



Hans-Ulrich Treichel

Better Than Ever

Novel

(Original German title: *Schöner denn je*. Roman)

approx. 175 pages, Clothbound

Publication date: 19 June 2021

© Suhrkamp Verlag Berlin 2021

Sample translation by Laura Wagner

pp. 7 – 17

1

I never told anyone about it. About my being chosen, if I may call it that. Not my friends or acquaintances – and not even Erik. Which was the hardest for me. After all, Erik and I had been competitors for as long as we had known one another. Competitors in life. Competitors in everything and everyone. At least that's how I see it. And me being chosen, to call it that, was somewhat of a victory. Or wasn't it? Finally, I was the winner in a contest that usually didn't turn out in my favour. Erik was not only better when it came to grades at school, popularity with girls, sports or career, that I could have managed. No, he also seemed to be leading the more interesting and more eventful life. And he did so even when we were still in school. Even though both of us were completely ordinary small-town boys from northern Germany. There was nothing much to experience. Buying clothes in the closest town, thirty kilometres away, that called itself a shopping metropolis because it had two larger department stores. The jazz concert in the lobby of the city library every summer, a weekend at the North Sea, in Döse or Duhnen near Cuxhaven, and that at any time of the year. None of that made me particularly happy, maybe the jazz concert if anything, even though the musicians who performed there were teachers and students at a church music school in the Lipperland and practiced their passion for jazz downright heretically on the side, but that didn't seem to bother anyone at the church music school.

Those were all the highlights of my youth and things probably weren't much different for Erik. Yet he was someone who was able to experience things differently. Because, after all, it's not about what you do but about how you feel doing it. Erik seemed to be delighted with all

the things he did. Wherever he went and whatever the venture, he returned inspired. Having received many gifts from whatever experiences he made. I, on the other hand, sifted through my everyday experiences over and over again, like a desperate gold miner, to find at least a few nuggets of gold in them. And that was hard enough.

I didn't know what was ultimately responsible for Erik's enviable attitude towards life. He didn't let me get close enough to find out. He was friendly, he was companionable, but he avoided any real closeness. I would have given a lot to be his best friend. Or even just his second or third best. All the things I could have learnt from him. And potentially experienced with him. Apart from his talents and his way of mastering everyday life. The casualness, for example, with which he passed through grammar school as a good student, with equal talent for music, science and technology and languages, without ever getting into trouble but also without being a teacher's pet. On the contrary, wherever he could help, he helped, and you could definitely ask him to plant a piece of paper with the answer in the bathroom during a maths test.

Instead of holding back and going my own way with the same casual, friendly aloofness I intensified my efforts to be close to him. Or even, I admit it, to be like him. That too, of course, because I was so completely different from him. Not tall and slender and gangly, but a little chubby, not the Mick Jagger type that he embodied in my eyes, with an easy swagger, confident, sensual, masculine and androgynous at the same time with loosely falling thick hair. In comparison, I was more the accountant type, going bald at the temples by the time I graduated grammar school.

Maybe I'm overexaggerating to my disadvantage. Because not only did I admire Erik, I also tended to see myself in a worse light than was fair. Most likely, we were both just ordinary schoolboys, one maybe a little more handsome, slim and with thicker hair than the other, and I could certainly have told myself at the time: Who cares, people are just different. The answer was: I cared. And more and for longer than was good. When I look back at it today, I might arrive at this – not really surprising – diagnosis: I idolised Erik. He was the star and I was the fan. He knew and sensed it, stayed fair but kept his distance at the same time. That's what stars do with their fans. Remain friendly and send out autograph cards – but please no close personal contacts and definitely no familiarities.

Therefore, I didn't find out what Erik's secret actually was. What made him seem so relaxed and so seasoned, saturated with experiences and suave at the same time? An effect that was only heightened by the fact that he was the first one in our class to have a car and drive it to school. And a white BMW 2000 CS at that. A fact that he, however, did not place too much importance on. When asked about the car, he just shrugged his shoulders. It's just a car. Besides,

it was a second-hand one. But to me a white BMW 2000 CS like that was far more than just a car. It was a character trait. You had to earn such a car on a higher level. You had to mature enough to get such a car. Erik had matured enough for that BMW 2000 CS. A Renault 4 or Citroën 2CV, for example, would have been nothing but a costume. A university student's car. Not to mention a two-seater sports car or a convertible. This slightly greyed and yet still sporty BMW, however, suited its owner perfectly. It became downright one with him.

