

A true story by Emil Hakl

Translated by David Short

Tossing the Coffin

Kájik – Party down the local on Monday, would you come? I write and click send.

Wouldn't say no, comes her reply. Who's gonna be there?

No idea. We can turn up, say hello to Mat and Chris, then we'll see.

But suppose you go and say 'Hi Mat!' to Chris again...

Engines firing up, must go.

Safe flight!

As soon as we reach flight level I dig my book out of my bag. I try to get stuck in.

Hanns Martin Schleyer came to the notice of the German public during the sixties and seventies thanks chiefly to his tough stand against the unions. He was born in 1915 in Offenburg. Having taken a law degree, he joined the SS in 1933 and the NSDAP four years later. There he made quite a name for himself, which saw him transferred all the way to Prague. In 1943 he landed the job of presiding over the Central Industrial Association for Bohemia and Moravia.

The smooth surface of the water is glinting far below the wing's trailing edge. Herman Melville, Karel Zeman, Jules Verne, Arthur Gordon Pym, The Black Corsair plus the diving adventures of some Russian or other (the underwater Red Army man made short work of anything he ran across down below: Hunnish torpedoes, mines, electric eels, submarines) – these had been cardinal encounters. On the other hand, I have this recurring dream – of sinking into the depths, losing first the light, then oxygen, finally my mind. Consciousness fades away, dissipates. I see the sea as a grave.

After the war Schleyer spent some years in the internment camps of Baden-Württemberg. However, in 1951 he joined Daimler-Benz, soon becoming a member of the board of directors. Added to that, he held office with various commercial organisations. Then in 1973 he became President of the Confederation of German Employers' Associations. For the Red Army Faction (RAF) he embodied everything they despised. They saw in him the ideal candidate for a kidnapping. A wrinkled, fat eelpout with eyes that had seen plenty.

Why am I bothering about this – the way one does. I once saw a film where most of the cast overacted, but it left me with this bee in my bonnet.

What follows is the text of a letter written from captivity by Schleyer to his son on 8. 9. 77. *Lieber Eberhard, I'm still with you all in spirit. In health terms I'm fine, but as to what's*

going on outside, my kidnapers don't tell me much. Anyway, I want to say that there is no guaranteed safeguard against anyone who goes about their business as thoroughly as the RAF. Their actions have been poorly assessed by the relevant authorities. Once their demands have been rejected and I've been disposed of, they'll just pick another victim. They don't court risk, but they're not scared of it.

He wasn't wrong. The next victim chosen, now under Brigitte Mohnhaupt's leadership, was Siegfried Buback, the attorney general. On the morning of April 7th, Buback set off for his office in his official limousine. With him was his driver and a judicial officer. A motorbike pulled alongside, two riders. One drew a semi-automatic and emptied the chamber into the car.

The Airbus is beginning its descent, the letters dance before my eyes. The terrorists had held Buback directly responsible for the killing of Ulrika Meinhof, Holger Meins and Siegfried Hausner. His death was a turning point – a decade of innocent, conspiratorial noughts-and-crosses [*amer. tic-tac-toe*] had come to an end.

I'm making my way out of the terminal, looking for my connecting bus. I'm here to give a half-hour spiel. Czech Centres, bureaucrats, foundations, departments, publishers *et al.* sometimes need to haul into the light of day some wimp who'll pop a jacket on and trundle into hell. There he'll tickle the audience for half an hour, stay the night and leave. But then, they're entitled to know what they've put their efforts into. It's their business.

Which is what awaits me tomorrow, today my time's my own. The day after tomorrow as well, and the day after that. The Ministry of Culture is a body that does like to splash out. They'll casually book the dearest travel arrangements then cram four days' worth of expenses into a sociopath who'd rather have just flown in, done his "idi-idi-ots" into the microphone and buzzed off.

Which is generally just the initial impulse. But then I surrender myself to indiscriminate observation of the horde. Dissolving into it. I'm strolling through an unfamiliar megapolis. The bitter smell of conifers, smog with an alien tang. Explosions of solar plasma alternating with lashings of rain.

