She also was a pocket Venus and had some other attributes that fitted nicely in my hands and that I did not want to miss; and a mischievous twinkle in her eye that every time I saw her – even after more than two years – made little butterflies take off in my stomach, a very pleasant feeling.

Recently, her bank, too, had made little butterflies in my stomach, rather unpleasant ones though. It was one of the country's major banks. I had entrusted them my savings of the last years, they had promised to safeguard and augment the money: *We realize your dreams*. The year after their slogan was: *Trust us, we'll do it*. Five years later, the same amount was on my account, the bank had charged a fortune on fees and was paying ever increasing dividends to its shareholders and salaries to its senior officers. That had not been my dream and I did not trust them any more.

What had upset me most was the fact that they had lent my shares to speculators without my knowledge; when I asked my young and bumptious “personal adviser” about it he told me that it was covered in the small print of their terms and conditions of business – *large print giveth, small print taketh away*.

Annabel apologized and explained the luring advertisements of the bank to me. Then she discussed the matter with a colleague of hers who was in charge of the small fry – customers with less than one million Swiss francs on their account. There was an – oral – internal directive: “Milk them!” Or in other words: If somebody wants to borrow shares for short-term speculation, lend them out. Don't tell the owners. Instead, sell them low-interest bonds, tell them it's a safe and interest-producing investment – even if they don't want it.

He also told her things she had not been taught at business school: “Money has neither nationality nor morality. World politics plays no part in who shall be granted deposit privileges in Swiss banks,” he continued. “Politics change like governments but our banking strength lies in secrecy. Bankers form our aristocracy.”

Her colleague finished by stating: “Somebody has to do it – and somebody will do. If it's not us, the Germans or the British, the Americans, the Chinese, or the Israelis will be the bankers. It's better done by us, we possess an innate moral superiority in these matters.”

He belonged to the new class of banksters, who had no scruples to deceive their customers.

Annabel was upset – not about the innate moral superiority; that she took for granted. She had been educated to act in the interest of the customer. Now her world changed: The self-interest of the bank came

first. She hadn't known; she was young and naive; scheming and intrigues were not yet part of her life.

I knew. But I also knew that Switzerland was but a little cog in the worldwide wheel of money.

I changed banks and transferred my little assets to a smaller bank. Hopefully they will cheat me less. Annabel stayed with her bank – what should she do?

My name is Jack Boulder, age 36, height six foot two or 1.85 meters, weight 80 kilos, black hair on my chest, light brown on my head. I live in Switzerland, travel with a Canadian passport, and earn my bread as a consultant – usually for clients interested in clear and unquestionable results in subtle and delicate affairs, governments included.

I was born in Chile, but, for periods, when I was a small boy, my family's domicile was in Canada. My parents came from Europe. At home, we spoke English, French, German, and Spanish – as it came.

I was brought up open-minded – and told to seize the day, if possible. Deception and aggressiveness were not prime values in our family. “Tough luck to you” is not my kind of approach to life.

There are some things that really matter to me: I try to be honest and kind. I value my independence and tenacity, and I expect this from others too – but I am also very prone to accept what others tell me, blue-eyed and often deceived; the values of the world are different. I am well aware of it, often skeptical, but have not reached the age of resignation and cynicism – yet.

In my days at university and afterwards I was a young man of slender means. My adolescent dream was to become a private banker. Thus, I studied economic sciences before I strayed off to the occupation that feeds me today.

Many people believe – in earnest – that economics is a science and point out that there is even a Nobel Prize in Economics. It took me some time to discover the prevarication of truth: There is no Nobel Prize in Economics. There is Sweden's Central Bank's Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel, established and funded by the financiers of that bank. They probably had flirted with the idea of a Nobel Prize – and bought one for themselves from the Nobel Foundation, cash or bribery. Economics is all about money and studying people in the ordinary business of life.

In former times a banker was a distinguished man, a gentleman. He was the owner or the co-owner of the bank, not an employee. I saw myself sitting in an office full of antique furniture, wearing the old-

fashioned outfit of a banker: black and gray striped trousers, sharp crease, double-breasted black jacket and vest with a golden watch chain, bowler hat and black umbrella. I would pay close attention to my employees, weigh their opinions, intelligence reports, and advice – an unperturbed master of the art and patience of listening. I did not want to make fast money but build up an honest business made for decades – as my grandfather had done it in another field.

At that time I took it for granted that being honest, resourceful, and supporting the benefit of mankind could be based on the principle of pleasure. I did not know that banking is all about deceiving. Meanwhile I don't believe in black suits for work any more. I believe in honorable public-spirited hedonism, a kind of respectable intelligent egoism – selfishness with applied brakes. This latter perception of hedonism dates back to my childhood.

Sometimes, when we did not fly to Europe for our summer vacations, we spent the holidays at the Atlantic coast, mostly on Prince Edward Island – by the Gulf of St. Lawrence, south of the enormous estuary of the St. Lawrence river into the North Atlantic.

Beyond the miles of sandy beaches, the low hilly country of the island undulated toward the horizon, changing from green to yellow as the summer passed. Potato fields and lush pastures with herds of black-and-white Holsteins covered large parts of the island – and did not have much appeal for me. The strawberry fields, however, I found very attractive.

Although we idled away a lot of time at our summer home playing, staring into the flames of the fireplace, or reading when the days were foggy and stormy, I remember the skies of Prince Edward Island always blue.

My preferred whereabouts was by the sea. With friends or alone I spent the days roaming the endless beaches, clam bucket in one hand, clam shovel in the other, turning digging clams into a sport. The clear waters along the shore were awash with them. At high tide they were covered in water and hidden from us, but walking on the beach near the edge of the water at low tide we could spot the holes where the clams burrowed into the sand or mud and fed as long as they were covered by the sea.

Squashing the sand around the holes with our bare feet made them squirt water out their hole – and divulged where to dig for them.

I collected them by the bucket and carried them home. My mother's favorite clam dish was New England clam chowder, a thickened, whitish soup with chopped clams, fried salt pork, potatoes, onions and

celery, and a mixture of non-skimmed milk and heavy cream. I did not like milk at all, but I made an exception in milk converted into a soup with my own clams.

Oyster beds had their attraction too, mostly because oysters might contain pearls; treasure hunting holds an irresistible fascination for small boys, incomprehensible for most adults. Usually, however, the oysters were out of reach, in the deeper waters of small river mouths and inlets. Sometimes, however, I came across shell beds only half a meter deep. At other times I could pick them at low tide in shallow waters. Their color was a mixture of brown, gray, green, and white, and I could not decide which color was the most reliable clue for pearls. I never found an oyster with a spotless pearl – only some cripples.

Searching for pearls, I had taught myself how to open oysters. It was a rather difficult task, but I developed some skill rapidly.

Shucking oysters requires practice to do it just right. Ideally one uses a specialized oyster knife. My grandfather in Switzerland had given me one of those red Swiss army knives. I used the can opener to pry apart the powerful muscle sealing the two shells at their hinge, finding out that a can opener is able to create huge bleeding wounds when it hits the ball of one's thumb. Since I could not be stopped in my treasure hunts, my mother gave me a glove and a proper oyster shucking knife.

I did not eat oysters for a long time, I thought them unappetizing and revolting. In general, boys – and as I found out later, the rest of the population – don't like the taste and consistency of oysters at the first go.

The first oyster costs quite an effort.

But after a dozen I got accustomed, even more, I liked them.

We could wander by the sea for days. We never got bored combing the miles of shoreline for mussels, clams, oysters; we had the enormous beach supermarket and the untold stories of flotsam and jetsam for ourselves: boxes, wooden beams, shells, colorful pebbles and polished glass pieces of broken bottles, and sometimes even life savers washed ashore.

I suppose, one cannot afford to throw away one's childhood, but – as time goes by and one gets older – Berlin's extravagant wine and dine museum that we just had entered, with its profusion of foodstuffs of any imaginable kind from the four corners of the earth, could easily replace my childhood's beach supermarket.

Yet, the grown-up is nothing but a mask. The seacoast of the Canadian Maritime Provinces with all its surprises was still dear to me and I missed it; I loved walking these beaches for miles in my bare feet. But with age different, new, and expensive desires open up.

Clams I could not find in Berlin. Mussels, however, were for sale – and variations of oysters from many countries, easy to get at, enticingly presented – and, entering these halls, my mother was not standing by the door telling me to shake the sand out of my shoes before coming in.

The department store's oyster bar was made of artificial stone, curving crescent-shaped in a gentle S. It was located in the periphery of the many merging halls of the food bazaar, at the beginning of a wide corridor with seafood: live fish in tanks, dead on ice, processed or readily prepared ones waiting for their customers.

In between stood the accessories to indulge, most of all fitting wines, white, rosé, and champagnes.

Real men have white wine with oysters.

We found four stools and ordered three dozen French oysters, *fines de claire*, tangy and salty, together with a bottle of cold white wine, Sancerre from the Loire river. Annabel held back; not with the Sancerre, but with the oysters. Perhaps she was going to sample one of mine – perhaps not.

I initiated her into the mysteries of the oyster. “An oyster must not be dead. A squeeze of lemon, a drop of vinegar, or a prick with your fork: if it responds to that it is alive.” Annabel gave me an incredulous look, aghast, with her eyes wide open.

At this point the devil got into me and I continued with further detail: “You feel the live oyster's body still pulsating as you suck it in and it passes your lips. You have to swallow it slowly and accompany it mentally, while it slides down the gullet into your stomach. You sense how it contracts and expands.”

“You make me sick,” her incredulity turned into revulsion. “You are mad. Why should I eat anything like that?”

I explained it to her.

“It's power food for power women. Your natural resistance increases. Your mood improves. Women in the menopause feel better. Oysters smooth and rejuvenate the skin. Your performance – if you know what I mean – increases after eating oysters.”

Skeptically she looked at me, biting her lower lip. Then she said:

“Pass them over before I enter the climacteric.”

