



**Stephanie Bart
German Champion
(Deutscher Meister)**

Sample translation

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Harvestehuder Weg 42
20149 Hamburg – Germany

Contact:
Nadja Kossack
nadja.kossack@hoca.de or
foreignrights@hoca.de
Tel: +49-40-44188-266
Fax: +49-40-44188-319
www.hoca.de

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Stephanie Bart

German Champion

Novel

Sample extracts translated by Imogen Taylor

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The Flank Vault

“What are you wearing to Trollmann’s match tomorrow?”

“My white number with the cherries. How about you?”

“My new court shoes – and not a stitch more!”

Like a rubber ball bouncing downstairs, Trollmann leapt up the three steps to the ring. He put his right hand on the turnbuckle of the uppermost rope as he jumped, then touched the floor again with both feet. The crowd began to cheer as Trollmann executed his famous flank vault over the chest-high rope. The two shop assistants from Brätzke’s Bakery – Henriette Kurzbein in her white number with the cherries and Maria Plaschnikow who had a little more on than just her court shoes after all – were screaming even more loudly than usual. Trollmann seemed to be thumbing his nose at gravity. He bent his knees slightly as he touched the floor again with both feet. Let his hips lead him as he breathed in with ease. Shot into the air. Threw up his legs, the right one in front of him, the left one behind. Swung his left arm in the opposite direction, like a bird spreading its wings. Positioned his centre of gravity directly above his supporting hand. Hung almost horizontally in the air above the rope, as the shrieks of the crowd swelled. He looked up into the roof of the open-air ring and in his mind’s eye he saw the immaculate June evening sky, washed clean by a storm. He was as light as a child and had the feeling he was being buoyed up by thousands of upraised arms that exposed ladies’

naked armpits and sweat stains on men's shirts and caused chests to swell. He was greeted by a surging ocean of V's for victory and clenched fists that now opened in wild applause.

"Can't leave the razzle-dazzle, he can't," Trollmann's opponent Adolf Witt was thinking – and, "They're all on his side" – and, "He's certainly supple". Witt had been called into the ring first. His seconds had turned away to be on the safe side. The ring announcer smiled maliciously. In the referee's eyes, envy and admiration were vying for supremacy. At the foot of the ring the judges were doing their best not to notice the flying Trollmann, but their eyes were drawn to his body in spite of their efforts. The Chairman of the Association of German Boxers was overcome with rage: What a farce! Disgraceful! What really got him down was that the gypsy had the whole crowd on his side. Just you wait. Officially, perhaps, the question of race had yet to be settled beyond doubt; it still hadn't been ruled out that gypsies might be Aryans too. But the Chairman had neither the time nor the intellectual curiosity for such scientific niceties. He believed what he thought he saw – that as far as colour went, a gypsy might as well have been a black. In a rare moment of unity, the Chairman of the Association of German Boxers exchanged a silent glance with the President of the German Boxing Authority: sickening, this here Trollmann. But the two gentlemen were ploughing a lonely furrow. A few of the SA men had to be nudged in the ribs by their comrades for clapping at the wrong time. SA man Willi Radzuweit elbowed back: "First let me see *you* do a flank vault like that – then you can tell me who to clap for and who not to clap for."

Meanwhile Trollmann finished his vault. On the upward swing, the deliberately loose sash of his dark red, pure silk paisley dressing gown came undone. The smoothly flowing material billowed out over the fence and into the ring like the flag of a victorious revolution. Trollmann flew over the uppermost rope following only his own momentum. At the zenith of his vault, he twisted his hip into the ring and let his centre of gravity glide through the air as the screaming crowd shifted from "hoo-" to "-ray". Impossible to say whether their screams were piloting his body or trailing it; the people were as one – they'd forsaken bakeries and SA

and gypsydom – forsaken the world to lose themselves in the present moment. Trollmann was borne along by the movement; breathing out, he lowered his legs on the other side of the rope and landed with both feet on the ground. He had entered the ring. Behind him, the hem of his dressing gown slid off the rope. It was the match for the title of German half-weight champion on 9 June 1933 in the Bock Brewery, Fidicinstrasse, Kreuzberg, Berlin.

