

In Foreign Fires

Everywhere in the Allgaeu, Germany's alpine area, they build huge bonfires on the first Sunday after Ash Wednesday. Those bonfires are called "Funken" - big stakes of trunks, branches and planks, piled up high on the mountain slopes. They are supposed to scare away winter and to welcome spring. Such a "Funken" looks fantastic, blazing wildly into the night - it seems like a greeting from a long forlorn time when wicked dragons still lived in dark abysses, spit fountains of fire, kept beautiful virgins in chalky caves.

By one of those **Funken** it happened. Till this day he cannot understand the story and that is why he keeps dreaming of it. Sometimes, at moonlit nights - and when he wakes up, at dawn, bathed in sweat or shivering cold, he does not know whether things were such - that is, as he recalls them - or different, maybe completely different. And whether he could have done something to prevent them.

He has told his story a great number of times, first to the police, then to quite a few other people, because he hopes that either he, the story-teller, or the audience would come upon something that would shed new light on the situation and its moral implements; so far this has not happened. Possible, but not probable the fact that possibly he will never live out the profession he is so eagerly preparing for in the famous Tuebingen Convent, where Hegel, Kepler and Schelling studied.

It began harmlessly. He had been to see his mother who had rented a small flat in the village of Langenwang in order to be near to the clinic. She was in need of comfort in those days; his father was ill and would never recover. It had, as he used to say, begun with a stupid mishap - he had missed his train, why is of no importance now. In Kempten he would have had to change trains and there would be more than an hour time in between, so if he could have made it to Kempten within an hour, he thought, he could have made it back home and into his own bed that night. He did not, if you need to know.

This he did not know, of course, when he listlessly left the tiny train station of Langenwang. In front of him there was a long queue of cars occupying the main road through the valley. It was Sunday, the Sunday of *Invocavit* in terms of to church terminology - his father was a Lutheran priest - , the weather had been fantastic, the day tourists wanted to get home, out of the valley, trooping all in northern direction. Every second car, or so he thought, would pass through Kempten, the city he desperately needed to get to. The idea was obvious - he would try his luck as a hitchhiker. He carefully watched the cars slowly moving by - many of them had enough place for him, a lean young man, but, alas!, nobody stopped. Finally, his fingers already stiff from coldness, his desperation stronger than his inhibition, he decided to bring his plan to an end. He would not wait any longer. He would - out of his own power and conviction - open the door of the next car on the passenger's side. And he would ask politely. It deemed unlawful trespassing to him but he thought he had no choice.

Of course he had had a choice - he is thinking now - he could have spent the night at his mother

's, could have rented a room in Oberstdorf, could have taken the first train on Monday morning. Could have simply stopped another car. One with a nice family, with a bunch of friends, students, young men like himself. Today he thinks it must have been his fate that he stopped that black limousine of which he did not even recognize the country code label. Even when his fingers touched the ice cold handle he could have abandoned his decision, but he did not. Chance? Fate? Providence?

Behind the wheel there sat a man and on the back seat there sat a woman. The man said "yes" in reply to his question whether they were going to Kempten and the woman said "no", and he did not know what to do. But the other drivers behind the limousine were aggressively blowing their horns and finally, after the man had curtly said "come in", he climbed into the car.

Something was strange in this car, he felt it immediately. The odour which streamed from the upholstery of the seats was different, the dashboard was strangely decorated, under his feet there was a carpet of oriental pattern and tuzzled fringes. On the back and arm rests there lay shrivelled petals of obscure flowers as if forgotten. He sat down next to the driver, on the seat on which the man had patted invitingly. He tried to relax. He called himself a racist, a stubborn donkey, a xenophobic idiot. Everywhere in Germany there lived a great many strangers, bearers of foreign cultures. All and every kind of humans lived in this country - from the blueblack Nubian to the Kasach Tartar, really no reason to feel frightened.

And yet and although Germans, Allgeuians, Ulmians, Bavarians, Swabians must have been riding in all those Mercedeses, Volkswagens, Opels and BMWs around him he felt nervous and restless as if he were stranded on foreign territory.

He put his modest travel bag between his knees and tried to get a glimpse of his driver, cautiously, in a by-the-way manner, so that he would not feel spied on. The man was Indian or Pakistani or maybe Afghani or Persian - he did not know his way around in those far away regions of the world, he was not sure. The man had a big curved nose, dark beard stubbles and a high forehead. He might have been around forty, fifty years of age. He looked strong and forceful and a fighter. In the darkness of the car cabin the whites of his eyes shone. Golden rings with rubyred stones sat on his fingers beating the wheel in an unknown rhythm. The man did not speak but intently watched the crowded highway, constantly drumming this strong beat of his. On his hairy arm there sat a rolex with diamonds. Curled like a snake, fake or not.

catch sight of the woman because he did not know if he was expected to make conversation. He thought that hitchhikers used to pay their debts by entertaining, was that not correct? He was not sure, normally he did not hitchhike. Normally he was much too shy, normally he was much too frightful, by far not enough competent in communication. And after all - he could not know if the woman understood German at all. He did not dare turn round, he did not dare smile at her. The atmosphere in the car was too tight, yes, indeed, too hostile. One could feel it, it was lying like frost

in the narrow cabin - the two of them had had a row.

