

Walking the Wire by Ondřej Šanc

Translated by Graeme Dibble

In the outskirts of the city, near the five arches, in the place where the potters and the stray cats live, weary steps crunched through old snow. Snatches of a sad drinking song were carried from the harbour tavern on the icy wind, but otherwise it was quiet. The path to Mariánská skála clambered steadily uphill, and she had to stop and get her breath back. The cold air stung her lungs and froze her fingers, and to top it all was that whispering wind, relentlessly stripping away the last remnants of warmth through all the layers of clothing. On the hilltop, where the path ended in a snowdrift, the stars illuminated the chapel and the frost-coated cross with a twinkling blueish light. But Mária didn't stop, she just slowed her pace, her head bowed down towards the ground. She walked directly into the biting wind that whistled across the plain towards the Elbe. It pushed Mária back as she fought for her life, for every metre, every exhausted step. She was already standing above the escarpment when a violent gust of wind finally brought her to her knees and rushed past to howl into the mountains so as not to hear her words. "Holy Mary, Mother of God, for your mercy, for the love of your son, please help me!" She shouted it for a long time, but only to herself, her chapped lips barely moving. She thought of her own two elder sons and of Ján Michail and her home in Upper Hungary. What had she found here? Apart from hard graft, only a grave for little Rózi, a small hole in foreign soil where she had laid her dysentery-ravaged body a month ago. And Zoltán? He had withdrawn into himself, just as she had; they were silent together, isolated within themselves, drifting through their chores like lifeless shadows. Then one day she felt a wave of nausea and had to dash out of the tent to throw up. Zoltán looked at her in fear – that was how it had started with his little sister, and Mária knew this wasn't cholera. As yet there were no visible changes in her skinny body, but she was sure of it. After all, it was what she had been dreading since that miserable day when it had all begun to fall apart. That was why she was here now, kneeling in the snow at night, because she no longer had the strength for another fight. She closed her eyes. She had lost, she knew that. Why console herself with the thought that she'd been dealt a rotten hand from the start? The cold no longer seemed as bad as it had when she resisted it – instead she felt a comforting heat, and she relaxed and let herself be soothed by the slow process of forgetting. On the riverbank she saw some figures and heard laughter, carefree and heartfelt. Effortlessly, she rose and went towards them. She was barefoot, the soil warm against her soles, and she breathed in the scent of rose blossoms with pleasure. "Rozálie!" she called aloud, because

there was a little girl playing in the grass and she looked just like Rózi – it was her, and there stood Ján, and he had both his legs and was waving happily! There was a boat bobbing in the reeds by the bank and on it, like a statue, a man in a loose shirt that went down to his ankles, leaning on a pole. They'll be on the other side in no time, it's hardly any distance at all, Mária said to herself with a smile. And then someone grabbed her by the shoulder. Žiahľava appeared on the opposite bank, she almost didn't recognize him, he had a kindly expression but was shaking his head in disagreement. What of it? Mária felt that she had to get to her loved-ones no matter what, so she climbed into the boat, when all of a sudden someone jerked her shoulder again. "Mum! Mum!" That didn't come from the opposite bank! Where were they all and where was that boat with the man in it? "Mummy!" Dawn was breaking. The crest of the hill, scraped back to bare rock, emerged from the greyish white mist that was filling the whole valley. Mária struggled to open her eyes and then immediately closed them again, dazzled by the first rays of the rising sun. She felt Zoltán's arms around her and then fell asleep or passed out. She came to in Camilla's hut. Zoltán was asleep on the floor by the fireplace. Still in his shoes, half-covered by a patched-up coat, he was lying on the bare ground without a blanket, with just a piece of sacking in his hands in place of a pillow, breathing soundly. He wasn't even wakened by the draught when Camilla came through the door, bent under a bundle of willow branches. With relief she let them fall to the ground, and as she straightened up she smiled at Mária. She had meant to frown, to reproach her, berate her if necessary, but she just couldn't do it. Camilla had a woman's sharp eyes and could always put two and two together. It had been at her request that Fabio had secretly sent a couple of dependable tight-lipped blokes round the neighbourhood to find Riccardo, but they had returned empty-handed – the general consensus was that the *bastardo* had long since fled to Saxony. Ever since Rozálie had died, Camilla had been watching over Mária almost constantly – she always happened to be in the area, had brought her a bit of supper or come to borrow a sewing kit. Mária's sudden bouts of nausea hadn't escaped her either, and they worried her all the more. Yesterday, when she hadn't been able to find her anywhere, she had sought out Zoltán, who had been spending days sitting silently by a hole in the ice with a rod. He set off with a grown-up look on a child's face. She had no idea where he was heading, but she waited all night till almost noon the next day, when Zoltán and that lad who was always singing those sad songs by the arches, had pulled Mária back on a sled, half-rigid with cold, along the frozen river Bielá. She had sat down next to her on the bed and stroked her hair. "It'll be all right, you'll see."

