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Friedrich Christian Delius
My Year as a Murderer

Translated by Isabel Cole

[pages 7-15]:

A Free Voice from the Free World

It was on the evening of St. Nicholas' Day, at dusk, that I received the instruction to become a murderer. From one minute to the next I was agreed, however fecklessly. A firm masculine voice from the air, from the unending ether, incited me to it, not a devil, not a god, an announcer reading off the headlines and breathing into my ear, as if on a secondary soundtrack, the call to murder the murderer R.. A voice from RIAS, the Radio in the American Sector, and on St. Nicholas' Day to boot – confessing the superannuated assassination attempt today, I have complete understanding for anyone who takes me, or the person I was then, for a madman.

No one knows my secret, the police paid no more notice to my clandestine criminal impulses than my best friends did, and since I'm regarded as a quiet, peaceful person, my silence on the subjects of murder and violence has never raised suspicions. Now I can speak, the confession is due. I have the growing desire to switch on the roller coaster of memory and descend into the little basement flat where a student turns on the radio, stokes the tile stove with egg-coal, boils water for instant coffee and succumbs to the smell of the ginger-nuts from his mother's advent package.

As no one will be so quick to buy me as a murderer, I need to digress a bit; the stove and the cookies belong in the narrative chain of evidence too. As long as I can't rule out the possibility that the ginger-nuts stimulated my bloodlust, I can't leave them out of the written confession. I must conduct my own interrogation. That is the downside of not getting caught. As in any good mystery, the motives, circumstances and embarrassing details of the deed must be revealed bit by bit.

The news came on, ordinary phrases in ordinary newsspeak, I wasn't really listening, nursing the weariness of the grey, wet December. The room was still cool, a tile stove takes it's time. I let the announcer's voice warm me, the familiar bass which rose hourly as the free voice of the free world. The ginger-nuts were hard and redolent of a shabby sweetness. I waited for the weather forecast, then Mozart or Beethoven to relax to.

Like all Berlin's radio stations, the American RIAS was not propaganda-free, but it had the best announcers with suggestive, deeply resonant voices, masculine, protective and resolute as the protecting power itself. I was listening less to the news than to the distinctive modulation of the bass until it reeled off the dispatch: *The criminal chamber of Berlin's*

regional court has acquitted former People's Tribunal judge Hans-Joachim Rehse of seven counts of murder.

There was nothing sensational, nothing unexpected about the news, not even back then. Any other ruling would have come as a surprise. Jurists don't convict jurists, especially not Nazi jurists, even ones who did produce more than two hundred death sentences. A cliché was confirmed – yet different, whispered tidings lurked behind this news. As if in a third ear, in the labyrinth of the cochlea where contradictions stick, I heard a secret message vibrating in the words from the ether, the clear command: Someone will set an example and kill this murderer, and that someone will be you.

No, I hadn't been drinking, wasn't on drugs, hadn't staggered out of a girlfriend's bed. I was completely sober, just a bit tired, when the words hit me: Someone will set an example and kill this murderer, and that someone will be you!

As the announcer read the weekend weather forecast my imagination raced on ahead: Me with a gun, a report, a man falls down, it's that simple, the logical next installment of the news program. It wouldn't have surprised me to hear the breaking news on the radio: This just in, a Berlin student has decided to kill the judge R..

You're crazy! You of all people! Forget it! I tried to put the brakes on my imagination. It wasn't even funny, it was just silly, inane, not worth half a thought. Enough already!

I didn't even have the courage to pick up a paving stone, you see, much less throw it. Me as a perpetrator, a murderer, the notion was more than reckless, it was impossible, crazy, nuts. But for its very absurdity, I now suspect, it struck sparks and set fire to my sensitive imagination, which immediately came up with the images to match:

I was leaning in a doorway somewhere on Witzlebenstrasse in front of the Berlin Court of Appeal, in the leading role, waiting for the judicial murderer. Not for long – he stepped out of the portal, an inconspicuous elderly gentlemen, and went down the steps to his car, where, aiming quickly over the notch and bead sights, I brought him down with three shots and walked on calmly in the direction of Lietzensee, recognized by every passer-by, stopped by no one as I strode on proud and confident: young man, approx. 20 to 25 years old, approx. 180 cm., slender, blond, wearing a dark blue windbreaker and blue jeans – until from Kaiserdamm the sirens announced my ritual arrest and the film broke.

A primitive short: a man, a villain, a shot. A B-movie, that was clear, but I felt the stimulating effect immediately: the euphoria of being a hero for a few minutes, the avenger of the righteous.

It was too late, I had no choice. All this happened, to complicate matters, in the year nineteen hundred and sixty-eight.

