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Jochen Schimmang

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New Centre

Translated by Ruth Martin

1.

Zander was waiting for me at the entrance to the first ruin. The usual weeds had shot up behind the enormous window arches on the ground floor. Weeds took possession of all abandoned buildings sooner or later; they didn't even spare a former seat of government. Zander was standing in the doorway, and met me with a friendly smile. We hadn't seen each other for twelve or thirteen years, and I was surprised at how little he seemed to have aged. He was forty-seven now, and had a light trench coat on, which he wore buttoned and with the collar turned up, though it was only mid-September. I would soon realise what he was protecting himself against. You were sometimes exposed to sudden fierce gusts of wind here, which, a few steps further on, would give way again to practically motionless air.

Zander shook my hand and led me into the house, or rather, between the walls that remained standing. It took us almost a quarter of an hour to reach the other end of the ruin. In some rooms, part of the furniture had been left behind: chairs, armchairs, desks – and in places, these were now completely weathered and mildewed. The new occupants had removed other pieces of furniture and refurbished them, Zander told me.

“Between us, we can do practically every kind of handicraft there is,” he said. “If we couldn't, there's no way we could exist. The junk that's still here will soon be disposed of.”

Cats darted through the rooms where petitioners used to wait to be admitted. The cats were treated well by the current occupants, Zander told me, because they were useful for controlling the rats. They were almost like the compound's secret gods.

The general's official portrait was still hanging on one of the walls. Every time he walked past it, Zander wanted to take it down and throw it on the rubbish heap, but then he'd put it off and carry on walking. The photo was heavily darkened and very slightly wrinkled, but it showed the

general as the whole world had known him: in semi-profile, his short hair severely parted, gazing out in a way that was meant to convey both determination and benevolence. When the government had fled, his portrait photographer had not been taken with them, and was captured. But rather than putting him up against the wall, the new official luminaries had secured his services for themselves.

At the other end of the ruin, the view opened out onto the innumerable low concrete buildings in which the individual offices and commissariats had been housed. It was only the two high-rises, where much of the rulers' knowledge had been stored in files and electronically-saved media, that the fleeing government had managed to dynamite shortly before they disappeared. And so to our right and left there were now two enormous heaps of rubble. Earth had been heaped over them, and they had been partially planted.

Between the individual building complexes, there were still gaping holes and debris. A year after the old government had fled, the first stages of demolition had begun on the vacated centre of power, but this was then abandoned as it became clear that the planned industrial estate would be a bad investment. Since then, there had been discussions about how the former centre of power should be used; surveys were created and commissions undertaken; questions were put to historians, curators of monuments and professors of ethics, and in the meantime history, discontinued and decaying, carried on rotting away.

The endless debate was still going on when the first squatters arrived, and they had gradually taken over the low buildings. They repaired the electrical connections, and established the most important links with the outside world. Subsequently, craftspeople, two small IT firms, an historian from the Free University, a group of anarchists whose creed was Kropotkin's principle of mutual aid, and many other people had settled here. A year ago, Zander had been brought in to establish a central library.

"I haven't been outside again since," he said. "When we say *outside*, we mean going through the doorway of the first ruin, where I was waiting for you."

"But you must have to buy groceries?"

"The anarchists do that for me once a week," Zander told me. "They take care of errands and transactions for most of the others too, buzzing about in the outside world. And in return, we all provide for them."

"Right: Kropotkin in practice."

"You could say that. It's incredible to think that the state used to practise its terrorism from here. That house over there" – he pointed to a long building on the left side of path we were taking - "is now a plant nursery, but it used to be the interrogation centre for enemies of the state. Unlike other regimes, these criminals didn't outsource their killing machines - they wanted to keep them as close as possible."

A small man in his early eighties came out of the building, wearing a blue-grey smock and an ancient baker-boy cap.

"That's the gardener," I said, on impulse. "The head gardener."