She wrinkled her nose, when she swallowed the first one. It was obvious that she was disgusted at the very thought of ingesting. But she did not stop. After she had put away another couple, she said:

“Tastes of sea.”

Attitudes in life can change fast. Now she was corrupted. She had crossed the threshold and changed sides, from the enemy camp into the camp of the supporters:

“Oysters? Always!” It was a pleasure just to be alive.

Laszlo and Malcsi were sitting quietly next to us and enjoyed the children being absorbed in their play. I had watched Laszlo from the corner of my eye. He had a sense for savage practical jokes as I had found out earlier, but since he had slurped his oysters with apparent delight I was sure that one of those jokes was not in store just now.

“You seem to like oysters?” I wondered.

He nodded and responded: “All good friends of the fine arts are also friends of the culinary delights.”

This answer stopped me in the tracks. I focused him.

“I bet you had prepared this response long before I even had thought about the question.”

“I know you pretty well. I knew that you would ask it, sooner or later.”

That was like him: First he challenged me, then he made fun of me – however, something else excited my interest.

“Where did you learn to relish oysters – growing up in an impoverished landlocked country like Hungary?”

I paused.

“Of course, I should have thought so – when you were young, Hungary’s president was an admiral.”

He gave a little chuckle. “I do not think that Horthy, an admiral without fleet, seduced the population, or me at an innocent preschool age to indulge in oysters. He had other things in mind. I got accustomed to oysters twenty years later in Paris.”

“As a tourist in France?”

“No, young man, I was active and lived in Paris for quite some time. I didn’t have a shop, I bought and sold printed art of any kind at auctions or elsewhere.”

I really would have liked to know which kind of “printed art” he was talking about and where “elsewhere” was, but this was neither the time nor the place to go into details.

“This opens up new horizons – Laszlo living the French life in France. I thought you had come from Hungary to Germany and –

years later – as a new man with a new Hungarian identity emigrated to Switzerland – and your national dish is goulash.”

“Wrong. In between I spent some time in France. I even became a French citizen, chanting with great emotion, tears in my eyes, that bloodthirsty song: *'To the arms, citizens! Form your battalions! Let us march! May the impure blood soak our fields!'* The Marseillaise has a beautiful melody, but the lyrics have not kept up with times and democratic thinking. By the way, the French dedicated their national anthem to a German – Count Luckner. Still, I liked being French – earlier, during my times in Germany, I never applied for a German passport.”

Malcsi just smiled. She showed no surprise. I knew Laszlo quite intimately for some years, but apparently there were more layers to his life than I had ever imagined.

At this moment my cellphone rang and interrupted our interchange. I shouldn't have carried it with me. But you always think you might miss something in life.

Dr. Engel from the German Foreign Office called. He asked me whether we could meet in Berlin the next day.

Accidentally, I said, I was in Berlin.

“What a lucky coincidence. We would like to request your services,” he replied. “Perhaps we could meet somewhere quiet since I cannot discuss it with you on the phone.”

Dr. Engel was my contact at the German Foreign Office in those cases when they wanted me to take care of something. I was one of their independent consultants, a freelancer, and was offered jobs none of the civil servants wanted or was able to perform, for instance negotiating the release of German tourists taken hostage somewhere in the world when the Foreign Ministry did not want to be officially involved. Several years ago somebody had recommended my services, I had been successful, and since then they returned to me every so often.

Many people abducted abroad were secretly ransomed by the Foreign Office. Most of the times these stories did not reach the media. Whenever possible they were suppressed.

We arranged a meeting in the early afternoon.



## Ice Tea, Diplomatic Style

The youth of the present day are quite monstrous.  
They have absolutely no respect for dyed hair.

Oscar Wilde

When we left the department store, the storm had vanished and the city was bathed in bright afternoon sunshine. The sky was blue and almost completely clear as if nothing had happened. Only the puddles on the sidewalks and streets reminded us of the downpour an hour ago.

Annabel proposed to walk to the Foreign Office, but Laszlo pointed out that the distance was too far, even for a leisurely stroll. Thus, we took the bus to Brandenburg Gate and continued by foot.

To me, the wide, open thoroughfare of Unter den Linden boulevard used to be the epitome of Berlin's unsightliness, a lifeless wide canyon of buildings in somber brown and gray stone, formerly dilapidated, now restored, emanating castrated dictatorial terror, now staring apathetically at the passing people. It gave me a very uneasy feeling, a strange foreboding of coming ill. All of a sudden Laszlo admitted sympathizing with me, describing similar sentiments.

“There are idyllic districts in Berlin, even in the close vicinity, but the buildings of Unter den Linden and beyond are rejecting, repulsive; there is no architectural attraction. Fortunately there are the trees to cover the lack of cheerfulness. The last time I passed by here, the fronts of the buildings were pitted with shrapnel – gutted Prussian grandeur under Communist German administration.

“Today you see that there is prosperity. The holes are filled, the façades new, of flat and faceless glass, but there is no transparency. To me it still has the aura of the shadow-frontier between the two Berlins, East and West, and the two Germanies, Nazi terror and the open-mindedness of other parts of Berlin. It’s just painted over, as is much of the German mind.”

“I do not know about the German mind,” Malcsi objected, “but I know about the rapid change of what seemed an immutable progress – or standstill – of history. Sometimes I believe we are dreaming a curious dream. For you and me Hungarian life was a struggle, even life afterwards in Switzerland for me was a fight, eking out a living was hard. I have the feeling that for the younger generation life is heavenly nowadays although they don’t seem to realize it.”

Laszlo ran his eyes over the people on the sidewalk pouring out of the gloomy railroad overpass of Friedrich Strasse train station.

“They are better dressed than in East Berlin in the late 1970’s, but today’s younger generation is not very particular about their appearance, neither the women – what I find appalling – nor the men: razor-cropped heads, rings in the ears, barn jackets, baggy grandfather slacks or worker’s pants or jeans, worn and wrinkled, clumsily styled and cut, in dingy colors, and torn shoes; parka hoods tightly pulled around their faces.

They don’t look smartly dressed, to say nothing of elegance; joyless faces, sexless figures, Babbitts disguised as proletarians. They don’t attach great importance to proper and clean looking clothes. Even the Young Turks, the Masters of Business Administration look repelling with their bestubbed faces in Mafia-styled suits.”

Annabel did not agree at all.

“Why? That’s the fashion – groovy clothes. Casual or cool young executive: dark suit, dark blue shirt, dark tie. Easygoing. Loose. Enjoying life. Berlin is where the action is. People have a wild time here. Berlin is cosmopolitan!”

She was happy in Berlin, she loved the boulevards and the alleys, the parks, the museums, the theaters, the cafés, the babel of languages, and the blunt directness of the original Berliners – rude and at the same time friendly.

“Here and there, perhaps,” Laszlo said, but he did not sound convinced. “It’s not my generation and being poor does not necessarily mean tasteless and dirty – on the contrary,” he added.

Malcsi rubbed him slightly on the shoulder. The slight tension between us faded away. Laszlo was dressed like a Hungarian country squire, the complete Eastern Central European gentleman, coming to

town. The tweed jacket suited him, though his tie with brown stripes in different hues was not exactly to my taste. Compared to the majority of youngsters, and to some of the elderly he looked completely overdressed.

We did not fit the crowd, we were easily recognizable as foreigners.

We were to meet Dr. Engel at the coffee shop of the Foreign Office, a kind of espresso bar in the corner of the huge entrance hall, with simple, modern, almost minimalist furnishing, stools and benches without backrests in the café itself – and a handful of tables outside the café by the glass front inside the huge covered hall of the atrium – more comfortable, but not suited for a longer sojourn.

Some tables were occupied; respectably dressed gentlemen in coat and tie had a quiet chat with visitors whom they did not want tramping through their offices or were too lazy or too reluctant to steer through the security checks into the central parts of the building.

Annabel ordered a glass of ice tea; it contained a reddish, strange tasting liquid. “When I was young,” she said, “ice tea had a different flavor.”

“You are in East Berlin,” I explained her jestingly. “Here the former West-Germans underpay the former East-Germans, or those they take for East-Germans – even in the Foreign Office – and things taste differently.”

Laszlo and Malcsi did not want to drink anything, but they found the entrance hall fascinating, a glass-encaved courtyard, intended to be a visiting center for the public.

From a distance, they watched intently the exhibits and the people who had stopped by to look at an art show installed in the middle of the hall: paintings from Brazil. The pictures were hanging from mobile display walls used for rotating exhibitions.

Laszlo was all enthused.

“This is a tailor-made place for presenting art,” he pointed out. “It is a not too big place, yet inviting, with open access. Many people with a fear of the unknown who never go to an exhibition will come in here, because they can see from the outside what they are going to face. The big glass doors beckon to passersby – and the security control adds a little flavor of adventure.”

To me, it was another building planned and designed by egomaniac architects with their hunger for a sterile world of blandness.

At the very moment Malcsi and Laszlo were going to move over to the exhibition, Dr. Engel appeared from the interior through a passage between the displays. He had the pale face of Berliners in the winter;

the rings under his eyes were deeper and darker than when I had seen him the last time.

He greeted my companions in a politely detached manner with some kind phrases, finally apologizing:

“You might find our meeting a little dull.”

He turned to me: “Perhaps your friends would like a cup of coffee in the meantime? We should take a short walk outside.”

They understood the hint and sat down at one of the tables. Dr. Engel took me by the arm and steered me around the entrance control to the exit. As usual he was under stress and wanted to get it over with – a thickset man in his mid-fifties in a smart business suit, a man in a hurry. I could do nothing but fall in step beside him.

Engel was one of those tight-lipped, humorless people in the civil service who lived in a curious formal world, turning red tape into a fine art if he considered it advantageous to himself, avoiding making any decisions of his own whenever possible – although he liked to play with his limited power, and, most likely, jingling with medals and decorations the mandarins of the Foreign Offices of this world awarded to each other.

“Strictly speaking, it's not me who wants to talk to you, but Dr. Schall. He did not want to contact you directly; therefore he asked me to call you.”

