

The Big Delay

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On the far side of the bridge it was becoming increasingly distressing for those closest to the fence. About an hour and a half ago, *Oberstleutnant* Harald Jäger, duty commander of the Bornholmerstraße border crossing this evening, after consulting with *Generalmajor* Gehrhard Niebling of the *Ministerium für Staatssicherheit*¹, who himself was uncertain what to do or how to proceed and who just couldn't get through to the top brass – an hour and a half ago Jäger had decided that between five hundred and a thousand people would be allowed to cross the border. Even though no instructions, no... no orders had been issued to this effect from on high, the 'ventillösung', the 'safety-valve principle', as the short-lived opening of the border was officially called in the telephone communication between Jäger and Niebling, was by far the most sensible, and possibly even the only way to relieve some of the pressure on the border post. People were being crushed.

But the result was counterproductive. '*Die fluten, die haben geflutet*'² – the word spread through the streets of East Berlin like wildfire. More and more people came flocking in. On the Eastern side. But increasingly on the Western side too. Even more when, about an hour later, newsreader Hanns Joachim Friedrichs opened the ard news with the... the historic words, you could call them – with the historic words that the ninth of november, that this ninth of november, he said, was 'ein historischer Tag', he said (of course he said that), and that the gdr, after Schabowski's remarks earlier that day, that the gdr had in actual fact opened its borders. '*Die Tore in der Mauer stehen weit offen*'³, he said, which wasn't true, which wasn't true at all at that moment, he was lying, Hanns Joachim Friedrichs was lying. At that very moment Rega was standing out of breath at the closed barriers and gates of Invalidenstraße and was looking at the pale faces across the canal, or maybe he was already at the corner of Sellerstraße and Müllerstraße and saw that the crossing in Chausseestraße was still firmly shut.

Oberstleutnant Jäger didn't know what to do. He had a wife. He had children, I suppose. He saw the fence, the gate, its wire already bulging, moving to and fro. There was his duty. There was his duty and there was danger. He tightened his grip on his Kalashnikov. His subordinates looked nervously in his direction. There were still no orders. There would be no orders. No compelling directives. No sound advice. Egon Krenz remained silent. Erich Mielke remained silent. Not a whisper from the politburo. *Generalmajor* Niebling hadn't a clue what was going on. The *Nationale Volksarmee*⁴ and the commanders of the *Grenztruppen*⁵ were given no instructions on what action to

¹ The Ministry of State Security

² 'They're pouring through, they've poured through!'

³ 'The gates in the Wall are wide open'.

⁴ The National People's Army

⁵ border guards

take; some soldiers had no idea what was happening, but just saw a mob advancing on them. *Oberstleutnant* Harald Jäger stood alone, alone against thousands, possibly tens of thousands, or even more.

Rega made his way through the crowd, he... he *shouldered* through, if you can say it like that, his eyes fixed on the bridge in front of him. Beyond the *chevaux de frise*, the closed red-and-white barrier, beyond the large sign with the word 'Abfertigung!' on it, and beneath it an arrow pointing to the left for 'Der Bürger der brd' and one pointing straight ahead for 'Der Bewohner West-Berlins'; on the bridge itself, the section of road between East and West, *Sperrgebiet*⁶, *Todesstreifen*⁷, a strip of land that ran left and right of the bridge, ran along the Wall and the railway, ran on for kilometres in both directions, a strip, often neatly raked soil that no one could cross with impunity; on the bridge itself there was no one. As if the air had come to a standstill. As if everything was holding its breath. As if time did not exist over there. Or politics. War. Love. Nothing. Everything.

Rega was now almost at the edge of the crowd, almost at the spot where an invisible hand seemed to hold back the people, as if there were a fence there too that prevented people from going any further — which on the Western side was not the case. But something held back the crowd — instinct perhaps, a collective awareness of danger, or perhaps it was a... a... what was it called again?... a 'Pavlovian reaction' thingummy had said, what's his name... maybe it was that: a physical reaction when approaching certain stretches of asphalt everywhere in the city, when reaching precisely this sort of empty space, where there was nothing to see and which for that reason only then became what it was: a border at which one stopped. It didn't seem to have that much to do with fear. Not necessarily. It was more a sensible habit.