He tried the rear mirror: She sat there on her seat and he could watch her. She was not pretty. Yes, the two of them must have been Indians because she wore a sari and a dot on her forehead. A symbol that she was married? He thought so but was not sure he remembered correctly what he must have heard at one time or another. She kept her eyes low, but he could see that she had a puffy hamstery face, a slack double chin, pimply skin and bulging eyeballs under heavy lids and hair which showed grey where it was parted. She, too, wore a lot of jewelry on her throat, arms and fingers. Those two were wealthy, he decided, ate too much fat and oil and sweet, and had long ago stopped talking to each other.

Only now he realized that the limousine had a very long rear, a trunk in which obviously furniture was transported, chests, boxes, chair legs and bits and pieces of wood. The silence grew thick and he felt he should say something to give proof of himself as a peaceful, harmless citizen who thought that India was an interesting tourist country and its strange culture fascinating.

"A celebration?", he said hesitantly picking on a decapitated pinkish flower between his thumb and indexfinger.

"Shshsh!", the answer was a single harsh noise accompanied by a raising of the hand. Exactly like someone shooing aside an annoying whelp.

Then, at the latest, he should have withdrawn. It would have been so easy. He only had had to press the handle down, take a grip on his bag, jump out. He did hurdles, it would have been absolutely no problem for him. From time to time the car stopped completely. Long seconds. At no point of time there had been danger for life and soul. But he was and remained a hesitator.

So he stayed and the silent journey continued. He tried to occupy his mind with something else in order not to feel frightened. He thought that the interior of the car smelt like myrrh and like garlic and like a heavy moschus perfume, emanating probably from the woman behind. He did not have an especially good sense of smelling, but the olfactoric charms of myrrh he recognized immediately, because he had visited hundreds and thousands of churches and cathedrals throughout Europe - for his father's profession as much as for his own goal in life.

Yes, he snuffed some more, yes, it also smelt somewhat foul and unwashed. His snuffing produced a soft noise. Immediately the driver shot him a view which was - one could not call it different - menacing. He stopped short in the middle of his breathing. Something was very wrong.

The man made a number of harsh throaty sounds. Nervously he looked again for the eyes of the woman on the back seat. She behaved as if she hadn't heard anything, didn't look up, played with her jewellery. She opened the safety locks of her bracelet, produced a small velvet bag, let the gold cascade into it and hid the velvet bag where it had come from: in the folds of her opulent sari.

The fully lighted Swimming Hall of Sonthofen slid by; she took three rings from her fingers, one after the other with a careful final movement. Sonthofen centre came and went; she loosened her earwear which looked like brilliant transparent

waterdrops. The mountain Gruenten with all its bonfires grew out of the night to the right; she made a whole school of arm ringlets disappear in the little sack. She was completely involved in her task. Only once their eyes met but he could not have said what they told him if anything at all. The feeling to be in the wrong place at the wrong time became stronger. Outside the mountains were burning and inside death had been seated next to him.

Not yet thought to the end and he received proof. After Immenstadt they left the highway. Did not take the way to Kempten as expected but turned westwards, through a commercial site, across railroads and then immediately mountainwards, up, up: Was this the famous Noon Mountain? It was dark hereabouts where he had never been before. The black limo was very softly suspended, but one could feel that it was heavily loaded – it swam like a vessel around the serpentine. He opened his mouth to protest, but an eye of the chauffeur silenced him on the spot. The woman in the back moved her lips as if she was praying.

They passed a number of men, bearded also, wandering along the road, but without giving any signs of recognition. Finally they stopped in a parking lot. A dark winter night. A man got in, wordlessly, and they continued their journey and turned into a small forest road which was not allowed for automobiles.

More serpentine. Behind the trees there was a blazing fire, a Funken. Though one could not see the wood that made its base, the wood that must have been collected by girls and boys from Immenstadt or the near-by villages. But what they saw was a huge fire and raging flames and occasionally pretty eruptions of glow spraying into the sky like naughty little volcanic explosions. The Limo stopped.

He opened the door – they wanted to see the Funken! The famous Noon Funken, Allgaeuan customs, peasant rites, okay, why not? - he was going to run off protected by the night's blackness.

When he turned to run he felt the hard grip of the driver's hand on his shoulder. While trying to duck away he realized that there were more and more oriental looking men and women stepping out of the shadows of the trees. They must have been waiting. What did they want from him?

Nothing, they did not acknowledge him. It was as if he were invisible. Untouchable. Did he belong to the Parias they were said to despise in their eyes? He could, of course, not understand what they whispered among each other but he noticed that his driver was a person of respect, an authority that nobody dared to challenge.