"It certainly is," Zander confirmed. "Though only for the past year. His name's Ritz. Does that mean anything to you?"

"Only as the name of a hotel in Paris, and another one in Wolfsburg," I said.

"Ritz spent many decades working as a consultant. I don't know why, but all the big companies, and lots of unions and politicians, engaged his services. He got very rich on it; he's certainly the wealthiest person in the compound."

"So you have wealthy and less wealthy people here?"

"Of course we do. Even the anarchists don't want all that egalitarian rubbish. They just want to be able to live without any outside regulation, and to have an income, and that's what they've got here. Ritz came here two years before me. Then at some stage the issue of planting the compound came up, starting with the two heaps of rubble from the high-rises. And Ritz was still acting as a consultant, at that point. But he's

systematic, you know, he really got down to the nitty-gritty of garden-building and landscape architecture, and that's how, late in life, he discovered his real calling. We hope he'll be with us for a long time yet. At the other end of the compound he's already laid out an English park, and between some of these low buildings, he's put Japanese gardens. His biggest job now is to plant up the first ruin. You saw, it's still chaos in there. We want to plant little gardens in different styles along the row and in the rooms, and one day the façade should vanish completely behind all the green."

Ritz had been coming towards us slowly, with a pencil and a black, leather-bound, breast-pocket-sized notebook in his hand. Zander introduced me, and I felt a moment of irritation as he started speaking, at the drawn-out, Rheinland inflexion in his voice. It was a first pang of homesickness for the town I had just left.

"It's a great mistake," he said, as we walked on towards Zander's library, which was still at a provisional stage, and was housed in the villa that the general had used as his living quarters. "It's a great mistake to see rubble and ruins on the one hand, and harmony and beauty on the other, as opposing forces. Think how this compound looked during the Terror: an architectonically closed system, built purely to serve the retention of power, and for defence against anything that could have threatened that power. A system with no holes, you might say, aimed at eternity, and it seemed eternal to us, too. But for all that, it only lasted nine years. In the long run, terror always dies by its own hand. It suffocates, in a way: because it has no holes, it can't breathe. And now, with the compound still half-derelect, and therefore open" – at this moment one of those sudden gusts of wind I mentioned earlier came down a side path at us, and Ritz raised his voice, " it unfurls its possibilities. Only dereliction makes it truly rich – makes it blossom. I shall be occupied for at least another five years, just with the gardening."

A large van rolled past us, at least forty years old by the look of its exterior. In the cab sat two younger men, and the passenger gave us a brief wave.

"Those are two of the anarchists," explained Zander, " they've been shopping, and they're just starting the distribution process."

There was a bend in the path. Behind another complex of low concrete buildings, the general's former living quarters came into view, and behind it you could see where the park began. A few minutes later we had reached the library, and our ways parted, as Ritz turned off to the right to check on his park, where another group of anarchists was busy clearing and tidying.

Zander and I climbed the stairs to the first floor, and looked out from the rear windows. Beneath us lay a raised area of land, a hill that was almost round and planted with a group of assorted shrubs. The surrounding countryside was flat, and I asked Zander where the hill had come from.

"It covers the old bunker," he said. "The bunker obviously joined directly onto the general's private house, looking at that short path. Ritz capped it with a hill, and he chose this shape to make it look like a burial mound. The general disappeared, of course, but shaping it like a grave is a kind of charm to keep him away: as if he was actually lying under there."

We heard a loud knocking at the front door, and Zander went down to open it. I followed him. The two anarchists were standing outside, and they pointed silently to several piles of cardboard boxes. Zander rubbed his hands, turned to me and said: "Books, boxes and boxes of books. Let's get to work!"

I had imagined there would be more disorder in the library; chaos, even. In reality, there were piles of books in some corners waiting to be sorted, but on the shelves, which reached to the ceiling, interrupted only by the high windows, order prevailed. Everything was labelled and divided into

subject areas. Some of the rooms looked as if they had already been fully arranged. I learned from Zander that the library was due to open in six months' time, whereas I had assumed that everything was still at an early stage.

