§3: THE DAY I LEFT FOR BELGRADE

DÜSSELDORF, OCTOBER 14, 1998

The day I left for Belgrade: rain dampens the picture of the city (Düsseldorf). Heavy freight trucks: wheel marks in the puddles; the sky is burning, weary, sick, tissue.

At the airport (in Düsseldorf), passengers in the vehicle approaching the airplane are helpless. Numb faces. Tired. Still marked by the night.

ZÜRICH

The picture is then slightly (or essentially) changed. Weak sunrays burn the eyes through the arched windows in the hall of Zürich airport. Only a few penetrating rays pierce the pale, sleep-exhausted, and thin skin on the neck of the woman, head resting on the shoulder of an unshaven middle-aged man with bloody eyes. Of course, no one in that icy space reacts to the thin voice from the loudspeakers that gratuitously, with the sound of a tuning fork in approaching silence, seems to announce the grieving after a crime against a dear one, felt in long, dark, sweaty sleep . . . Then a sluggish look at the screen and the word “Belgrade,” denoting the destination of the next flight, like the faded trace of a mother tongue constantly forgetting itself.
The faces of the passengers in the plane are shriveled. The eyes of the passengers in the plane are moist. The clothing of the passengers in the plane is black. The voices of the passengers in the plane are lifeless.

Belgrade. Ponderous and alone. The baroque of the city, and of the whole country as well, is so pronounced that eyes fix on every rough spot on the ground. Gutters are crooked and twisted. The face of a woman in the bus is square. The taxi tires are cogged. I immediately noticed the uneven spots on Handke’s book *The Innerworld of the Outerworld of the Innerworld* (translated into the Serbian by Zlatko Krasni). (On the next-to-last page of the book, the titles *Child Story, Sorrow Beyond Dreams, Lesson of St. Victoire* simply fell out of their place in the original titles.) The city is pretty. People are good-looking. The president of a local political party whom we meet in a bar is handsome as well. The theater director we meet at the entrance to the police building is handsome, too. We are first drawn into “everyday life” on the central city square of Terazije. Then we are “transported” to the floating river restaurant “Bahus.” There we are “graciously” “lowered” to the very bottom of an “independent” dark story that will only take place several months later. L.L. and D.B., B.K., and S.J. are with us. The river widens toward the sky on that spot. It stretches its skin. Tightens its flesh. The river’s blood circulates with all its strength. It pounds from the center of itself in the name of God who, in the shape of an enormous heart, breathes deeply and laboriously. Waves carry off a swollen board. Waves carry off the distended carcass of a horse. Waves carry off a boat with no one in it. Poplar leaves applaud soundlessly. Never have I seen so little knowledge about one’s surroundings. Never have I seen so little interest in the evil that will come crashing down on the innocent suburban shadows at any moment. Self-confidence is so absurd that everything that moves with determination in one’s immediate surroundings slips right out of the hand. With every subsequent movement, everything breaks up. The place where we were located was a pile of junk, where you sat like a king. It was truly a country without neighbors. People existed there without a state. (And not, as they maintained “imprisoned in the cage
of the state.”) Freedom. An empty field where we were negative tourists.

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 of the state.

 The stay in Banja Luka? Real presence? We were employed most of the time? We worked off every bit of the hospitality of the people of Banja Luka? We were, finally, asked to work. And those unforgettable nights when I felt like an empty log cabin with the wind blowing through it.

 The same feeling continued in my sleep in the night on Fruška Gora’s Iriški Venac. During dinner, I tried to stop my thoughts and reduce them to feelings. They were too dense. My body felt like the log of a tree with rough bark.

 I awoke in the morning empty. I stood above the hill in front of the hotel (“Vojvodina”) for a while and stared as though through a narrow opening at the Srem lowland. Like saying to myself, “Is it possible, that you are really here?! Am I dreaming?” Last night’s visit to the monasteries of Hopovo, Grgeteg and Krušedol turned out to be only bruises after a salvo of slaps in a fight with myself. Now I was calm. Tired. Conversations in which I transmitted Handke’s sentences to others exhausted me completely. Like hearing in a song on the radio about the end of translation, an issue that my friend Scott pressed all the time.

 Of course, I remember the bright face of a woman named Teodora: pretty face, elegant, proud build and a little acerbic, readiness for measured, long, truly meaningful conversations about everything.

 What really happened on that seventh (?) trip with Handke? What?

