

# In Germany, all trains go from left to right.

Thorsten Botz-Bornstein

## 1

In Germany, all trains go from left to right. Things were different during my grandfather's time: for him, trains would go from right to left, but that's because he was living in a completely different world. When my grandfather was eighteen he decided to kill the Romanian King. "Why would there still be a king in Romania when the entire world was moving forward towards democracy?" he would ask. My grandfather was a strange person. You wonder why he was actually so concerned about the Romanian king while he was living in his native Germany, not even eighteen years old, during the economic depression and with Adolf Hitler touring through the country in his borrowed airplane delivering bombastic speeches. But my grandfather thought that the Romanian king needed to be killed and if nobody would step forward to do it, he would have to do it himself. In the summer of 1928, almost on his eighteenth birthday, he bought himself a train ticket to Bucharest and traveled eastward. I know the exact date of his trip because he arrived in Berlin during the premiere of Berthold Brecht's *Three Penny Opera*, which took place on August 31. I know that he had even managed to get a cheap ticket for the premiere. It was one of those tickets that permitted you to listen to the music but made you stand (and not sit) behind a large pillar completely blocking the view. It was a listening ticket and not a seeing ticket.

My grandfather stayed only one day in Berlin because he had no time to waste. While poor King Michael, shy as ever, did not suspect anything, his future murderer would roll into Bucharest North Station in the early morning hours of September 2, 1928.

What do you need when you are planning to kill the Romanian king? Don't say you need a gun, because you will not drive into Romania with a gun in your pocket. The gun, you will have to find it over there. No, what you need is some knowledge of the Romanian language because you will have to organize the whole stunt together with the locals. This is why my grandfather bought himself a Romanian language teaching book when he was still in Germany, and about two months before his scheduled trip he started learning Romanian. It was one of those books written by Romanian-Germans which contained, for whatever reason, lots of German-Romanian cooking recipes. I found the book after

his death in a box in his cupboard. It must have been difficult to study with that kind of book during the depression with limited food supply and hunger all around. But my grandfather thought of his final objective, which was to kill the Romanian king. This gave him the power to overcome such obstacles.

During the long train ride, my grandfather carefully jotted down the essential sentences to be exhorted upon meeting the leader of the subversive political opponents in Bucharest. First he thought of a short but passionate outburst of hate against the Romanian king, but then he decided that a longer and more elaborate speech would be more apropos. In the end, he wanted to convince those people – whoever they were – not only of his passion but also of his intellectual integrity. Something like two and a half minutes speaking time would be appropriate. For half my life, I have wondered what he could actually have said because the subject – tricky as it is – requires a high degree of linguistic sensibility as it should not be addressed too directly. Normally some basic Romanian will not do the job.

Obviously, my grandfather did not worry about such details. But he was realistic enough to understand that his Romanian language skills were still very basic. This is why he decided to say the most important things twice or even three times just in case somebody in the group would not grasp the ideas he was going to convey. While on the train, he managed to jot down those repetitions and even make them entertaining by expressing the same thought each time in a slightly different fashion. When he had drafted about thirty sentences in Romanian my grandfather learned them all by heart, paying special attention to the grammatical endings of verbs because he knew that a wrong ending can cause severe misunderstandings in any language.

When he arrived in the early morning hours in Bucharest on that doomed day he was well prepared, at least linguistically. Soon he was rushing through the city barely looking left and right. He could have been impressed by things that he did not know from his hometown: the large number of cars, the Parisian-style buildings as well as the new art deco architecture on the Bratianu Boulevard. But he had no time for sightseeing. Through whatever miracle he managed to locate the headquarters of an underground anarchist group who had been plotting against the King for years. While he was blazing his trail through crowded Bucharest, constantly asking people in his approximate Romanian for directions, he did not forget to constantly recite the thirty sentences that he was bound to present to the head anarchist. Some lowlife was approaching him suggesting a deal but he vigorously brushed him away yelling some Romanian words that must have left many a Romanian petty criminal speechless.