I had met Zander during my short time as a student. He had finished his own degree already and was working in the university library. He was twelve years older than me, and I met him one afternoon in the summer of 2012, as he was sitting, exhausted, on the grass outside the Germanic Institute. The police, who had cleared the institute out, had just left. In those days, older people's eyes were lit up – the oldest most of all. The conflicts had flared up again! *Lotta continua! Under the pavement lies the beach! L'imagination au pouvoir!* For me, these slogans were all from a time when I had not even been planned. Not that I *was* planned, but more of that later.

It was a sunny afternoon in late June, twenty-five degrees or thereabouts. I'd been following the conflicts, attentively but cautiously, from the side lines. After the police had moved out, small groups gathered all over the lawns to debate, but since I'd only been at the university two and a half months, I didn't feel entitled to join in. I was eighteen years old, and understood very little of what had been going on here in the past weeks. Zander was the only one sitting entirely by himself. He was on a blanket under a lime tree, his knees drawn up with his head resting on them, dozing perhaps. And so I was able to take my time deciphering the title of the book lying next to him. A weighty tome, with a title that sounded like a crime novel: *The Death of Jorge von Burgo*, by Adam Melk. It meant nothing to me. At that moment, Zander raised his head and looked up at me. At first he seemed a little surprised, but then he smiled and said, "Sit down. Do you know the book?"

"No, I've never heard of it. But I'm not terribly well-read."

That wasn't quite true. It was a lie, actually. In my later years at school I was almost the only person in the class who still read books, without any guidance and in a completely unstructured way, but for whole

nights at a time, my ears burning. It was even the reason I'd wanted to study something as old-fashioned as German and Philosophy. But I didn't want to talk about it just then.

"I'm reading it," Zander said, "to find out something about the year of my birth. It was a bestseller then – and for years afterwards. Come on, sit down."

So I did, and when the day cooled and it began to get dark, we moved on to a pub, from which we only emerged at around midnight.

Four years later, the Putsch came, and it wasn't long before Zander was fired. After that he worked in a little publishing house in the far west of the city, and when the regime - was toppled? died by its own hand? – and the university tried to get him back, he declined. He stayed there until a year ago, when he was asked to establish the central library in the ruined compound. Two weeks ago, Zander finally tracked me down and asked if I'd like to help him, and although I felt very comfortable in the old West, I promised him I would at least come and visit, and then consider it.

However, there was no more talk of 'considering it' now.

"We'll discuss your responsibilities later," he said. "Let's get these unpacked first!"

The books that we gradually retrieved from the twelve large cardboard boxes were treasure from the breaking up of a library. An intellectual had died at the age of nearly eighty-two, a Professor Emeritus of philosophy, and he hadn't specified in his will who was to inherit his library. His children and grandchildren (his wife had died fifteen years previously) may have taken one or two books, but had little interest in the majority, which they packed into a total of a hundred and twenty-four equally-sized cardboard boxes. The books were packed according to how they fitted in the boxes (meaning that they were totally mixed up), and then auctioned off. The anarchists, dispatched by Zander, had been equipped with only enough money for twelve boxes. The bidders were under no

circumstances allowed to see the contents of the boxes beforehand: you bid blind, buying a pig in a poke. We now had to examine this treasure piece by piece.

If I were to number the books here one by one, it would fill a hundred pages or more. A lot of them I had never heard of, but I want to mention a few that made the greatest impression on me as we were unpacking them.