 It started with frequent excursions with the media close by and eavesdropping.
Conversations about nothing and everything most often developed slowly, nonchalantly, without any specific intentions and showing no fear for the times in which we lived.

One might even say that this time the trip took place through telephone calls. The direction we took, the stations, means of transportation, guides and even the accessory equipment were already frequent topics in those short or long phone conversations. The discussions were not heated. But not lukewarm either. Conversations about everything. Wistful, attentive, warm and passionate. With every conversation the trip that we were planning became more real, clearer, brighter and “more plastic.” And not only was there no more reason to postpone the trip: any thought of any change was excluded.

I arrived in Belgrade two days after Handke. It was the first time that Peter had preceded me in my own town. That fact surprised me with the additional consideration of “changing places,” whereby I would immediately feel like “a stranger in my own house.”

The changed places were already portended by how one traveled to Yugoslavia at the time: while I must say I was afraid of the announced “bombing of Belgrade,” Peter was cool, at least on the phone. While I thought of postponing the trip, periodically in the grip of panic, Peter stayed true to his intention to go to the capital of Yugoslavia and, as he said, see “with the naked eye” “what was going on” and “personally” catch the “smell of the country.” While Peter had landed on time back on Monday (October 14), flying with “Air France,” I was forced to stay in Cologne because the German air carrier “Lufthansa” had cancelled its flights to Belgrade (fearing the announced bombing).

The next day, Tuesday, I tried Peter’s “Air France.”

Peter had already been in Belgrade for some time. I called him by phone around noon. I was in the DW building. The telephone was

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in an empty room on the twelfth floor. Peter was in his room at Hotel “Moskva.”

Dead silence. Then noise echoing like explosions. The voices seem all the more subdued.

“You really can’t come today?”

“No, even ‘Air France’ is going to cancel their flights to Belgrade!”

It is cold in the restaurant as I write this. The place is just about empty. That is why I notice that all the stools along the bar are different. Why can’t I remember the face of the journalist from Banja Luka who mentioned going to the office of Književna Reč (Literary Word) (in the “old Yugoslavia”).

Silence. Methodical movements of the woman’s hand at the next table. If the spoon bringing foam from her coffee cup to her mouth were to slip out of her little hand, the clang of the metal cutlery would echo so loudly that the ceiling fan, alarmed for a moment, would stop its otherwise methodical but—I have no idea why—sad rotation. And the waiter would only cough. The man at the table by the window would sneeze. I would wipe my nose loudly, of course, not in place of the man. And it was only after a woman with very long legs entered the place, causing the bartender to choke—we have no idea why either—that I remembered the face of the journalist from Banja Luka. It was the unmistakable picture of a man in his forties. The tired, suffering face, unshaven, with wrinkles (like escape routes in the war) deeply chiseled in his forehead, and pale, almost bloodless complexion, aroused me from my sleep. Did my bright eyes pass over the prominent cheekbones of that half-dead face? Did my stern eyes search through the charred remains of his nose? I wanted to stop such thoughts, so that is what I am doing. I have no idea why there is such a strong desire to write in the present tense. There is also a strong desire to go to the movies. Suddenly it seems to me that the book I’m writing here that I want to finish right now is not a story about recollection. The unfinished state of this text is primarily shown in that Knifer-like constantly starting and only periodically finishing what has been started. This gives rise to the need to write in the present tense, which suspends any storytelling. Because this is an observation story and an “observation story” must report on the present. Of course, this kind of “storytelling” seems like talking emptily and like talking to yourself. Because who listens to a storyteller of the present?

28 Several years later, as I was rewriting this text (for the seventh time), I found out that the man had committed suicide.
Who wants to be in the audience of the absent? Because listening to a storyteller of the present is the same as removing yourself from the present. Closing your eyes. Extinguishing the fiery images. And wholeheartedly abandoning yourself to listening.

28 October 1998

So, right after I get to Belgrade I meet Peter in the restaurant of Hotel “Moskva.” We are sitting at a table “in the point” of the room, like on the bow of a ship anchored in a harbor, which is what this square looks like with its two streets that meet right in front of the hotel’s front façade.

“Hi,” I say.

“Hello,” replies Peter, getting up politely. That movement is so familiar to me, so pleasant and tangible, that the embrace, patting my friend on the back and his friendly slap on my forehead, turn into the signs of a story that suddenly needs to be recalled. It was summoned by those light, soft, short glances. Silence, of course, sweeps away the roar of daytime traffic in the street.

