

## Ingo Schulze

**PETER HOLTZ**

*His own account of a happy life*

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Orphan to millionaire. How did it go so wrong?

Peter Holtz wants happiness for everyone. As a child, he tried living without money, made Punk music based on the spirit of industrial folk songs and converted to Christianity. He fought for Christian-Communist democracy as a CDU member (East).

But to his surprise, the way of the world defies all logic. The market economy rewards his altruism with riches. Had he been fighting for the wrong cause? Or was he simply fighting for the right thing on the wrong path? And above all, how can he decently rid himself of the money? Peter Holtz takes the promises of capitalism at their word. Deploying humour and poetic diction, Ingo Schulze creates a character like we have never seen before, but certainly need today, in times where the world has been turned upside down.

Translated by Simon Pare

## CHAPTER ONE

*In which Peter visits a restaurant without a penny in his pocket and explains why he thinks he is right to do so. Reflections on the value of money in a socialist state.*

That Saturday in 1974, eight days before my twelfth birthday, I don't yet know how lucky I am. I'm sitting on the terrace of a restaurant for day-trippers near Waldau, waiting for someone to persuade the waitress that my arguments are valid or else settle my bill for four marks and ten pfennig. I've already told her several times that I have no money either in my pockets or back at the Käthe Kollwitz children's home in Gradow on the Elbe.

'Money really isn't important!' I say before immediately adding, 'As long as I'm a kid, society has to provide for me, whether I'm at the children's home or on an outing to the Baltic coast.'

I repeatedly tell the waitress that I am prepared to work for my portion of cured pork knuckle with potatoes, sauerkraut and mustard, washed down with a glass of apple beer. All she has to do is give me a chore, although I wouldn't want to get her into trouble for child labour. It stands to reason, however, that she should not charge me for the meal. 'Why should society give me money,' I ask, 'if, sooner or later, that same money is only going to end up back in its coffers?'

'Where does the money end up?' the waitress cries, her voice rising with every word.

'In society,' I answer.

'You're crazy!' says the waitress, jabbing her temple several times with her index finger. 'You must have a screw loose!' She grabs her thick black plait, which is lying diagonally across her low-cut top, and flings it back over her

shoulder. The plait swings back and forth between her shoulder blades as she walks away, only coming to a rest when she gathers herself to mount the three steps leading up to the restaurant entrance.

As always in tricky situations I try to keep a cool head and stifle my disappointment at how unreasonable even adults can still be. What would Paul Löschau do now? I gaze up into the sky. He said that observing the clouds was the best way to relax if you lack the energy to keep studying. We always saw figures in the shapes of the clouds. Enormous hedgehogs, crabs, rabbits and bears sailed over our heads. On other days, though, we saw the pioneers of our cause – Ernst Thälmann or Rosa Luxemburg, once even Lenin with his jutting chin!

Today, however, no cloud will metamorphose for me. Should I simply run away? But if I did that I'd be placing my own interests above those of society, and the waitress would ultimately come to regard her selfishness as vigilance!

By now there is such a throng of patrons that a waiter drives those waiting away from the entrance and orders them to form a queue. I take up position close to the door. I want one last go at persuading the waitress!

'Get to the back of the queue!' calls a man. He tugs my elbow and pulls me backwards so hard that I almost fall over. 'The very back!' the woman next to him adds.

'I've got to speak to my waitress,' I say. 'I've already had something to eat and drink, but the waitress insists I pay for it . . .' I look from one to the other, but neither meets my eyes. By the time I get to expounding on how ridiculous it is to use money in a socialist state, the woman narrows her eyes at me and points over her shoulder with her thumb. 'The very back,' she says again.

Since there's no sign of the waitress, the only thing I can do is stand in the waiter's path.

'Are you blind?!' he exclaims, barging past me and hurrying away in his black patent leather shoes.

'You'll never get a seat like that,' whispers an elderly man, whose beige trousers are held up by a narrow white belt at belly-button height.

'I'm not after a seat . . .' I say, then turn away because the waiter's coming back with an empty tray tucked under his arm. I scurry alongside him and repeat my request.

'The boy's got a concern!' says the friendly man in the pulled-up beige trousers, stepping out of the line. 'It's your duty to answer him!'

When the waiter reappears he pushes a book into my chest and pulls out a biro. 'Make sure I get it back. And I mean directly from you!' Rather than look at me, he glances at the friendly man, who has now returned to his place in the queue.

'Now you have to be brave and write something!' the friendly man says.