So, once more they use you as an errand boy, I thought but kept a straight face. One could see and hear it, his offhand tone of voice was unconvincing – he did not appreciate being the messenger. It did not tally with his self-image.

I had got to know Dr. Schall some time ago. His real name was Rauch and he worked for one of the smaller German secret services, innocuously dubbed the Bundesfinanzinspektion, BFI, or Federal Finance Inspection Services. Few were aware of its existence and whoever heard that name would presume that the service was part of the Federal Ministry of Finance, which it was, perhaps a control board, which it wasn't, but hardly anybody knew what its employees did in reality.

Even I had only an inkling as to what their assigned business was, although I had traveled for Schall and his company.

Without any encouragement and unknown to me the foreign ministry had passed – basically procured – me to Schall at one of my assignments two years ago, obviously on his request; and, thus, one morning I woke up in an environment of spooks.

I performed well for Schall; but after my return home I had conducted an extensive *post-mortem* on my mistake falling for him. I had

learnt a lesson: avoid secret services at all costs. Once in their clutches, it is nearly impossible to escape.

Schall usually played his cards very close to his chest and never dropped a word about the tasks and duties of his service – but it seemed to be small and functioning quite well. His service was not one of those selling snippets to the politicians in government to prove how important and efficient it was.

I still had *carte blanche* with him and a sort of fool's license. Once I had asked him: “Are you inspecting other people's finances?”

Dryly he answered:

“That's another way to phrase it.”

I would have liked to ask him why he was working in intelligence – principles, persuasion, personality? Usually time, tides, and title change one's originally upright character irrevocably; but he seemed different and not corrupted by power, but being firm and unalterable. I should have disliked Schall, given the differences in our outlook on life – and yet, I didn't.

I took him for the head of the BFI, or – if he was not its director-general – he held a fairly independent leading position, able to make *ad hoc* decisions of his own. His outfit used to be stationed in Bonn, but for some years now the BFI was located in Potsdam outside the city gates of Berlin in an oversized manor house that, until their departure, had served as an officers' club of the Soviet Army of Occupation in Germany.

It just disappeared into the overabundance of small, scattered government agencies and foundations inside and in the outskirts of Berlin and Potsdam.

Dr. Engel brought me back from my dreams. I had been quiet for some time, lost in thoughts and had not responded to his request. Mutual incomprehensibility was total; he must have concluded that I did not want to meet Schall.

With a ghost of a smile he tried to assuage my non-existing opposition.

“I know, we owe you, Herr Boulder, surely, we owe you. However, you should consider to see Dr. Schall.”

I looked up and nodded consent. He sounded as if I had behaved badly in some way and now had been forgiven. No doubt, they owed me, but I wondered what Dr. Engel knew about it. Schall wouldn't have told him anything. Engel just tried to pump me.

I went along with his remark without commenting it. All the stranger it must have appeared to him when I responded.

“Basically, I am looking forward to meeting Dr. Schall.”

When Dr. Engel and I returned to the Foreign Office building, my three companions had just ordered another cup of coffee. I asked them to be patient with me and apologized that I had another meeting.

They were not upset, it even seemed to suit them.

“Let’s walk back to Französische Strasse, it’s just ten minutes from here. Twenty-five years ago I had lunch at a restaurant. It still exists. I wonder whether it’s really so much worse than during communist times as people say. We’ll have a snack there and a cup of coffee – and then back to the hotel to take an afternoon nap.”

When I walked by the glass front of the building on my way to find a taxi, I saw that Laszlo and Dr. Engel were in a lively conversation, Dr. Engel, Malcsi and even Annabel all smiles.

I wondered what this was about.



## Artificial Ingredients

Soon we will be sliding down the razor blade of life.

Tom Lehrer. Bright College Days.

An hour later I found Dr. Schall in one of the restaurants of Hackesche Höfe, a restored web of eight courtyards. The complex of buildings was a prime example of *art nouveau*, built just outside the very center of the old city shortly after the turn of the last century, a mixture of offices, workshops, small stores, restaurants, cinemas, and apartments.

At the entrance to the restaurant two burgundy ceiling-to-floor curtains formed a small vestibule to keep the elements at bay – cold, wind and rain. The restaurant was a long room, with a bar stretched down one side. In mid-afternoon the place was nearly empty and quiet.

Schall had chosen an isolated corner table next to a small podium that inexplicably flaunted a sofa with red flowers on it behind an egg-shaped cast-iron bistro table. He sat there alone and rose to his feet when he saw me enter and shook hands with me – a hard hand with a firm, but tender grip. Then he interrupted a waiter laying tables for the expected evening crowd and ordered two glasses of red wine and some nuts.

Voices drifted in from the entry; he looked nervously to the door, but nobody came in. He gestured for me to sit by the wall and settled down with his back to the door and the other guests.

I reckoned Schall being some fifteen, perhaps even twenty years older than me; he had dark hair, graying at the temples, and was slender and agile. Everything about him was kind and gentle, still he looked full of energy – and not to be played with.

“I am pleased to see you again.”

He meant it – his eyes revealed it – and smiled friendly. He seemed to have a liking for me.

“How is the offspring?” I asked.

He was perfectly content: “The little one grows and thrives. He will be three soon. I just can repeat what I told you earlier: Produce a boy too – it would do you good. My little one is a sun ray in my life.”

Occasionally this had crossed my mind, but daily routine had swallowed it – other things had taken priority. I’ll propose it to Annabel, I thought. Perhaps she likes the idea.

However, Schall was not keen on making light conversation; his late contribution to mankind was not the center of his thoughts. They were elsewhere. He came to the point without further delay, as if driven by a hidden pressure.

“We have received two corpses from Cairo, stuffed with dollar bricks.”

I winced slightly. The transition from one topic to the other was rather graceless; the tenor of the conversation changed too fast for my taste – his remark did not fit the peaceful contemplativeness of the afternoon. I had learnt to grapple with grotesque situations; years of contact with all sorts of people, many of them incoherent, had taught me. So I gave him an inquiring look because I could not establish a connection. Were the dead men addressed to him, a label hanging from their big toe with his address written on it? How was he linked to these corpses and what about the money? On my inner eye I saw two open corpses, dollars gushing from their cut-open abdomen.

I emptied my glass.

Schall was not in a joking mood, I saw it, but quite serious.

I checked with him: “What a strange consignment. Bricks?”

“Yes.” “Building bricks I know, dollar bricks I don’t.”

“One brick was twenty times one-hundred 100-dollar notes strapped together, in other words 200,000 dollars. The weight is slightly less than two kilos. Altogether the transport contained one million dollars in cash, nicely vacuum-packed and not spoiled by body fluids.”

“That’s news to me, but one learns. And what do you mean by: *We have received*?”

“Both corpses were on a scheduled German Airlines flight from Cairo, one body from Hurghada, the other one from Sharm-el-Sheik,

two elderly German gentlemen who had died in these places two or three days earlier. The German Airlines night course leaves Dubai at midnight local time, stops over in Cairo some three hours later, and arrives at Frankfurt in the morning. It's the night flight picking up dead Germans from all over Egypt."

I looked at him, but could not read anything from his face.

"By the institutions in charge it's being treated as part of organized terrorism," he said. "The deduction is easy and clear: Terrorists don't have bank accounts. They need cash. They tried to smuggle in the money for a major coup."

He was staring down into the surface of the table as if his eyes could suck out an answer to his – and my – unasked questions. He seemed to talk to himself and carried on in his train of thoughts.

"We are not in charge. Terrorism – I beg you. Somebody wants to make us believe that there is a terrorist connection. It might be a message. I wonder a message to whom? But the *modus operandi* is too complicated, too sophisticated."

"What do you believe?"

"That their primary intention was not to smuggle money into Germany. There are easier ways."

He ran a fingertip round the rim of his wineglass.

"For instance, a bank transfer," I proposed. He did not show any interest in my suggestion.

"Seriously now," I reasoned. "Perhaps somebody uses the terrorist hysteria for his own purposes. It might not be as capricious as you see it. Don't think complicated, think easy. See it as an artless message, bland mental food, to naive people with simple minded brains to throw them off the scent of something else. Who would derive an advantage from riding the 'fight-the-terrorists' wave?"

He looked up, smiled, tilted his chair and started rocking back and forth. "That could be an explanation."

When I was a child I was forbidden to do that.

He must have seen it in my gaze. He stopped.

"I know a chair is no rocking horse. And I might break my neck when the hind legs collapse. I might break my neck anyway."

He rumbled his hair with both hands, his head to the front, his eyes turned toward the table again.

"Let's go back to the facts – the Egyptian connection: Hundreds of thousands of German tourists spend their holidays in Egypt every year – mostly on package tours. Nearly every day the body of a German tourist is flown out of Egypt, in most cases from one of the major tourist centers such as Hurghada or Sharm-el-Sheik, but also out of

Luxor and Assuan, sometimes directly out of Cairo. Accidents are daily occurrences; besides many tourists are old and sick, they want to escape the rain and cold of Germany and die in the heat of Egypt.

“Any dead body from Egypt and from some other countries in the Middle East is first flown to Cairo; from there they are forwarded to Frankfurt in special caskets. Anything added to the body would attract attention in Cairo. Tourism is the big business of the country. The Egyptians are careful in this respect. Egypt might be very corrupt, but it is also a dictatorship.”

“Can't one dodge their controls?”

“We have checked – it would be very difficult. Of course, nothing is impossible, we cannot be sure. In reality, however, the transport of goods in corpses out of Egypt is a hopeless venture.

“For safety and security reasons they are inspected before and after the flight – both the Egyptians and the Germans x-ray the coffins. In some cases, the special transport caskets used are changed in Cairo and in Frankfurt.”

“Then, why turn to me?”

“For the boys in green at Frankfurt airport, the customs and police guys, this was a routine case. The traffickers tried and failed. Why should they try such an unsafe route?” He looked up.