Coming towards me, striding along like gladiators, some blokes, pretty rough-hewn – topknots, leathers, steel rings in their noses, and lips, beards down to their belly-buttons, Nordic metalheads or something. Crowds of well-dressed giants. Weathered senior citizens. Oddly clean-shaven, six-foot elders in top hats. Swarms of earnest schoolgirls. A decent percentage of poignant beauties fit to make the likes of us throw a fit. Slim, solidly built, half a head taller. And quite a lot of raucous old gaffers. Drooling idiots, whistlers, windbags with no one to stem their outpourings. And of course a family of beggars camped out on the pavement, lost souls, dark- and olive-skinned aliens, the professional poor, con artists, grubby workmen, yappy old women, benighted hobgoblins.

Footsore, I find a spot in a coffee shop. There's a couple of PCs buzzing away in one corner. I ask if I may. Go ahead, it's all yours.

Evžen? I write and click send.

I'm here.

What are you doing?

Playing Tossin' the Coffin – <http://online-hry.luksoft.cz/hod-rakvi.html> – you speed up by clicking the right arrow, slow down using the space bar, then once you hit the pink tarmac, you have to hurl the coffin as far as you can. Have a go and let me know how you get on.

I click on the link, have a couple of shots at getting the little hearse going, toss and reply: 746.8 m., can't do any better, the software here mightn't be that good.

You have to use quick little taps + coordinate your movements, he writes. Have another go.

752.2 m. and that's my lot.

You need to get quickly up to 120, hold it there and brake RIGHT NEXT TO THE WALL. Toss it on impulse.

On impulse I tossed it 778.8 m.

See, that's a brilliant, we've got folk here at work who can't get beyond 700. We reckon the best results can be got by doing it together. One to drive, one to brake and one to cheer. My personal best is 895.4 m. And I've got a new tat.

I reckon that more important than tossing at the last minute, I write, is to wang the coffin so it arcs as high as poss, i.e. the best ploy is to get to max. speed then brake hard. What tat?

I wanted an Aztec relief, so I was sitting in the chair, completely knackered, it tingled but I still nodded off, then I came to and I'd got a panda on my biceps. No idea how that happened, so I just paid up and left.... But look, the earlier I sling it, the lower the arc. From which it follows that I should make the toss as late as poss. Typical mistake: I crank it up and hold, but chuck the thing from the middle of the pink, which means it flies too low and can't get more than 600.

I write: How about this as an improvement – just as you make the toss, bellow like a karate fighter before he lands a blow, that'll focus your energy, which I can't do here, but give it a go.

You're having a laugh, my boss would do his nut. Anyway, halfway through the pink's too soon! Closer to the wall! Have another go?

Sure.

I shunt Evžen down to the taskbar then go at it with my right hand as if my life depended on it.

831.3 m, I write.

Me 882.4! I've got a new ploy – up to 100 I use my right hand, then switch to my left, which has had a rest, then change back and bingo. Got to go and do some work. Will you be there an hour from now – or two?

Yep.

You at home?

No, Oslo.

Okay, get back to me.

The afternoon session of the festival is taking place on the fourth floor of a spacious, old-fashioned type of building with a wide staircase. Stucco work, statues, reliefs, background noise, people coughing, long applause. The latter for the old boy just leaving the microphone. Hands like shovels, a face like Amundsen's. The lady presenter thanks Norway's most important poet.

I sit down by a small table, cross my legs, then uncross them immediately because I need to lean across to the mike.

I'm expected to say something. As I go for a verbal upswing I can't help thinking of the parallel with tossing the coffin. I kick off too feebly – I'm flying too low, just wittering on, floundering in the pauses, and completely failing to kindle even a spark.

My translator primps herself from solidarity, puts her glasses on and starts reading.

As she reads I'm put in mind of the words of Heinrich Böll: Why is it that in affluent Germany of all places kids from privileged families, whose parents are high-ranking officials or university professors, and they themselves have been to university, have decided out of the blue to launch a bloody total war? Against whom?

End of the reading, time for the discussion.

"You Czechs have a tradition of crime writing – why are so few detective novels being written today?" a bearded man asks.

"Perhaps they're out of fashion."

"On the contrary – they've become Europe's lifeblood! If they were written in your country they'd be the crowning glory, take my word for it."

"I do."

