

Translated extract from

Hans Joachim Schädlich
Kokoschkins Reise
Rowohlt Verlag
München 2010
ISBN 978-3-498-06401-3

pp. 9-24

Hans Joachim Schädlich
Kokoschkin's Journey

Translated by Philip Boehm

“Well, have you thought it over?” Fyodor Kokoshkin was tall and gaunt, with white hair. Jakub Hlaváček—younger, smaller, and portly—shook his head.

They were standing in the lobby of the Hotel Bogota in Berlin. It was the afternoon of Wednesday, September 7, 2005.

“Let’s sit down,” said Kokoshkin. He waved to a waiter and said: “Will you have some as well, Jakub?”

“Yes.”

“Two pots of the Old Russian blend. With *varenye*.”

Hlaváček said: “I need to rest up after our trip.”

“We could go fish for pike.”

“In Boston?”

“Nearby. Just like at Studená in Moravia.”

“I have to go home.”

“I understand you, my friend,” said Kokoshkin. “I feel the same thing. I’m sorry we have to part ways. I couldn’t have made this trip without you.”

“I hope that you accomplished what you wanted.”

“I think so.”

“I’m happy I was able to accompany you,” said Hlaváček. “There was so much I never knew. And some things I had forgotten. Any later would have been too late for a trip like that. At my age...”

“What am I supposed to say! Compared to me you’re...”

“No-no. Although...”

“Are you staying in Berlin?” asked Kokoshkin.

“No. I’m flying to Prague this evening.”

“I’m spending the night. Tomorrow I’m off to London.”

Kokoshkin and Hlaváček stood up. “My dear Jakub. I don’t know whether I’ll ever travel back to Europe. But you could come to the States. Then you’ll have to be my guest. Stay well!”

“You do the same,” said Hlaváček.

They shook hands.

Kokoshkin said to the waiter: “Please charge the tea to my room.”

September 8, 2005

Kokoshkin landed at London-Heathrow at 12:00.

At Berlin-Tegel the security guards uncovered a small Swiss pocketknife inside his carry-on, and Kokoshkin had to hand it over.

He made it through passport control at Heathrow, retrieved his suitcase from the baggage claim, and lifted it onto a luggage cart. After he passed through custom he saw some women in the lobby holding signs showing the name and logo of the shipping line. He joined a group of people in front of one of these women and they immediately set off for the assembly point. On the way he noticed that most of the others had tied a white band around their suitcase handles—about four centimeters wide. He remembered seeing two such paper bands in the front compartment of the black ticket pouch.

When he reached the assembly point he took one of the paper bands out of the pouch and filled in the required information: name, address, city, country, telephone, deck and cabin number (both on the ticket), pulled the band around his suitcase handle and pressed the self-adhesive ends together.

Apart from the flight attendant, Kokoshkin hadn't spoken with anyone since Berlin-Tegel. The women with the signs had disappeared. The others were waiting next to their luggage carts; some were sitting down. Very few were talking.

A bustling woman appeared carrying a notebook and announced that they would begin boarding the busses. The first group was led out of the lobby, but Kokoshkin stayed until there were only five travelers left. Then went to the end of the line and followed the other four passengers and the representative. The luggage carts had to be left at a barrier. Kokoshkin had difficulty rolling his suitcase the short distance to the bus, where the driver stowed it away.

Kokoshkin took a seat in the next-to-last row, on the right. At 1:30 PM the bus left Heathrow. A young man sitting three rows in front of Kokoshkin was taking notes. Traffic was light on the highway heading southwest. The sun was high over the green of Berkshire near Windsor Castle. Kokoshkin dozed off, but was awake by the time they pointed out the royal residence. At 3:00 PM the bus pulled up to Dock Gate 4 of the Eastern Docks at Southampton.

Kokoshkin stepped off the bus and walked the few steps to the departure lounge, where he was directed to a counter.

“Your ticket and passport, please.”

“Fingerprint, please.”

“Please look into the camera.”