“My colleagues in Frankfurt lack imagination. For them it's clear: Egypt – Islam – terrorism: as simple as that. That means that they are not in charge – or don't want to be in charge.

“Both local police and customs do not think it's appropriate to inquire further – nor does the district attorney. They don't want to 'waste' staff and money on useless investigations. They say that they are understaffed and overworked. They called in BKA and BND, because it's a federal criminal police and secret service problem.”

With one fast gulp, he emptied half of his glass. The wine was Italian, cherry red, a very pleasant afternoon wine.

“Somebody else must love this outcome. I wonder who.”

“I believe somebody is drawing a red herring across the path,” I said.

Schall sat back on his chair. “Yes, it makes one wonder, doesn't it? I also think there is a twist to it,” he said slowly swallowing his wine.

When I first met him, I had noticed Schall having a kind of sixth sense for dodgy affairs. He was smelling a rat somewhere, something he could not quite put his finger on.

Moreover he did not have the authority to demand or order further investigations locally.

This was why he had wanted to see me.

“A friend of mine is a forensic pathologist in Frankfurt. I only know about this case because he called me. We don't regularly deal directly with drug, arms or any other kind of trafficking. He had gotten suspicious because the two corpses had been treated completely different from what he usually sees when he is asked to perform autopsies of bodies from Egypt. When he told this to the Frankfurt district attorney, he got a shrug for an answer. Then he gave me a ring.”

“Does he know what you are and what you are doing?”

“Yes. Sometimes we use him as a consultant. He told me that the bodies were most likely not embalmed by local people, but by American specialists with a background in trauma cases and decomposing bodies – to be transported over very long distances.”

“Let me get this straight: You hint that somehow American military personnel is involved. That's a far fetched hypothesis. Let's not leap to conclusions we cannot back up. Excuse me for what I am going to say – the manner dead Americans are preserved is not different from Europeans or Arabs, is it?”

“Oh yes, it is. Americans have turned embalming into big business, and because of this it has become an applied art or even a science in the United States. They have developed their own routines that are different from European and Asians; by the way, Muslims and Jews ...”

I interrupted him:

“Muslims do not allow embalming, as far as I know.”

“Correct,” Schall responded, “and Jews only at special occasions. But these two bodies were preserved by one or several persons with special knowledge; most likely not Arabs. My friend went a step further.

“He assumes that both corpses were prepared and embalmed by somebody in the military. Ever since he could remember the US Army has special embalming units, he said. US troops are stationed and fall all over the world. They have to be returned to their families in a presentable condition. Americans are very picky about it.”

He emptied his glass, turned around and signaled to the waiter: two more glasses. He was edgy and held his hands loosely clasped on the table. He wants to play with the glass, I thought.

But he took a small nut instead and split it into small pieces while he continued.

“More so, the logistic work behind it is admirable,” he continued.

“What do you mean by that?”

“The first body must have been preserved in Hurghada, the other one in Sharm-el-Sheik, a distance of eight hundred or a thousand kilometers. Both were treated similarly. The internal organs were re-

moved, the chest cavity and the abdomen emptied and filled with these double-sealed plastic bags, the remainder with cotton cloths, Egyptian cotton by the way. Then the body was stitched together, from the outside it looked like a regular postmortem scar. The rest of the body was carefully preserved with embalming fluid injected into the main arteries, at typical injections sites, as it is done by well-trained American morticians.

“At the same time it had to be secured that both corpses were transported to Germany simultaneously. They had to be flown to Cairo and transferred to the plane to Frankfurt, usually a night flight.

“Whoever arranged it must have bypassed the x-ray control in Cairo and got the two caskets on the German plane without further check. You need an extremely well functioning network to organize all that – in Egypt of all places.”

Schall was right. The transport had required a massive organization in the background.

“Your colleagues in Frankfurt must be aware of that.”

“I completely share that opinion of yours,” he said with a note of scorn in his voice – or was there an undertone of retained anger?

I still did not see where I entered his scheming – and scheming he was. Although he had presented but bare facts to me I could not untangle his drifting lines of thought. What was all this leading up to? Smuggling was not my business.

“All I want to know is who got the two corpses on the German Airlines plane.”

“I don't speak Arabic and don't have any contacts in Hurghada, Sharm-el-Sheik or Cairo – if I start snooping around, their police or secret service will find out within minutes. And the rest of the mob will know about it at the same time.

“No, thank you. It is too dangerous and doomed to failure. It's a lot better to employ an Arabic speaking agent who is familiar with the local conditions.”

“We don't have any.”

In our times you should, I contemplated quietly. I guess he was only too well aware of that. I restrained myself from even mentioning the thought and simply asked:

“And your Egyptian counterparts?”

“I don't want to cooperate with my German colleagues – let alone with foreigners. I want and need to have people I have every confidence in. Anyhow, you don't have to speak Arabic. I bet no Arabs are directly involved. The puppet masters in control of the play are European and American. Arabs only act in supporting roles.”

He looked up for a second and into my eyes, sincerely begging me:  
“Please, do me the favor, look around in Cairo, will you? We'll cover and protect you.”

“As a tourist?”

“No. We'll send you with a government delegation to the Middle East next week. The Minister of Public Safety and Internal Security will travel to the Middle East. Everything is already arranged. You are a guest of the German government. That's a rather discreet entrée to Egypt and will open the right doors without arousing suspicion. You can masquerade under the guise of a Canadian journalist, as you have done before, can't you?”

He left the sentence in the air, his eyes expectantly trained on me for any sign of acceptance or rejection. Was it more than a question? He seemed not quite sure about my reaction – and I was wary. He smiled, seeking my consent.

I had traveled in that whimsical guise, but not for them – for my personal gratification, on my own business – basically to hide from them and their colleagues.

“The last time when I was on the road for you in Russia, you did not explain all implications to me, just to describe politely what happened. I prefer to get all background information. It might guarantee my survival – and the only one responsible for that is me. I have become very cautious.”

His smile was still there; it was assuring although he did not look into my face any more. Meanwhile he nursed his red wine glass between thumb and forefinger, as I had foreseen, peering into it as if he could read the future at its bottom.

“This time I really do not know more.”

He left it like that without further explanation, but, as if he wanted to apologize, he lifted his hands off the table. He sounded sincere, not taking subterfuge.

Very probably he did not know more, but perhaps he suspected something?

I thought of two open coffins with two disfigured corpses inside.

Should I trust him? Could I trust him?

The last time he hadn't kept me in the loop.

I took my time to contemplate. “I would allege,” I finally said, trying to build a strong sentence, “I would allege that you just want to butter me up, yet, frankly, I know you to be honest – as honest as your profession allows.

“On the other hand,” I confided in him, “you have this laid-back persuasiveness of the habitual liar.”

He smiled at my reply looking at me directly. His eyes were in mine, untwisting the strings of my thoughts.

“Never mind. And, by the way,” I added, “my Canadian press card is a fake.”

It was a rather lame argument – I realized that immediately. I was never any good at making an exit after presenting my position and point of view.

“I do mind. However, that does not matter. You'll get a genuine one from us. It goes with the business.”

I wondered what went with the business: lying or faking documents, or both – most likely far beyond that. Instead of asking I murmured something about spooks what he took for agreement because he said:

“We have people to watch and protect you, and – as you have already found out two years ago – they are well-trained professionals. However, my people can't do this job, nor can I, nor our, say, 'correspondent' in Cairo. I do not have anybody and I do not know of anybody of your caliber, talent and international background.”

I was stunned and speechless. Never had I heard somebody singing my praises like that. It was more than buttering me up. Basically I was ashamed. I rated my talents not as that vast – but, in general, I doubted many things about myself. The impression I gave seemed different.

“You got a number of useful abilities, and a particular one in addition – making yourself amiable to and liked by complete strangers, foreigners at that, who do not know you. I want you to be an onlooker, a spectator. Stay in the background. Just watch without becoming involved or participating. Then tell me what you have seen.”

He emptied his wine and continued fidgeting with the stem of the glass.

“Let me introduce you to somebody.”

He turned around and gave a little cough. The waiter looked up, but simultaneously a man appeared from behind the curtain at the entrance door and nodded at Schall and me.

Somebody *had* come in earlier.

“Meet Helmut Tal.”

Tal was a handsome man with a bronzed and gentle young face. He looked athletic and tough. His fair hair was already graying. I always look at the hands; his were expressive – with a touch of cruelty.

He was to be my “Watson” in the future, according to Schall's decision and wish, my contact, perhaps friend, confidante and, if necessary, bodyguard. My first fleeting glimpse of Tal was that of a capable, honest guy with zeal and intelligence, no fool, more the stockbroker type, planning and calculating.

For me it was good to know that there was a back-up; it would make my decision easier.

“Let’s meet again tomorrow; at that point I’ll be able to fill you in on the missing details.”

Schall nodded to Tal and rose from his seat.

With a question in his face he looked at me.

I nodded, accepting his proposal. “Yes.”

The adventure tempted me – as did the exceptional pay Schall proposed – and I had to support my new small Swiss bank. Yet, once more I had the feeling I was becoming involved in something in spite of myself. My instinct told me: No. I had promised myself that it would never happen again; now it was going to happen. I was irritated with myself for not staying with my resolution.

How would Annabel react? I could not take her with me.

When I did not work from home I traveled in Switzerland and Germany most of the time, perhaps in other countries of Europe – and would be back in Basel for the weekend, the latest. I had kept it like that since we lived together. Going to the Middle East was another story.

She wouldn’t like it, nor did I, somewhere in my stomach. On the other hand, she would not complain; it was my profession, my bread-winning.

The hissing, spluttering and gurgling of the espresso machine in the background of the restaurant reminded me of a person being very sick. I should have been more attentive – perhaps it wanted to hint at something, a sign and a portent, a coded Morse telegram from God.

Thoughtfully I returned to our hotel.

Only a small night table lamp shed some subdued, indirect light on the vast bed. Annabel was hidden in the piles of pillows, heaped around her like a mound.

She was sleeping deeply.