My Friend's Father's Murderer

When memory picks up again a few hours later, I was lying next to Catherine, who had turned contentedly onto her side and gone to sleep. No, she wasn't French, she was quite a good photographer, fled from Marktredwitz to Berlin, who in keeping with the fashion of the times had given her first name Katherina a touch of French refinement, and attached great value to the long, echoed ee-sound at the end. With her I took to the streets and to bed, a love, if I'm not mistaken, which did without the word love. We waged the usual political and aesthetic debates, but she was never to hear a word about my career as a murderer.

I envied Catherine her sleep, and with this envy the voices and hallucinations of the early evening revived. As in those tremulous phases before decisions, tests and adventures, my brain refused to simply go to sleep. In the ups and downs of mixed emotions I tormented myself with excursive soliloquies. Someone's playing a trick on you, I told myself, it's a trap. Who's going to get worked up about old Nazis these days? You can leave that to the boy scouts of indignation, always prepared. They'll protest the verdict with hoarse, weary voices, let them, it's perfectly ok, however pointless. They'll draw their exclamation points in the air, huffy and helpless as ever, the last of the righteous, and then they'll go home, 'til next time, they won't have long to wait before another Nazi murderer is acquitted somewhere.

Catherine breathed evenly, I cautiously touched her shoulder, smelled the coveted body and tried to calm myself: Go to sleep, go to sleep, there are better things to do than thrashing or killing the enemies of yesteryear, one of a hundred thousand criminals on the loose. Let them go on chauffeuring the old swastika men into their bureaus, let the retirees take their strolls and whet their knives over the steaming pork roast every Sunday, it's no skin off my nose!

There's nothing you can do about it, I said to myself, you can't lock them all up. There are too many of them, they're lurking everywhere, in administrations and courts, in corporations and universities, that's no secret. A banal truth, an everyday obscenity, a bothersome commonplace. Not your thing, stay out of it. They share the power, or they live off their former power, vegetating in executive chairs, couch sets and the beds of old-age

homes until they die, or doing good business like Hermann Josef Abs or Catherine's father, a household goods supplier who was once an assiduous Nazi mayor somewhere in the Upper Palatinate. Be grateful to him for his smart, beautiful daughter and forget him, forget these people!

You strain to forget, but the opposite occurs. That night I was still ignorant of this simple mechanism. I distracted myself, sought sleep, forgot, drifted off – and promptly the crucial image popped into my head: my friend Axel at the cafeteria table, the newspaper next to us opened to a headline about the start of the trial of this judge who had passed at least 230 death sentences at the People's Tribunal. Immediately the soundtrack to this image kicked in, Axel's bitter, contemptuous words which hit me only now, in bed, like an evil epiphany: He fabricated my father's verdict – him and Freisler.

The murky story of Axel's father, killed by the Nazis for fighting the Nazis, had already haunted me as a child. As I'd learned in the meantime, he had formed a resistance group with Robert Havemann and others and was executed for it in 1944, even before the assassination attempt of July 20th.

Only now, late at night on St. Nicholas' Day, did I realize: He was the one who had Georg Groscurth beheaded! My best friend's father! Hand in hand with Roland Freisler! And he's getting away with it!

Now the child in me rebelled, or so I could claim today – and leave the rest to the psychologists. Wide awake, eyes straining in the darkness, I realized why I couldn't get the judge out of my head. Why he rode me like a goblin. Why the whispers pursued me, urging me to act.

Now I no longer heard the announcer's voice, but my own: Someone will murder this murderer, and that someone will be me.

Hardly a far-fetched notion at the end of the year when Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy were assassinated, and almost Rudi Dutschke too, the year of the huge massacres in Vietnam and Mexico, the year of the riots in Paris and the uprising against the Russian tanks in Prague. Each month there were new affronts to one's sense of justice, each month rage and agitation. Each one of these dramas affirmed the desire for change, rebellion, freedom. Power is corrupt, be it in Moscow or Washington or Bonn or Paris, everyone demanding basic human rights is the target of implacable repression. The question was as complicated as the world view was simple: You have to fight back, but how?

I calmed down and tried to convince myself that an act like that, if I committed it, would be nothing but an act of good, a small contribution toward educating the public, toward

democracy, toward justice. Like Beate Klarsfeld's act when she slapped the Chancellor in the face right in front of the assembled CDU crew four weeks before.

I went back to check that too: the famous slap took place on November 7, 1968, and I am speaking of the night of December 6 to 7. Even at the risk of being seen as a copycat criminal, I don't want to be accused of cowardice in the face of the facts.