Within a few minutes Kokoshkin was holding a plastic card with a magnetic strip: photo, name, date of birth, nationality, passport number valid from to, embarking Southampton September 8, 2005. The card was to serve as ID, cabin key, and credit card for payments aboard ship.

From the departure lounge to the ship was a single step.

Two stewardesses greeted Kokoshkin.

When Kokoshkin told them his cabin and deck number one said: “You can take a lift.” The other said: “Or you can take the stairs.”

He walked up the stairs and then down a seemingly endless corridor, and stood outside the door to his cabin. A man appeared: “I am your steward. My name is Philip. Here’s my phone number if you need anything or have any questions.”

Kokoshkin gave him ten dollars and asked: “Where is my suitcase?”

“It will be brought here shortly. The staff will set it next to your door.”

Kokoshkin went inside his cabin. He found a note requesting passengers to report to Deck 7 at 5:00 PM: Come practice how a life jacket can save your life.

The life vest may be found in your cabin. First take it with both hands and pull it over your head, the reflectors facing forward. Attach the two sides using the Velcro fasteners. Wrap the belt around your waist and close the buckle. Fasten the belt as tightly as possible while holding the right side of the vest! The life jacket contains a whistle and a light that automatically illuminates in contact with water.

There was still some time left before 5:00 PM, and Kokoshkin first wanted to view the harbor from the topmost deck. He took the elevator up to Deck 13. He saw large ships

that had moored. He saw small ships pulling into the harbor. The blue of the water beneath the sunny late afternoon sky.

After the trip with Jakub Hlaváček he suddenly felt a great calm. The ship an island. Kokoshkin unreachable. The prospect of an even, measured speed. Pondering the images from the past.

Back in his cabin, Kokoshkin put on the life vest as instructed and made his way to deck 7. Countless people in red life jackets.

The passengers learned: don't jump in the water except under the most extreme circumstances! Should this prove necessary, however, hold your nose and press the palm of your hand against your mouth. Using your other hand, grip the opposite side of the jacket so it won't be torn off when hitting the water.

Now look to see if there is something or someone swimming in the water directly below you.

Now look straight ahead and step forward!

The passengers also learned that the emergency signal consists of seven short and one long ship's bell. In the event the alarm should ring, passengers should dress warmly (don't forget your head covering) with their life vests already on and take any necessary medications to one of the assembly stations. The assembly stations may be found here on Deck 7, where the life rafts are stowed, as you can see.

After the training session was over Kokoshkin took the life vest back to his cabin. His suitcase was waiting outside his door.

Before he unpacked, Kokoshkin wanted to go back up to Deck 7, which was also the promenade deck. More and more people joined him at the railing. Harbor attendants in yellow jackets cast off the mooring lines. At 6:00 PM the ship shoved off away from the pier with hardly a sound.

Dinner at 8:30 in the Britannia Restaurant. Attire for the evening: casual. Shirt or sweater and long pants. No jacket necessary. And the ladies? Blouse or sweater, skirt or pants. Kokoshkin never wore sweaters and he never went to a restaurant without a jacket.

Time to wander around. The Grand Lobby had six floors. Entrance to the Mayfair shops was level with Deck 3. Hermès, Chopard, H. Stern etc. Kokoshkin enjoyed looking at the things: jewelry, watches, perfumes, cosmetics, clothes, spirits, tobacco. All at fantastic prices. But he also noted that the objects didn't really interest him. At most the photo shop.

He glanced inside the chart room; it was too early for a visit to the bar. Not to mention the champagne bar Veuve Clicquot. But Sir Samuel's Wine Bar was just right for an aperitif.

It was 8:45 before Kokoshkin walked into the Britannia Restaurant

He was impressed. The restaurant was three decks high and as wide as the ship. A gigantic tapestry was hanging on the front wall showing the ship against the Manhattan skyline. At the foot of the tapestry was the captain's round table. He was known as the Master and resided with ten guests.

Kokoshkin made his way to his seat using a map of the dining room that he had taken from his papers. He bowed slightly: "Kokoshkin."

