

Gerold Tietz

Great Times Little Happiness

When¹ Gernot paid his inaugural visit to Rita S., she posed to him the utmost pivotal question: "Are you acquainted with Prague?" Gernot affirmed, yet he felt akin to someone caressing the globe in the hand of Tycho Brahe in the Teyn Church at the Old Town Square, contending that he has journeyed the entire world.

[...]

In communion with her fellow scholar Jakob, she [Rita] shared not only the morning rolls but also the scholastic duties. While she diligently tackled Jakob's French assignments, he in turn supplied her with the mathematical solutions. Typically, Jakob's response to Rita's question on how to handle the work's correction without overly arousing the professor's suspicion was: "Just make it sufficiently passable." However, the reciprocal arrangement would only materialize if Rita discreetly tucked a crown into Jakob's jacket - a crown destined for Theodor Herzl's Jewish State.

Rita would have rather augmented the hoard of the Nibelungs than add to Herzl's treasure, yet she did manage to persuade Jakob, albeit successfully, to bestow upon her the emblem donned by the Zionists during their congress in Prague - an emblem of brass - in gold, upon a field of blue.

Subsequently, while embarking on a trek through the Bohemian Forest with her confidante Esther, where they adorned their buttered bread with freshly picked wild strawberries, Rita yearned to present Esther with the "bedstead" - as Rita called the Zionist

¹ Translated from the German by Jonathan Berg (mail@jonathanberg.de). Berg was deeply involved in the publishing of Gerold Tietz's novel. Before his death, the author Gerold Tietz left his novel - based on true events - close to finalisation. Together with the publishing house (ROGEON Verlag) as well as the son of the novel's protagonist it was Jonathan Berg's work and challenge to deliver the missing roughly 3% in order to publish the novel. So far the novel has only been published in German.

emblem. Regrettably, to her dismay, Esther declined the emblem. Her Jerusalem, she professed, was Prag, and her Jordan was the Vltava.

[...]

During the summer of '38, Rita's father received a letter from Uncle Karl in Teplitz. Uncle Karl, a tax official immersed day in and day out amidst the archives, was a rare correspondent. And when he did write, it was mostly on birthdays and high holidays. Once, Otto received a postcard depicting the old steamship "*Germania*": Uncle Karl informed that his Saint Bernard had triumphed with the top prize at the dog show in Aussig.

The missive that now rested in Otto's hands spanned several pages. This was quite unusual, as Uncle Karl, who professed the need for discipline and order, was apt to be succinct.

Uncle Karl wrote that he comprehended fully that Otto, as a member of the Regional Cultural Council, had to flit from one water sample to another. However, he pointed out that even in the life of a chemist, there ought to be something beyond water and soil samples. The fact that his daughter Rita participated as a quiet listener in the Saturday literary circle was commendable, as was her playing of the piano in the Adelspalais. Yet, in the realm of intellectual cultivation, he believed the pivotal matter had been overlooked: imparting a political education to Rita.

Otto read the sentence twice. Uncle Karl was, indeed, presuming to interfere in his family affairs. That was quite audacious.

Uncle Karl wrote that he found it hard to believe what Rita had recounted during her recent visit. Could it really be true that Bohemian was being spoken in the kitchen of Otto's wife Emmi?! Had Rita truly chosen to associate herself with a member of the Schlaraffia fraternity when attending the balls at the Anatomy Building and the German House? Otto could not possibly have missed the fact that the Schlaraffia members were cosmopolitically tainted Freemasons! Had the Puhls never told their daughter that she originated from an ancient Prague merchant lineage, one that required steadfast loyalty?

Furthermore, he expounded that, way back, it was Duke Sobieslav who had summoned the Germans to the Slavic land for its civilization. And then, of all things: Jews! Rita had spoken to him of a classmate named Jakob, to whom she provided French tutoring

while receiving math lessons in return. Yet, this Jakob, not only involving her in numbers but also drawing her into the history of the Jews!

Rita's eyes had gleamed as she recounted how Rabbi Löw had fashioned and brought to life the Golem, and why the Prague Zionists were preparing for their emigration to Palestine.

And not just Jakob, who openly aligned himself with Theodor Herzl's disciples, had made a profound impression on Rita. One of her dearest friends was a girl named Esther, residing in an old German merchant house near the Teyn Church. There, in a deep cellar space, they engaged in pranks with a Czech coffin maker and assisted a Slovak laundress who, once a week, did her washing at the cellar's depths. Not only did they help the laundress haul heavy baskets up to the attic, but they also pilfered shirts, undergarments, and stockings, using them to flag the wooden bridge connecting the stone house to the towers of the Teyn Church!

Had Otto and Emmi never paused to ponder upon the company their daughter kept? With Jews, Czechs, and Slovaks! It should come as no surprise that Rita exhibited no sense of responsibility for her German heritage amidst such companionship.

[...]

"Caution at Platform 8! The train to Paris is arriving," echoed a loudspeaker. The throng of people began to stir, surging toward the train even before it had fully come to a halt. Amidst backpacks and boxes, a grandmother who clung to her grandson and refused to let go, two children bickering over a pair of ice skates, and kisses that seemed incessant, Rita sought to find her footing.