"Have you got everything?" "Yes, I told you that already," Zoltán replied impatiently to his anxious mother. Bent over with a growing belly, she looked older than he remembered from last year. Apart from clothes, a knife and a walking stick, a water bottle, a tinderbox and a

blanket, all he had was a carefully stashed stone spearhead, the one Luigi had found on the riverbank in autumn. Since then it had been his most prized possession; he had put all his claws, bird's feathers and other treasures in Rozálie's grave by her head. She had always had her eye on them, especially the spotted feathers from woodpeckers. He should have given them to her while she was still alive. His eyes roamed over the pit-house, searching for anything else he might need. Even Mária had the impression the packing had gone awfully quickly. Back home there had been a lot more in the way of preparations... She strained her memory, clogged up with coal dust, and all the customs and traditions she remembered suddenly struck her as foolish and naive. Then she was frightened by her own thoughts and at least prayed to the Virgin Mary to protect Zoltán. Suddenly she tapped her finger on her forehead and even smiled at how quickly a prayer can be answered. "Wait! I won't let you go without this," she said, reaching into a money tin and taking out a silver earring wrapped in a piece of cloth. "This is from your godfather, Juraj Lépiš." Having your ear pierced with a piece of wire hurt like any transition from child to man, especially when it was done too early. Saying goodbye wasn't easy either, but they were to meet again in a year's time. Zoltán had been going to the port to scout for tinkers for about a month, ever since he had convinced his mum he needed to start earning something. Now he was a *džarek*, a tinker's apprentice, as he was destined to be from the moment he was born in Kysuce.

He stepped out of the door right foot first and Mária, as if by accident, tipped a bucket of water into his path. It seemed to Zoltán that the days and weeks just dragged slowly by one after the other, weighed down by a series of new duties. The seasons, on the other hand, flew by as if in competition with the birds. Spring brought flocks of starlings and larks, the sedate silhouettes of storks and the aerial acrobatics of swallows. In summer they were joined by recently hatched chicks, and soon afterwards whole families of birds were assembling on the telegraph wires for their autumn journey, not caring who was trudging by below them. All in all, it had been a pretty lean season for Miro and Kubin. Granted, they had earned a little more than last year, but since they had got used to the *džarek* taking care of the jobs around the camp as well as lugging around their tools and coils of wire, and cooking and getting hold of food and whatever else they might need, they had more time left for drinking. They wended their way along the river Bielá, a few days on the north bank and a few days on the south bank, as the mood took them. The towns on the slopes of the rugged hills were neat and tidy, the richly decorated facades of the brick houses looking down on the wide, cobbled streets through large windows. As Miro, Kubin and Zoltán walked past by the gleaming windows of shops, dressmakers' and restaurants where contented Germans were sitting with a beer warmer in their drink, they felt out of place. All those suits made of fine fabrics, watch chains in the buttonholes of dark waistcoats and clean shoes alongside the