2 November 1998

That afternoon after I got to Belgrade is memorable for my meeting with L., and less so for meeting M.J.²⁹ Let me explain, L. is that artist whose art did not seriously interest me before, perhaps because of the “rebellious image” of “1968-ers” who in my (not apolitical!) “anti-moralizing” “purism” were abrasive from the very beginning of my awareness of the “truth” about art. Didn’t fellow student Z.R. openly say at a meeting of general literature students in Takovska Street that I should be “ideologically processed” for my “unsuitable apathy,” “amoral aloofness,” and “complete political absence”? In the mass of exalted rebels in the student protest demonstrations of 1968, didn’t I truly seem like just a loser? After the decisive, declarative meeting of student rebels in the Hall of Heroes at the Faculty of Philology, when Z.R. himself screamed into the microphone and called everyone there to go out into the street, I, who just happened to have wandered there, accidentally ended up in the front lines of the mass of students, inflamed not only by Z.R.’s speech. Many of the students were truly

²⁹ He will be discussed in my book Handke.
dissatisfied. Nevertheless, the whole time I seemed to have a premonition of my later despair. And I said so to my parents right then: articulating my vision of the “ruination of everything,” speaking in the agony of a nervous breakdown that only seemed to be feigned. That was when I left my parents’ home, forever. So, on the way out of the Faculty of Philology building, the police beat me up. Not only did I not feel the truncheon blows, but I felt bad the whole time (owing to the accidental nature of my being there, because I felt guilty at having taken someone’s “heroic role”). The same feeling filled me on the ceremonial balcony on the front of the Faculty of Philosophy, which the students took over that day. Down below on the sidewalk in front of the entrance, film director Želimir Žilnik, a young documentary filmmaker at the time, filmed me on the balcony (for his later banned film Rani radovi (Early Works) later celebrated throughout the world). And I was not brave enough to leave the balcony right away (“run off”) or shout at the cameraman (“stop filming”). On the contrary, in my dull-wittedness I “posed,” establishing a distance from my present time. My eyes were “fastened” on the director’s face; he pointed at me to the cameraman as he gave orders triumphantly and a little despotically. During the night in the courtyard of the barricaded faculty building, when Minderović (“Minda”) played Beatles tunes on the piano, I was lying on the ground, head resting on the stomach of a half-naked girl (not Drinka!) looking at the starry sky, imagining myself in prison. Even Dilajla, a good buddy, who had lit a joint, seemed to me like the hero of a drama that would not end happily. I felt the sharp taste of deceit: in the marijuana smoke and in the beats of Minderović’s music, and in nudity of the woman with whom I later moved to the armchair of the University rector. Unlike some students, I felt unnatural the whole time. I did not physically feel the words in the speeches of professors P.O. and D.M., not even in the fateful speech by Josip Broz. It was like none of it attracted me, even though I was present the whole time, and even active. (I moved from one place to another. I talked. I clapped.) Later, several years later in “Kolarac” restaurant on Knez Mihailovoj Street, I saw L.—he was at the top of his artistic career. He was in jeans and white tennis shoes. “Like Tito in a formal white suit,” I thought. Like the “wrong hero in the wrong place at the wrong time” in a drama that was not all that good, I wrote. In words and sentences

30 Today the president of a Serbian political party.
31 Today president of the Yugoslav Assembly.
that, allegedly, carried the truth itself, there was something of the illusionist. Perhaps that is why I don’t remember anything that was said. Only images remain: sweaty brow; moustache falling into a spoonful of fish soup; dirty hair; a voice like that of an announcer reporting on a coup d’etat. I wondered the whole time about the motives behind the hero’s actions. In a number of public appearances—later primarily as an ideologist—L. was not lively enough, thus unconvincing. Or else he: seemed level-headed, quite diplomatic. (I am speaking here of someone I have never met.) (This is, therefore, an opinion without a tangible foundation. So it is not even an opinion. It is more like a feeling.)

Everything the artist said that afternoon in Belgrade and later in Zemun neither confirmed my previous thoughts nor brought any new ones. Of course, I took pains not to show my feelings. I am sure that those present did not deduce them either.

