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CHAPTER X

HOME IS WHERE THE HEART IS

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CHARACTERS

MAN

No curtain. The stage is open. On the stage there is a seat and a man of about seventy. He has a postcard. He's already on the stage before the lights go down on the audience. He peers into the audience. The light changes.

MAN Straight in front of this house, it's the (Date) today, so exactly thirty years ago, there was a demo and a rally afterwards. The traffic stops, residents hang at the windows, water cannons and hundreds of police officers in combat gear lurk in side streets, waiting for things to start.

I stand here in front of the house on the loading bed of a lorry, I have a box seat. After the speech there's chanting, those who are autonomous tauten their catapults, the police pull down their visors, someone from the state attorney's office takes pictures and takes part a bit, so that there will be something for him to report. Standard stuff therefore.

In those days we thought that taking a stand only makes sense if it finds a forum. Make it visible. Demonstrate, write articles, fight. Don't get too comfortable. Things aren't very homely on the leftwing says my Granddad.

My Granddad had "Truthful Jacob" in the house. Truthful Jacob was a satire journal which Granddad, a left wing pastor, subscribed to. The picture books of my childhood were fifty bound volumes of Truthful Jacob. I loved them. Of course it's foolish to put too much trust in your memories, but anyway that's how it started.

On the beach of the Oder in the winter of '43
a new born human lay in the snow and screamed.
Along came a coal merchant on a horse and cart,



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and the bundle screamed that it reverberated over the ice. And the clattering of hooves, the rattling of reins and steamy snorting of the beasts was silenced. Bowing to the indignation of this mite, who offered a curled finger to the coal merchant's cupped hand. Scarcely saved, the child fought for breath while the steeds' breath froze in the fog over the Oder's moor. The moon's festive sheen lay over the landscape as a new, more magnificent and powerful scream split the cold, a piercing scream, so sharp and clear and full of outrage, in savage turmoil at all that is right, which was discharged more hotly by the minute, until the merchant became anxious and drove the horses on so that they tossed their heads. As the cart reached the next village, as I screamed and screamed so that the man long shared my indignation, he thumped on the vicarage door which was opened by the parson's pious daughter who saw the small screaming blue face, blue with cold, purple with outrage – perhaps an outrage shared, considering the disgrace which cried out to the heavens and made her open the door wide – in went the man, she gave him her hand and together they laid the screaming bundle down in the vicarage parlour

As a child I made up such stories, but only ones with a grain of truth in them.

I grew up without parents. Mother died in childbirth and my father was a freelance artist and so always away somewhere. I was conceived in Berlin; once he showed me a room and said this is where you were conceived in forty-three. But a pious aunt in Brandenburg brought me up. I was a small town boy and I was aggrieved that I wasn't a child of Berlin.

8th May 1945. Unconditional surrender of the German military. On this day of liberation from Hitler's fascism, when peace broke out after a six year war of destruction, precisely that historical Tuesday, I decided at the age of fifteen months to cross, for the first time without help, the churchyard of that small town on the Oder – which was soon to become a part of the Russian occupied zone, colloquially known as the East Zone and here, in the East Zone, the first social state on German soil was to rise.

1950. The GDR isn't a year old yet. The Ministry for State Security is founded and I start school. My uncle has a small coal merchant's yard; I am the class child capitalist. I was excluded from grammar school and whenever there was any conflict I was the capitalist ringleader who led the proletarian boys politically astray. When I was nine years old I was almost thrown out of school. My friend Willi and I had found a whole package of ammunition and used the cartridges to blow up some old tin baths in a field. It made a brilliant bang, but a barn got slightly burnt in the process. It was clear to the school that I, the capitalist offspring, had enticed Willi, the proletarian child, to take part in a reactionary



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attack on The People's seeds.

There were words and sentences to be used at home and words and sentences that were for school and the street. I took this "double tongue" in at the breast, even though in my case that isn't exactly possible. Anyway, the GDR spoke of Taiwan and the West of Formosa, when they meant the same island. GDR radio: Taiwan, West radio: Formosa. If you unintentionally said Formosa in lessons the teacher immediately knew you were a child of RIAS, the radio station of the American sector – I was caught out with Formosa through not being careful.