I assemble the gold letters imprinted on the leather volume into the words 'Guest Book'. There are no chairs free, so I sit down on the red-and-white railing along the roadside, dropping my camping bag by my feet. Carefully I open the guest book. The first few pages have been torn out, and the rest look like someone has chewed them. As a result the guest book begins with some photos of wedding parties, two of them even in colour. These are followed by a written entry. The text isn't long. I recognise the individual letters and try to connect them by forming syllables. I have considerable difficulties with reading and writing: that's what my school report says. Not every sentence reveals its secrets to me. After starting from the beginning again, I realise that the writing is about the ladies' toilets, and that makes it easier to understand. None of the toilets was in a fit state. I read the inventory of the actual situation with growing interest and increasing indignation. By way of conclusion it says that this woman didn't even dare to do a 'number one' there. The signatory, Dagmar Freudental, calls for the collective of catering establishments to take a stance. Underneath this is an address. I'm impressed by how objective and detailed her entry is. I'd like to be able to express my thoughts this clearly. I focus on the basics. 'Long live the fulfilment of proper needs!' I write, because I think pork knuckle and apple beer were a good choice. 'Down with individual selfishness! Down with private property!' reads my second entry. The collective of catering establishments will compare my suggestions to the actual situation, discuss them, cease their wrongdoing and improve matters.

I'm just writing out my address when someone stops in front of me. A young waitress smiles and hands me a full glass. 'Lemonade,' she says. 'It's on the house!'

I want to ask her what that last phrase means, but since she's kind enough to hold the guest book while I take the glass, I drain the lemonade in one.

'No need to rush,' she says, 'and don't write anything bad about us.'

'We all have to learn,' I say, handing back the empty glass. 'We must never ever stop learning.'

She stares at the ground. She has a good think about what I've just said instead of giving a hasty answer. I stretch out my hand, and in the process the biro slips from my fingers. She quickly bends down. 'Thank you,' I say, taking her right hand and giving it a firm shake.

Then I complete the address of the Käthe Kollwitz home and sign with my first and second names. Too late I notice that I haven't written a valediction. I squeeze in 'In socialism, respectfully yours' and snap the guest book shut, delighted to have brought the whole matter to a satisfactory conclusion. I hurry past the line of waiting patrons. They're all in exactly the same places as they were before. The one person I cannot see is my friend in the beige trousers. I may not be able to claim that I have taught the others all a lesson, but at least I've made better use of my time than they have. A similar thought is presumably running through their minds at the sounds of the imminent thunderstorm.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

*In which Peter goes for a walk through Berlin (West) and receives some surprising answers to his questions. Some reasoned remarks about the exchange rate between the mark (East) and the mark (West).*

An important milestone has been reached with the election of Joachim Lefèvre as chair of the CDU. The task now is to clear up the Otto Nuschke House. We have to change everything at once. The finances alone are a complete disaster, and the cosily ensconced officials on the executive board still think the worst has blown over now that the election is behind them.

Monday 20 November is Joachim Lefèvre's final day as a lawyer for the time being. After that he will be free to leave. That is my reason for choosing that day to undertake an excursion to West Berlin, although I'm not exactly in the mood. But I cannot really tell others to see capitalism for themselves and then duck out of it when it's my turn.

I pay a fee to have my identity card stamped at the People's Police station in Treptow. I make myself two sandwiches, the same as every morning. The only thing I pack into my rucksack other than my water bottle is a waterproof, and then I take the S-Bahn to Prenzlauer Berg. I want to start out from the Bornholmer Strasse border crossing and advance in a southwesterly semicircle from there.

None of the border guards I met in September is on duty this morning. I don't have to wait: a glance at my identity card, a look in my eye, a friendly nod and I'm already in no-man's land. I wish they would do more stringent checks. Who knows what kind of stuff's being smuggled across the border right now!

I keep my identity card in my hand in readiness for the checkpoint on the other side. I can already see Western cars. Two other tourists overtake me. I expect someone to call and send me back. Eventually I come to a halt, but there's no one in sight asking to see my ID. This is just so lax! I'm hurt by this lack of attention.

The first shop I enter is a newsagent's. The shelves sag under the selection of papers and magazines. I ask for a copy of *Die Neue Zeit*.

'Not the most recent,' the saleswoman says. She takes a drag on her cigarette and points to the giant-sized newspaper I've already seen at the Lefèvres' breakfast table.