A habit Rega did not know, maybe, or simply forgot at that moment, as if he didn't fully realise where he was, what bridge he — almost as if it could have been any bridge — was walking onto, almost strolling onto, and at what moment... at what moment in... in *history* he was doing this (there was no history, he thought, maybe, probably). He did it so terribly casually, without any fuss or triumphalism, without wanting to provoke (quite the opposite, I think), without even the slightest intention; without wanting to demonstrate or represent anything, but more as if at that precise moment he was thinking of something completely different. As if he didn't see the bridge (which was not the case, it was the only thing he saw). He had no plan. Eyes still fixed on the bridge, he had steered his way through the increasingly dense crowd, saying 'Entschuldigung, entschuldigung'⁸, saying 'Bitte'⁹, and 'Darf ich'¹⁰; with cautious, but decisive arm movements, sometimes with a friendly hand on a shoulder and some slight pressure, with an almost apologetic gesture, he had advanced, smiling all the while. Indeed as if he... as if he was happy. Happy about something. Or happy in general. Happy like the peddlers of eternal life you could run into in the Ku'damm, who continually emanated from within what they wished to proclaim to mankind, for whom there wasn't the slightest distance between words and world, not a chink, even though they were snapped at, thrust abruptly aside, ignored or sometimes even verbally abused. Rega had the look of someone who appeared to see something in the distance and who at the same time was completely self-absorbed.

Or was free, freed, free of... of... everything.

Free of intention and meaning. Free of Ribcke, but also of Dankov. Free even of *Das Rote Kabinett*. And of *Che* too, perhaps, of Puut and Buks and Veerling and the others. Of Betty. (Of Mireille.) Free of the *Rabenhaupt* and of Werda and Van Parys and Bama and De Vries. Free of the world as it presented itself, and free of himself in as far as made by that world into what he was and

⁶ prohibited zone

⁷ Death Strip

⁸ 'Excuse me, excuse me'

⁹ 'Please'

¹⁰ 'May I?'

was forced to be. As if he existed inside himself solely by himself, and at the same time freed from all that too. Free of East and West. Of justice. Of any idea of equality also. Free of history, of the historical moment. Free of desire. (Of Rosa). Free of what was expected. Of him. By him. Because of him.

Free of guilt.

Oberstleutnant Jäger saw him coming. A lonely figure detached itself from the crowd on the Western side of the bridge. ‘Was zum Teufel...?’¹¹ The man, dressed in jeans and what Jäger thought was just a white t-shirt and nothing else – no coat, no scarf, no gloves – the man was walking quietly towards the middle of the bridge and Jäger briefly made a calming gesture with his hand towards the rear, because he heard someone releasing a safety catch – *der Steffel wahrscheinlich*¹², Jäger thought, a nervous lad whose father was something senior on the railways. ‘Immer mit der Ruhe, immer mit der Ruhe’¹³, Jäger said, shouted almost, because behind the fences the uproar was mounting. This mustn’t turn into a bloodbath, *verdammt noch mal*¹⁴.

‘Da kommt einer!’

‘Sieh mal, sieh mal’

‘Der kommt uns holen, Leute.’

‘Los!’¹⁵

And Jäger heard rather than saw the fence, the *Drahtgitterzaun*¹⁶, being pushed aside, the heavy blocks of concrete in which the metal posts were set sliding across the asphalt while the wire-mesh tinkled and rattled. He jerked round and cried: ‘Nicht schießen, nicht schießen!’¹⁷ in the direction of Steffel and Marotzke and Konopka, who were all pointing their Kalashnikovs at the crowd wriggling through the opening in the fence, and seemed capable of anything. He ran forward. ‘Kontrollen einstellen!’¹⁸ he barked, and with the rest of his men he tried to channel the mob, to get the people to pass through the narrow sluice-gate of passport control, so that they would at least leave the country with a stamped piece of paper, even if there was no permission from on high, and even though he realised at the same instant that it was of course impossible to carry out the usual controls. At least he’d done his duty, Jäger thought, as he made a futile attempt to hold the people back and force them into the direction of passport control. To the left and right of him people were running past without seeing anything, it seemed, without heeding the representatives of law and order, taking no account of their taut nerves and their weapons.

On the Western side one could see the waiting crowd on the other side surging and swirling; a flow of people was clearly going from left to right, and behind them thousands of bodies were moving from right to left, making for the ever widening gap in the fence. There was applause. Some began cheering. Someone on the rooftop of a car lay his hand on his heart and began singing something. Nobody heard what it was exactly. Beethoven maybe. Or the national anthem. Or perhaps the Internationale (but that’s unlikely).

Initially there was no one on the far side who actually stepped onto the bridge. It was like a seething mass of water that was held back over there by piled-up driftwood, by a few rocks, by obstacles that for a short moment prevented it from roaring across to the other side. On the Western side too no one yet crossed the invisible line on the roadway of the bridge to run to meet the new, no, the old compatriots. The bridge was still empty.

¹¹ ‘What the hell...?’