On the other hand, I was curious about the outcome of the meeting with the artist. I certainly was hoping for all that. Was it also because of my hurt pride, bitterness and spite caused by the words in a letter from a female friend, M.Č., who “scolded” me for having “wrongly” “taken” Handke on “those” trips through Serbia? “You should not have gone ‘through villages.’” “You are creating a myth about Handke.” “You are mixing with the wrong people.” Suddenly I saw friendship like the picture of a pile of wood on a clearing in a forest, with despondent people standing in a row in front of it, as a forester gives them instructions: “You take this log,” “You take that log over there,” and “You take that log,” “Go on, take them, and go home,” and “Don’t anyone touch those logs over there,” “Dismissed!”

So there was a meeting: October 16, 1998, at high noon. (No! It was somewhat after 2 p.m.) It was next to the fountain in front of Hotel “Moskva.” (No! It was next to the hamburger stand.) The day was sunny. (No! It was raining.) (“Look, storytelling in the past tense again!”) The air was filled with the smell of that familiar Belgrade “sfumato” autumn. The particles of that picture were not only “large grain” but also the quite shaded, pale colors of the background where the bright shades of summer had truly disappeared. This is why nothing present took effect “at first glance.” Even the artist’s car (a Honda sedan), parked (“illegally”) at the top of the Balkanska Street descent, seemed to take effect “at second glance.” The picture, of
course, was “quiet.” The strong smell of rancid oil came from a kitchen window. The outline of scattered split logs and lumps of coal could be seen (only “at second glance”) through a half-open basement window knee-high to Peter. “Down there,” from Zeleni Venac green market, came the smell of rotten fruit in slow, heavy and long waves, plaguing the positions, gestures, limbs and hair of those passing by in the street. Seen “from Mars” (so a “long shot”), people looked “like ants.” It was only “clearly seen” “at second glance” that the eyes of these fellow citizens were “ringed” with dark circles. (“Like pools in the middle of concentric circles of ripples on swamp water, set in motion by a jumping frog.”) The black circles under the artist’s eyes were also evident “at second glance.” The dark circles under Peter’s eyes were also evident “at second glance.” “At second glance,” my dark circles were also evident. And we all stood there and looked at the “Albania Palace” building, once the tallest and most magnificent buildings in the Balkans (so they claim in the country), today only the symbol of a “superseded empire” (claim some foreign media). It is still a symbol of “growing up without maturing” (many say in some foreign media, but also in the coffee houses in the country). A symbol of “educating children with books having no substance” (they say). “A symbol of punishing offenders before they commit an offence.” (Do I, here and in general, reject symbols as denotations in talking about experiences and expressing feelings?) And at one time the Albania building (stressing “at one time”) was the perfect picture of success. In the streets around the building: Tito’s pioneers with red kerchiefs around their necks. Mothers wearing stockings “with seams” were not “streetwalkers” but were “virgins” one and all, giving birth to us by “immaculate conception.” There are no dog droppings on the sidewalk. Sport aircraft fly over piles of coal deliveries (for winter heating) and split wood thrown around it (also for winter heating) (“on the sidewalk”). In Belgrade, the Albania building was the very embodiment of a small cosmos in which everything had “its place” (say many even today in the country). And only madness will shatter the frame of that picture.” (Or that picture frame will shatter on the very crags of reason that were too hard and too harsh for all those there?) Only a troubled mind will break the coordinates of that system, the vectors falling out one by one. (Or the coordinates of that system will be broken precisely by someone’s vigilance, pure, cold and complete, drawn out to the point of being evil, warped and debauched?) And (they said in the country) that was a “time of the avant-garde” in which every word in
a sentence and every brick in a house was immediately clear to everyone at first glance. “There was no trace of the later ‘postmodern’ blurring of the picture,” I write (today) (neither in the country nor abroad). “Clear view through the window to the street where pedestrians, flocks of sheep, camels, cats, ants, wolves, workers, lions, pigs, horse-drawn carriages, cars, and policemen truly pass by, all together, not bothered by each other, and smiling when they meet.”

Of course, I am not normal.—“Today, consequently, everything is different. The claustrophobics, as we know, have the upper hand. They all wear sunglasses. Villages no longer exist. (So, the present tense again!) The towns are pens for cattle that were slaughtered, eaten, digested and ejected in the form of feces long ago. Figures in human form take public transportation, taxis and private cars from nowhere to nowhere. Consequently, no one goes on foot. Even if there are pedestrians, they are drivers. They jingle keys in one hand. A mobile phone is shining in the other hand. The sun does not shine but presses on the heart. I am suffocating. In front of the grilled meat stand I can’t find my wallet. I don’t have any cigarettes. Under my arm is a bundle of a dozen ‘daily newspapers.’ The weather is ‘cold and clear’ making everyone shiver and grin unnaturally.”—Of course, I am not normal.