I went into the shower and, toweling myself dry, came into the bedroom just at the moment when she woke up, yawned and told me lazily: “Let’s have some more oysters, but first ...”

She added another proposition, a rather indecent one at that.

Usually she conveyed complete innocence, today there was a cheerful animal magnetism in her. I sat down on the edge of the bed. She crawled over, propped herself up on one elbow and pressed her face into my back. I felt her damp lips and the tip of her tongue on my skin.

“Will you come to bed?”

Would I come!



## Rice Soup

The best thing about travel is that it teaches what are the places that are not worth seeing.

Pierre Bénait

The Federal Minister of Public Safety and Internal Security had a diarrhea. He had retired to his private bathroom in the front part of the plane immediately after takeoff and sent for the doctor on call. The doctor was on detail from the army medical corps for the personal service of the minister, his entourage of civil servants – and representatives of different paying lobbies and companies. He had found the minister with a very pale face, sitting on the folded down bench above the toilet, wearing green silk pajamas, sickly staring at his polished black shoes while trying not to move. The doctor had just been ordered to leave his family for the weekend and fly off to the Middle East to accompany the delegation. A government minister cannot travel without medical backing. It had proved to be true.

An hour ago, the plane had taken off from the government section at Berlin-Tegel airport. The minister wanted to get an expert's look, his personal expert's look, at the freshly recruited Iraqi policemen who were trained somewhere in the desert by “his” men – and be photographed with them, to enhance his eminence. There is not much of a difference between training policemen and infantrymen – ask for bribes and shoot to kill. Of course, training foreign military is forbidden in Germany; however, training foreign policemen is a contribution to bettering mankind.

The minister was well aware of the importance of images and their power of persuasion. Therefore, more than a dozen German and international journalists were allowed to accompany him, against a small fee to be paid into the state coffers. The amount was far less than the price of a regular flight.

There is something to be said for traveling by government airplane to foreign destinations – particularly if you are a kind of guest of honor. Like so many governmental endeavors, the politicians and their bureaucratic minders had arranged this trip – their trip – regardless of expense and complications to other people.

The other reporters were sitting in the back of the plane, I was in the front, in the upper class section. The seat had been specially assigned to me. Why I had been segregated from the rest I could only guess. I had the feeling it had been arranged by Schall or one of his business associates. My “colleagues” might dig into my non-existent journalistic background – and drop in the hole of my non-existence as a journalist. Gossip spreads fast.

I was contemplating why I sat on this aircraft. I had to place the blame on me, only me. Searching the responsibility elsewhere was too late and would have been futile – I was my own fall guy.

The army doctor sat next to me. I must have looked in a bad mood and grim; he was upset and suddenly spluttered out what had happened in the minister's bathroom. Perhaps he thought he could cheer me up.

“My grandmother's sister behaved like him, but at least she was a woman. Before the journey he has eaten some birdseeds; he seems to be a health freak – breathing therapy to reduce stress and get more energy, and eating muesli. Apparently his bird seeds were not really fresh from the farm – nor was his breath.”

The physician was quite indignant, otherwise he would not have talked to a stranger about the complaints of his minister, a foreign journalist on top of it, as he found out.

“Now he wants homeopathic medicines against diarrhea and a chicken-rice soup. He would prepare it himself, he stressed, if only he would find the ingredients aboard this plane. We only have emergency drugs with us, no esoteric stuff, and there is definitely no chicken broth and rice around. I told him to drink as much liquid as possible, preferably tea – and go to sleep.”

By his very nature the minister was a lackluster character, a choleric, hypocrite petty bourgeois, who dreamt about the advantages of the total Big Brother state. The name of his ministry had been changed recently to be up-to-date with the hunt for international terrorists and

popular vote at the coming elections. He had a very high opinion of himself, liked to be pontifical, was obsessed with power and deeply opportunistic. A lot of the time he should have devoted to the interest of the public he spent putting himself into the limelight, claiming tolerance, broad-mindedness, and charity.

For me he was the personification of the ugly German. He would have gotten to the top under any regime, at any time.

His sense of duty was obsessive, a compulsion he shared with many Germans of Imperial Germany, Weimar, the Third Reich and after: "Adherence to the principles" they called it. Whatever he did, he did with what passes for German thoroughness.

The doctor glanced aside at me.

"Please don't get me wrong. In Germany they immediately call you racist, anti-Semitic, and intolerant if you say something politically incorrect. Somebody told me that, when in anger, he throws files and books at his underlings so that they learn the importance of being obsequious. He is a man of malicious character. When he dies, many people will turn up for his funeral – not to pay their respects, but to be sure that he is dead."

From the tarmac I had watched the subject of our discussion climb up the stairways of the plane and disappear into his quarters. I tended to agree with the young doctor. Lean, always wearing a gray three-piece suit, apparently the customary raiment of people in his political position, the minister had hardly aged for decades; his haircut resembled a monkish gray bathing cap.

At all public functions and social events he used to sit straight upright, his back rigid and stiff. Those who can read facial expression, the gestures and body language, realized rapidly that he held most people close to him and, most likely, the rest of the population in utter contempt.

It never became clear whether he was an honestly democracy-minded man because he did not show his true colors. I gathered he was nothing but hungry for power.

"I wonder whether he is afraid of people. Perhaps his parents have put him on the pot at a too early stage of his development," the doctor appended unceremoniously.

The air force steward came by and inquired what we wanted to drink. I took some red wine from the state-owned Rhine valley vineyards, the doctor a bottle of water. At the same time he asked the steward whether somebody could prepare a little chicken broth with rice for the minister.

That earned him a startled look and the steward responded:

“We don't even have a stock cube in the galley,” then he disappeared as fast as he could.

The doctor took his plastic water bottle, looking enviously at my wine glass and sighed:

“No alcohol on duty – army regulations.”

“Not doctor's orders?”

He grinned.

“No, not really. But we stick to the regulations – most of the time. Sometimes, however, they are quite troublesome and getting in our way while we are trying to work.”

“And then everyone has a glass or two.”

“No way. About that we are strict,” he said, “but although it's forbidden we are using our own mobile phones abroad, when – as usual – neither the Ministry of Defense, nor the Foreign Office, nor the Ministry of the Interior – nowadays euphemistically called Ministry of Public Safety and Internal Security, come up with functioning telecommunication. The administrators are good in administrating and in self-service, but everything connected to initiative and their obligation to those who do a real job is easily forgotten. They would have to get down to work, and that they try to avoid.”

“Are you talking about blind everyday negligence and carelessness of the bureaucrats in orderly Germany?”

He turned to me and said: “I didn't tell you anything. By the way, for whom are you working?”

“The Toronto Star.”

He fell silent, thinking. Then he said: “I have heard the name before, but I have never read that newspaper.” After a short time he said: “Didn't Hemingway write for the Toronto Star?”

“Yes, at the beginning of the twenties, after the First World War.”

“You speak excellent German.”

“I am virtually German; my grandfather fled the country when the Nazis started the war. I am a Canadian citizen – and Chilean. Germans are allowed to only possess a single citizenship; that's a good old Nazi law that has been tighten up recently – by your Minister of Public Safety and Internal Security. He insists that he is fair, just, and tolerant, but they all say that – and have said that all along.”

“And he allows you to accompany him? You won't praise him in your articles, I gather.”

“I do not believe that he has been informed about my views of the world and him in particular. I have not told him. I didn't want to have my bags dumped unceremoniously on the tarmac before the plane took off.”

“You are rather anti-German, aren't you?”

“No. As everywhere you find good and bad people. Germans still are deeply hierarchic, trusting blindly in authority and, when they have authority, insisting on it; and the administration is lazy and malicious. The generation of the minister always boasts how much they have learnt from history – but have they?”

At this moment the steward returned and, with clumsy politeness, reported to the doctor: “We have found a soup.”

“A broth?”

“No. Instant pea soup. And canned frankfurters.”

My neighbor was friendly and patient.

“No. That's not easily digestible,” he said and dismissed the steward. “The smell of these sausages makes one feel nauseated immediately.”

I had expected that he would get cross with the young air force soldier who played air host on this flight. However, he remained calm.

“I guess it would not be beneficial for German-Egyptian relations if the minister would have to inspect the parade of his policemen from a toilet seat,” he concluded his sentence at a low voice, adding: “Perhaps I should have gotten a job as a medical officer on a cruise liner.”

But the steward already had disappeared. He himself disappeared some ten minutes later; he said a friendly good-bye and vanished into the back of the aircraft. I looked around for the steward and one more glass of wine; but I could not spot him. Most likely he had gone into hiding in the galley.

I felt a sense of guilt where Annabel was concerned – I had left her alone for some weeks – and was suffused with guilt for myself. There was nothing I could change any more.

I went to the toilet.

When I returned, a chubby middle-aged gentleman had taken the seat next to mine. Musical chairs seemed to be the game of choice on government flights.

“Eich,” he said. I understood “ache” and thought he was complaining about something. But he just had introduced himself. He had a pleasantly soft voice and started talking immediately. For at least ten minutes he talked without interruption. He thought that I was an important and influential journalist, one of those opinion makers.

He was in arms – employed by *Cator & Bliss*, formerly a British company in defense and armament, nowadays part of one of the big German multinational conglomerates – he mentioned the name of the big company. He himself was not in arms trading or trafficking, but an engineer in arms development. Yes, of course, he sold them too; but that was not his premier task.

I sat back and listened.

Keeping good connections to American, British, French, Israeli – and lately – Russian companies, licensing German weapon technology, he worked out of the Foreign Office. He was one of the industry-delegated lobbyists consulting in government ministries. In other countries this was quite usual, *raison d'état*, as the French would put it, in Germany it was also part of the game, but kept secret from the public.

“Many major companies have their liaison officer in ministries and government offices, of course paid by their companies, not by the state. Everything is done correctly,” Herr Eich explained. “The energy companies, the defense companies like us, the oil companies – as my office neighbor –, and all the big German industrial players, you name them. We are part of the foundations of the state and, of course, must be represented in its power structures – for the benefit of the country.”