They gathered around the trunk, opened it and lifted a heavy wooden box out of it which was covered by blankets. Afterwards they carried away all kinds of planks and woods and assorted rubbish which appeared to stem from torn down houses. Murmuring they took everything to the hungry bonfire. The tension of atmosphere was broken now, the people were busy, he felt his muscles relax. The claustrophobic narrowness of the car cabin, the grand aggressive attitude of the driver and the sullen presence of the ugly woman were past. The night's fresh air filled him with the sudden hope of finding young people like himself by the fire, finding music and schnaps and beer and pretzels and gay drunkenness. Anything was

allright for him, anything that took him from the foreign folks and into the arms of his own.

Right next to the flat plateau on which the biggest Funken he had seen in years was built a stone cliff grew out of nothingness. It rendered drama and theater to the scene – somewhat artificially, one might say. But then he was disappointed – either the Indians had sent away the youngsters or they had built the Funken themselves.

It was already very late when he understood what he was to give testimony for afterwards: When they opened the wooden box and lifted a longish bundle from it, set it onto a simple stretcher and pushed it into the fire suddenly a wild hissing and crackling filled the mountain air. A well-known smell of grilled meat rose.

He swallowed. He witnessed a cremation – a dead body was burnt here according to Hindu rites; under the open sky, in nature alone, just like the law abode. He sniffed. He tried to understand.

Of course, it was illegal, but it was not really bad. Here Believers of a foreign religion tried to obey the rules that were laid down in their Holy Scriptures. In just the same or at least in a smimilar way Christians would set about, too, when abroad... unthinkable that a Christian corpse was offered to the vultures as the Parsens did it or buried with the head on top the earth as, he had recently read in National Geographic, it was the custom in Bali. Oh yes, he understood and was ready to forgive. It must be difficult for foreigners to arrange their lives between the Germany of rules and laws and one's own cultural duties.

His eyes searched for the ugly woman, but couldn't find her. Where was she? Was she the main mourner? Did she bury, no, the word did not apply, in-terr..., no, ... dispose of her mother? Her father? Her brother? Where was she? With this question he approached the boss of the family, the man with the rolex, the driver of the big black mourning car. A thought ran through his mind: too bad he had no camera with him. He was not likely to ever see a thing like this again.

„Woman?“, he asked, „Frau?“

„Widow“, the man answered. Ha, he was able to converse in German, after all.

„Woman“, he explained gutturally and spat into the hissing fire, „woman obey first fadda, then husband, then son.“

He nodded, exercised tolerance, well, it was like this in foreign underdeveloped countries, not fair, politically certainly not correct, no equal rights, but well working for centuries. They were going to adapt, sooner or later. First came education, then emancipation. Even little fat old women would-
`font size="3" class="text12_white" face="Geneva, Arial, Helvetica">` enjoy equal rights in Germany.

„Me, son!“, the man continued, putting one hand on his heart und bowing softly: „Fadda. Peace. Good.“

It seemed as if a tear appeared on the man's cheek and he felt a hint of empathy. It was not easy to lose a father. His own, too, would die soon; much too long he stayed in the clinic with cancer. The man with the hooked nose now stretched out his arm in a fieldmarshall's manner and pointed to the

cliff which looked eerily fantastic in the orange light of the fire.

Invocavit is the Latin name of this Sunday. A Sunday, on which an Indian father was disposed of. *He or she calls out*, is what it means. Should he have called out to the woman? But in what language? Would she have heard him?e spread her arms wide and jumped. With naked feet. When still in the air the fire caught the seam of her sari. A simultaneous roar out of a great many throats exploded. It sounded like a jubilant exclamation and rose up into the sky, unstoppable like the smoke now spreading, outdid the crackling crescendo of the fire dragon, wiping out the cry of the victim. If there had been one.

Nobody had pushed her, he could testify when the police inquired later. It was exactly for this that he had been allowed to sit in the car – he, the hitchhiker from the Allgaeu, who had so freely imposed himself. The eye witness who German Law was bound to believe to.

„Suttee*“, said the man with the hooked nose, „goodd for soul, goodd for widow, goodd for son!“ and touched the velvet sack which looked like a small lump in his trouser pocket.

*Sati or suttee – Hindu word for the ritual burning of widows

„Die Autorin Nessa Altura hat bereits den Gläserpreis eingeheimst und nun ist mir auch klar, aus welchem Grund: Sie schreibt einfach tolle, kuriose, skurrile, spannende, schräge, düstere, philosophische und humorvolle Kurzgeschichten! Sie glauben, diese Adjektive seien des Guten zuviel? Bei weitem nicht! Obwohl ich eigentlich Kurzgeschichten nicht so gerne mag, konnte ich - einmal mit der ersten begonnen - mich nicht mehr von dem Buch losreißen, bis die letzte Seite zugeschlagen war. Meine Empfehlung: Lesen!“
Literaturschock

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