

OPERATION OSKAR

MAX HERTZBERG



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BERLIN

HOHENSCHÖNHAUSEN

“Where were you between 1600 and 2200 hours on the night of the fifteenth?”

My comrades love a good question, maybe that’s why they were asking me again. And again.

And again.

OK, I know what you’re thinking. Why didn’t I just answer?

But I’d already answered. I’d given them my answer this morning. And yesterday. And the day before.

And guess what? They were still keen to hear what I had to say.

I knew the procedure, I knew what to expect—I’d been on the other side of that table many times. I’d heard the lectures at the Ministry school in Golm and I’d read the manual. But this time I was in the hot seat. Knees closed tighter than a nun’s, hands pressed under my thighs, palms pushed against the seat. No sleep for two days. Or was it three? Couldn’t really tell whether the hallucinations were from alcohol withdrawal or lack of sleep.

Probably both.

So I gave them my answer again: “I was in my office, opening a preliminary file on a potential informant in Potsdam. The gate records will confirm that I spent the whole night at the headquarters of Main Department VI in Treptow.”

The Stasi major sitting behind the desk didn’t react. Didn’t even bother looking up from the sheet of questions in front of him, just read out the next one from his list.

I didn’t need a sheet of paper in front of me, I knew which question was next because he’d already asked me, as had the

interrogator before him, and the one before that.

Like I said, they love a good question.

The shifts changed. The faces opposite me changed. But I stayed right where I was, and that list of questions stayed right there on the desk.

Every day or so they let me go back to shiver in my cell, just for a bit of variety. My cramped legs struggled to carry me down the cold corridors, my hands were shackled together and my head was lowered.

I couldn't see much. The traffic light system was above my line of sight, my vision topped out at the thin wires strung along the walls at shoulder height.

I thought about reaching out, pulling the fine wire before my guard could react. Break the electrical connection and the alarm would go off, more screws would turn up, truncheons ready for action. Surely the pain and the bruises would be better than this monotony?

Just for a bit of variety.

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They were having a hard time deciding whether my dead Boss was a hero or a traitor and they expected me to help them work it all out.

Everyone else who could help was either dead or in the West. Either way, they were out of reach.

Fair enough, it was going to take them a bit of time to figure it out: all they had was the Boss's corpse with a big hole in the chest where a bullet had been dug out of it. They didn't know who had killed him.

But that wasn't the important bit.

They wanted the *why*. If they knew why he'd been killed they'd know whether he was a class-hero or a class-traitor.

Once the brass agreed on the why they might declare him a hero—just for the propaganda value—even if they'd decided he was a traitor.

Or it might happen the other way round. Who could say how it might turn out?

And me? I couldn't care less whether my dead Boss was a

hero or a traitor. I only cared what the comrades thought. The interrogation notes would be sent to Berlin Centre, and one day the verdict would come back.

If the bigwigs decided the Boss was one of the bad guys then I was as good as dead.

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BERLIN

HOHENSCHÖNHAUSEN

They returned my clothes and put me in the back of a Barkas van, a hard hand shoved me into one of the narrow cells. The door slammed before I could even turn around.

My shoulder hit the wall as we accelerated away. My hands were still cuffed in front of me and I dug my elbows into the scratched and pockmarked sides of the cell—my only chance of staying upright as the van twisted through corners.

There was nothing for me to do but count stops and turns. After a long run down a stretch of straight road, halting briefly for traffic lights, I felt the van pull off to the side. Cobbles rumbled under the wheels and the brakes squealed like a tram going around a tight curve.

When the cell door opened, a *Feldwebel* undid my shackles and stood aside to let me out.

I was nauseous with fatigue and disorientation, but made it out of the Barkas and took a first look at the world outside the prison walls. I knew this place, I knew the broken steps that led up the steep bank of trees.

Those steps were good news. Those steps were the side entrance to Volkspark Prenzlauer Berg. Slap bang in the middle of Berlin.

If you're going to shoot someone in the back of the neck, you don't do it in the middle of the city.

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Behind me, life went on as normal. The traffic on Hohenschönhauser Strasse hummed like a beehive worried about a visit by a bear and his paw.

I didn't turn around when I heard the Barkas' two-stroke

engine wind itself up to join the traffic flow, and I didn't turn around when the little engine faded into the background buzz of the traffic.

Like some eco-freak, I kept my eyes on the trees in front of me. Bright leaves floated down, flirting with the breeze that stroked my hair, gentler than any paid lover.

Sometime, while I was in that cell, autumn had arrived. You could tell by the yellow of the poplar and the bronze of the oak—not something I'd bother noticing under normal circumstances.

The sound of a familiar voice made me turn around.

"Comrade Lieutenant Reim?" It was an *Uffzi* from the Clubhouse. He had his heels pressed together, his forefinger stuck to his forehead and the rear door of a Chaika open.

I didn't bother with questions, there had been enough of those lately. I just climbed into the limo and the staff sergeant closed the door and ran around to the driver's side.

He took me home.

He took me the long way round, past S-Bahn station Leninallee. And that suited me just fine—I wasn't in the mood to wave to the Comrade Minister at Berlin Centre.

I had one hand balled up in my lap, trying to hide the shivers, the other held the curtains back. I watched Berlin pass by on the other side of the murky windows and imagined the taste of my next drink.

When I got to my flat, I went straight to the kitchen and poured myself a vodka.

I necked it. Then another.

Feeling more human, I stripped off my grimy clothes and stood naked in the kitchen, readying myself for another hit from the bottle. Only then did I go to stand under the shower.

I stayed there until I could no longer see the grime thread towards the plughole, and then I stayed for a bit longer.

Freshly washed and shaved, I went back to the kitchen and re-introduced myself to the bottle. There were no objections when I suggested we should go to bed together.