When I had heard this, I just completely lost faith in the government’s integrity. I asked him to sing me the song of arms and settled back in my seat to let him continue. I had always thought that weapons were produced to kill, but according to him, this was not the case.

“Dead soldiers are of limited use,” he recounted without hesitation, “an injured soldier is far more valuable. He bleeds and screams – and discourages the others. They try to help him.

“One dead soldier is one enemy gone, one injured soldier ties several others and disables them. Therefore land-mines are so efficient: one hurt, three assisting – and all at discount prices for the mines, five or six euros per piece. That’s what efficient weapons are for, because we do not have conventional weapons that kill everybody.”

He stopped and thought.

“Of course, non-conventional weapons are different.”

I was all ears: “How do you know that your weapons are effective?”

“We join the action – well, not personally; we stay behind the lines. The wars in the Middle East and in Africa are choice fields of research for us. We have people to bring back fallen enemies. Our forensic physicians examine them afterwards.”

“You got your own pathologists?”

“Let’s say, we can borrow some from the US-Army, they are the best in the world.”

I thought, since when is *Rent-a-Pathologist* a registered trademark of the US-Army? I found it curious and intriguing that they rented out personnel.

But I only said: “Interesting,” which kept him talking.

“We check everything scientifically. We want to know how long somebody has lived after he was hit by a bullet, how high was its penetrating power, how effective are our bulletproof vests and helmets? Lately we are experimenting with radioactive ammunition. We know that it leaves nice round holes in armored vehicles, almost like someone had welded it out. It opens new dimensions, really valuable aspects. The ammunition is not really radioactive, of course, only slightly.”

I wondered whether that was like being pregnant, but only slightly.

“And why do you do that?”

“The customers want hard data. Would you buy a deodorant that does not protect you safely against your unpleasant smells?”

He looked so friendly and civil, yet he was so abhorrent that I did not want to see him any more.

I asked him: “May I be excused?” and returned to the toilet.

Salesmanship, at heart, is a courteous and amicable profession – depending on what you want to sell. I felt I was going to be sick. When I got back, Herr Eich had disappeared. I discovered him a few rows back, absorbed in a conversation with a German journalist.

The seat next to me did not stay empty for long. No sooner had I returned than the press officer of the Minister of Public Safety and Internal Security approached me. I must have been recommended warmly to him; he was very courteous and accommodating.

He told me that I would enjoy a specially arranged program in Egypt; they had been in close contact with the Egyptian Ministry of Information and fixed up appointments with people usually out of reach or bounds for journalists. When asked before the trip I had stated that I also would write an article about the German training of policemen, that, however, I would like to draw up a major background article about tourism in Egypt covering everything, suitability, efficiency and performance, from special food for foreigners to medical care, the infrastructure in case of sickness, accidents – and death. I had discussed my ideas and what I wanted to see with the press officer and he was quite interested in this topic himself. He would assist and back me to the best of his abilities.

“My superiors seem to be very keen to have you supported with all that you request. The embassy has been instructed accordingly.”

I was perfectly sure that he didn't know the actual reason of my being there.



## Cooking Classes

And I will harden Pharaoh's heart,  
and multiply my signs and my wonders in the land of Egypt.

Exodus. 7,3.

**I**t would be unfair to describe Cairo as dirty. It was just that it was not very clean – and it was not the enchanted place some tourist brochures try to turn the city into. Yet, at this time of year, the air in the urban sprawl was endurable. Canadian woods, spring meadows, lakes, or the seaside would have been more pleasing, without doubt, I thought with yearning dreamy longing.

The day was warm and sunny, but not hot. The night, the driver told me, would be refreshingly cool. I gathered that for this remark he expected a higher tip.

I smelled and saw the air pollution, and felt and saw the black flour-like dust and the greasy soot coating all surfaces, but on that day there was little sand from the desert in the air. If one of the ugly spring khamsins had blown in hot fury, the oppressively hot southwesterly wind typical for this time of the year, coming as a sandstorm from the Sahara and choking the city with dust and sand, it would have been unbearable.

The entire German delegation stayed in one of those hotels you forget while you still live in it. It was part of one of the big international chains and most foreign government ministers and presidents were accommodated there. The hotel could be easily guarded and protected – and the rooms could be easily wiretapped.

Somebody had booked a business-class suite for me – and paid for it.

It had more attractions than one would notice at first sight; mostly crawling, as I should find out later.

I had not brought my laptop, only my mobile telephone – and my moleskin-covered black notebook. If one brings a computer and cannot lock it in a guarded safe, one can be pretty sure that the hard disk will be copied by someone – wherever you travel, be it the United States, Russia, Israel – or Egypt.

Walls not only have ears but also eyes.

The minister's first task after arrival was a visit to a police school, far away from the hotel, at the other end of the city; the next day he would meet his Egyptian counterpart.

I took myself off and joined a sightseeing tour, arranged by the German Embassy and the Egyptian Ministry of Interior Affairs. Basically, I had no choice, it was either – or. I had to take part in it, or visit the police academy. Instead I saw the Giza pyramids, the sphinx, the Egyptian museum and, finally, we toured a bazaar.

What we saw was a pale and shabby reflection of the former atmosphere. The government sightseeing guide referred to the faded splendor of Cairo, whose remainders I could not detect: ashes to ashes, dust to dust. There was a lot of dust.

Security was intense, policemen surrounded our group all the time, and cars with sirens cleared the way for our cavalcade thrashing through corridors in the jammed traffic.

The main streets were crowded with cars that never stopped, advancing slowly, hardly ever coming to a complete halt. Even the buses did not pull up, people got in and out while they were moving. Nobody braked to let people cross the wide eight or even twelve-lane thoroughfares. Pedestrian crossings did not exist. The drivers were shouting at each other, blaring their horns, yelling at pedestrians.

After our return, I went out on my own, just making the circuit of the hotel's neighborhood. I hated sightseeing tours in herds, especially guided tours guarded by the police. I tried to walk off my bad temper and zigzagged the neighboring quarters.

After some time I turned into one of the narrow dead ends leading to the Nile. It was a short street, blocked with parked cars. To my amazement many of them were not empty. Young couples were sitting on the front or back seats, the women usually with a headscarf. They seemed to be very much occupied with themselves, holding hands or letting their hands wander. I felt completely out of place and hurried down the street. This was not what I had expected in an Muslim country.

The further I walked, the dirtier the streets became. Garbage had been carelessly thrown away on the sidewalks, by ledges, in the gutter. On one heap I saw an emaciated dead cat; around the street corner the next dead cat waited for whomever would clean up one of these days.

Every so often when I traveled the world I wondered what makes the difference between countries. One is dirty, it's disorganized, the next one is beautiful, people are friendly. There is no connection to being poor or being rich. Are these descriptions only in the eye of the beholder – are they plain prejudice? Is it discrimination? In some regions of Europe and North America people put emphasis on cleanliness, but piety has been lost. Piety is a strong part of the Egyptian society, cleanliness is not – instead there is a fatalistic resignation to one's fate with a propensity to seediness and carelessness. I pondered if there was a connection.

I had nobody to discuss my thoughts with. I missed Annabel.

On the way back, looking for transport, I passed a broken down taxi. The hood was open, the driver tried to repair the radiator, tinkering about with some wire; water was dripping on the street.

Anyhow, like an unconditioned reflex, the driver asked me: "Taxi?"

I wondered whether he wanted me to push his car back to the hotel.

I had a well-done hamburger in the hotel restaurant, to avoid food poisoning, took a shower and went to bed.

Life started very early the next morning.

I took a cab to the German embassy at seven, for the early morning strategy meeting of the embassy staff.

I passed through their security check. They had just pulled out a huge dead rat from a ventilation shaft of the green-glassed bullet-proof guard booth. The stench was hard to bear.

Once inside the building complex, I followed the instructions of the doorman. Walking down the corridors, I just happened to overhear a young female employee banging the door of somebody's office, yelling down the hallway: "You asshole!" Everybody with clean ears could hear her résumé.

When she passed me, she realized my astonishment and smiled.

"So what?" she sneered cockily.

The Ambassador was having breakfast with the visiting Minister of Public Safety and Internal Security, accompanied by the embassy's first minister.

Thus, the chancellor, the embassy's senior clerk ran our meeting. He spoke with a note of patronizing bureaucratic irritation. Most likely

my arrival had mixed up his early morning program – coffee, toilet, newspaper. He was one of those state employees who measure professional competence in years of service.

Despite his low rank his name, von Prauss, fitted nicely into the system of the German Foreign Office, civil service nobility, as the Germans put it. One of his *petit bourgeois* family forefathers had been raised to the peerage by the Kaiser in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century, and now he drifted through life loftily above the *hoi polloi*.

The main item on the agenda was the reception and dinner party arranged in honor of the Minister of Public Safety and Internal Security. Since they had outsourced the entire social program to a hotel and a catering company, they had nothing tangible to discuss; they could only hope that everything would go according to plan.

I thought to myself that I would have been at the hotel where the event was going to take place, checking everything; or, at least, I would have dispatched embassy personnel to supervise the entire show, including security personnel. However, responsibility had been outsourced too, to staff flown in from Germany.

“Security tried to reach you last night,” a man at the table mentioned to the chancellor.

“I always have the telephone disconnected after dinner,” he answered. “One must keep some part of the day for oneself, you know.”

The parade of people working at the embassy was like the cast of a second class movie or television series. The chancellor had a deep-red face and permanently sucked on breath mints. They discussed that another employee had been hospitalized the night before; he had drunk with diplomats of other embassies to the extent that he suffered respiratory arrest.

The military attaché fell asleep during the meeting; his head hit the table. The impact woke him up straight. Apologetically he remarked: “Hoopla, sorry. Too much to do; too much to drink.”

He looked around, saw me and said:

“I have seen your picture before.”

I wondered where.

Then he fell asleep again, this time burying his head between his folded arms on the table.