"Why do you write?"

"It gives me something to do."

"Is that enough?"

"Yes, it's the process that matters. The outcome says nothing – almost every author writes as if he's just gone bonkers."

"Why is nothing, or hardly anything, published in your country in line with what's trending in literature, I mean contemporary subjects?" the silence is reclaimed by a girl with a tiny face set in an untamed thicket of curly locks.

"What do you have in mind?" I ask.

"Mythology, sagas, vampire novels, werewolves."

"I really couldn't say."

End of discussion.

During the break I pop round a couple of corners to the coffee shop to write to Evžen.

You there? I write.

The corporate dogsbody's always on site, he replies. So?

Haven't been back to it, no time.

A moment ago I chucked it right in front of the wall – and holy shit! Fabulous flight, nose up like a Boeing, the coffin even vanished off the screen for a second – 936.9 m. Your turn, I'm online.

I attempt a high arc.

I write the result: 961.9 m!

You're kidding.

I'm kidding, I added 20 metres.

While you were going, I also had a throw – 994.7 m.

Honest?

Just kidding, only 930.5.

Hang on, now – are we actually tossing that coffin or just taking the piss?

*I play all day long. My boss keeps his beedy eyes on me, but I still get in two or three throws a minute. I also read *Britský listy*, *Česká pozice*, CNN, and they all agree that we're on the verge of a global break-down that most likely this year, or next year at the latest, will end in WWII.*

I get the same sense. Listen, have you any idea why there's so little Czech writing about werewolves?

LITTLE? We've got whole shelves of the stuff at home, the girls don't want anything else. A skull ring in every first sentence. Holy fuck, they ought to be reading Šabach, but they're constantly drawn to Zombie Killer. Sorry, must dash, we've got an HR meeting.

HR = home relations?

Human resources, ciao.

I take a turn round a couple of blocks, corners, streets. I pass a church – outside it there are hundreds of candles burning despite the drizzle. And dozens of wreaths and bouquets laid out on the steps.

I hurry back to be in time for the evening round. Well-dressed, pasty-faced people. Men of linear features. Women at first sight fragile, in fact rock-solid. A few girl students, a few curdled old biddies from the embassy. We circulate mechanically round the smorgasbord.

I get most attention from older émigrés. Globetrotters with faded gazes. Sixty-eighters. They emanate a unique kind of sorrowfulness, a strange, desiccated repose. A whiff of white wine, loneliness and unfulfilment. They beg me to describe to them just how crappy things are looking back home now.

I tell them what they want to hear – resignation, stagnation, disintegration, zero ethical standards, open season on the assets of bankrupt individuals. A tenth of the population's had its property seized.

They're over the moon, happy as sandboys. Wouldn't you know it! Gee! Their sense of grievance carries the odour of death. We exchange contact details.

I thank my likeable, gentle translator, and greet my likeable publisher with an iron handshake. I collect my coat and run down the stairs.

Passing the internet café, I check on Evžen. Nothing – so I write: *Say, why do actually play that stupid crap?*

I'm sipping coffee, leafing through my book at random. On 8th February 1977 Brigitte Mohnhaupt came out of the gate of the prison where she'd served a four-and-a-half-year stretch. An utterly hard, undeviating, uncompromising female. A former philosophy student. Straight after her release she set about organising the second wave of the Red Army Faction. She put to good use what she'd gleaned from her time on the notorious seventh floor of Stammheim prison, where she had met up with the legends of the first generation. Thanks to her, during the spring of seventy-seven, the hard core of the RAF regained its sound structure and leadership.

I head into the cutting wind. Plasma is boiling in the sky. I reach the edge of the bay, walk round the harbour. Sullen yachts bob on the dark waters. Short-stemmed boats with high, stepped superstructures. As if I'd landed in the middle of Star Trek.

I turn back towards the city centre. Trek across a park. Pass something like a stately home. Probably what it actually is – the other side of the grill fence an armed guard in camo gear is marching regularly up and down.

I head along a meagrely lit boulevard. I pass gaunt gentlemen and bebies of svelte gazelles fit to make you swoon. A dwarf with such fine features that it comes as a shock. An elephantine old granny. A knot of activists striding along like automata.