Prologue

Eight years earlier, in the idyllic landscape of the Obersalzberg, in a small wooden hut that was annexed to an inn, the future Führer was wresting from himself the second part of his opus, *Mein Kampf*. One of his devotees was with him, operating the typewriter. Unfazed by the cramped room and the low ceiling, the future Führer would get up every now and then, and take two great strides across the hut and two great strides back, before sitting down at the table again. He enjoyed dictating. Dictating fuelled him to such an extent that he was now discovering that inexorability that he had always lacked as a painter. It was hot in the hut in spite of the open window. The wood radiated heat like an oven and the two men were sweating – the devotee from warmth and effort, the future Führer from warmth and excitement. The overwhelming magnitude of his inner vision had to be put into words, and it was so overwhelming that neither of them noticed that the milk in the half-drunk coffee cups had gone off and was now beginning to smell sour through the stale bitterness of the coffee. The overwhelming magnitude of the future Führer's inner vision was greater than language. Language was too petty for the magnitude of his vision.

Time and again the future Führer would begin a sentence and get so carried away by his vision that he couldn't finish it. The devotee was having trouble following. The future Führer had already begun work on the realisation of his vision, here on paper, tackling it relentlessly from all sides and every angle. A small detail would lead him off at a tangent; he would go for the big picture, lose the thread, pile up convoluted sentences, and in everything he wrote he

was intellectually somewhat volatile. Everything was wrong the way it was. What had to be done was no more, no less than to create a new human being whose radical newness was to be rooted in the previous age. They had to start from scratch. Start with training! And this was where the future Führer got on to boxing.

“I think we ought to have a break,” said the devotee, getting up. They stepped outside. They stood there in silence. But thoughts were racing through the future Führer’s mind. Of course! Boxing! Boxing instead of turning tail and summoning the police! He clenched his fist inside his pockets. Stab in the back...Versailles....degenerate politician-bigwig-intellectual-bastards with their hoity-toity lessons in manners. Two strands of hair fell from his side parting onto his sweat-drenched forehead. He screwed up his eyes and looked out over the mountain peaks. Kiel, Munich, Berlin – one great big rabble revolution! A complete lack of national leadership, because what training there was, was purely intellectual! The future Führer tore his clenched fist out of his pocket and shook it at the mountain peaks – that was why they were defenceless in the face of the crowbar! The devotee gave a start. The future Führer was pleased with the word crowbar. It would have to go in his book. His book was to be an intellectual crowbar. He would dictate it all in a second. All the young men of the Reich had to learn to box. There were no two ways about it. “Back to work!” They went in again. The devotee sat down at the typewriter. The future Führer remained standing, bent slightly forward, his hands on the table, his gaze fixed on the typewriter. His gaze nailed the typewriter to the tabletop and he began to dictate, but beneath his gaze the devotee made even more typing errors than usual. Later, the landlord from the inn appeared at the door with freshly-brewed coffee; at his knock, the devotee made a dive for the door, put his finger to his lips and shooed the landlord away. After several hours of intellectual struggle, this was the result:

Nor is it any less noble for a man being attacked to defend himself against his assailant with his fists rather than turning tail and yelling for the police. If our entire intellectual upper

class had not been trained so exclusively in fine manners – if instead they had all learnt to box – a German revolution of pimps, deserters and other such rabble would never have been possible. But our entire intellectual leadership was only “intellectually” trained, with the result that they were defenceless the moment the opposing side stopped using intellectual weapons and took up the crowbar.

It was midnight by now. The men went to bed and laid their hands on the blankets. The exhausted devotee immediately fell into a restless sleep, but the future Führer stayed awake for a long time. In his mind’s eye he saw all the young men of the Reich holding their own. He saw fists raised in every school yard, every lad a crowbar – ach, some day a generation would be born that was ever ready to defend itself. The idea stirred him so deeply that he didn’t get to sleep until it was beginning to grow light again.

Like this they slaved away, day after day. Several typescript pages later, the future Führer returned to the subject of boxing. Apart from the odd digression, he was now busy dictating his thoughts on the SA. This time the link with boxing was so obvious, that the future Führer was able to work it in without having to shake his fist at the mountains first.

Boxing has always seemed to me more important than any inadequate weapons training. Physical training should instil in the individual SA man the conviction of his superiority and give him that confidence that can only stem from the consciousness of his own strength; furthermore it should teach him those athletic skills that, in the defence of the movement, serve as a weapon.

At this point the devotee wanted to suggest putting “weapon” earlier in the sentence. Instead of saying, “those athletic skills that, in the defence of the movement, serve as a weapon,” it would be better to say, “*those athletic skills that serve as a weapon in the defence of the movement*”. But he refrained from making the suggestion, because it was of the utmost importance that the future Führer’s trademark style should be preserved.

