

EXCERPT (pp. 22-28)

Three

The seminar passes without incidents. There is no shining and no light, no revelation, no idea, no flash of genius, no insight, neither for him nor for his students. During the two hours, not the minutest thought emerges, as rudimentary as it could be, that would be worth elaborating or even be written down.

Sebastian Hollert is giving a seminar paper about the Jews of London during Shakespeare's time. Hollert is the stupidest and most bored of all of his students, and Stolzenburg had to remind him repeatedly to refine his paper and to present it in class as announced. And now, this young man is talking, for a full thirty minutes, double the time it takes normally and above that about a topic which doesn't interest him and about which he wouldn't have to say something not even for ten seconds. He knows it is unjust toward him. But he can't and doesn't want to change it. He hates Hollert. He hates him for a reason, as he admits to himself, which is stupid and banal. Hollert receives from his parents a monthly salary, as he doesn't want to call an amount which exceeds his own monthly income a scholarship. And Hollert knows this and he knows that he knows. The students are well informed about the financial situation of the institute and of the teaching staff, and they also talk about the moneys available to them, for sure Hollert and those two students who dispose of higher incomes although of quite less than this young nabob. They like to talk about it, to put down

the others, the other students and also the badly remunerated lecturers as himself. As student, Hollert has more money at his disposal than he himself, and following his meaningless studies, he will join his paternal enterprise or lead as pensioner faineant a sweet-idleness life, and will then have even more money by way of inheritance. And Stolzenburg also knows that Hollert despises him and his work. Is bound to despise. One can't teach students who have such high monthly checks, Stolzenburg is convinced of that. One can't talk about the world to a person who disposes of more, much more, many times more by a multiple possibly than oneself. It would make more sense to invert the relationship, become his student instead of playing his teacher and to have him explain the world and society to oneself and be it only to have him show which side the bread is buttered on.

Hollert has visible difficulties in pursuing with his presentation. He doesn't get what he is reading, the phrases are foreign to him, their meaning is foreclosed to him, he is reading his presentation off his paper, reading what means nothing to him, what is to him a riddle wrapped up in an enigma. He has put it together from copied materials without grasping any of it. It could be that he even hadn't read it through beforehand, instead has constructed a topic from half-way fitting bricks, and now he is presenting by stuttering, is announcing premises he doesn't understand. With one single question, Stolzenburg could burst this inflated balloon.

Conceivably, Hollert has extracted his presentation from the internet, but he is tired of proving deceitful conduct on the part of his students. He had learned from

colleagues that now there is a program available on the internet which transforms stolen texts automatically in ways to defeat summary examination and upon more intensive investigation at best results in reasonable grounds for suspicion. And he is tired of discussing suspicions with loath, dishonest students. He shies away from hassle with students. Four years ago, he had been able to prove unequivocally a student cheating on the thesis. The student was threatened with denial of the degree and with revocation of a job contract he just had concluded and, therefore, hired himself a lawyer, who bullied him with shameless letters and calls. Stolzenburg was sued in court and only by compromising settlement didn't lose the process. The Institute had to admit the degree and he himself, upon pressure by Schloesser, had to hand over the diploma to the cheater. The Institute had left him alone with this litigation, although it had been for the sake of the university's reputation and standards of quality that he had withstood the student's and his lawyer's shameless offers and had risked a court case. Even the legal expenses he had to assume by himself and thus had decided to never ever more put himself on line for his employer beyond any unavoidable limit. And why should he? He didn't have to provide for the university, it didn't provide for him either. And in the final analysis, he didn't care about the students. If they didn't want to learn anything, that was their decision, he wasn't their preschool teacher. And if, as it is turning out of late, it was to become custom that if they didn't want to repeat a failed paper, they hired instead a lawyer who was to prove omissions and failures on his part for a student's

insufficient performance, he then will consent to an agreement, a deal, in order to avoid more annoyance and further loss of time. If one of his students was to think of improving his grade by procuring the help of a lawyer, he was not to stick out his neck, would avoid another legal case, and would on the spot give a student a friendly grade of two. And in case of a whole lawyer office knocking at his door, he might even concede to negotiating a cum laude. After all, he is holding just a half-time position at this Institute.