The meeting was wound up shortly after.

On my way out, the chancellor asked me about my plans. Earlier he had written a memorandum to me. To be polite, he had written it in English. It was full of orthographic mistakes and not very helpful.

He now repeated it to me in his conscientious public official tone of voice. He too seemed not have been informed about my task. I thought that was a very intelligent choice. I told him that I had been invited to the news conference for the local press and the accompanying journalists at nine.

He showed me the way and was obviously pleased to be able to disappear into his office.

One of the embassy's conference rooms had been selected and prepared to receive the press corps. Small water bottles, coffee in stainless-steel thermos jugs, glasses and cups, writing pads with pencils were waiting for the journalists.

When I looked around, I noticed that I was not the first participant who had arrived – there was another one, sitting by an open French window, nursing a cup of coffee.

He was a local representative of one of the public German television channels. Although he did not know me, he grinned and told me:

“Now you are going to witness something very entertaining.”

“How do you know that?”

Instead of a response he showed me where to get a cup of coffee, then he asked me:

“I don't want to get too personal, but you seem to be a newcomer to these affairs. Do you know how an embassy functions?”

“More or less,” I answered.

“You got a number of people, everybody very proud of his rank; they climb from Attaché, Second Secretary, First Secretary, Counselor, Minister Counselor, Minister, to, finally, Ambassador. Even the lower ranks have important-sounding names: the chancellor is the managing clerk, a better secretary. The pecking order is given and they all fight each other, for strange reasons in Cairo more than elsewhere. Perhaps it's the dust crawling into their heads.”

He continued explaining the foreign service from his point of view and his experiences.

As the morning wore away the room filled. The television guy had been right. The news conference was extremely entertaining.

Five minutes later than scheduled the door opened and the press attaché came in. It was the young woman I had seen earlier – slender legs, pert breasts, and big mouth. She took a seat at the desk on the podium, pushing her right leg out, letting everybody see a golden anklet she wore on her sickly chalk white skin. I wondered whether she wore the tattoo of a butterfly on her shoulder or somewhere else.

When the German television journalist saw my astounded face, he grinned even more.

He had fun.

The press attaché explained the aims of the visit of the Minister of Public Safety and Internal Security, thanked Egypt for the friendly reception, summarized shortly the highlights of the curriculum vitae of the minister, added the usual background information about topics like cooperation between police forces and trade relations, and mentioned the new German University in Cairo – “a long overdue venture.”

At the end, she asked: “Any questions?”

There were questions, mostly from German journalists. Unfortunately, she did not have the real overview, she was too young, too inexperienced. Most likely she had studied German literature or something similar, and then been sent abroad. I would not have hired her; but perhaps she was good at her job and an asset to the embassy despite of what I thought of her.

She tried to be omniscient, Miss Know-it-All, and dominating – although she lacked the bare knowledge and experience to deal with the older and better informed in the foreign correspondents’ community – and the brutality of some of the newspaper men. She was glib in replying when asked concrete questions. Often she crossed the line into arrogance, when she did not know the answer. It did not protect her.

Some questions were in English – her answers too.

It reminded me of a stewardess of German Airlines who on a recent flight had offered me a body bag. I looked like a busy undertaker, she told me smiling. The terms were taken straight out of the English section of the in-flight magazine. What the airline’s offer meant was “toilet bag”, not body bag, and “businessman”, not undertaker. Translating straight from one language to the other can lead to embarrassing misunderstandings. I didn’t want a body bag, but was very content with the toiletries.

After the end of the press conference the spokeswoman walked up to me and asked whether I required any help, anything special.

She was out to please me and looked at me as if the “special” could be fairly special.

I told her that the purpose of my visit was to write about German tourists, background research for a Canadian newspaper and for the English language program of Deutsche Welle – the Voice of Germany, the German government’s international radio and television station. I was going to present the topic from a point of view different than usual: What happens when and if ...

“What happens if I get sick during my holidays in Egypt? What happens if I need medical care? What happens if somebody in my family dies while on holidays?”

“And perhaps some more background information about cultural developments: If the Egyptian population becomes more religious and if the country becomes dry and public consumption of alcohol banned, many tourists will flock to other sunny destinations. Will women, in the future, be barred from the beaches and pools because they are not allowed to wear swimsuits in public?”

“That’s what people want to watch and read – like a reality show: the life of ordinary people, actual events, with a pinch of humor and facts.”

Apparently she was one of those persons who mostly watched television in her free time. Cairo’s nights were joyless for them, living voluntarily in compounds with little connection to Egypt, and what else could she do in the heat of the summer? Stay inside for months, the air conditioning system running at full speed – and watch the satellite channels.

“I drop the top of my bikini by the pool; I don’t think it’s forbidden – we have to educate the Egyptians that women have equal rights. And I love reality television,” she confessed to me. “Do you also do TV cooking classes? I love to watch them too.”

She looked at me inquiringly with big open eyes – no doubt, she looked pretty; but I could not tell her the contents of “my” show to come. Nor could I tell her that there would not be any show, and definitely no cooking class:

“The Jack Boulder Cooking Show! Tonight the chef prepares Nile Delta Muck Chicken, your prospect of gippy tummy.”

I left that announcement unspoken.

“You are really good looking,” she tried now.

I murmured a non-committal appreciation of the unexpected compliment. I did not want to upset the Fraulein. Nor did I want to invite her for lunch at the Italo-French-Chinese restaurant up the street as she had hinted. Earlier she had acted untouchable and cold, now I got a come-hither look.

Instead I returned to my hotel to peel off my socks, take a shower and have a siesta to be prepared for the evening.



## Malt Beverages

Doth it not show vilely in me to desire small beer?

William Shakespeare. *Henry IV; Part 2, Act 2, Scene 2.*

I didn't know what to look for, where to look for it, whom to look for. I thought it would be a complicated task. Yet, at the end it was rather simple, perhaps too simple.

I was early again, this time for the evening program. The official reception for the Minister of Public Safety and Internal Security was being arranged at a palatial hotel in the shadow of the pyramids outside Cairo. It was one of the famous hotels in these parts of the world, or once had been one – exquisite antiques, handcrafted furniture, rich textiles – and, of course, a lot of desert dust on the window sills and everywhere else.

Party tents had been erected close to the swimming pool of the hotel.

I had a beautiful view of the output of Egyptian breweries in front of the pyramids. The beer cans were colorful; the vista of the venerable, colonial hotel and the pyramids in a haze of desert sand the impressive grandstand of the lost culture of Egypt.

A waiter approached me. “Sundowner, sir? Or, perhaps, malt beverage, sir? Beer, sir?”

He came very close to confusing me, notably when he answered my question about the origin of the beer:

“Australian, Indian, German, Swiss, American – whatever you want.”

Since I only saw Egyptian cans, I was polite and said: "Egyptian."  
"Certainly, sir." He was pleased.

So was I; the Egyptian beer was not bad. I gave him a tip. "Thank you, sir. Generosity is a very fine quality in a gentleman."

I wondered whether I should give him another tip for that sentence.

The embassy – or some opera lover in the Foreign Ministry – had arranged an opera for the attendees of the night's reception in the main tent, a condensed concert performance without costumes, curtains and scenery, but modern, twenty-century music. The singers and part of the orchestra had been flown in from Germany.

Operas usually leave me in a state of darkness; I cannot stand sopranos; if there is anything worse, it's a mezzo-soprano. Tenors are just a little better. To me, they all shriek. Perhaps somebody in Berlin thought that it's close to Arab music.

I had another beer to quench my thirst and waited for the end of the performance. The ambassador was among the first ones to join me at the bar after the final applause, on hand to officially receive the guest of honor.

The ambassador was a woman, an ambassadress – perhaps not being the most intelligent choice for an Arab country. Her selection was an educational hint to the Arabs that genders are equal in the Occident, at least on paper; but better a female representative in Egypt than one in Saudi Arabia. Understanding different cultures sometimes is demanding, diplomacy too. Money, however, is understood everywhere. Germany had money and was paying generously – it desperately needed to export its products to maintain the standard of living at home.

Dr. Cecilia Meyendorff spoke Arabic and seemed to be easy to get along with. Her figure came close to the Arab ideal.

She seemed nobody's fool. She had made a fast career in the Foreign Office due to her friendly contacts with female politicians of all political complexions. She was more intelligent than them, but they were better in pulling the right strings to promote a member of a gender minority to high-ranking posts in the public administration – officially women were preferred over men to reach a proportional representation, apparently at all costs.

I talked to her for a while until a wave of furtive straightening of ties announced that the guest of honor finally had arrived. He had expressed the wish to see the sphinx in the setting sun. It was just a short walk out of the hotel's gate.

The sphinx had seen it all before. Exactly sixty-five years earlier Dr. Goebbels had paid him a visit – and stayed in a suite at Mena House,

tonight's venue of German choice. A couple of years later, it nearly had been conquered by the German Afrika Korps; the Egyptians would have liked it.

The ambassadress felt quite tickled that a Canadian journalist would travel all the way to report about the embassy, its efforts – and about her. She was tough, a bit of a goose, could produce the right line of talking in its correct jargon for every occasion, and good-natured and well informed. I liked her; she liked herself too.

More guests arrived and I started drifting through the crowd. Whoever could, bowed and scraped to the Minister of Public Safety and Internal Security as he made his handshake rounds. The ambassadorial staff put on airs of superiority, an elite they did not represent. Their wives showed off pretentiously. They felt and knew that people were always attracted by power and high office. An embassy to which the leaders of politics and commerce gravitated was immensely more valuable than the house of Mr. Anybody however rich, intelligent and good looking he might be.

The ambassadress was new to Cairo. People were gossiping about her. She must be an intriguer, they said, otherwise she would not have gotten the position. Her predecessor was an excellent ambassador, let's make no mistake about that. He had contributed so much to German-Egyptian relations.

The beauty of a dinner party is conversation. You float from group to group with a fresh glass of beer in your hand and you are good for a quarter of an hour's talk. My gaze traveled over the assembled members of the society, from face to face. The more people arrived, the more they seemed to enjoy themselves.

