

ROSTOCK CONNECTION

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June 1984 was the month I won the lottery. Being offered a fortnight at one of the Firm's guest houses on the island of Rügen sounded nice enough, but after the field operation last winter I wasn't keen on another trip to the Baltic coast. So I swapped holiday places with a colleague: my place on the beach for a quiet room in the forest near Berlin.

The colleague was all smiles when we sealed the transaction with a handshake, thinking he'd got the better half of the deal, but I wrote his name in my notebook, knowing I'd ask him to pay back the favour one day. Then it would be my turn to smile.

So I was content enough when I began clearing my desk on Friday evening before my leave began, already looking forward to a fortnight with no reports to write or assess, no operational situations to analyse and no superiors to appease. Just one more file to complete, then a wee glass to celebrate, I told myself, not supposing for a moment that Lieutenant Colonel Schur of Counter Intelligence was about to drift along the corridor and into my office.

But drift he did. When he pushed my door open without knocking, I stood up—back stiff, eyes straight ahead—uneasy in the knowledge that visitations by superiors, particularly when unexpected, always bring complications with them.

"Comrade Reim," said Lieutenant Colonel Schur by way of greeting, gesturing with an unlit cigar to let me know I should sit down. I waited for him to find his seat, then lowered myself into my chair, spine rigid, hands clasped on the desktop in front of me.

"I've been looking at the report on Secondary Operational Procedure Merkur," he said, making me wonder why the

interest, a full four months after the case had been closed. “You wrote the report, didn’t you, Comrade Reim? Not so straight-forward, that operation, so well done for getting to the bottom of it all.”

It was a compliment, but no response was required, and anyway, the lieutenant colonel was still talking:

“But of course, if Major Kühn and I hadn’t covered for you, things would have ended quite differently. You would have been in some difficulty, wouldn’t you?”

Marvellous how the brass rewrite history to cast themselves as the heroes of any operation. In my recollection, the KGB used me and then pulled rank to make sure my superiors couldn’t complain. It must have stung when they realised they’d never know how the case turned out.

I opened the drawer and pulled out a clean ashtray for Schur, anything to break the steady gaze he was pointing in my direction. He lit his cigar and puffed it into life, then took it from between his fleshy lips to admire the little glow he’d managed to produce. I used the moment to wonder how much of the real story this officer knew. I don’t mean what I’d written in the dolled-up final report, but the real facts of the case.

He stood abruptly, leaving me scrambling to get out of my chair, and with a nod and a wave of his cigar, he left my office. I remained on my feet for a few moments, waiting to see whether he would come back and tell me why he’d popped in, but hearing his heavy footsteps recede down the corridor, I crossed to the door and shut it.

Back at my desk, I reached into my drawer for a glass. I took a drink and asked myself whether the head of a different section had just come all this way to persuade me I owed him a favour?

I looked at my watch: five to seven. That was me for the day, in fact it was me for the rest of the month. All I still had to do was pile the files into the safe, put the bottle in my bag

in case anyone came snooping in my absence and put the seal on the safe and office door. After that, I'd be free until the first Monday in July.

I was pressing the *Petschaft* into the disc of wax on the door of my safe when I heard the phone. I thought about leaving it to ring, but a glance at my wristwatch showed the minute hand just shy of the top of the dial—my twelve-hour day wasn't yet over.

"Meeting with Major Kühn, tomorrow morning at seven," said my immediate superior, Captain Dupski.

"My leave starts in less than two minutes." Normally I wouldn't argue, but two weeks furlough was short enough without my boss organising meetings for me on my first day off.

I was talking to a dead phone. Dupski had hung up, and I knew that come the morning, I'd be right back here at Berlin Centre.

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The first day of my leave saw me standing in the corridor outside my boss's office. I could hear the buzz of voices through the closed door, but little else. Early Saturday morning is a quiet time on the brass's corridor, even if other parts of the Lichtenberg complex were as busy as ever.

The door didn't open for another ten minutes, and when finally I was commanded to enter, it was no surprise to find Lieutenant Colonel Schur, the one who had drifted into my office the previous day, seated next to Major Kühn, the head of my own section. I marched in and came to a stop at an appropriate distance from both Kühn's desk and Schur's thin knees.