¹² Probably Steffel

¹³ ‘Easy now, easy’.

¹⁴ damn it

¹⁵ ‘Someone’s coming!’ ‘Look, look!’ ‘He’s coming to fetch us, people.’ ‘Let’s go!’

¹⁶ The wire-mesh fencing

¹⁷ ‘Don’t shoot, don’t shoot!’

¹⁸ ‘Set up control points!’

Only Rega stood there, in his jeans and t-shirt, like... like the Last of the Mohicans... or like the first under equals... his arms held slightly away from his body, as if hesitating whether to spread them wide — in a gesture of welcome as it were, or as some sort of wings on which he would slowly sail upwards to heaven in a little while — or to keep them close to his body, whether to broaden or narrow himself. He seemed undecided whether to sit or stand. He wasn't so much looking at what was happening straight in front of him. He looked right. He looked left. Then upwards, at the left and right, gently receding arches of the bridge above him, I suspect, which enclosed what he saw, enclosed him, lovingly embraced him with what seemed to be some sort of tender inescapability. And just as the first residents of East-Berlin rushed onto the bridge — two boys who ran onto the roadway with great strides like hurdlers — he raised both his arms in the air, not in a gesture of triumph, I thought, but as if he was reaching for something. His head was bent far back, so far you could easily look him into the face. He opened his mouth wide and stuck out his tongue as far as it would go, like someone trying to taste the first snowflakes of the year.

He was licking into nothingness. Or so it seemed.

Once, twice.

He didn't see the two boys, or what was heading his way behind their running, leaping figures, shouting and roaring at the top of their voices.

It was a wall of ecstatic people, a tidal wave rolling over the bridge, something massive it seemed, something that hit him just at the moment he stretched his arms out to the side, his head still bent back, his back slightly hollowed. The wall of people seemed to break him in two then and there. His body doubled up in the force of the collision as if he were being cut off at the waist. And you could still just see him spinning on his own axis, once, twice, after which he went under, to resurface immediately one more time, now almost as if he were being carried along, as if the crowd were bearing him across the bridge in triumph. In his face there was neither pain, nor horror, nor panic, nor rage, but rather, I thought, or so it seemed at least, rather a kind of... bliss, I think it was. His eyes were closed and he was rolling back and forth, as it were, over the bodies darting beneath him, as on a living carpet. And everything in him seemed to say: do as must be done, I trust you, I trust you all. Everything in and about him seemed to want to deliver itself. Everything in and about him had surrendered, and wanted to be, so it seemed.

His body was now tilting dramatically and finally disappeared again, now towards the right-hand side of the bridge, into the jolting and jostling mass around him — disappeared and did not re-emerge.

The next moment there were sparks to the right of the bridge as if a train were passing underneath. Or as if someone was taking pictures down there, someone on the strip of raked soil, someone in the *Todesstreifen*, using his flash to record all this for posterity, eternity. But it could also have been something falling on the overhead wires, a flag, an article of clothing, something else, a plastic bag swirling about or some such thing. Or maybe someone set off fireworks, which did actually happen shortly afterwards on the Western side. A firework went up, and another one.

The bridge was a swaying mass of people in which no one could be properly distinguished any more; where East and West Berliners merged into one big jumble of bodies embracing each other, leaping about with their arms around their shoulders in ardent togetherness; the bridge was a new, as yet unseen and unknown new world where what was mine was thine, he was she, I was another, we were you and all the others, all together were one, ah...

And elsewhere along the Wall too, even where there were no border crossings, at the Brandenburger Tor for instance, there too people, from both East and West, climbed the concrete barriers, crossed the *Todesstreifen*, nervously watched by indecisive border guards, hugged each other ardently, then jumped down both on the Tiergarten side and on the Pariser Platz side to a freedom that for a moment, for a short moment was universal, for this night was not only found in the West but also in the East, everywhere — 'From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic', from small villages in the Thüringer Wald to Zelezná Ruda and Malacky, along the Morava and the

Danube, everywhere where barbed wire and *Schießbefehl*¹⁹ and *Hundelauf-Anlagen*²⁰, where watchtowers, *Selbstschußanlagen*²¹ and minefields had divided the continent in two.

People were drunk with joy, we, I, everybody, as if we were no longer recognisable as the people we had always been. For a moment we were who we were meant to be, perhaps, or so it seemed at least — a tangible distance, a hole in time, the redemption of ourselves. For a moment, a short moment the whole city was the world.

And the world a bowl, a shell, a womb.

And we, yes, we were happy that night, deeply happy.

At least, I think we were.

¹⁹ shoot-on-sight orders

²⁰ dog-patrolled areas

²¹ booby traps