'My experiences with it haven't been so good,' I say, correcting the saleswoman, who's being extremely friendly towards me. She has probably been trained to turn on the charm with East German citizens. She has pale blonde hair and looks as if she just got back from a beach holiday.

She wedges her cigarette into the groove in a fullish ashtray while she searches for *Die Neue Zeit*. Not only can she not find it, she admits that she's never heard of it before. My second test question is about *Neues Deutschland*, which they don't have in stock either, merely confirming my expectations. That same second my eyes alight on a colour nude photo, spread across the cover of a magazine. The direction of my gaze doesn't escape the saleswoman.

'Fancy a peek inside?' she asks, already reaching for it.

'No thanks,' I shoot back.

'You sure?'

'Do you have to sell that? Does the owner force you to?'

She arches her eyebrows. 'I *am* the owner.'

It would probably be tactless to ask her if she's embarrassed by it. I would be. She picks up her cigarette and draws on it. Her teeth are dazzlingly white despite all the smoking. I thank her and say goodbye.

'See you!' she says, as if we're now friends, then exhales the smoke across the counter and stubs out her cigarette. They've successfully indoctrinated the shopkeepers near the Wall to be friendly. Another thing we've neglected to do.

I like the greengrocer's shops, which are clearly all run by foreign traders. Despite the season, the variety of produce on offer really is amazing. Maybe it wasn't such a good idea after all to set out without any preparation. I've obviously missed the centre: there isn't a historic building to be seen.

Two hours later I'm finally standing outside a castle-like building, but I'm prevented from visiting it. It is supposedly the federal president's official residence. The policeman doesn't react when I remark that the so-called federal president has no business being in West Berlin.

Next I come to a large square with a pillar with a golden angel on top of it. At first I think that the gleaming golden rods on the pillar are there merely for decoration, but on closer scrutiny I see that they are cannon barrels. Gilded cannon barrels! I hope a lot of people look at these, because this is the final word on Prussian militarism and how West Berlin deals with its legacy. Only when I spy the Brandenburg Gate at the far end of the street do I realise that I know this view – but from the other side. I feel a sudden wave of homesickness. I find it pretty ridiculous to be wandering around a place where I don't know anyone, especially as I have enough work waiting for me back home.

It takes me a while to find my way out of the Tiergarten, which is what this park is called.

As one shop follows the other, I wonder about the huge role advertising plays in West Berlin. Even if you bear in mind that in the West there is not one good product that everyone can buy, but several identical or similar products competing with each other because every supplier is out to make the greatest possible profit, which obviously comes at the expense of quality, I still fail to grasp why businessmen spend so much on advertising. Every customer can see that expenditure on advertising raises the price of the product. That's why I would deliberately avoid the products that advertising had brought to my attention.

I spot a few benches on the broad strip in the middle of a dual carriageway. I think I've earned a break. There's some room next to an elderly man with a trolley filled with waste beside him. Putting my rucksack on my lap, I unpack my sandwiches and start to eat heartily. My neighbour is watching me out of



the corner of his eye, but he doesn't respond to my repeated nods, so I hold out my open lunchbox.

'Go ahead,' I say. He hesitates. I wouldn't automatically accept something from a stranger either. My persistence is rewarded, however. Slowly his hand – which has black fingernails and is swollen, as if from frostbite – reaches for the other half sandwich. He lifts off the top layer of bread and bites into the bottom slice, the one with the salami on it. His lower jaw moves from side to side, as if his teeth keep slipping when he bites.

'Like it?' I ask so as not just to sit there beside him in silence. He turns towards me. Instead of answering he scrutinises me carefully and shamelessly. It is not only his mouth but the whole lower half of his face that trembles as he eats. I'd like to drink something, but then I'd have to offer him some and I'm wary of the viscous spittle in the corners of his mouth.

'Is there something strange about me?' I eventually ask him. He acts as if he didn't hear my question. I shut my lunchbox and am about to pack up when suddenly he asks, "Where're you from?"

"Berlin," I say. Of course this explanation isn't precise enough in West Berlin, so I add, 'The capital of the GDR.'

He stares at me, his features impassive. I'm about to say it again when he repeats it slowly and deliberately, as if sucking every syllable like a lolly. 'The capital of the GDR,' he says, and then, after a brief pause, during which he continues to chew with quick gasps for breath, 'He comes from the capital!'

I nod. 'Berlin Treptow.'

It looks as if memory has got the better of him. Are those tears in his eyes? Is he laughing? He is indeed shaking with laughter, and a tear is already rolling down his cheek. 'Not much going on in your capital now, is there, eh?' he shouts, roaring with laughter as if he also wants to offer me a glimpse of the last black stump in his mouth surrounded by mushy bread and salami.