Hollert is bored at reading words and sentences for which he has no use. He employs foreign terms which he seldom pronounces correctly, if he were questioned on their meaning, he would have to stutter helplessly. Stolzenburg however doesn't insist. Not any more. And above all with a guy like Hollert. He doesn't want to know either why this fellow is studying, why he would have a need for it and why he would enroll at his Institute out of all institutes.

Hollert is bored. Stolzenburg is bored, and the seminar participants are too. Upon Hollert ending, finally, he thanks him briefly and invites the group for comments on the presentation. The discussion is dragging, just two of the fourteen participants are speaking up at this point, they are always the same two students who are presumably trying to broaden or to conceal their intellectual limits by their zeal. Stolzenburg gets through his program, the Institute's program, he delivers as expected. Should one of the young people show more evidence of some more intellect or curiosity or just vividness, he would would go into it and would seek to support the such a student. He

would recommend readings to him, require additional work, would give him an extra lecture during his office hours. He was willing to give more, but only on being inquired to do so, and that happened extremely rarely. The usual is good enough, he tells himself and looks around the room, looks at the faces and imagines what these young men and young women are going to do in a few years when they leave the university with their meaningless diploma and--except for those three who get lifelong parental support—are having to get a part-time job, one after the other, or are becoming for years the new conscripts in the huge army of interns. Fifty-nine, he says to himself, that is a quite pleasant alternative by comparison. One doesn't get a full-time position, but he is holding a half-time one and that is more than the majority of these youngsters are ever going to get.

At the end of the seminar, after already having taken leave of them and being ready to exit the room, Hollert asks whether Stolzenburg was satisfied with his paper and how he is grading it.

„Startling,“ says Stolzenburg, „quite startling, you have worked hard. Your presentation was not original, there was no thought new or unknown to me which I hadn't encountered reading here or there before. But you worked hard, you did. A great writing effort. You have stunned me, Hollert.“

„And more you haven't to say about it?“

„It was more than I had expected. As I said, surprising. I think you should be satisfied with yourself.“

„I rather wanted to hear whether you are satisfied.“

„Me? What do you want to hear. You shouldn't

expect too much of yourself. Satisfy me, I seldom manage that even toward myself.“

Some girls are giggling.

„One can never be careful enough in teaching others to talk,“ continues Stolzenburg, „that is at least what Confucius meant and I think he had a point.“

He takes his briefcase from the desk, reiterates another friendly greeting, and leaves the lecture room.

He hadn't always been that fed up and cynical. He too once had taken by storm the seminar rooms with energy and pleasure, ambitious about his lectures to wake up young people, to pull them out of their lethargy, feeding them or at least offering them bites. He was ambitious enough and enjoyed entertaining and exciting them, and he wanted to be admired and adored by the students. Back then, he had succeeded in that. His lectures were overcrowded, they were scrambling for getting him as tutor for their annual final paper, his colleagues envied him for his students' acceptance of him. He enjoyed teaching, he basked in being a teacher. And yet, as he knew, he was reputed for being severe and demanding, for never being satisfied enough, still, they also said that he was just and was able to listen which must be rare teacher virtues if measured by the continuous lauding of what, for him, went without saying. Back then, he is telling himself today, he was still educating his students as he personally saw appropriate.

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Ten minutes later, uncle Friedl and Sebastian Hollert's father appear. Young Hollert notices Stolzenburg's surprised expression and tells him his father and the uncle were twins, monozygous twins. Only by their outward appearance they are distinguishable, one of them has proper short hairstyle, is wearing a tailored dark-gray suit and a silver-colored tie, the other twin has long hair framing wildly his head, is wearing jeans and a corduroy jacket with deep baggy pockets and around his neck a most carelessly fixed velvet bow-tie. Sebastian Hollert introduces them to him, the man in jeans and velvet bow-tie, contrary to Stolzenburg's conjecture, is not the unusual uncle but his father who is managing the successful, though seemingly jeopardized enterprise. The two men shake hands with him, then turn toward the youths.