The first, astoundingly, was the *Introduction to The Science of Record-Keeping and Registration, Together with an Explanation of Several Passages Therein*, by Philipp Wilhelm Ludwig Fladt, Judicial Counsel of the Church and Upper Appellate Courts of Churpfalz, and Member of the Chur-Bavarian and Pfalz Academy of Sciences, published in Franckfurt and Leipzig, by EBlering Booksellers, 1765. This is, as it were, the abbreviated title – the full version would take up too much room. Admittedly, this was an unaltered photomechanical reproduction of the 1765 edition, published in 1975 in Pullach, but the reprint was in first-class condition, well-nigh untouched. The professor had evidently never studied it closely: the book might well have been a gift he'd received one day, perhaps from a colleague who'd been invited to dinner and didn't want to bring the customary bottle of wine, *grand cru* or not. This was, in its own way, a *grand cru*, and had therefore not yet been opened.

Right at the bottom of the second box, there was an English crime novel in German translation, a paperback edition, dog-eared to the point of being almost tattered, more so than any other book in this box. Its title was *The Bleston Murder*, and the author was a J.C. Hamilton. The translation came from 1960, and I did a quick calculation: the dead professor must have just turned twelve. The name of the translator elicited a chuckle from me: the man was genuinely called Michael Ruffian.

The showpiece of the third box was a book that was very well-known to me, a bestseller from my schooldays, which I had very much enjoyed reading myself: Margarete Mühlenbeck's *The House on the Elbe*.

This one was a splendidly bound special edition, thread-sewn, with a ribbon bookmark. Rainer Harms, an old school-friend who was in the parallel class and who was one of the few other manic readers at that time, had found two interviews with the author on the internet. We watched these videos over and over again. We were head over heels in love with her. We were fifteen.

In the next two boxes, works in the same series had been left together, nothing magnificent this time; here and there they had pale marks. We had bagged three Frenchmen: Marcel Bergotte, Edmond Teste and Antoine Roquetin, plus an Italian, Zeno Cosini. I had never heard of any of them, but of course they were familiar territory for Zander. There were no complete critical editions among them, not even *Collected Works*; there was just a selection of each, published on a round-number anniversary of a birth or death.

The sixth box, in contrast to the two preceding it, was a huge mish-mash, of which our favourite was the small volume *Barthes Foucault Toyota: After Structuralism* by Karl Furrer, published in Darmstadt in 1988 by WBG.

In the seventh box, the heirs had evidently left part of the library's Portuguese section intact and unmolested, since here were the works - in German translation, naturally - of Alberto Caeiro, Ricardo Reis, Álvaro de Campos and Bernardo Soares.

The eighth box contained the real treasures. Amongst others, we discovered Silas Haslam's *A General History of Labyrinths*, and a very old edition of Johann Valentin Andreae's *Readable and Worthwhile Remarks on the Land of Ukkbar in Asia Minor*. Then *The Secret Saviour* by Nils Runeberg; Emil Schering's 1912 German translation of *Kristus och Judas*; the novel fragment *April March* by Herbert Quain and, finally, Pierre Menard's sonnets for the Baronesse de Barcourt, from 1934.

In the ninth box, almost all the books were still sealed in their wrapping, but on top of them the diligent heirs had pressed a paperback

edition of a novel that I remembered well from my night-reading as a schoolboy. The dead professor, too, had probably read it with enjoyment, and maybe even more than once, as the little book was dog-eared in a similar way to the crime novel from the second box. Its margins were too thin for the innumerable pencil annotations with which they were crammed, in a minute hand reminiscent of Robert Walser's. It was Johann Andermatt, and his glorious book *Children Children*, a grandiose child-hating grotesque, or grotesque child-hating grandiosity. I remembered reading it and feeling strengthened in my sixteen-year-old's resolve never to bring children into the world – something which, at that point, I admittedly hadn't had a single opportunity to do.

In the tenth box – and this instantly made us smile at each other, a gentle, almost loving, remember-when smile – in the tenth box, we found the book over which we had first met, Adam Melk's *The Death of Jorge von Burgo*, in one of those 'bestseller' editions. There was also a bibliophile's edition of the little essay *Cohabiting with Kafka* by Franz Odradek, a facsimile of the first edition from 1928, published in 1993 by Bittner & Klein.