6 November 1998

And this meeting will, consequently, be remembered. We will remember these moments later. The meal, scruples, uncertain steps toward the restroom, gazing at the other bank of the river, the story of a woman with moist eyes. What primarily sticks in my mind is the expression on the waiter’s face as he recognizes the customers, but remains calm the whole time, “ostensibly” “uninterested” . . . And it all started with an absurd handshake. As one pressed the other’s hand as hard as he could, the other was concentrating on what he was looking at. His hand seemed to float in the air.

6 Stuttgart, 21 November 1998

Much, much later I visited a city that in my earlier adult life had been an important foundation of the grubby awareness of what was then and continues to be the unfinished edifice of my Balkano-Slavic persona.
It was a time of possible storytelling based on the ability to control thoughts and experiences. The narrative system was quite clear, tangible, and sound. Above all, it was indestructible. And enabled the slow, zigzag or roundabout movement around a center that immediately ceased to exist or else immediately became something else, or immediately changed, etc.

At the time, I was hungry for something new.
At the time, I wanted more.
At the time, I sought the Other.

Going to museums, for example, was ("at the time") a “holiday,” an “event,” an “amorous encounter.” Standing (or sitting), for example, before a master’s painting brought trembling owing to the very closeness of the uneven areas in the layers of paint.

Today, in the same museum, in front of the same painting by the same master, uninterested so to say, my eyes go out the window into the grayness of the wintry late autumn landscape of the street “with a bus passing a car” and “with” several “random passers-by.”

There is not a bit of the controlled flow of narration. The story, if it still exists, develops in fits and starts, with sudden interruptions, breaks, jumps, degenerations and tearing of the fiber of an increasingly drawn-out story. It is reminiscent of dough, saliva, and spit.

The storyteller’s interest in the secondary is captivating. First, he observes the exhibit goers. In front of a canvas of the Mother of God, for example, a group of people resembles spectators watching a sport aircraft review.

In the meantime, a touching letter arrives from a friend. He makes special note of wanting to get together . . . . Later, on the phone, shudders of loneliness. Along with fear of illness.

Then H.S. called.
Unpleasant surprise at work yesterday.
Rain. Thinking of going out into the street: drowning.
Suddenly a passer-by like an “adolescent” or like the picture of childhood turned ugly. He seems so silly, inauthentic, wrong, but convincing, that only after he leaves, consequently in his absence, do I feel myself.

On the telephone, I have to shout. Annoyed by the picture of someone who never ever looks “flirtingly” at anyone. Everything in the picture seems so purposeful that you really see the primordial picture of the future. “Does that guy ever sleep?”

Reading the protocols of polemics, I feel helpless. The first thought is “attack the artist again.” At the same time, the image of
smothering the soul with definitions and one-beat interpretations. I see misreading as being both twisted and an autistic reaction. But they, it seems to me, really seem like “professionals” and linguistic “lawmakers” . . . . And then those polemics appear to me like an issue that touches those who are truly affected by something, but also those who benefit from the subject of the polemics . . . . “Old folks of ancient history.”

And why was it that when I looked at something I felt the increasing need to listen. As though expecting the sound or voice of the story. And I strained my ear every time. And the picture in my field of vision blurred.

When they spoke about “tolerance,” I wondered whether all of us, the speakers, audience, guests, “were in church” . . . .

That problem of expressing myself, particularly after some letters that arrived at the time, suddenly boiled down to the need to reform my correspondence and translations . . . What first came to mind was the idea of stopping all communication, so that the missive became sufficient in itself . . . . Right afterwards I thought I should screen the senders, so the missive would take on what I considered its necessary aura. I imagined the recipient of the missive in a happy position, sitting on a bench in a park. He is reading the missive like his favorite novel. Of course, his face is beaming with joy . . . . Then I thought I should intensify the correspondence. I thought I should reduce the vocabulary of the epistles to the smallest number of words so that, when used, they were also an injection, a serum and antibiotic in the battle against a disease that was spreading perniciously.

Several brief conversations with A. . . . .

A brief conversation with S. along with a lot of roaring laughter . . . .

A missive from P.

A long conversation with R. First in dark tones and rough. Later soft but not sunny as well.

A letter sent to Z. denoted the beginning of the “reforms.”

Oh, yes! And a brief conversation with H.S. . . . .

END