

# *Schöffling & Co.*

sample translation

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2.

In Mirca's Café, in front of a peppermint tea and potato soup, I manage to calm down. The owner, a pale Romanian with black hair, grins at me and pushes an ashtray over the table. I stuff tobacco into my pipe and lean back in the chair in my favorite niche, from which I can oversee the entire joint and a wet gray snippet of the Weinbergswegs.

Three Roma children jostle each other on the street, fighting over a yellow plastic watch that they fished out of a bubble gum machine. A nightmarish game for small children: they insert two marks and a metal octopus with small baskets at the end of each tentacle circulates, usually grasping only a ball of colored sugar. A boy, approximately eight years old, approaches the children from behind and grabs the first prize for himself. As the girls jump away with a jolt—their joints stiff with cold under their thin skirts—he stuffs the booty down the leg of his rubber boot. His scarred mouth opens into a grin, revealing gold teeth. What remains of his nose, tattered by civil war, twitches as he disappears from my field of vision with a skip and a hop.

At this hour there is not a lot going on in the café. The only other guest, aside from me, is a hip woman in orange colored leather pants and an apple green knit top sipping milk with honey. My friend Mirca brings coffee with milk. With laborious, shuddering movements, he balances the steaming cup all the way to the edge of the table.

One cannot expect elegance in waitressing from a painter without means who has to play host in order to feed his family. Next to the bar, steps lead to the renovated cellar, to oversized nightmares from Ceausescu's regime—Mirca's studio. People in

cold boulevards, with pasty faces and backs of oxen, as if terror were a hormone that warps growth, heads of children behind the rusted bars of a window, neck less, without bodies, stacked on top of each other like cabbages. Whoever climbs back up the stairs maintains, for a while, a certain paleness about the face that strongly resembles Mirca's. As yet no one has bought a painting and I don't know anyone who would go down there a second time.

My attempt to recall information about Dunkel fails miserably, I was never very interested in her. Perhaps it is due to the fact that there are hordes of women like her and me in this city.

Once, during the spring before last, I stood in front of her apartment door. I was looking for the handle on the opposite side and had the feeling I was making a movement the wrong way round, as if I suddenly had to write with my left hand. I held mail addressed to her that the postman, confused perhaps by our names, had inadvertently delivered to me. When she came to the door and looked at me we both started. For years we lived as neighbors, yet we had never stood so close together. I felt like I was looking into an uncontrollable mirror, pressed the envelopes into her hand and ran as fast as possible back to my corridor.

When I go back to the side wing I will break into her apartment. After years of hard training with master Wang, a couple of blocks away from here, it shouldn't be a problem for me to open the lock. Calling the police isn't an option, after all, I don't live legally in Lehniner Straße. You never know if they'll bring their dogs along. As well as punches and kicks, Master Wang also teaches his students the thirty-six Chinese survival strategies. Master Wang has taught me how to wait, he calls it the feeling for the right moment. So I wait. Curling smoke is my tranquilizer and my measure of time for strategy no. 4: Well rested, meet the exhausted enemy.

3.

For the second time in these past few days I accidentally pack the wrong tobacco bag: instead of Orient mixed with vanilla I inhale strong French smoke. Disgusted, I throw the pipe onto the table and glare at it as if it were an evil goblin who wants to pounce on me. And in reality, a hateful face that I wanted to forget takes shape anew in the blue haze, crawls like a genie out of the smoke and looks at me.

I walk along the street again, a spring day in 1989. I'm back in the old, now utterly unreal life in the Western axis of the city. I don't know any different. I do not yet have the impression that this life is a delusion, risky and carefree. I live at the cost of now, a cost for which I can hardly marshal the strength on some days.

It is a hot day, too hot for spring. The streets of Kreuzberg in the neighborhood of the Görlitzer Bahnhof shimmer with heat and sand. The sand blows over the remains of the train station—an unkempt expanse scattered with tracks. Aborted by the Wall decades ago, the tracks have lost their purpose and have relapsed to desert and steppe.

It is late afternoon. The quarter begins to fill up. Turkish families in middle class cars, packed to the roof, look for parking spaces. People clamber out, bang the doors shut, drag tired children and the remains of their barbecues into houses still cool with winter. A little girl with blackened front teeth stares from almost every façade, the picture is frayed at the edges, wavy with poster glue. She shoulders a stick like a paramilitary, and offers passersby a speech balloon: Come out for the revolutionary First of May.

Small groups, who have already broken off from the rally come over from Lausitzer Platz, walking toward me with apparent coolness, without haste. Only the

way with which they keep, unfaltering, to their direction betrays tension. The drivers of the white and green cars with barred windows drive around the block and look bored. Occasionally they come to a halt, chat, roll up the sleeves of their ochre uniforms, listen to scraps of radio signals. On the opposite side of the street, two sixteen year olds tie red Palestinian scarves over their nose and mouth and start gathering cobblestones from the border of a flowerbed.

There are several ways to approach their probable destination. From southeast, coming from the Sonnenallee, turn into the Wiener Straße and then slowly, toward their green target, move forward in the dusty stretch—made up of small trendy bars illuminated like cellars and dirty arcades and Laundromats—that ends at the iron girder of the elevated railroad. This is the strategic center that both sides want to conquer. Or one can start from Oranienstraße and cross Adalbertstraße and Marianenstraße and likewise approach the elevated railroad, albeit from the northwest. The destination of my walk is still the Turkish stall beside the crater in the plot where, at this time the year before last, the supermarket burned down.

That year I decide for the southeastern approach. While I proceed as slowly as possible along the big flagstones I count over in my head the five side streets which I can turn into and, should it become too dangerous, down which I could quickly disappear: Glogauer, Liegnitzer, Forster, Ohlauer, Lausitzer. Side streets lead to quiet territory from which it is possible to reach a bus stop. The yellow double-decker bus that drives along the Kottbusser Damm out of the danger zone, approaches droning and swaying at regular intervals.

A fat man with a brightly colored print shirt secures the barred windows of the Turkish bank with chipboard, plainclothes policemen in jeans and sports jackets cut up the greasy plastic rope at the exit of a pizzeria. Caribbean drumming reverberates

in the distance through the canyons of high-rises. Block after block I push myself through the masses. The sidewalks are dense with dreadlocks, badly tailored suits, black headscarves of synthetic material that shimmer in the heat, the raw hands with bad circulation of street fighters, suppurating nose rings and necks, white calves above bulky boots. I am almost at my destination. Only Lausitzer Straße lies between me and the Ankara-Grill, where by noon already they have set up as many plastic chairs as they can fit between the doorstep and the cycle path, in order to distribute kebab and warm bottled beer to idling passersby.

I want to cross the street behind two figures carrying petrol canisters with wool hats covering their faces. Breaks screech—a column of cars rounds the corner. Even before they come to a halt, the doors open. Green armored forms jump onto the road and set themselves up in front of me, a row of plastic heads, breast protectors and shields held high. Panic-stricken running breaks out beside me in the opposite direction and I am dragged along.

If only I had stood still.

For further information on international rights for this title please contact Kathrin Scheel at [kathrin.scheel@schoeffling.de](mailto:kathrin.scheel@schoeffling.de)

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