In the eleventh, besides three or four cookery books – apparently the heirs already had enough of those – there was a lot of philosophy: primary, secondary and tertiary. Some of it I was familiar with, having studied philosophy for four semesters, but a lot of it I didn't know. When we had stacked the books into piles, and I was just about to open the twelfth box, Zander held one of the books up and said: "there he is."

"There who is?"

"The testator," said Zander.

It was a classic Suhrkamp academic paperback from the year 2008, with golden-yellow writing on a black background, around a hundred and sixty pages with the title *Irony: A Philosophical Compendium*. The author was Ulrich Goergen, at that time still credited as Professor of Philosophy at the Goethe University in Frankfurt am Main, and inside the book's front cover there was also a little card with the handwritten inscription: "Dear

Herr Goergen, please find enclosed an advance copy of the paperback edition. Yours, Raimund Fellingner."

With the last box, the anarchists appeared to have drawn a blank, since at first glance it seemed to contain nothing but a pile of old newspapers. But then, right at the bottom, we found three more books. The first was a special edition of Walter Benjamin's essay *Unpacking My Library*, published in 2012 by Ulrich Keicher in Warmbronn, with an afterword by Lukas Domnik. The second was a well-thumbed Polyglott travel guide for *In and Around Bad Münstereifel*, which was about thirty years old. And finally, at the bottom of the box there was an eight-hundred-page brick of a political thriller, with the title *The Sonja Conspiracy*. It was the sixteenth edition of the paperback version, published in 2005. The hardback had appeared in 1999. The author was a certain Gregor Korff.

"I'd like to borrow that for my solitary evenings, before we shelve it," I said to Zander.

"No problem," he said. "It's not exactly going to be the showpiece of our library."

2

By the time the Putsch came, in the spring of 2016, I had completely lost my way in my studies, and had no idea how to find my way out of the labyrinth. My biggest problem was that I was interested in almost everything I came across, and so couldn't tread the straight path my degree expected of me: I was constantly taking detours. Philosophers in particular led me ever further down a remote path, away even from their own discipline, and I would suddenly find myself with ethnologists, linguists, sociologists, communications theorists, cineastes, psychoanalysts, art historians, semioticians or medical historians, and each time had difficulty finding my way back. It was the same with friends, with women: always a detour, another diversion. During the four

years I spent studying, Zander was the only constant in my life, but then, when he was sacked and vanished into the little publishing house, we fell out of touch.

It was also because I left the capital and went back to the old West. Over the previous decades, the capital had already been smartened up and expanded in an architectural style that I didn't like - but the new government didn't seem to be satisfied with the existing governmental architecture around the Reichstag. They had it all torn down, extended the area further by demolishing the neighbourhoods that bordered onto it, and rebuilt in a mixture of Italian Futurism and New Objectivity. This affected not only the government district, but a lot of public buildings outside it, and the speed with which it was achieved, thanks to technical possibilities that were constantly developing, and the enthusiastic personal commitment of the international star architect who had won the competition, made the whole world hold its breath. The new centre of government was all set for use after ten months, and that was also when I went back to the old West. The new regime was just too much in my face, architecturally speaking. I was never a resistance fighter, but I at least wanted to move as far away from it as possible.

I spent two months living with my mother in Frankfurt, and then started work for the *Del'Haye & Münzenberg* trading house in Aachen. An acquaintance of my mother's had arranged it, and so at the age of twenty-two I began a classical commercial apprenticeship, and left all the confusion of the humanities behind me. *Del'Haye & Münzenberg* was a large wholesale and retail business that traded solely in semi-luxury consumables. It was located on the edge of Aachen's city centre, and had existed for over two hundred years. There had not been a Del'Haye in the company for a long time, but the Münzenberg family still owned the business, which was extremely successful and employed up-to-the-minute business practices, but where, from the minute I arrived in the morning, the traditions of a family business wafted up at me from every corner.