Stolzenburg is starting getting bored, nobody seems interested in a conversation with him, and he determines to cut short his stay. He tells Sebastian Hollert he had to leave, he had commitments, if his father or his uncle would like to talk to him, this was the only opportunity. Minutes later, the two are coming over and are inquiring about Sebastian's studies. Stolzenburg replies evasively. On being questioned forthrightly by the uncle whether he was satisfied with the nephew, he replies he would be a bad teacher if he were satisfied with his proteges' performance as each student was capable of more provided they were challenged and fostered

accordingly. The uncle is not satisfied with this answer and is looking at him silently and deprecatingly. Fishing for a reply, would be the fitting, long out-of-fashion term, crosses the thought Stolzenburg's mind. It is a cold, gray gaze, those are the eyes of a reptile piercing him, filled with contempt. He is sensing how these eyes are devouring him, is feeling defenseless, stripped bare, delivered. For an instant, he considers refusal of any more questions. It was inappropriate, the students weren't minors any more whose guardian could request information about them any time, there was something like protection of confidence betrayal of which might disturb and ruin the teacher-student relationship. However, under the spell of these transfixing, mouse-gray eyes, he tells the uncle what that one insists on hearing, tells that in the beginning he had been dissatisfied with Sebastian Hollert, disappointed by the latter's performance and his insufficient involvement, but that Sebastian had achieved to impress him, more so, that he never has had a student about whom he had been as utterly wrong and who had been able to stupefy him beyond comprehension. He is not telling the whole truth, just a very selective part, his discretion corresponding to what the young Hollert had asked him for and to what his two elderly gentlemen were hoping to hear, and Stolzenburg is cognizant that he is formulating it that way not for doing the student the desired favor or for getting the promised money, he does so because of being intimidated by these cold eyes, these eyes staring at him as if at a pestering insect, and because of being paralyzed by their spell, being incapacitated for stirring. Apparently he must have hit the right words, the

uncle's eyes are widening by a tiny fraction, changing to a friendlier or more satisfied expression, but they are still lurking, waiting for the correct, befitting answer. Stolzenburg keeps talking, he feels he is doing it not only for this weird uncle's nephew, more so for convincing this uncle, for winning favor with him, he himself wants to be accepted by him and to satisfy him. At some point, with some sentence, he must have succeeded in it. There is an almost imperceptible nodding, the uncle turning toward his twin brother, both smiling, then the interrogation has ended. Now, the uncle asks him about his own research with eyes appearing indifferent and almost benevolent. He is listening for seconds, nods, and simultaneously with his brother is turning away from him for walking over to other guests. Stolzenburg takes a quick step into his way and inquires about his collection of autographs. He talks about his research on Weiskern, explains hastily who this man is and asks whether he possesses any manuscripts by him.

“If the man was important, for sure. I am the owner of the fifth largest collection of autographs in Europe. Act on the assumption that I am in possession of originals by him. “

Herewith, to the uncle, this conversation is concluded, Stolzenburg however explicates quickly his insisting on asking, reports that he had been offered forgeries of letters with which a Viennese auction house as well had almost been taken in.

The uncle nods absentmindedly.

“Forgeries,” says he in a tired voice, “well, yes, with those we have to deal every month. Now what won't people do for reaching money?”

He looks at Stolzenburg who is starring at him.

“And now you want to know what I am owning by this chap and whether it is authentic. Take it for granted, I buy no forgeries.”

“Those were perfect at the level of craftsmanship.”

“Fair enough,” the uncle says smiling. He casts a look at his wristwatch, it is shortly before eleven, pulls his cell phone out taps two keys.

“Sperber, little Sperber, it is late, but I'm needing a piece of information,” he says without greeting the other, “do we own...”

He turns toward Stolzenburg prompting him with his look who understands and whispers immediately the name “Friedrich Wilhelm Weiskern.”

“Wait,” the uncle says, passes the cell phone to Stolzenburg who understands this silent prompt as well and gives Sperber Weiskern's name and birth date, returning the cell phone after that.

“Do we have him? --”

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