But there was one thing that my grandfather did not know at that time: most inhabitants of Eastern Europe were multilingual and here they were actually very likely to speak German. While he was approaching the basement of a rundown shop in downtown Bucharest that served as the headquarter

of the anarchist group, eager to rattle down the sentences that had been floating through his brain for more than a week, the leader of the group carefully watched him through the cobweb-covered window of his office. The leader, of course, immediately recognized my grandfather as German. Even today you can clearly distinguish German tourists walking through Bucharest, and I guess that at that time, a German in downtown Bucharest in the early morning hours stuck out like a seal in a birdhouse.

When my grandfather opened the metallic door of the basement with an energetic push, a strong gust of wind blew away freshly printed leaflets and playing cards that were piled on the shaggy tables. As the room was murky, my grandfather had difficulty distinguishing objects and people. Still he knew what he had to do. He opened his mouth to recite the prepared sentences, but before he could pronounce a single word the anarchist leader of the group said to him *in German*: 'I can see that you've come a long way. What can I do for you?'

My grandfather was shocked, confused. During the seconds of silence that followed, one could hear a mouse rushing across the floor and the faucet dripping. By now, my grandfather could recognize other human beings, all of them having a fanatic glance in their eyes similar to his own. And they were looking at him inquisitively. However, he was unable to say anything, either in German or in Romanian. Why had nobody told him that people here speak German too?

Deep down in his head a voice must have signaled to him: 'Holy shit, this project is not working according to my plans.' At that time he did not understand how true that was. He still could have returned and he definitely should have done so. He simply should have recognized that things will *never* work according to his plans here. But he did not understand this and that's why he went right into the disaster. And it was a real disaster.

'Where did you come from?'

'From the Ruhr, Germany.'

'You're sure you can handle a gun?'

'No problem.'

On a bright autumn day, an anarchist group composed of six people took a bus to Peles Castle where the rascal was living. My grandfather was sitting on the bench trying to hide a long knife under his linen shirt (the anarchists could not agree on handing him a gun). He, like everybody else, had a tense expression on his face. I could never get hold of details about what exactly happened in the hours afterwards but the affair went as wrong as anything can go. Not only did they not manage to kill the king, but everybody got caught and was sentenced to heavy prison terms. This is how my grandfather

spent the next fifteen years of his life in Romania, more precisely, in the famous high security prison for political prisoners named Doftana (also called the “Romanian Bastille”).

This is the story of my grandfather going to Romania. It is a tragic story but it also has a positive side. In prison, he would meet many interesting people, probably more than he would ever have met in Germany. All inmates were political prisoners and intellectuals who had come from all European countries. The average IQ in this prison must have been around 145. Most of them had come to kill the Romanian king. Faced with the boredom of prison life, they would teach each other everything they knew and for my grandfather, who would have had no chance to attend college in his home country, his prison term represented a kind of university education. The prisoners had even established an information network and were so well informed about everything in the country and in the world that the guards, when they wanted to know what is going on outside, would ask the prisoners. In those fifteen years, he learned to speak Romanian fluently as well as French and Russian. He also obtained an impressive level of knowledge in economic theories and in art history.

Some things were unfortunate though. The 1940 Bucharest earthquake caused the prison to collapse killing almost all inmates. Miraculously, my grandfather survived. When he crawled from underneath the rubble entirely unharmed he was longing for freedom. He would be free for exactly twelve hours, when the police picked him up just before dusk while he was running through Romanian cabbage fields. Of course, he had no idea where he was running. He was sent to a makeshift prison where he would serve another three years. When he was released after having spent almost to the day fifteen years behind bars, he realized that by now he had lived almost half of his life in Romania.

When the prison doors closed behind him on a chilly February day in 1943 and he was released into freedom, my grandfather understood that he had no other place to go other than back to Germany. In Romania he was a foreigner and a convict and certainly not welcome. Unfortunately, in Germany, meanwhile, the Nazis had established themselves as the rulers of the country. When my grandfather arrived after a two-week trip by foot and by horse cart through Hungary and Czechoslovakia at the border crossing of Strážný-Pippersreut in South Germany, two Nazi officers examined his papers. After two minutes the tall one said to the short one with a malignant smile: “Look, a communist from Romania!” My grandfather was put into the Concentration Camp of Dachau for another three and a half years.