A society is like an organism, it's linked together by shared language, values and traditions. Or sometimes not. A tear went through the country and cold seeped in through that tear, crept into my bones and stayed. A hardly noticeable, but pleasant chill; pleasant, because it has become part of me. That's where I am even now. My inner chill is sort of a personal home advantage – it is a drive that has become embedded in me, I can't do without this basic chill. It's a reminder of the cold origin of my chance existence, this chill is my motor and my sonar and even now I have a horror of overheated rooms.

"Youth of all nations
the same purpose unites us, the same courage!
Wherever we live
our happiness depends on peace.
During the dark years
we experienced this
Life was poor.
But we bring
hope to the tired world!"

I sang FGY¹ songs with enthusiasm, but always under the blankets because of my pious aunt, very quietly and full of fervour. "Youth of all nations, the same purpose unites us, the same courage!" Only to myself though, I couldn't do it at school. Ever. I would rather have bitten off my tongue than do it in public. – I couldn't do it. Not on command. Not in the hall. Not in a choir with the others.

I didn't want to join the FGY, but then my father put pressure on me and (*breaks off*). The teacher asks who had intervened in Hungary in '56 and I say to my neighbour, yes, the Russians. And I say it too loudly. And of course it was completely wrong. It was, as a GDR citizen you knew, the CIA who had intervened there, not the Russians. There was a furore. The ten mark support that my Aunt received for me was cancelled. And I was taken apart to drum rolls at the flag ceremony on Monday – (*short pause*). But the point is that six months later those bastards accepted me into the FGY. Because I (*breaks off*) I caved in. As my father had demanded. It was something that I was end-less-ly ashamed of.

I swore to myself that I would start a new life. And if anyone had later said now you're scared, now you'll cop out, now, now you'll cave in, then – then I was in the trap. The demonstrations thirty years ago, here in front of the door, were registered with the police by me. Rather than cop out. It was a demo over which I had no influence, where it was absolutely clear that it would be a violent demo. But when I was asked if I'm copping out or

¹ Free German Youth



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not, I stepped into the trap, dashed off to the police and state security and registered the bloody thing.

1960. The GDR is ten at last. I'm sixteen. At least temporarily. And I go to another aunt. At last I'm out of the sticks, it's Berlin at last. There were spies there, even amongst school children, little comrades. Caution like this amongst school kids was new to me. The dilemma of what you can say. (*Pause*). And to who. (*Pause*). Yes who. Pitiful.

Then came a Sunday afternoon, I turn on the radio. Sunday afternoon. The Mecki trio were always on then. Only there wasn't any Mecki trio. Just a political cabaret. There was no Mecki trio; instead there was an announcement that East Berlin was to be closed off. Until then you could get over to West Berlin. But now they said East Berlin was to be closed off. Closed up. I remember getting dressed, leaving the house and running to the zone border. Bernauerstrasse was where I was beaten by the police for the first time. They spoke with the dialect of Saxony and later in West Berlin they spoke in the Berlin dialect.

I come home beaten black and blue and my aunt says "You're old enough boy; you should know what you're doing. I wouldn't risk anymore limbs in this state. I'm still tired from the last one." And she, my aunt, stared at the wall.

And I go to school and keep my mouth shut and look at the faces and at the mouths, the teacher talks of a fortified border and of the anti-fascist protection wall. My fellow pupils welcome the safeguarding of the state borders of our socialist homeland: and I am as dumb as a fish and think that my eyes are popping out because something is expanding in my head. A thought is spreading. It screams: Clear out! Clear out! You have to get out of here. You have to find someone to go with you. Someone you can trust.

Bruno. Van Oosten. Written with two O's. VANOOSTEN. Impoverished old Dutch aristocracy was Bruno. We called him Earl Dawnred or Oostenvan. Bruno, was what was written in the class register. Bruno said that his gran once had a corner pub in Pankow, but they'd taken it away from her and given it to a greedy communist lady. And the gran had gone. To West Berlin. His parents were away on installation work, so Bruno had a whole flat to himself. Bruno was built like a brick wall; nobody dared have a go at him, the girls swarmed around him, because Bruno could dance Rock and Roll like Elvis. Bruno wasn't in the FGY either. Perhaps if I hadn't met Bruno I wouldn't have done it. Bruno listened and nodded a couple of times and said I'm coming. I'll go to my gran.

For weeks we thought about how to do it. We didn't have wire cutters, but Bruno managed to get hold of some tin shears. The problem with tin shears is that they're smooth and when you cut, the wire slips forwards. While wire cutters have a bulge which catches the wire. We practiced for ages on garden fences and eventually...we succeeded.