The Münzenbergs imported, shipped, and sold coffee, tea, cocoa, cigars, wine, spirits, chocolate, spices, preserves and honey – all, of course, of the highest quality. The business premises had been expanded several times, but always in the same style as the original shop, with counters and shelves made of massive dark wood, and when you entered one of the offices, you'd always be tempted to call it a counting house, though even back then the word had almost vanished from the German language. Even the warehouse, which was run using the most modern logistical methods, exuded an odour of the old and the sedate.

Right from the beginning, the Münzenbergs did not participate in the regime's somewhat hapless attempts to establish new symbols, or rather, to establish old symbols anew. The stylised double lightning bolt, which was supposed to symbolise the power, the resolve, the modernity and perhaps also the destructive urge of our new masters, was nowhere to be seen there - though it was, of course, on every public building, every uniform, every official letterhead, and even widespread in the world of fashion. The company didn't even hang the obligatory photo of the general, which was something the regime generally had a harder time enforcing here, in the western edge of the country, than in large parts of Central and East Germany. Old Münzenberg, who was still alive when I started with the company, said at every opportunity: "If they make things difficult for us here, we can very quickly move elsewhere. It's only twenty minutes to the Belgian border, and we're sure to get a warm welcome there: the Belgians know a thing or two about luxury consumables. And that'll be the end of the Münzenberg tradition in Aachen." But they didn't make things difficult because, now that they could afford it, some of the new regime's parvenus and officials had become some of Münzenberg's most eager customers.

During my two and half year apprenticeship in this very traditional firm, I spent time in every department, from warehousing to accounts, ordering, shipping, sales, and then finally purchasing. Purchasing was where I was subsequently employed, and I often travelled to Belgium,

France and Italy, to Brussels and Montélimar, to Piedmont and Emilia Romagna. Of course I also travelled within Germany, and so you could say that I got through the years of dictatorship both in inner emigration, and periods of actual temporary emigration.

Immediately after the dictatorship came to an end, I entered the black market, though I kept working for the company at the same time. After all, it was the relationships I had built up there that provided the foundations for my enterprise. I am convinced that one of the junior bosses, Anton Münzenberg, the grandson of Old Münzenberg (who died in 2018), was pretty well aware that I was carrying out my own transactions as well as company business. He never spoke to me about it. Anton was four years younger than me, and we got on well from the moment we met. He had a girlfriend in Lüttich who his family knew nothing about – by their rules this would have been a *mésalliance* - and he often accompanied me on my trips to Belgium. I stayed mum, and I think he reciprocated by keeping just as deathly quiet about my side-lines.

On the black market, I dealt mainly in coffee and tobacco products, and in the first two years I earned good money. However, the interim government got the supply situation in the West under control more quickly than could have been anticipated, and business dropped off steeply. You could still earn a bit here and there, but there were no more fortunes to be made in this area of the economy. Besides which, in spite of everything I had always to reckon with the possibility of having my cover blown in the firm, and I might not have survived the shame. The Münzenbergs always treated me almost like one of the family. I had never had family in the traditional sense. I was my mother's only child, and had never known my father. Even my mother never really knew him. "Your father was just passing through, Ulrich," she said, "and I already knew that the night we met. I don't even know his surname."

And so I left the black market alone, and kept working for *Del'Haye & Münzenberg* for just under another three years as a serious purchaser. Then I got Zander's call. I knew straight away who was on the end of the

line, and we chatted as if we'd just seen each other the day before yesterday. I didn't say yes immediately: I had no reason to leave the old West. I lived in a beautiful apartment right on the market square. The house belonged to the Münzenbergs, and my rent had a somewhat tokenistic character. I was close to the border, in sight of Western Europe. I had other friends besides Anton Münzenberg; I had a few romantic involvements. I had a very secure position in the company, and I enjoyed my work. I loved the aromas and the low light in the old rooms.

“Just come and take a look, at least,” Zander said on the phone.
“You've never seen such splendid ruins as we've got here.”