Schur had one of his cigars going, and despite the open window, the room was tinged with pungent smoke, although neither of the officers seemed to notice the thick atmosphere.

"At ease, Comrade Second Lieutenant," said Kühn, glancing over the expanse of his desk at the ranking officer occupying the visitor's chair.

"After you, Comrade Major," said Schur, waving his cigar generously.

"We may have a task for you, Comrade Reim, something to fit your ..."

"Individual skill set," offered Schur, using his cigar to point at me. The tip was dull, perhaps it had gone out.

"Absolutely." Kühn gave Schur another glance, then turned back to me. "Comrade Schur's department has a minor difficulty, and the comrade lieutenant colonel suggested you'd be the right man to get to the bottom of things."

Schur nodded along, looking rather pleased with Kühn's tactful formulation. He leaned forward, deposited his extinct

cigar in the ashtray and took over the briefing, such as it was.

“The comrade minister, General Mielke, has expressed concern that my department may have fallen behind in the acquisition of operationally relevant material. He made the point that the comrades over in Foreign Intelligence, HV A, have been more productive in certain endeavours.” He leaned forward again, but instead of picking up his cigar, he addressed my boss. “You’re sure Reim is the right man?”

Kühn wasn’t expecting this attempt to shift any future responsibility for choosing me, but he quickly recovered. “You said it yourself, comrade. You felt the Merkur case was satisfactorily resolved, and would not have been but for the political-operational and professional efforts of Comrade Second Lieutenant Reim.”

“If you say so.” Schur leaned back in his chair and peered at me through thick lenses. “I have been given sight of a selection of the material that HV A is using to impress the comrade minister. The material makes for uncomfortable reading—it appears to have been channelled through an unofficial source in the imperialist intelligence agencies.”

I sharpened my ears in interest. In his delicate way, Schur was saying a contact in a Western security agency was passing information to HV A. And if reading the material had made the lieutenant colonel feel uncomfortable then the ultimate source was probably one of our own.

“We require an urgent operational analysis of the material in order to gain an overview of the operational-political context,” the lieutenant colonel was finding his pace now, spouting the usual jargon that we use at the Ministry to distract ourselves from what we’re really doing. Schur’s department, Counter Intelligence, had failed, and their rivals over in Foreign Intelligence had run to General Mielke to tell tales. No wonder Schur was under fire from the big boss.

It can sometimes be hard to stand there like a little soldier doll and at that point I could feel the corners of my mouth

tightening into a smug grin. I liked hearing when other departments were the focus of the Comrade Minister's ire, it meant his attention was elsewhere, that my section was evading his capricious scrutiny.

"Comrade Major Kühn has kindly offered your services, he tells me you have a formal background in operational analysis —just the man I'm looking for. You are therefore seconded to my department with immediate effect."

The nascent sneer slackened on my face and I turned to my boss. "Permission to speak, Comrade Major?"

"Go ahead, Comrade," said Schur before Major Kühn could respond.

"Comrade Lieutenant Colonel, Comrade Captain, I am currently on leave—" But I didn't get any further, I noticed how Kühn's eyes had darkened.

"Change out of uniform and report to the comrade lieutenant colonel's secretary."

Taking that as my signal, I left the two senior officers to gossip.

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“Second Lieutenant Reim reporting,” I told the secretary.

Without acknowledging my presence, she lifted the phone and spoke into the receiver. Just a sentence or two, then she returned her attention to an electric typewriter.

Since she hadn’t told me otherwise, I stood around, waiting to see what would happen next. I was tempted to light a coffin nail, but I’d left the pack on my desk and I had to make do with propping up the wall and examining my fingernails.

I didn’t have to wait long, the phone rang and the secretary picked up, writing herself a note as she listened. She hung up and looked at me for the first time, her fingers pinning the note to the edge of her desk. I leaned over to read what she’d written.

U-Bahn Tierpark, wait opposite car-park

“Hold this in your left hand,” she told me, picking up a folded copy of that day’s Neues Deutschland newspaper.

