

## Ondřej Šanc: *Walking the Wire*

### summary

The story begins in the mid-19th century in what was then Upper Hungary (now Slovakia), in a poor mountain village in Kysuce—a region steeped in old customs, superstition, and hardship. Faced with scarcity and the need for supplemental income, the villagers turned to tinkering, a craft that became a hallmark of the region. Using nothing more than plain wire from nearby Silesian steelworks, they skillfully repaired broken ceramic dishes and crafted a variety of everyday items—pipe cleaners, mousetraps, kitchen utensils, sieves, and even intricate, artistic masterpieces coveted by bourgeois households. Carrying their wares, these itinerant craftsmen roamed the vast Austro-Hungarian Empire and, with the advent of railways and steamships, carried their trade to far corners of the world.

Despite the new opportunities and rapidly changing times, prosperity eluded the region. Many men wandered for years, never to return, leaving the yokes of poverty and toil on the shoulders of women and the elderly. Ján, Mária's husband, never forgot his family, but while traveling, he lost his leg in a railway accident. Crippled and desperate, he turned to poaching and smuggling, a choice that ultimately cost him his life.

Determined to change their fate, Mária, along with her children Rozárka and Zoltán, heeds the advice of Zoltán's successful and well-traveled godfather, Juraj, and ventures out into the world. They arrive in Aussig (Ústí nad Labem), a city in the midst of an incredible industrial and entrepreneurial boom. Possessing the empire's largest port, the recently completed Vienna-Hamburg railway, and an abundance of coal—vital for the new steam engines—the city has become a bustling hub filled with thousands of workers, entrepreneurs, and travelers from around the globe.

Mária and her children find shelter in a makeshift camp of Italian railway builders, yet her dreams soon dwindle to endless toil, loading coal and struggling for survival.

Meanwhile, Zoltán explores the area, befriending local Italian boys and scavenging for food. Two years later, he sets off for the season as an assistant to older tinkers, but when he returns in the fall, Mária and the camp have vanished. From that moment on, he must fend for himself, eventually leaving the city for the hills.

Rejected by villages due to his distinct appearance and Romani heritage, Zoltán is left with no choice but to sleep in forests. It is there that he meets a young man named Karl, and they quickly become friends, embarking on various adventures together. Karl teaches Zoltán to read and write, and as the story unfolds, it becomes clear that Karl is none other than the future writer Karl May, who spent time in the region during those years. Well-known facts from May's youth are woven into the narrative in a playful, imaginative manner, capturing the essence of the genre he would later define. Thus, a whimsical "fairy-tale" quality, driven by coincidence, runs throughout the tale.

Despite the many hardships he endures, Zoltán ultimately grows up and reaches his dream destination—America.

In the New World, however, Zoltán is not among the victors of progress, nor does he achieve any heroic feats—quite the opposite. He endures relentless racism and violence; instead of hunting bison, he gathers their bones for fertilizer, hides from lynch mobs, and bears witness to the extermination of the last flock of passenger pigeons. The best land has long been claimed, and the Native Americans he encounters are far from the untamed rulers of the prairie depicted in Karl's stories.

For years, he drifts from place to place, constantly adapting to new means of survival as he crisscrosses America on the roofs of train cars as a hobo. During one of these journeys, he has a fleeting yet, as time will reveal, fateful encounter with another historical figure—E. T. Seton. Many years later, in the first days of the 20th century, Zoltán marries Geanamoya, a woman from one of the last free-living Native American groups in California. Thanks to Seton, they escape the harsh fate of life of the reservation.

In a separate part of the book, we meet Adam, a modern-day Romani man whose caravan burns down one winter above a village in the Sudetenland. He finds refuge with Petr, Monika, and their children, agreeing to work for room and board until spring.

While settling in, Adam discovers several shelves of adventure books in Petr's library—the very same books he cherished as a child. This discovery transports him back to his memories of the boiler room in an elementary school in the Most region. Young Adam would often skip his Young Pioneer meetings to visit Michal, the school's boiler operator and a former history teacher. "*For years, his smoke-filled kingdom was Adam's refuge from the cruelty of classmates, the strictness of teachers, and the indifference of the world.*" It becomes clear that Michal, along with the moral values embodied by the heroes in the stories of May, Seton, and Štorch, played a defining role in shaping Adam's character—just as they did Petr's.

As time passes, Adam begins telling the children a story each evening, "*...the kind of paperback tale they used to call a dime novel.*" Before long, the reader comes to realize that Adam is not just telling a story—he is recounting the history of his own family, revealing himself as the narrator of the entire book.

Feeling unsafe in America due to rampant racism, Zoltán, his wife, and their son, Thompson, relocate to Bohemia. They settle in a caravan near Prague, where Thompson becomes captivated by the emerging scouting and tramping movement—a Czech phenomenon that romanticizes wilderness exploration, often drawing inspiration from Native American, cowboy, and military themes.

Thompson befriends Burka, who is gradually revealed to be none other than Zdeněk Burian, the renowned painter and illustrator of adventure literature. He also forms a friendship with Eduard Štorch, and together with Burka, they assist him in building a scout base and nature school, the *Children's Farm*, in Libeň, and in organizing a skiing trip for underprivileged children. Štorch appears in a lesser-known chapter of his life—his writing career still lies ahead, but he describes himself as "*a critical observer of the new age.*" After enduring several grueling years as a teacher in the coal-mining regions

of Most, he makes desperate yet ultimately futile efforts to improve the social conditions of the local people, particularly the children.

As the Great Depression takes hold, Thompson marries his friend Zuzana, and they start a family. After his parents pass away, they move into their caravan, but by then, ominous clouds are gathering over Europe as war looms. Zuzana, being half-Jewish, fears deportation, but in the end, it is their *"Gypsy way of life"*—living in a caravan, which is not considered a permanent residence—that seals their fate. They receive a summons to the forced labor camp in Lety. Thus, Adam's story reaches its tragic conclusion, and the book's final chapter turns to his own fate.

During his stay with Petr's family, Adam manages to save some money and decides to sell a rare coin—a hobo nickel—that had already appeared in his tale about Thompson. With the proceeds, he buys an old van and prepares to leave. On his last evening, alone with Petr, the conversation takes a more personal turn. Petr, intrigued, presses Adam for the missing link—how the story connects Thompson to Adam. Petr enjoyed the tale but finds parts of it far-fetched, especially after researching and discovering that escape from the Lety camp was impossible. *"I think this is enough,"* Adam replies. But when Petr insists, eager for the sake of his curious children, Adam simply asks, *"Do you really want to know the truth?"*

With disarming honesty, Adam admits that he grew up in an orphanage and knows nothing about his real family. Everything he told—the lives of Thompson, Zoltán, and those before them—was pieced together from books, stories he heard from Michal the boiler man, and fragments he found online. The fairy tale is over—for good.

Thanks to this sudden shift in perspective, along with Adam's earlier memories and his subsequent conversation with Petr, we can infer that Zoltán and Thompson are not Adam's ancestors but rather his historical alter egos. Their lives echo his own—from a childhood spent without parents in a mining community to pivotal encounters with influential writers and a series of smaller, significant events. We also learn that the hobo nickel featuring a bison skeleton was given to Adam by his mother during their only meeting when he was eighteen. However, the origins of the coin remain a mystery,

even to Adam, and it may very well have inspired the creation of his entire story. The book itself is a work of fiction, crafted with a wealth of historical detail and largely based on Adam's true experiences, loosely inspired by Thomas Berger's *Little Big Man*.

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