At the zone border in Mitte, Berlin. Two crows in the mud. March '61, cold, wet, grey. Early morning. Pretty quiet. A field of ruins, full of weeds. Guarded. (*Pause*).

First of all a wire fence, a barbed wire fence. We cut our way through it, Bruno crawls in front, slowly, steadily, securing, searching cover. I'm close behind. And then, the first wall, after ten metres. Stone blocks with one of those chevaux de frise things on top. We're lying next to each other in the dirt, looking up, there's the wall in front of us, very close. Then, when I move, a hand pushes my face into the dirt, it's wet mud, there's dirt in my mouth and nose and for a moment I can't breathe because Bruno keeps pressing the back



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of my head and then there are footsteps. There's a soldier walking past us, he's probably a metre away...I don't know whether he's seen us or overlooked us. He's walked past us on single patrol, which goes against every military principal as far back as the Prussians. But in this case it was a single soldier, a single sentry on patrol, who walked a metre in front of us and we lay there with our faces in the mud and....goodness only knows how we...got over.....without injury.

Bruno then carried on to Templehof and I needed somewhere to stay.

My new home was one of the Inland Mission's homes. It was really a welfare institution for youths, who had been taken away from their parents by the courts. Evening, in the dining hall. Sixty boys and I get a cup of cocoa in the face. I know that here I have to fight now or go under. My father sends me a paperback for two marks forty. "Latin in 30 days". Thirty days later he calls me and wants talk in Latin... (*Pause*). My A'levels were lousy.

I want to find out where I belong. Where I want to belong. Where I fit in. I'll never fold again. The world is a slaughter house. In Paris, Rome and Berlin students are becoming organised and are taking to the stage, in the name of justice, for their world revolution. They're everywhere. On the streets. In the uni, in old houses, which are threatened with being torn down. I sign myself up for sociology at the Free University in West Berlin and become a student. I study Marx and understand this world at last, as sure as the comrades in the politburo, sure inside that the secret of the world has been decrypted here, it's no longer a matter of interpreting the world, it's a matter of changing it.

I distribute pamphlets for the Home campaign. We're fighting against secure homes, that's what they called the youth gaols. Difficult youths from difficult backgrounds were sent to them. Technically and officially they say "Socially and biologically inferior human material". That's pre-war terminology. Our goal at the time was to make this state of affairs a scandal and most of those homes were then actually closed down. In existing real life socialism they also had these places. And some sort of ideology, whether Christian or Marxist, it was just brushed over. In both the west and east. It was an inherited authoritarian burden Germany wide. They drilled the same absolute obedience into the kids which had been drilled into them.

Is there anybody of the over sixties generation here in the audience who has relevant experience of homes? Doesn't anybody want to comment? No? Obedience can seriously harm you and those in your environment. Obedience can cause death.

He takes out a packet of cigarettes. Matches. Pocket ashtray. Smokes.

After my degree I couldn't find a job. Then there was plenty of time to explore the transport network of Berlin Island, in the warm lap of the liberal democratic constitution, protected by three western powers, walled in by the GDR's anti-fascist anti-imperialistic protection wall. I learnt to listen as a taxi driver. I collected stories and earned money for it. Then somebody actually wanted me, as an assistant at the uni. To a professor of sociology. We spoke, the chemistry was right, the project was right, and now I just need an employment contract. "Impossible" says administration, "Intelligence service".

I never found out what the intelligence service had against me. Perhaps my Maoist tendencies, although after a trip to China Maoism was finished for me. But not by a long



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shot for the brothers of the intelligence service.

In 1970 Willy Brandt decides to dare more democracy and as I'm banned from working I decide to become a civil rights campaigner. My civil rights league is home to me. We organised campaigns against state surveillance, against new police powers, anti-terrorist laws and bans on working. And then the president of the Employers Association was kidnapped and murdered. All of a sudden anyone left of the middle is under general suspicion. Us too. Our league as well. It becomes uncomfortable to belong to our supporters. People bring me cash because they're afraid to transfer money onto our account. There's so much fear that...that you silently...come...come with cash.

We of the league have a small office. We give advice to people there who have trouble with state security. Anonymous and free. People to whom nobody else will talk. Radical leftists. RAF sympathisers too. One day a postcard arrives. Sent to me at the office. "Thank you for the advice. It helped me. By the way I recognised you straight away. All the best. Dawnred."