I took the paper, and left Berlin Centre to walk down the hill to the underground station.

I didn’t have to wait outside the zoo—as soon as I emerged from the U-Bahn station, newspaper in my left hand, a Trabant sputtered out of the car park, rumbled over the tram tracks and pulled up a few metres down the road. Once I reached the car, I leaned down to see the driver—he wasn’t in uniform, but I could tell the type from the way he was perched in the driver’s seat, staring straight ahead: *Uffzi*.

The NCO remained eyes front as I opened the door to climb in next to him, and we sat in silence as he took us south, over the Spree and towards the motorway. I knew there was no point asking where we were going—if his orders had included

letting me know the destination, he would have done so as soon as I clambered into the vehicle.

Nevertheless, I was still able to read road signs, and I watched with interest as we turned first onto the Berlin Ring, then onto the Autobahn to Frankfurt.

We took the exit for Storkow, heading south then turning right onto a narrow cobbled lane. The dusty forest grew close to the road, overhanging branches had been splintered and broken by high vehicles. A granite post marking the verge leaned drunkenly into the bushes.

A sharp curve to the left hid the village until the last moment, the faded yellow sign announcing the name of the place was illegible with grime. In a second or two we were through the settlement, turning onto a concrete track that fringed the edge of the forest.

The Trabant halted at a red and white painted boom, and I peered through the dust-speckled window at the BT9 tower that commanded the approach track.

A soldier in army grey fatigues sporting the yellow piping of the signals regiment on his shoulder boards came out of the guardhouse, stooping to take the documents handed over by my driver—grey booklets in a plastic wallet, these were military IDs rather than the green hardboard of MfS clapperboards. The sentry flicked through the pages, bent down again to compare our faces with the mugshots, then handed the papers back.

A wave at the guard hut to raise the boom, then a salute as we entered the base.

We drove slowly between two fences—the slabs that made up the track were freshly laid, but already roughened and buckled from heavy use. The air was charged with the scents of hot sand and pine resin, and the branches from the forest reached over the fence to meet above us.

An open gate, 300 metres after the first, allowed us to exit the enclosed zwinger, and we drove through to the main site

of the camp. Pre-fabricated buildings of assorted sizes and purposes were in various states of completion, the three-storey accommodation blocks to the left looked ready to move into, and my driver halted the car outside the first of these.

“Room 27, Comrade Second Lieutenant,” he said, holding out one of the grey military passes. “You’re expected.”

I clambered out of the Trabant, leaving the Party newspaper behind, and mounted the steps to the door of the block.

A couple of workmen were wiring up fluorescent light fittings in the stairwell, and I edged carefully past the ladders on the stairs. More sparkies were at work in the corridor off to the side, but the second-floor corridor seemed remarkably finished—all wiring in place, lights working, doors and frames tacky with fresh paint. Even the plastic nameplate holders for the room number and occupant details were waiting to be filled.

Pausing outside office number 27, I examined my new military identification booklet. Flipping it open, I checked the details: name of Schultzke, Bernd, a few months younger than me, but lucky enough to have my features staring out of his photograph. The various entries for kit issued and qualifications gained had been filled in by different hands, dated back as far as five years ago. If I hadn’t known it was fake, I would have believed I was a signals lieutenant.

I knocked on the door and, gambling that I wouldn’t find a particularly senior officer in a half-constructed camp, went straight in.

I was only half right. A captain in NVA uniform with the same yellow piping on his shoulder boards as the sentry at the gate looked up as I entered.

I stopped just inside the door and put the fingers of my right hand to my temple, my feet together, left thumb along trouser seam and eyes forward.

“What do you want?” It was said with force, but the voice

was a little high to carry much authority.

“*Unterleutnant* Reim, reporting for duty, Comrade Captain.”

“Shut the door, get yourself over here.” He gestured at a chair on my side of the desk so I got myself over there and sat down.

He had a square face divided by a broken nose and hollow cheeks. His eyes, when finally he looked at me were grey, overhung with heavy eyelids and thin black brows.

“First of all, you’re not here. Comrade Reim is not, was never, nor will ever be here. Understood?”