In the concentration camp he would meet many more interesting people and was taught many more useful things. He learned, in particular, much about chemistry and ended his camp career as a certified prison chemist. He would be “liberated” and leave the camp of Dachau at the end of the War as

one of the very few Dachau survivors. As the reason for his survival in one of the most murderous camps ever he would always cite the fact that the Romanian prison experience had taught him how to get by in extreme situations. "In the concentration camp you always need to have a job," he would explain, "so they won't put you into the oven. Whenever they come close to you with an oven order you tell them: 'Just wait a minute; I have to finish that job first.'" During all those years, he had been a librarian, a carpenter, a gardener, a pharmacist...

My grandfather married a young woman just before he left Germany. People married very young in those days and Maria – that's the name of the woman – waited exactly fourteen years for him to return. But no longer. It is perfectly understandable why she had abandoned any hope of him coming back, especially since my grandfather had told nobody that he was going to Romania to kill the king (which would have been a lack of professionalism) and his family simply thought that he had disappeared into a sort of black hole. The few letters he could write would never arrive in chaotic war torn Germany. After eleven years my grandfather would be declared dead and my grandmother would marry the man whom I have to consider – for lack of better terms – as my grandfather number two.

When my grandfather (number one) knocked one early spring afternoon in 1946 on the shaky door of the ruined house that my grandmother was sharing with her new in-laws, everybody was very surprised to see him. Here he was, emaciated but still recognizable as the idealistic youth whom nothing could make abandon his belief in the essentially good nature of humanity; not even the experiences in the Romanian prison and in the concentration camp.

'Where do you come from?'

'From Dachau.'

'Alright.'

Since almost all of my grandfather's family members had died during the war, he had no place of his own to stay and was accepted in the half-destroyed apartment of his wife's new in-laws. Inside the apartment, pails and bowls had been placed everywhere, even on the beds, to collect the rain water that was pouring in through holes in the roof. The cohabitation turned out to be easier than expected because my grandfather would stay almost "invisible" for the next two years. He had become so alienated from society that the simple sight of a human being would scare him to death and send him straight into his bedroom where he would lock himself in for days. His state became normal after a few years.

Under these circumstances the contrast between him and my grandmother's new husband would become clearer than ever after. My grandfather number two was quite another kind of person. This

short, fat, and bald headed man would spend most of his time sitting on the sofa, drinking strongly sweetened coffee with cream while blowing large rings of cigar smoke into the air, constantly boasting about his imaginary business successes (most of which were linked to the black market). Morally speaking, my grandfather number one was superior because he had so severely suffered for a noble cause. However, grandfather number two would contest this whenever there was the occasion. Number one had never been to war but had hidden in an obscure prison in some fantastic country. Number two had not been at the front either, but among the many half-real feats that he was boasting about was his heroic saving of a Jew, which, as he thought, would make him at least morally equal with number one. It is true that he had hidden his Jewish business associate in the cellar of his apartment block for three months during the last phase of the war, feeding him whenever he would go downstairs to fetch coal. His Jewish friend fled to America after three months. The coffee that number two was now drinking had indeed been sent by Kurt from America, which made the whole story plausible and realistic.

While number two was materialistic, number one was hopelessly idealistic. While number two was hedonistic, loud-mouthed, and jolly even while he was leading one business after the other into bankruptcy, number one was frugal, clumsy, unable to express himself, and hesitant to do anything but “useless” intellectual work. While number two’s personality was expansive and equipped with an untamable sense of ego, number one seemed to be constantly disappearing into the very nothingness he had come from.

My mother, who was born during the first year of this *ménage à trois*, would be raised within a constant tension lingering between the ruminating intellectuality of number one and the optimistic daredevil commercialism of number two. She had no preference for the one or the other, but would be equally tempted by number one’s unrealistic though scrupulous morality and by number two’s equally unrealistic but reckless self-aggrandizement. Given that she had two fathers, she was affected by both sides almost to the same extent. Her bi-paternal education would predetermine her future state of mind that would forever hover somewhere between simplistic wisdom and schizophrenia, between distorted critical insights and mere self-hypnosis. Seen retrospectively, it seems no coincidence at all that she became the head preacher of the local chapter of some Indian New Age sect when she was in her forties.