The exit of the station hall did not draw any closer; it seemed to recede farther and farther away. The oppressive sultriness grew increasingly unbearable. Beads of sweat formed on her brow. She mustn't faint, she thought.

The station dome above her went in circles. The afternoon sun wove its scorching threads across the glass façade. Hastily scrawled names glinted in the glaring light on suitcases and boxes, revealing to Rita their intended destinations.

Rita passed suitcases destined for London, Amsterdam and Lisbon and navigated her way toward the exit. Behind a stack of luggage, her gaze fell upon a pair of boots - lambskin-lined boots - belonging to a young woman.

Over her winter shoes, she wore a thick sheep's wool coat, and around her neck was draped a fox fur stole. A fox fur stole, just like the one Rita's mother wore when the Vltava froze over. But today, in this heat?! Anyway - hadn't she seen the fur-clad woman with the long eyelashes somewhere before?

Indeed, it could only be the beautiful Judith, the mannequin from Madame Löwe's salon! Rita had drawn inspiration for her ball gowns from her, and Judith had slipped her many a cutting pattern. Rita intended to find a way round the mound of luggage to reach Judith, but a nurse with three young children thwarted her.

One day, Judith had confided that she was planning to emigrate to Palestine, much like Rita's former classmate Jakob Flusser had intended for a long time. It was him who had done her math assignments only if she slipped a crown for Herzl's Jewish State into his jacket.

Judith came from a small glove factory in the *Josefstadt*. Her parents failed to notice that the air for Jews in Prague was steadily thinning. They observed the Sabbath as always and contributed to the Jewish War Veterans Association. They adored their cat, for whom they had fashioned a proper observation deck from wooden crates on their windowsill. Regularly, they visited the cemetery with their daughter, placing stones upon the graves of their departed. But Judith found it increasingly difficult to connect with this stony field. Her parents, however, were rather willing to die than to abandon those who had been meticulously layered upon each other here for centuries. What good was it for her when her parents read to her from the elegy of the renowned scholar Avigdor Kara, in which he bore witness to the bloody pogrom of the year 1389? She was young and yearned to escape Prague before she would be enclosed here, alive, together with the deceased. She couldn't bear it any longer when she stood before the café at Kleinseitner Ring, which she would frequent after work, only to be denied entry by the sign that read "*Židům nepřístupno*" and below it in German, "Jews not allowed." She wanted to emigrate.

[...]

As Rita scans the lines, adjectives like "dire," "bizarre," "sad," and "absurd" flicker through her mind. She recalls how seemingly normal her life in Prague was just over a decade ago - and how surreal it now feels to be confronted with these reports. Everything was meant to become so much better and grander, lasting for a thousand years. Yet, a mere ten years later, the racist megalomania of Germany has literally laid the world to waste. The only thing that might endure for a thousand years, Rita muses, is the pain and hatred sown on all sides. She endeavors to arrest this somber shadow in her mind, summoning forth the beautiful aspects of her time in Prague: the escapades with Esther throughout all the floors of the "*Zur Glocke*" house, the small swindles in swapping assignments with Jakob, the strolls through the Old Town or up to Laurenziberg, the breathtakingly chic Parisian fashion at Salon Löwe, the unforgettable soirées at Papa Blosser's - and, of course, her meetings with Leo.

[...]

Rita would not engage with the findings of the fortune teller. It was as alien to her as the superstition related with an ill-fated Friday the 13th - a superstition which, incidentally, as Jakob had repeatedly underlined at school, held no ominous significance in Jewish tradition, but rather was a day of pronounced good fortune.

When lying upon her bed in the castle that evening and examining the oval stucco ornaments on the ceiling, the number 13 does cross Rita's mind. Yet, she contemplates it without a hint of superstition - and unfortunately without any burgeoning sense of happiness either - as it carries her 13 months back in time.

January 1945 in Prague. Christmas and New Year had just gone by for the Puhl family. A peculiar Christmas. And an ominous New Year.

[...]

While at school Jakob had still depended on Rita's French assignments in exchange for his mathematics tasks, in later times he published numerous works in French language.

[...]

Rita passes away at the age of 90, a few months after the death of the author Gerold Tietz – on the very day of his birthday. Coincidentally, this day also marks the anniversary of her classmate Jakob's passing.

During her final days and hours, when her consciousness is already fleeting, Rita repeatedly mentions her dreadful fears and hardships endured during forced labor sufferings and the dismantling of barricades in Prague [throughout the months following the unconditional surrender of Nazi Germany].

Closing note:

Over the years after WWII Rita became an interested follower of Jakob's/ Vilém's life and career. More than once she expressed to her son the continuously increasing admiration, she felt for Vilém's life, knowledge, development and achievements. And often she wondered whether Vilém missed - besides the dreadful personal loss of family members - the years and the life they had in Prague as much as she missed it herself. Needless to say, that the news of Vilém's death marked a very sad event in her life, too.