So: According to the ancient legend, Klarsfeld's at the party conference with a press ID, the Chancellor's giving autographs, she comes up from behind, not from in front, so he can't duck, and when Kiesinger turns around, she lays it on, yelling "Nazi, Nazi!" A summary trial for bodily injury and willful insult that afternoon, because a former member of the NSDAP, a State Department official in charge of censorship and propaganda abroad can't be referred to as a Nazi. A year in prison without probation – and what's the effect? Acclamation from around the world, a heroine who's talked about, a woman who won't be forgotten, a star who has her picture taken everywhere, who's interviewed, loved and hated.

Hearing soft snores beside me, I gently laid my hand on Catherine's hip and fought the growing desire to wake the sleeping girl tenderly, seduce her again and forget this nonsense once and for all. She was fast asleep and would have resented my overtures. I asked myself in alarm what Catherine would say about my *idée fixe*. The answer was clear. I resolved never to ask her, never to let her in on it.

In those days I hadn't come to trust women's intuitions, I thought as soldiers and Western heroes do: A man makes his tough decisions by himself, women bring their heart into play and just complicate things. The question that really worried me was, how many years of prison would it take to destroy our love? Two, five, eight? Or half a year?

If I was condemned to spend half the night brooding anyway, I'd rather speculate about concrete things, about the right murder weapon, for example. I thought about guns, poison, bludgeons, knives, but my imagination was as feeble as an amateur's, a beginner's, I had no criminal background, not even a foible for crime novels. I ran through numerous possibilities, pictured the perpetrator in various poses, me with the gun, me with the bottle of poison, me with the bludgeon, me with the knife. Nothing looked convincing, everything looked as awkward as in silent films or cartoons, and I postponed the questions of practical execution. All the splendid murder plans subsided; I adjusted my breathing to my girlfriend's and must have sunk into the gentle waves of sleep soon after.

Incidentally, it was Axel who got me into the habit of abbreviating the name R. If a man can have my father's head chopped off, he said, I at least get to chop a few letters off his

honorific, however silly that sounds. Axel was studying psychology, so the argument made sense to me.

[pages 20-25]:

Head Chopped Off

It's time to tell the story with Axel. We're going way back now, deep into the fifties, the forties even, now we have to leave Berlin behind, turning off into the Hessian hills in search of the town of Wehrda between Bad Hersfeld and Fulda, approaching on country roads via Rhina from the north, Rothenkirchen from the south, Unterstoppel from the east, Wetzlos or Langenschwarz from the west, making for the middle of the valley, the church with the plump onion dome, half-timbered houses, barns, two castles, meadows and fields rising behind them to the wooded hilltops surrounding the village.

As a scene of the stories I have to tell, this remote backwater plays a crucial role. Here is where the motive of my deed first germinated.

We flash back to the conversation between the city boy Axel who once lived in Wehrda and the country boy that I was. They are twelve or thirteen, ardent friends. As always, Axel and his brother Rolf have come from Berlin to spend the summer with their aunt on her farm. One Sunday afternoon the city boy and the country boy are walking along the field paths outside the village, as they often do when they get tired of playing with their brothers or the other boys. The sun is high, the breeze is in the cornfields, the harvest has yet to begin. The country boy starts complaining about his father, who quizzes him mercilessly on Latin vocabulary every day except Sunday, until the city boy says: Be glad that you have one. The country boy feels a shock; he's known for a long time that his father's friend died in the war, but somehow unlike the other fathers. Sparrows fly up from the path, the ripple of ears and stalks flows away with the wind, the red of the poppies isn't blood-red, it's a much prettier glitter than blood, and after a long silence the city boy starts talking about his father: the doctor who was against the Nazis who started the war and made millions and millions of people die. The country boy has other friends with photo-fathers instead of fathers, fathers who've disappeared behind the words "fallen" or "missing" or "didn't come back from the war" and are displayed on top of the dressers. Once, the country boy knows, there was the war and a Führer, mysteriously described as "that Hitler" or "Adolf", names uttered only briefly and hastily, secretly or defiantly. It also involves the word Nazis somehow, shadowy figures spoken of only on the sly. But he's never heard of a father like that. And because he was against the war, the city boy said, they killed him, those criminals. In a single second the country boy is hit by two feelings: shock that Germans killed a German, a doctor, just like

that, and shock at the harsh condemnation of the Nazis as criminals. That's new, cuttngly clear, somehow that's going too far. His father speaks out against the war too. The worst, saddest thing there is, he says, just be glad that we're at peace now, the country boy quotes that to his friend, and he didn't get killed for that, he even got taken prisoner by the French. The reply comes swiftly: But my father said that during the war, and yours only said it afterwards.

Larks high up in the air, the warmth of the sun is getting uncomfortable, the country boy feels his face turn red. He'd been trying to show off a bit with his POW father, three years, all the same, and now he feels defeated, ashamed.

Another long silence, then the question: And, was he shot? Silence. No. Silence. Hanged? Silence. No. Silence. What then? He was in prison. Go on, say it. They chopped off his head, with a machine, a chopper thing.