reflections of their own grease-stained, rumpled figures. They preferred to head to smaller, more out-of-the-way villages, where they could expect to encounter thrifty farmers and smallholders with cracked cabbage pots, women with their best cups missing a handle and young boys with slingshots. The days were all alike. Unless they had been given a tip for where to head next, they simply went wherever the wind took them along any route leading west. The mountains and foothills were densely populated, and although they often wandered off course, they could hardly get lost since they didn't care where they were going. They could tell they were approaching a village by the barking of dogs and the sounds of work in the fields or woods, by the fruit trees and firmer paths. They would make themselves a bit more presentable, tuck in their shirts, which they had been using to gather whatever was growing to eat along the way, and Miro and Kubin would fill their pipes. Miro took the lead. Apart from his walking stick and the blanket across his back, all he carried was a small backpack adorned with the best they had to offer. As if his grey hair and heavy moustache, lending him the dignity of an elder, together with the attractive wire supports for under pots and irons, could enhance the credibility of this otherwise suspicious- and foreign-looking trio. Behind him went Kubin, a slightly big-eared youngster with a cocky, self-confident smile and a shifty look. It was his third trip out of Upper Hungary, and even after the first one he had made himself out to be a man of the world, despite the fact that he hadn't saved a single kreuzer. Over a drink he would make up smutty stories from his travels, and when he got near the bottom of the bottle he sang filthy songs. His role on these trips was twofold. He did the talking, because Miro couldn't shut him up anyway, and he did all the ordinary, simple wire work. Even after a hundred repetitions, he didn't develop any exceptional dexterity or distinctive style, didn't improve or create anything, but when he didn't have to think about it much, he did the job well. Zoltán went last, so as well as the weight of the toolkit he also had to put up with attacks from children and dogs. Sometimes they went from cottage to cottage; at other times they settled down under the trees in the village green and waited for someone to come and look at what they were offering. Kubin had a sales pitch that no-one here understood anyway, even though he tried to incorporate German words into it. The important thing was to secure at least one or preferably two orders – that made their presence somehow official, confirmed, even desired. Then the two tinkers could show off their skills and convince the waverers and penny-pinchers. They worked directly on the ground and a circle of curious onlookers often formed around them. When people gathered, that was where Zoltán came in. Tools, wire, a piece of goatskin to go under their backsides – he had everything prepared for his masters so there was nothing to stop them setting up shop with ready-made products. They carried the more expensive pieces primarily to entice customers – mainly kitchen utensils and mouse traps. In addition to the two basic types he was already able to make by himself, he always put out the coil of wire on which he had stuck many

dozens of dried mouse and rat tails. This unusual trophy drew the boys first, the ones with the slingshots tucked into their trousers and held in place by one of their braces. In the meantime, Zoltán set up ten traps next to each other, and as soon as he had attracted enough attention, he lifted up a thick piece of cord and stretched it over the traps so that it was positioned above all of the springs. At that moment, he always unexpectedly raised his gaze to the spectators and let go of the cord, almost as if by accident. The tenfold snap that followed sometimes gave the onlookers such a fright that they jumped back abruptly. Laughter. Zoltán would hold up the whole string of traps with a smile and take a bow as if he had just finished a performance. Then he usually had to repeat the demonstration; often one of the boys wanted to try it for himself, and in the end one of the older bystanders usually got in on the act too. When things went well and there was the chink of a kreuzer or two, then the good times could roll, but often the only person who showed up was a stooped old auntie with a split lard tub in one hand and a loaf of bread in the other, while the stable boy who had brought the leaky sieves would gesture to show that they could sleep in their barn in return. But a place to spend the night was very important – it wasn't much fun waking up in the middle of a storm or fleeing from a gamekeeper. Under a roof there was also the chance of breakfast, and sometimes they could offer to do some odd jobs and then try asking for some schnapps, but money was money. When things didn't go well and people were irritable because of drought or rain, they would close the gates and spit in the dirt in front of the tinkers. Then Miro and Kubin had to reach into the pocket in their wide belts and pay for liquor out of what their families were waiting for at home, because that was the only way they could endure the nights in wet overgrown spinneys and the yearning for their own dreams. Zoltán experienced a period full of contradictions. Despite the hard graft, which also entailed washing and mending his masters' badly soiled clothes or drying their shoes, the life suited him. They had enough to eat; in the countryside there was always more food than money. Both Kubin and Miro soon noticed that Zoltán's dark eyes, slightly narrowing at the corners, were just as capable of being lively and merry as they were sombre or bashful, widened in surprise one moment and resolute and unyielding the next, always according to the circumstances but with the same result each time: that with childish innocence he would succeed in bartering a pipe tamper or a potato masher for leftover goose with the dumplings and sauerkraut thrown in. When he couldn't trade, he foraged, hunted or stole. In the fields he never even entertained the possibility that it was off limits, and the same went for a lane of fruit trees; and a couple of times when necessity or the eternally grumpy Miro forced him up over a fence and into a garden for some taters or a head of cabbage, he imagined as he sneaked about that he was a Delaware warrior. But if he had been, Miro wouldn't have kicked him whenever he needed to give vent to his feelings, or when the liquor ran out... Zoltán grimaced and slowly placed the eggs inside his shirt. They felt cool against the