I hadn't recognised him. I racked my brain wondering which of those people who came day in day out could have be Bruno. I never worked it out. All the best. Dawred. No clue. Nothing. Bruno by the way wasn't called Bruno, not even van Oosten. His name was totally different. He wasn't in my class either.

The truth is I didn't recognise Bruno. It would be impossible for me to recognise Bruno now after fifty years. Bruno for example could be (*breaks off*).

Let's imagine. An old extremist
from the edge of the far left here among us
a silent infiltrator here this evening
here in the warmth of this audience
very silent, quietly chilling. Sitting there now
wholly neighbourly, a tireless pilgrim
of justice who has bravely covered
from the left systems and instances.
A well travelled infiltrator. Among us.
Here. To emerge again. Now.

Bruno and I didn't talk much at the time. But sometimes I still feel Bruno's hand on the back of my head – and the way he wiped the dirt from my eyes before we climbed up the wall.

The Bundestag declared our league to be infiltrated by extremists. "Findings of the State Intelligence Service". We then wrote to the intelligence service to inform us of the names of the infiltrators – and as an answer we got. "We don't give out names". Well that's when we sued. And at court those law breakers said "They're not seeing anything, there's no question about it." But the judge ordered them "to provide something at the next hearing." Eight weeks later at the second hearing. The brothers arrive and say "Pardon, but now we have destroyed everything."

It is character assassination to our league. The supporters withdraw. We have to close the office.



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But even then because of my teenage oath “You’ll never subjugate yourself to them again!” I opened my mouth and ...argued loudly once more. (*Pause*).

I organised campaigns for radicals against work bans – SEW’s. SED’s. KPD’s, DKP’s. We fought for them. And years later it turned out that some of these figures had practised guerrilla warfare at Muggelsee, in East Berlin and had been blasting away there with machine guns.

When the Wall opened I drove to the GDR archives in East Berlin and bumped into Bruno’s parents. They were arrested a few weeks before our escape and had been bought free by the West years later and I saw mine and Bruno’s escape in a different light. I *wanted* to leave the GDR, but Bruno *had to* get out. Bruno had no choice.

The Stasi informers are being busted now. And well known leftists from the West suddenly sit on Solidarity committees for well known Stasi informers. Leftists cover up for leftists. And it’s happening amongst my civil rights campaigners too. They had no problem with these East Berlin villains, they knew were well versed in Marxist slang. And as I cannoned against them and said for goodness sake people you’re sitting here in a huge moral pit – they broke off contact. With me. Permafrost. Siberia.

Short Pause.

Then I resigned from the civil rights league.

I begin to think aloud that German history can only be written about as an overall German history. One day there’s a call asking whether I, as a critical expert on German-German history, might be interested in contributing to a reworking of GDR history. Yes I am. I’m like a red rag to my former comrades now. To them I’m a communist hater. A dangerous subject.

I held lectures on GDR history. Many who came had been victims of political persecution in the GDR and they...wanted to tell their stories. They were often anti-communists, difficult people with difficult stories. . These people were sceptical, but somehow it became known that I respected biographies. They came to my lectures, listened to me and afterwards I listened to their stories. These people had something to tell and I had something to learn. Even if I didn’t agree with them because I had other convictions. An old man once said to me, “You listen to me and because you listen to me life goes on.”

Early one day in the snow
the suburban railway hibernates
I get into a taxi at Zoo
and want to go to Köpenick
it’s still dark and the journey is long
the driver asks what I want out there
in Köpenick and I tell him what I do
what I fight for. And the driver listens.
It slipped you by he says.
That word. I ask which word.
And he says you said fight.
You spoke of elucidation.



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That's where one has to quarrel, says the driver
Fight is the wrong word.
I've never fought. I've quarrelled.
I've got myself bumps and carry on quarrelling.
He says. When history says fight
it only means destruction. History
must count the dead. And murder without pause.
And fight is the wrong word for one
who takes a taxi for the purpose of elucidation.
Comments the driver. And then he says 23.80.

I'd like a favour. If Bruno is here today and wants to make it known, I'd like to ask him to join in the following song. If not, then. Not.

Sings quietly.

"Youth of all nations
the same purpose unites us, the same courage!
Wherever we live
our happiness depends on peace.

Softly from the audience a female voice joins in with singing the following.

During the dark years
we experienced this
Life was poor.
But we bring
hope to the tired world!"

He goes down into the audience. The woman stands up and together they leave.