Their conversation took on an odd insularity; people on an island drifting across the face of the earth. They talked small talk and small ideas which helps people to communicate with each other, to be friendly, to maintain and create the social meshwork necessary for survival in a foreign country. Yet, it was snobbish and parochial in one – and extremely entertaining. The language they used was the clipped bureaucratese they used to snub the people they should serve.

"I really believe that his interest in boy scouts is not completely unselfish."

"I want to be cremated, to be on the safe side. I don't want to be buried alive. People are so careless."

"I have made too much jam this year, blackberries, strawberries; I wonder if I can sell it to the wife of the British ambassador – or better the French?"

As I moved on I found myself listening to a man talking in a smooth and assured voice, a well-dressed gentleman in a tuxedo. He enjoyed entertaining the flock he had assembled. The way people gathered around him gave the impression of an influential member of the local German community.

He was telling an anecdote about a German politician from Bavaria traveling Africa on a fact-finding mission. His idea of development aid was as follows: He spent some days with friends hunting exotic animals – the bigger, the better – having taken enough duty-free alcohol with him to have a good time.

“Why take glass beads for presents? We just leave them the empty bottles when we return home. They can melt them afterwards and make their own beads. That teaches them personal responsibility and self-sufficiency, something they need. It’s applied foreign aid; the French preach it, and the Brits are excellent in it.”

Everybody laughed eager to please – and everybody knew that there was always a little ideological truth behind such stories, yet nobody admitted it. Dutifully people found it a good joke – all but one, the German television correspondent I had met in the morning. He raised his eyes to heaven, visibly annoyed, looking around for a partisan. He caught sight of a woman whose gaze was also fixed to the ceiling; they both exchanged conspiratorial smiles – shortly later they moved together to the bar.

Under the tents by the swimming pool the local upper crust and the foreign guests were treated to a buffet banquet, German sausages – veal, not pork, of course – and German beer, pasta salad and fried fish – all the German trappings.

The tent was illuminated with blue light, courtesy of the technical department of the local opera. They had invested a lot of effort in this idea. It gave the affair a ghostly aura. The bluish faces and hands of those navigating the buffet line looked as if they had died days ago. The food on the buffet, as nice as it would have looked in the warm colors of the sunset, glowed bluish, nearly colorless. Blue light makes scampi look like pasta, and pasta look like seafood. If the shape is the same, you do not know what you heap on your plate.

The champagne of the party was flat, no bubbles at all. I found out that the people of the catering service had wanted to look as competent as the Germans: Be prepared, be efficient. They had opened all bottles, wine, champagne, soft drinks long before the beginning of the party, to be able to serve fast.

Conversation had become general, people were swarming around the buffet tables and shouting remarks to each other – it was noisy.

Suddenly the press attaché of the embassy showed up next to me.

I was scared that she would involve me into another conversation on television shows, but she just did her job.

“Let me point out some people who may be of interest to you.” And, after a short swallow, she added, with a special twist:

“Perhaps we can meet later, to have a nightcap.”

There was dew left on the outside of my beer glass and I was running my fingers up and down the smooth surface of the glass.

She watched me doing it and had taken on an unnatural tone of voice, out of nervousness, and gave me a coquettish look. The more she looked, the worse it got. I stopped playing with the glass.

“Perhaps,” I said. This time, her motives were fairly transparent. As far as I was concerned she would sleep alone tonight. I did not want to see her tattoo.

She took me across the room to a gaunt man with sharply etched features and brooding eyes who looked like a rather odd sort of a fellow human being. He was Dr. Lindner, an airline doctor of German Airlines.

Being in his late forties, he had an impressive set of black, bushy eyebrows, wore a troubled expression and was lost in this crowd of foreigners and expatriates, although he did not want to show it.

Sometimes my brain works overtime and I could see him on a sleigh, rushing through the white Russian taiga, whipping his horses – pursued by a pack of wolves in a cloud of powder snow. He wouldn’t escape them – they would catch up with him. But to save his skin or just to enjoy himself he would push overboard others from the sleigh one by one.

Imagination is all it takes.

The waiters came and went. We chatted about planes, medicine and traveling abroad when suddenly a uniformed man waved at him. He waved back and the man came over. He had a head of closely-cropped, spiky gray hair, Prussian fashion, in other words a member of the US army.

“May I introduce you to the military attaché of the US embassy in Egypt?” the doctor asked.

The name of the American was difficult to make out, it was embroidered in dark khaki on his even darker khaki uniform tunic; I hardly could read it: Isselbacher. On his business card his position in the army was described as “Coordinator and Special Adviser”.

The army rank of the attaché was lieutenant, his name was fake, I suspected. He smelled secret service. He had a short thick neck and a touch of simple-mindedness was written over his face. He glared at

me, as if I had done him harm. Then a smile covered his face, but I was not deceived by it. I had erred: Perhaps he was naive, that naïvety and earnestness Americans possess, but he was not simple-minded. He was perceptive and alert. His phenotype was wrong or carefully rehearsed, as was his small talk.

His voice did not fit his looks. He had a genteel East-Coast accent, placeless between New Jersey and northern New England, but not from New York City.

After a short exchange of commonplace and banalities, Lieutenant Isselbacher moved on. “See you,” he said, circling his forefinger in my direction, very friendly, perhaps a little condescendingly. Was it just an affable good-bye? I had the feeling that he really wanted to see me again. Why? I pondered. I gazed after him and tried to locate him again, but he had melted into the crowd.

The doctor called loudly after him: “Good bye. And – God bless America!”

I turned to the doctor. His behavior was remarkable.

“How come you know the US military attaché in Cairo?”

He looked at me proudly and unctuously:

“We have a very good relationship. He is an extremely nice guy. Some weeks ago when I was in Egypt the last time, he arranged that two Germans who had died on their holidays be flown out of two Red Sea resorts on a special US plane to make the night flight to Frankfurt. Their relations were mourning and anxiously waiting for their beloveds’ bodies in Germany. I really appreciated lieutenant Isselbacher’s sense of compassion. They even arranged for a small civilian-looking jet.”

I was stunned. I had solved my task. I could go home.

The doctor’s Adam’s apple bobbed up and down as he spoke and he gave me an evasive glance, looking away as soon as I looked him in the eye. Something was wrong with him, but he tried to pass for a person of authority. I thought to myself that an occasional, cursory conversation partner would not call him in question. He did not spread charm, definitely no good will, rather a know-it-all respectability. However, if someone exudes – and exerts – authority, he not necessarily possesses such authority.

I inquired directly about the two coffins in Cairo. His information and explanations sounded competent and appropriate:

“I could speed up the repatriation of the dead men. I told the people at Cairo airport that everything was in order, that they could proceed immediately, straight from the American to the German plane. Frankfurt Airport Police had been advised of the arrival.

“For the sake of regulations, I had them open the transport caskets: Both times elderly men. I shortly inspected the coffins; funnily both men wore nearly identical black suits. I read the toe tags to verify their identities. Then I ordered the porters to load the coffins without delay and to ship them on our airline’s night flight to Frankfurt.”

“Can you judge such matters?” I asked.

Amazed at my question he looked up.

“I am a Senior Emergency Physician of the airline. I can supervise catastrophes.”

“I didn’t know,” I said. It was a strange way to describe his job and I did not see any connection between air disasters and clearing corpses for export.

The doctor, however, had blind faith in his and – most likely – his airline’s infallibility. “I got a diploma,” he added. You better, I thought; and another one in counting beans.

“We need more people like you,” I told him.

He brighten up. “You are right!”

He was very happy about my remark and quite intrigued that a journalist could be interested in the transportation of dead tourists. Triumphant he looked around, but there were no listeners.

“That’s enough material for two or three articles,” he stated.

“No, I’ll mention that in passing; that’s not worth a whole article.” He gesticulated with his hands, thinking aloud. “I mean scientific articles, learned papers in medical journals. I will write something for the medical community.”

Unintelligibly to me he rambled on about the need to inform his medical colleagues. Then his eyes veiled themselves and abruptly he fell silent, looking at me inquisitively. Perhaps he was afraid that I would steal his idea.

Without much ado he ended our conversation.

“I have to leave. I would be pleased to show you around in our institute at Frankfurt airport.”

He turned and eased his way through the crowd toward the bar. What a strange character I thought.

When I left the reception I saw him engaged in animated conversation with Herr Eich, the weapons engineer. He observed me with a masked smile.

It was very cool in my hotel room that night. I could not switch off the air conditioning and called the reception desk for another blanket.

However, I only used it very shortly. Then I threw it out on the corridor. I rather freeze than be eaten by fleas.

Instead I slipped into a robe I found hanging behind the bathroom door. I was thinking about the press attaché. I was not able to sleep for a long time; then, all of a sudden, tiredness flooded through me and I dozed off.



## Imported Delicacies

Poor Uncle Harry! Having become a missionary,  
Found the natives' morals rather crude.

Noël Coward. *Uncle Harry*.

**I**t seemed to me as if I just had fallen asleep – only to be woken up at five thirty in the morning, when the muezzin next door started making a racket calling to morning prayer: “*Allahu akbar!*”

Tin loudspeakers fitted into a minaret or church bells across the street – I hate them. I woke up and was completely clogged and my eyes were red and burning – the air conditioning had finally succeeded. Later that day I found out that I had not caught a cold, but a combination of pollution and draft had crawled into my sinuses.

I had time on my hands, no scheduled meetings, no press conference, no interview – three days to kill before I had a meeting with aviation and airline officials at Cairo airport.

In the afternoon I went for a walk across the Nile Island, heading for the Sheraton Hotel on the opposite bank of the river, to get a little something to drink and later perhaps read a newspaper over a solitary meal – my idea of self-indulgence.

Strolling on the Nile bridge I thought about life. It took some time to cross this arm of the river. The Nile was wide, sluggish, and of an unpleasant brown.

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