bruises on his stomach. He was still kneeling in the chicken coop when he suddenly heard rapid footsteps. Rushing towards him was a man in tall, shabby boots, worn smooth from tens of kilometres walked behind a plough, and in his hand he held a whip. Just as Zoltán was turning around and standing up, he came within range and so, instead of his back, the whip cracked through the whole clutch of eggs. The second blow was more accurate, not to mention the ones that followed. When Zoltán was no longer moving, the man wiped his whip on the straw and locked the door to the henhouse from the outside. Zoltán slowly rolled over. His shirt was stuck to his skin with eggs and blood. He waited. There was nothing happening outside. He swiftly tried bracing against the clapboards from underneath. Everything hurt, but he managed to dislodge two of them, followed by a third. He wriggled out like a cornered weasel, carrying a hen in the remains of his shirt. However, along with the hen, he also carried off hundreds of chicken mites, bloodthirsty little see-through beasties, as well as several bloody weals that reminded him for the next few weeks that he was no Uncas, just a common thief. What's more, he soon learned that his breadwinners were not the kindly uncles from the village he had dreamt up in the spring when he was persuading his mum to let him go with them. He learned not to draw attention to himself and to watch his back when they'd had too much to drink, or when they had nothing to drink. He always got up earlier than they did so he could get the fire and breakfast ready, but also so he could gain a little time for himself. He made himself a wide belt from a piece of old calfskin he'd traded for ten rats he'd caught, and in a small pocket on the inside he stashed every penny he'd managed to earn. His only goal was to hand it all over to his mum before winter. When he thought of her, and he did so often, he always pictured how delighted she would be. As soon as the birds headed south, the tinkers turned towards home. They made faster progress because it was no longer an unfamiliar route, just a poorer and hungrier one.

"There's that valley where we went so badly off course a few months back," declared Kubin one morning. He was jiggling up and down with the cold, blowing on his hands to warm them. "Just beyond it there's a place where we can spend the night and then there'll be that village where they promised us work during the apple harvest. It's not far now." At last the day came when they were met by a view of mining towers, the bark-beetle tangle of colliery sidings, that whole soot-covered termite mound of shafts and mines. The last few nights, Zoltán had been sleeping with one eye open. The two tinkers had been asking a lot of questions with pretend mockery, especially when they were on the sauce, about how much he'd made from his rat-catching. At the same time, he was troubled by their occasional talk about a lowlife that no-one back home would miss, and by their coarse laughter. Zoltán never even entertained the thought that there could be any significant change in store for him at home. He decided not to think about it. He said goodbye to Miro politely and to Kubin as if he were

an obnoxious elder brother. He was anxious to be rid of them, but even so, when they asked him as they were leaving if he was going to join them again in the spring, he nodded after a moment's hesitation. As night fell, a cold November wind swept across the land. Zoltán sat in the damp, roofless dugout. The darkness seeped through the silence into his head, swallowing up all his thoughts. He sat like that the whole of the second evening too; a survey of the area had revealed to him that the whole camp had moved on a long time ago, perhaps at the start of the summer. Tall weeds lay tangled, smothered by the runners of a blackberry bush, and the nettles were brown and sodden and had begun to rot down by the roots, where in spite of the approaching winter their little offspring were ready for the next year. Mum must have stayed on for a long time by herself – he found several cobs of corn and mouldy slices of dried fruit. Neither he nor Mária could read and write, but Zoltán was sure he would have understood any symbol – he just had to find it. He wondered in vain and in desperation what had happened to keep her from being here. If he had felt about sixteen yesterday, now he was nine again and he was alone.

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