I steer clear of any trolls, Vikings or werewolves.
I glance inside various bars, take a seat in one of them.

Coffee, double brandy, thank you. To hell with the cost. I toss my coat onto a peg, settle down at a messy little table and look about me. I jump – looming over a table next to the window there's Ornella Muti, looking straight down her nose at me. From the days when she had real flair. *La joven casada, Romanzo popolare, Swann in Love, Appassionata, Death of a Corrupt Man, The Last Woman.*

She looks at me dispassionately, lights a cigarette and lets the smoke drift from her little nose.

Stop gawping, my inner controller warns. But how not to gawp when I'm seeing my idol! Ornella! The usherette of countless bouts of pubertal masturbation, a-sparkle with St Elmo's fire.

Casually, leaving me quite unsurprised at anything, she rises.

Single mother at close of day, a hooker, like as not. Going by my appearance – jacket, coat, razor-grazed chin – the kind of target they tell jokes about.

"I shan't keep you," she says and sits down. Even her voice is like Ornella's. A manifestly dissolute, mellifluous rasp.

"I'm in no hurry," I reply.

"What a day, eh?"

"Indeed so."

"How are you on French films?"

"I know some."

"Fog, rain, a cemetery wall, French cops in capes – ring any bells? They turn up on bikes, stop next to a blue minibus with a flat front end. An inspector's standing there, trying to light up, but his lighter won't work. A constable offers him a light, see?"

I'm lost for words. She's knocked me for six. I'm totally crushed by the likeness. Luxuriant eyebrows, cool-green eyes.

She must be able to tell. And she can.

A waitress with a question mark on her freckled forehead is standing over us. I have the same again, my companion ditto. Double brandy? Yes, thanks.

"Are you scared?" she asks.

"What of?"

"Me."

"Yes, but pleasantly. Or rather tolerably."

"Tolerably?"

"Yeah."

"Have you seen Ötzi?"

"Of course."

"For real?"

"No, no."

"He's on show here at the moment, I've been to see. He's horrible, rr-ee-lly horrible."

In the indiscrete LED light I can see her botched make-up. A drift of powder on her chin and cheekbones. Plus something that bothers me. Ornella's still there, but someone else inside her as well. Someone oddly stiff. Set awkwardly. An old tin box with a relief, a mimosa of a sort. An off-duty clown.

What now? Another round, then we'll see. Double, yes.

Why not give it a try? Take her back to the hotel, don't be daft. She probably knows where to go. I wonder what an hour with Ornella will come to? Though an hour will have gone before I've shed my embarrassment, so better think two or three.

"Once you've made up your mind, stop having doubts," she says.

"Once I make up my mind, that's when I start having doubts."

"Complicated."

"You bet."

"Are you here because of work?"

"Partly."

"Partly?"

"I write books."

"Aha, the festival. It's right opposite Ötzi. Do you enjoy writing?"

"Yes."

"I also enjoy what I do."

"And what's that?"

"I recreate myself in various roles, or how else to put it."

"Actress?"

"Hm, no, no. It's more like playing at being someone I'm not."

I glance at her sharply, far from the first such glance she's seen.

Suddenly, I spot beneath the make-up some carefully concealed stubble. Whiskers shaved smooth. Not many, true. Hormones have done their job. The little nose will be plastic surgery.

Yet it still takes a while before I finally see daylight. Before it dawns that this isn't how the cookie crumbles.

"If you'd only take the plunge, you'd be doing me a huge service," she seeks to galvanise me.

On the table between us there's a couple of cups and unfinished glasses. Also a mixed mess of crumbs, cigarette butts and crumpled napkins.

"Ah, well," the tom-cat says, resigned. "Never mind. But really, don't go and see Ötzi."

"Where'll I find him?"

"The Munch-museet, but like I say, don't go – it's disgusting. Everything round about is pretty disgusting."

"I'm pleased to have met you, but unfortunately I have to go now."

"That's okay, off you go."

I get up; she remains seated.

Outside it's raining. Collar up, I dash along the pavement.