'Not a whole lot going on now! End of the line for the lovely Jee-dee-ar!'

He coughs violently, spraying breadcrumbs towards me.

I stay calm. I'm prepared for provocation, although I'm disappointed that it's coming from a man who's obviously a proletarian. But the capitalist system

has probably humiliated him so much that he's sunk into the lumpenproletariat, which will do anything, even if it harms its own interests. However, I don't want to brand him an adversary out of prejudice. I must understand him in his historical context, as a product of this society, and show him who his true enemies are, so I stay sitting there. He wolfs down the remains of the bread and salami and wipes his mouth with his free mitt.

'What did you buy with your welcome hundred, eh?'

'I didn't buy anything,' I say.

'Nuthin? No way! You all buy something!'

'What am I meant to buy?' I ask.

'You ain't got nuthin over there. That's why you all come over 'ere.'

'We've got everything we need,' I say. 'After all, you've just eaten bread with butter and salami. That isn't "nuthin", as you call it.'

'Oh ho ho, somebody's pissed off. Am I supposed to say a nice "thank you", shake your hand? Want it back?' He holds out the top half.

'No, I was happy to give you my sandwich. I'm just saying that it's not "nuthin", as you claimed.'

He looks at me again. 'If you're not buying nuthin, you can give it to me.'

'Give you what?'

'Your welcome hundred! I'd like something nice like that for a change.'

'Sorry, but I don't want any of your currency.'

'You didn't pick it up?'

'They can wait for me to pick it up until they're blue in the face.'

We say nothing for a while. There are no laces in his shoes. I don't see any socks either.

'Didn't want to offend you,' he says almost friendly and bites into the thin buttered half. 'Thanks again for the sandwich. But if you don't want it, go and get that nice little hundred for me. Could do with it.'

'Can't you get by on your pension?'

'What pension?' he asks, staring at me.

Too late I realise my mistake. He obviously looks much older than he actually is. I'm about to ask him about his job when I remember that there's unemployment here and my question might embarrass him.

'What?' he asks, even though I haven't said anything.

'How much do they pay for a kilo of wastepaper here?' I point to his trolley, which has lots of newspapers poking out of the sides. Doesn't he understand my question? I tell him that you get fifteen pfennig for a kilo of newspaper, and five for bottles or jars. 'The best paid of all,' I continue, 'is scrap metal. But there's hardly any left. It always goes quickly. There's no shortage of newspapers and jars.'

'Can't you go and pick up that hundred?' he asks.

'No,' I say. 'We mustn't do that. It's a trick. It's paid from your taxes, but only businessmen stand to profit and it's designed to turn our citizens' heads. No, no and no again, is all I can say.'

I look at him, but he turns away. 'You're a rum one,' he whispers to himself.

He wasn't convinced by my argument. Decades of brainwashing by his country's press have obviously driven all lucid thought from his mind. Rather than feeling disappointed or insulted, I simply have to find better arguments.

'You know what we'll do?' I say. 'I'm going to give you twenty marks – twenty marks from the German Democratic Republic.'

I take out my wallet, happy to have come up with a convincing solution so quickly. As it happens there are two tenners in it. I hand them to him.

'What am I supposed to do with these?' he asks.

'You can go shopping in the GDR. You'll be amazed how much you can get for it! That way you'll see for yourself not only that we don't have nuthin, but that your nuthin is a lot more than here, where your currency is worth nuthin in comparison.'

He still doesn't understand, even though I've expressed myself clearly in his language.

'Go on,' I urge him. 'Give it a go! I guarantee you'll get three times more food for twenty marks from our republic than for the same amount in your currency.'

He slowly stretches out his hand and takes the tenners. He examines the bank notes.

‘That’s Clara Zetkin,’ I explain.

He tries to give me the banknotes back, but I’m not taking them now.

‘Don’t give it a second thought,’ I say with a wave of my hand. ‘I’m a mason and I earn more than enough. If you decide to stay with us because we’ve made the right to work and to free medical care a reality, when your teeth have been fixed and they’ve found you a job, then maybe you’ll remember that it was those twenty marks that changed your life. Everyone is needed in our society! Goodbye.’

I get to my feet and hold out my hand to bid him goodbye. It takes a while for him to raise his right hand and steer it towards mine. It’s sticky, but still I shake it firmly for a long time. He needs to know who his true allies are.