However, initially, her career as a sect leader was not predictable at all and must have come as a surprise to anybody who had known her in her youth. Being short and chubby, she was far removed from the image of a charismatic person able to hypnotize the masses. Among the particularities that most people will remember is certainly her tendency to twist, in a very resolute way, the upper part of

her body to the left and to the right while walking. This looked very strange especially because she did it for no particular reason. Whenever my mother was walking she was wringing her waist in both directions, throwing her arms around her body like in a wild fury. This became particularly conspicuous when she was carrying her heavy bag because then she could swing only one arm and had to clutch the bag with the other though still twisting her waist like mad. This could be, especially on days when it was very intense, a spectacle bordering on absurdity.

The other particularity of my mother's physical appearance was that she would hammer her heels into the ground whilst walking with such strength that her shoes would leave deep marks on every wooden parquet she had crossed. The reason was that she would basically not bend her knees while walking but advance with mere goosesteps, the entire body bent backwards, which made people fear that she will tumble over backwards at any moment. The only force balancing her body was her big breasts that she was stretching forward or rather – upward.

Seeing her hastening through the street of this little industrial town in the early morning hours on her way to work was so bizarre that it became a sort of public entertainment. People who were living along the streets she used every morning would wait for her, some of them setting their alarm clocks so they would be sure not to miss her. People would be leaning out of their windows, many of them cheering, whistling and applauding as if this was a football match. It was a working class area and people were very straightforward when it came to expressions of approval or disapproval. Some men were still shaving while standing at the window of some upper floor, and some women were dressing their children who were standing on the window sill. After a few years, my mother's passage became like a ritual. Somebody living on the highest floor of an apartment block would perceive her curiously bouncing silhouette approaching from the distance and shout at the top of his lungs, "She's coming!" Soon the whole façade of the building would be filled with faces and gesticulating arms would stick out almost every window.

It is often very difficult to predict what effect certain events that occur in early youth will have on people later in their lives. My mother could have been bothered, discouraged or even destroyed for the rest of her life by the traumatic experience of being openly mocked on such a regular basis. Curiously, it had the exact opposite effect on her. She actually liked it, she enjoyed it, she wanted to get more of it. It is as if both grandfather number one's unrealistic idealism and grandfather number two's obsessional drive for personal prestige and recognition had been kicking in simultaneously while she was walking those streets. She never avoided the streets where people were waiting for her by the windows but would take those streets again and again on purpose. She enjoyed the thought that all those people

interrupted their hectic morning activities in order to witness this one minute spectacle. Never would she take the bus, even when it was raining. Walking along the high street of this industrial town at five thirty in the morning with hundreds of eyes glued to her grotesquely brandishing body gave her an intoxicating kind of fulfillment. More precisely, it gave her a taste of the kind of power that comes with the ability to control other people's actions. Those people were there because of *her* and *she* could tell them what to do and what to think during those few minutes of their lives, during those minutes stretching from the moment they got out of bed to the moment they closed the door behind them to go to work. During those minutes, the city belonged to her. Over the years, this thrill would become an addiction. In the end, my mother could no longer live without it.

It was my father who persuaded her to learn to walk normally unless she wanted to remain the butt of jokes of the entire city for the rest of her life. But it was not enough to convince her of the necessity of adopting a normal gait; he also had to teach her how to suppress all those strange movements. The problem was that she really *could* not walk differently. It took my father a little over a year to train her to the point where people would no longer turn their heads when she was walking by. It was a difficult task and my family still considers its accomplishment one of my father's greatest achievements.

My father was studying at the local evening school to become a physics teacher but he also participated in Germany's speedy reconstruction by driving around with his scooter servicing the various music boxes and peanut distributors that he owned in the city. Still he found time to give my mother walking lessons, which they attempted to hold at least four times a week for precisely one hour. At first, it did not work at all. Advices like 'don't move your arm', 'don't twist your body' are rather useless when the bad habit is really inveterate. Nonetheless, one day my father had an epiphany while studying the phenomenon of equilibrium in physics. He put a large book on my mother's head and told her to try walking without throwing it off. Now she could no longer bend backward, nor could she swing her arms or wring her body at the waist; all of which would fling the book from her head. The strategy worked. Eventually, my mother stopped walking like a Martian. That was the time when trains started going from right to left.