He sat down. On his right was a dark-haired woman in her mid-forties. She said: "Noborra."

That same moment, the man to his left, towards the front of the boat, said: "Herr Kokoshkin, we know each other. From Boston. I'm Josh Oakley."

"That is a surprise. I haven't forgotten that you once freed me from a dangerous situation."

Ms. Noborra said: "Might I inquire..."

"Someone barged into me in the middle of the street."

Oakley said: "Attacked you is more like it."

"Two young men had taken grabbed me and were demanding money. I was just about to give them some when Mr. Oakley showed up and pulled out his service revolver. The young men let me go and ran away."

A slight old man sitting across from Kokoshkin said: "Just call me Frank." He pointed to the tender old lady at his side: "This is my wife."

She said to Kokoshkin: "You may call me Lucy."

"That's nice of you."

On the forward side of the table to Kokoshkin's right was a young man who said "Sakhnovsky."

"Are you Russian?"

"Just like yourself."

Frank said: "You're late. The hors d'oeuvres are all gone."

"I wanted to avoid the Master's official welcoming ceremony."

"There wasn't any. Thank heavens. But there was a long line. They might have a ceremony tomorrow."

"Besides, I don't eat very much. I wouldn't have eaten anything anyway."

Lucy said: "I had some avocado and tomato in pico de gallo."

The waiter asked Kokoshkin what he wanted to drink.

"Mineral water please, just mineral water. And for my main course wild mushrooms, polenta and spinach."

Turning to the lady on his right he said: "Noborra is a Baltic name, if I'm not mistaken."

"I'm German. Perhaps my ancestors came from the Baltic."

“I’m sure they did.”

“I think so too,” said Sakhnovsky.

Kokoshkin turned to Oakley: “I’m looking forward to Boston. I’ve really missed it, especially our Beacon Hill.”

“Were you gone a long time?”

“No, just three weeks.”

“Where were you?”

“Europe and Russia.”

Lucy said: “These days people consider Russia part of Europe.”

“Europe reaches exactly as far as Poland,” said Kokoshkin.

Sakhnovsky turned to Lucy: “Were you ever in Russia?”

“No I wasn’t.”

“It is Asia. And it starts just after Poland and the Baltic countries.”

“We live in London, in Richmond,” said Lucy. “We can see the Thames from our house.”

Oakley said: “I was only gone a week. By the time I get home it’ll be two weeks.”

“On business?” asked Kokoshkin.

“The ship to Southampton was business. This return trip is private.”

Frank said: "That's about the same with us. We're sailing to New York to meet some friends for lunch, then we get back on board and sail back to Southampton." He laughed. "All private."

"Two weeks at sea," said Ms. Noborra.

"Our vacation."

"That's enviable," said Sakhnovsky.

Frau Noborra asked: "Where do you live?"

"In Chicago. I was in Amsterdam. For an audition. With the Concertgebouw Orchestra."

"Where do you play now?"

"With the CSO."

Lucy asked: "Where!?"

"The Chicago Symphony Orchestra."

"In that case I've seen and heard you in concert," said Frau Noborra.

"Do you live in Chicago yourself?"

"Yes."

Sakhnovsky turned to Frau Noborra and said: "I'd like to get to know the European orchestra tradition."

“And?”

“It didn’t work out.”

Lucy said: “There’s a string quartet on board. It plays in the Illuminations Planetarium.”

“How do you know that?”

“It’s not our first trip.”

Sakhnovsky said: “I’m not entirely convinced. A string quartet on a ship. The ones I know play on land.”

“Well yes” said Lucy.

“How do you like your cabin, Mr. Kokoshkin?” asked Frank.

“Very much. It’s an outside stateroom.”

“Just like ours,” said Lucy.

“When I first stepped onto the balcony,” said Kokoshkin, “I couldn’t help but think of our lifesaving training.”

“Mr. Kokoshkin, please!”

“Never sit down on the railing. If you see a person fall overboard throw that person a life preserver or something that floats, then shout ‘Man overboard!’ and tell the nearest crewmember.”