No one resented Erik for the BMW just as they didn't resent him for his hairstyle or his clothes, the loose-fitting trousers he usually wore, for example, even though everyone else was wearing drainpipe trousers at the time. Everything just fit. And captivated me accordingly. To be like Erik just once! But I was missing the recipe for that. Because I hadn't been able to unlock the secret of his life – or rather: the secret of his attitude towards life – during all our years at school together. All I could do was speculate. Yet I didn't get far with that, except for imagining that he was leading another, a second life. The speculation was fuelled by the fact that he lived in a fairly remote village beyond the Teutoburg Forest that belonged to a different district and whose agriculture profited from being in the foothills of this mountain range that was, albeit not high, quite charming. The village in which I grew up, on the other hand, was located on the other side of the forest in the lowlands spoilt by industrial estates. Although the number plate on Erik's car belonged to neither of the districts and sported a simple D for Düsseldorf. Erik's car was registered in Düsseldorf, which vested both car and driver with further grandeur. Düsseldorf might be in North Rhine-Westphalia, but it nevertheless had a Parisian flair. A city of modernity and of rich people. Erik himself or his family could possibly be some of those rich people or at least he had such close connections to them that he was able to register his car there.

Everything about Erik was just a little bit different. Strangeness wafted around him, which he combined with a probably friendly but at the same time always decisive disposition to distance which only increased his allure. He seemed to be unfamiliar with feelings of loneliness. He also didn't appear to be in need of something like a best friend. For he – I must add: luckily – kept his distance not only to me but to everyone else as well. Both boys and girls. He had plenty of opportunities. Only few of our fellow students said no to a ride in his BMW. But there didn't seem to be a favourite. He just didn't become involved with anyone and I never caught him having a fling with a female classmate. Nor flirting with one of the boys, naturally. Never that. I knew him well enough to know that. Even though I wouldn't have minded had he been attracted to males. It would have unburdened me instead. Then the competition between the two of us would have been over. Boys or even men – that was not the playing field I wanted

to compete on. But neither did he, it seemed. Even though he never had a steady girlfriend when we were at school, I never had the slightest doubt that he was not only a man who loved women but also one who was loved by them. And that, I was certain of this too, mostly by women I would have liked as well and for whom I envied him just for the sake of it without ever having met them to begin with.

Our life competition eased a bit, albeit involuntarily from my perspective at the time, when we left our North German home after finishing school and moved to Berlin, to West Berlin to be precise. We had both long since realised that we wanted to study in Berlin. Each had decided this for themselves and it was a trend anyway. Those who didn't study in Braunschweig or Hannover, some even as commuters whilst living at home, often went to West Berlin. To the divided city of exceptionality that lent a certain exclusivity and historical explosiveness to its inhabitants and the life there. In addition, there was the exemption from military service, a not insignificant privilege for anyone who registered West Berlin as their place of residence before being drafted.

The fact that Erik and I had decided on moving to Berlin independently from one another was important to me. For myself. I certainly didn't follow him. Still, it bothered me that he had looked for a flat in Berlin even before our final exams and had indeed found and rented one. First the driver's licence, then the 2000 CS and now his own flat. He didn't brag about it, bragging was not his thing, but neither was excessive restraint. And so he told everyone who wanted to hear it that he had an address in Berlin, in Charlottenburg to be exact, and had already furnished the flat: three rooms, kitchen, bathroom. Spacious, bright and cheap. On Schlüterstraße on top of that, only a few minutes from Ku'damm. In other words: a dream! If only it had been two rooms. That would have alleviated my envy if nothing else. But there was nothing I could do. Erik's good life was going to continue, and I had my work cut out trying to keep up with him. And if I couldn't keep up with him, I at least wanted to share in it. In a friendly way. We were, after all, classmates. Small-town boys in the big, grey city of Berlin. He just as much as I. That would bind us together, surely.

But even in Berlin our roles were rather different. I initially found accommodation in a students' hostel near Tiergarten station and then in a flat right around the corner, from whose kitchen window I could see the students' hostel. One room, kitchen and a long, narrow bathroom with a toilet and no window. But still better than no bathroom at all or a shared one. From the flat it wasn't far to the Technische Universität where I had enrolled in an architecture degree despite some uncertainty about my actual technical abilities. At least my A levels were

good enough to admit me to the course. But I could just as well see myself studying something artistic, at the University of the Arts, which wasn't much farther. Architecture and art: there were some commonalities. But ultimately everything you studied was a risk if you weren't one of the especially gifted students who already knew what they were best at when they were still in school. I was rather universally oriented, I was interested in many things but I still had to find out whether I was gifted enough for those many things. Why not biology or languages, French for example, at the Free University. But then it would have been better to live in Steglitz or Dahlem.