Whatever next? A bloke who looks like Ornella, is he still a bloke? Or an angel, more like? A being from an intermediate world? A spirit in the strict sense of the word? I'd have come to my senses the minute she served me up her – her what though? Brr, blimey it's cold! Live and learn – every experience counts for something. No, by no means every. This one or that. Hardly any really.

I take to the Hotel Thon's narrow bed. Slip into a disinfected sleeping touniquet.

Raindrops are bombarding the window sill. Who slept here before me? What were they thinking about as they fell asleep? What did they dream? Are they alive? Did they also hear that humming noise? Did they look down from the window? Did they wonder what that giant metal propeller was for – which, by the way, isn't even turning?

Did they, like me yesterday morning, see the red-headed goddess on the balcony opposite, with her excruciatingly smooth body in a state of utter undress, chain-smoking? Did they get the urge to reach inside their boxers, then abandon the idea?

I'm trying to read. The next victim they select is Jürgen Ponto, spokesman of the board of directors of Dresdner Bank. By kidnapping him the RAF hope to secure the release from prison of members of the first wave. An endearing role is to be played by Ponto's friend's daughter Susanne, a girl from a good family. She studies pedagogy, sociology, psychology, then chucks it all in and goes to live with squatters in Hamburg. Among them she gets to know some of the members of the second generation that has begun to take shape. She joins them. *I'm sick of all the bullshit and the gorging on caviar and salmon*, she says in defence of her move.

On 30th July 1977, when Ponto opens the door to her, he thinks she's still at university. Hi there, lassie, how you've grown. Come on in, are those friends of yours? Susanne enters the house accompanied by a young smartly dressed couple. In the hall, one of them reaches for a weapon. Ponto starts to panic and offers resistance.

Brigitte Mohnhaupt takes her revolver and shoots the banker five times. They'd only meant to kidnap him and demand the release of the prisoners, plus a ransom. Except that Brigitte – take this, you bastard, bang, bang!

What was she, this woman? Born in 1948 in Rheinberg, daughter of a publisher, in 1967 she'd been a promising student of the University of Munich. She abandoned her studies, having become actively involved with the Left. Rallies, protest marches, endless gobbledegook. There she met the Baader-Meinhof gang, joining the RAF in 1971.

At mid-day I take a quick peek at Evžen. He writes: *My reply to that is:- I don't have the time for anything more worthwhile, at home the kid won't sleep properly, at work there are cutbacks and it's getting tougher. On holiday recently I had a go at Wolfenstein III, brilliant graphics, but it's not that great.*

Compared to II? I write and go to get a coffee.

Yeah, he writes, at least that had atmosphere. Any idiot can don a tank and spray shit on everything around, but crawling through a sewer and silently knifing a Kraut at the critical moment does have a certain charm.

I reckon so. I liked the very early stuff, and then the later Ice station Norway, X-labs, Paderborn, Chateau Schufstaffel.

What about Catacombs?

I skip that, for me things don't really take off until The Defiled Church.

For me it's often best after that submarine in the dock, that's where those electric buggers pop up for the first time.

Lopers.

Lopers! They give me the willies every time I look at one of them from a safe distance through the spy-hole. There's also those bits where you don't have to watch your back and can take time to look around, wander about, appreciate the finer detail and wallow in the ambience. Decipher a notice on a wall, or gawp up at the clouds through a shattered roof.

Pity it's got such a silly ending.

Right, more makes you laugh than gives you a fright. Which reminds me, I've got a strategic planning meeting this afternoon.

What's that about?

Finding ways to rip off the greatest number of people in the shortest possible time and make savings in the process. They're all at lunch right now, I've got three rolls from the tuck shop, I'm doing my emails and watching a BBC documentary – Ceausescu, The King of Communism. 17 minutes from now I'll be explaining to the silly cow in advertising that she's not entitled to get classified newsletters, we send out so much bloody garbage it's a wonder anybody reads anything. I've been here so long now. Every time someone new gets taken on, it's me who explains why we do things the way we do and not some other way. Even allowing for any bright ideas they might have. They leave after a year then along comes another, full of energy, ideas and questions... There's the bleep, 15 mins left.

How long have you actually been there?

Fourteen years.

It's my last evening so I'm staying in my suite. The money's gone, I'm out of sleeping pills, and rain is lashing the hotel courtyard.