Oakley said: “It would be nice if it were always like that.”

“Don’t be gruesome,” said Lucy.

“Still, the water’s about sixty-eight degrees. That’s warm enough to last a little while.”

Sakhnovsky said: “But a ship this gigantic can’t just stop. It moves at almost thirty knots, that’s about thirty-five miles-per-hour.”

“You can deploy a swift rescue boat,” said Oakley.

Kokoshkin asked Sakhnovsky: “Were you born in Russia?”

“Yes.”

“I keep asking myself why your name sounds so familiar. Musicians? Actors? Athletes?”

“Actors,” said Sakhnovsky. “Vasya Sakhnovsky played Seryosha in Anna Karenina. Nineteensixtyseven.”

“Right. And Tatyana Samojlova played Anna.”

“Exactly.”

“Are you related to Vasya Sakhnovsky?”

“No.”

Ms. Noborra said: “You seem to know Asia pretty well.”

“It’s a long story,” said Kokoshkin, glancing at Sakhnovsky.

“I know the version with Greta Garbo, and the latest one, with Sophie Marceau,” said Ms. Noborra.

The waiter asked what they would like for dessert.

Kokoshkin had not intended to have any. Ms. Noborra ordered lime sorbet, chocolate ice cream, vanilla frozen yogurt and peach sauce. Suddenly Kokoshkin said he'd like the same thing.

After dessert Frank and Lucy were the first to leave the table. Lucy said to the others: “Set your clocks back an hour before you go to bed. Every night, until we reach New York.”

Oakley said to Kokoshkin: “See you tomorrow,” and stood up.

Sakhnovsky followed him.

Kokoshkin hoped that Ms. Noborra would stay. But she left as well, and he stayed sitting for a few minutes.

In the chart room he took a seat at the bar instead at a table. Next to him he recognized the young man who had been taking notes in the bus from Heathrow to Southampton. Kokoshkin ordered a beer and listened to the jazz trio: piano, bass, drums. Although he liked their playing he didn't stay long.

He took the elevator up to the promenade deck and went to the railing. Not a single light on the ocean. The air was a mild 65 degrees.

Before he went to bed Kokoshkin set his watch back one hour.

FIRST DAY AT SEA

September 9, 2005

Kokoshkin had no desire to go to the Britannia for breakfast. Instead he went to the King's Court on Deck 7, chose several items from the various buffets and sat down at a small table with a view of the sea. At one of the buffets he caught a glimpse of Ms. Noborra. She was wearing a pantsuit, and had put her hair up.

Kokoshkin went over to her and said, "Good morning. Why don't you join me?"

"OK." All she had taken was orange juice, fruit salad and coffee.

Kokoshkin said: "Please do me the favor and call me Fyodor."

"Fyodor?" OK. I'm Olga."

"What do you do in Chicago?"

"I see you're very direct. I'm an architect in my husband's office."

"And what do you work on as an architect?"

"On a crazy project. Green rooftops."

"Not at all crazy. I'm very interested in that."

"What was your... what do you do?"

"I was... am a botanist. Specializing in grasses and sedges."

“No!”

“Yes! I wrote a book on grasses. And I’ve worked with architects.”

“You surprise me, Fyodor.”

“Mostly on intensive greening projects.”

“That’s our specialty. Of course I’ve also worked on extensive green roofs, but we’re not interested in parking garages and shopping malls. Our clients want intensive. We aren’t very satisfied with the available grasses.”

“I could probably advise you, Olga. Naturally at no cost.”

“I’ll talk to my husband. Do you ever travel to Chicago?”

“I do.”

“Fyodor, in confidence. About your trip to Russia and Europe. Nostalgia?”

“No. I had to see certain places of my past once again. Petersburg, Berlin, Prague. I first went to Prague in thirty-three, then again in sixty-eight, during the Prague Spring.”

“I understand.” She stood up. “Will I see you at lunch in the Britannia?”

“Yes.”