The fact that I enrolled in architecture was, in a way, also related to Erik and our life competition. We certainly knew that we both wanted to study in West Berlin, but we hadn't talked about our future subjects of study. Much to my chagrin. I would have liked to study alongside him. Maybe even attend the same seminars and internships. Surely one did internships in subjects like architecture as well. Erik and I at the drafting table. Planning a town house complex together. Was there even space in West Berlin for new town house complexes? Maybe not. Wasn't all that interesting anyway. One house exactly like the other. What was interesting was redeveloping old neighbourhoods. Chamissoplatz in Kreuzberg, for example. I would have liked to redevelop that together with Erik, even if just at the drafting table. As part of a practical course called *Redevelopment Chamissoplatz – Designs and Concepts*. Or something like that. Studying together and cooperating would have been the best guarantee for further contact and possibly an opportunity for true friendship.

Why Erik played a role in my decision for architecture? Because of tactical reasons, in a way, a tactical friendship. I assumed that he didn't want to talk to me about his plans so that I wouldn't get the idea to study the same thing. He didn't want to have his fan and admirer from school days close to him at university. I, on the other hand, wasn't bothered by the fact that I admired him. He had something to offer, after all. Lifestyle and habitus, to put it like that. What I was bothered by was that he created more distance the more he sensed my admiration and my desire to be close to him. And so I practiced restraint even in our schooldays. Literally. I practiced keeping my distance and something akin to friendly indifference. I wasn't a stalker, after all. And I didn't have any other mental disorders. But as I got better in the disciplines of distance and friendly indifference, I inevitably moved further and further away from him. I became a pleasantly impersonal classmate of Erik's. This undoubtedly garnered me some respect on his part, but what good did that do me? He remained as he was: friendly but distanced, totally relaxed but aloof.

It was a good thing that school was over and done with at some point and that university offered new perspectives. For Erik. And for myself. And for our future friendship that, naturally, only had a chance if I behaved as discreetly and unobtrusively as possible. And didn't chase him, come what may, not even when it came to my subject of study. But what to do? It took some time until I got it. It wasn't enough to not chase him. Rushing ahead was the solution. And that meant enrolling in architecture as early as possible because I was certain, or as certain as I could be, that he would do the same. He never told me, I never asked him, but important clues pointed in that direction. Even though he was also an artistic guy, despite his interests in technical things, he would never study languages or literature. He would surely have thought that too teacherly. And he wasn't keen on teachers. That much I knew. And I also knew that he was into photography. With a high-end camera that was used by professional photographers. In addition, he read specialist literature on photography and developed his pictures himself. Black and white. Which seemed very professional. Once I flicked through a whole pile of black-and-white photos with him. He had them in his car and showed them to me in an unusually frank fashion. But they weren't private images after all, but something like architectural photos. Almost always without people and almost always showing architectural details of residential houses: doors, windows, staircases including the banisters. When I asked about the point of it all he simply replied: »I just find it interesting.«

I didn't ask any further questions because he was right. It was interesting. It was more than interesting. Doors, windows, staircases and banisters – we all encountered these things on a daily basis. Haptic, practical, aesthetic. A banister could be a true piece of art, no need to think of Renaissance or Baroque architecture, it applied always, really. So why not study architecture. And choose the appropriate focuses. Architecture was teamwork. And Erik had apparently already found his focuses.

I knew that he was in Berlin, I knew where he lived, I could have called him or rang his doorbell, but refrained from doing any of that so as not to revert to my fanboy behaviour of the past. Coincidence would help me. A coincidental encounter in the long hallways of the TU. You're here too? And architecture as well? Want to meet up some time? But it didn't eventuate. No Erik, nowhere. Not in the hallways, not in the canteen, not in the classrooms, not on the Straße des 17. Juni, where the TU's main building was located, and not in the pubs and cafés on Hardenbergstraße or in the area around Savignyplatz.

Erik's absence was not the only disappointment, my architecture classes also weren't the way I had imagined them. Too much maths, too technical, too much like engineering and ultimately, I admit it, also too difficult for my technical skill, of which, it turned out, I had rather

little. I should have known that studying at a technical university required mainly technical capabilities. But I had been deluded. Even though I still think that I would have made it together with Erik. Not only could he have helped me with the coursework, he also would have shown me how to finish a degree like this without tensing up. But those were dreams. I was realistic enough to recollect myself and change subjects and thus universities as well even though that wasn't strictly necessary, it was possible to study Romance philology or comparative literary studies at the TU. The technicians preened themselves with a small but excellent humanities division. Which was on account of our history. Especially that of the 20th century. Pure technology can lead to disaster.

[...]