Fortunately they've reached the edge of the forest, shadows, felled tree trunks to sit on. The country boy says nothing, the city boy says nothing. Houses, barns and stalls lie silent in the middle of the valley, on Sunday there are no tractors on the move, no teams of horses. Pigs and cows have their fodder, they're quiet, in the afternoon even the dogs, roosters, bells are silent. The only noise: the larks above the wheat field. Chopped off his head, the words resound along the valley, deafeningly silent, echoing back and eating their way into the mind. Head chopped off, that's what you do to chickens, they're grabbed by the wings, laid flailing on the chopping block, and then the farmer's wife raises the axe, it's women's work, and chops off the head, the blood spurts, the head falls to the ground, the chicken goes on flailing and twitching. One time the country boy saw the headless chicken rise up into the air, fly halfway around the barnyard with hectic flaps of its wings, and suddenly plummet to the ground as if shot. Off with the head, drain the blood, pluck the feathers, wash it, salt it, and into the pot with it, that's the chickens' fate. Even rabbits don't have their heads chopped off, pigs get a bolt to the forehead, cattle get carted to the slaughterhouse by the livestock dealer, no other animal has its head chopped off, why do they chop off people's heads? The country boy is on his own with the words head chopped off, he can't talk about it with his friend, his friend has said too much already, he's left on his own with the three words: head chopped off.

They've been friends since they could walk, since they could talk, they've grown up side by side, practically under one roof. In the second to last summer of the war Axel and Rolf were evacuated from Berlin to their grandmother in the country, Anneliese Groscurth's mother, who had taken lodgings in the vicarage. Right next door was the farmhouse belonging to their aunt, Georg Groscurth's sister. After her husband's execution Frau Groscurth found

refuge here too, one family in two houses separated only by a garden gate. In Wehrda no bombs fell, in Wehrda there was food to eat, then the Americans came, and there was still food to eat. The friends, grown up from earliest, oblivious childhood hand in hand, remained inseparable even after Axel became a Berlin city boy two years after the war.

At supper the country boy tried to ask his father: What did they do to Axel's father, did they chop off his head? But he only comes out with the first part. He doesn't dare to say the word chop, because the ch would have made him stutter, even more than usual, obsessed by the frightening images. Yes, it was tough back then, his father replies, I think he was shot, but then, he was a communist. That but, the boy thinks, what kind of a but is that? Communist, a word to make you shudder, still the boy ventures another question: What is that, anyway? This time the reply is already firmer, less irked: Someone like the people in the Eastern Zone, where there's no freedom and they want to ban religion. New questions leap forward, the boy doesn't dare to ask any further because everything keeps getting more complicated and more threatening.

Something makes no sense. If Herr Groscurth was for the Eastern Zone, why is Frau Groscurth here, why are her sons here? And as for freedom – if there's anyone who seems free, good-natured, generous, fond of traveling, it's Axel and Rolf's mother.

The next morning the country boy asks the city boy: Was your father a communist? and really wants to add: Why did they chop off the communists' heads? This question sticks in his throat too. The reply comes swiftly: Who says that? My parents. The city boy looks at the country boy for a long time, a withering glare at the traitor. Your parents didn't know him, all he wanted was for the war to stop and no more people to be shot to death. And he wasn't for the Eastern Zone? asks the country boy. That didn't even exist back then, you dimwit! And he starts laughing, the city boy, a merciless, bleating city laughter like the country boy has never heard before. Ashamed, he runs away, retreats into the house.

Even the country boy knows that the border between East and West didn't divide the country until after the war, but in conversations like this he feels stupid, inept, at a disadvantage. He can't stamp out, smother, extinguish the flames of the words head chopped off. Even worse is the silent rage at having failed his friend, betrayed him, in fact. He is almost as inconsolable as he was back then, at the first catastrophe of his childhood, when he sobbed and wailed for hours because his friend was being torn away from him. Axel and Rolf had to go back to Berlin, the war had been over for two years, Rolf had to start school, why couldn't Axel stay in Wehrda? The flood of tears was the only remedy for the impending loss

– until Frau Groscurth came and gave him a book in consolation, a real children’s book, not just a picture book, a real one to read, for later, *Nils Holgersson*.

The country boy looks for the book without finding it, and avoids his beloved friend until that evening. The next morning they’re on good terms again. The city boy takes back the “dimwit”. For years and years the country boy doesn’t dare to break his silence about the chopped-off head and the riddle of communism.

Here, I’d say to the court’s psychological expert, that’s my primal experience. Here’s where you can start analyzing my personality. Go ahead, draw your conclusions from the four-year-old’s tears and the country boy’s fantasies.