The intellectual crowbar, however, with its trademark Führer style, was not destined to fulfil its promise. It never really got round to battering down doors, because the doors were already down – especially those of the professional boxing institutions of Germany. Here one could indeed consider oneself one of the chosen. Apart from boxing (and jiu jitsu in passing), the Führer hadn't mentioned any other form of sport. "The Führer favours boxing!" they gloated in the offices and at the regulars' tables at the Association and the Boxing Authority. On Schiffbauerdamm in the editors' offices of the magazine *Boxing*, the sport was now viewed as the *core discipline of physical training as laid down by national policy*. And when the future Führer became the Führer, the Chairman of the Association of German Boxers began to make a killing.

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The Chairman of the Association of German Boxers was a butcher by trade. He had owned a small butcher's shop in a quiet side street which had been driven to ruin by the shady machinations of international world Jewry. Fortunately, at about this time the Chairman heard that the Führer of the movement was a vegetarian. This made him see the demise of his butcher's shop in an altogether different light; it now seemed to him an entirely logical stroke of fate, in line with the National Socialist movement. At home he pushed his plate of cold cuts away from him at suppertime and explained to his wife and son why it was they were to refrain from eating meat from now on. His wife concealed her annoyance at now only being able to eat meat in secret behind a demure nod. Unlike her delicately built husband, she ate frequently and in large quantities; she had, moreover, passed on her propensity to obesity to her son. The Chairman, however, was to discover that the vegetarian diet suited him very well. Everything butcher-like fell away from him. The smell of raw meat, which had once clung to him, disappeared. His face lost its reddish gleam; he began to look more

distinguished, more serious – yes, he looked more imposing, sitting there at his desk in the Association office in Behrenstrasse, about halfway between the Reichstag and the Palace.

It was Monday 27 March 1933 and because of the special purges, there were considerably more papers on his desk than usual. He had the list of members in front of him and held a pencil in his right hand, while the finger tips of his left hand were loosely splayed out along a ruler. He moved the ruler slowly down the page, passing over some members and stopping under others; then he pushed it a little higher up the page again and ruled a line through one of the names with a straight right. The Chairman was getting rid of the Jews. He'd made short work of the preparations – just pulled a ten-point plan for the purges out of his hat and had the odd informal talk with some of the board members. Now all that remained was for his plan to be passed at the board meeting next week; the amendment to the Association articles would follow. He had the board decision in the bag after the informal talks, and in any case the board toed the National Socialist line. There was only one Jew on the board – the Treasurer, Herzfelde – who was powerless by himself and had of course already been struck off the list of members. It was no longer any use to Herzfelde that he had once, before the board, managed to raise the issue of the 800 Marks which the Chairman had taken from the Association kitty, without bringing the Chairman's name into it. At the time, the Chairman had had to beg Herzfelde. He wouldn't have to beg him any more. What a boost the Führer gave them in these times of need! Only a short while ago professional boxing had lain knocked out on the floor – indifferent and financially ruinous matches, a whole heap of outstanding membership fees, feuding officials, gossip mongering, and no headway being made. But now the Führer had come, and with the purges the entire board suddenly stood united.

The Chairman stopped the ruler beneath "Burda, Josef". The man had made a fool of him in court – over the Jordan with him! He struck him off. And the ruler began to glide again. "Meergrün, Darwin, boxer" – a short scrape along the ruler with the pencil and Meergrün's

career as a boxer was history. The Chairman was getting into his stride. Taking the helm spurred him on. It particularly spurred him on that he wasn't waiting for the board's decision, but forging ahead and creating facts. As he was crossing out Peter Ejk, the President of the Boxing Authority, he realised that he was going to have to create even further-reaching facts. Never had circumstances been as favourable as they were now for disempowering the fine gentlemen of the Authority. But he rubbed out the pencil line through Peter Ejk's name. The Jew at the top would have to step down and relinquish his honorary membership off his own bat – then he could strike him off. And he let the ruler resume its course over the names, striking off the Jewish boxers, managers, trainers, organisers, technical directors, ring doctors, referees, judges, timekeepers, announcers, seconds – he struck them all off the list. At the Seelig brothers he paused. “Seelig, Erich, boxer”, “Seelig, Heinrich, manager”. It was a simple matter to cross out the Jewish brothers, but it gave rise to a problem that led in turn to an even more disagreeable problem, namely the boxer Trollmann and his manager Zirzow. The Chairman laid down his pencil and got up. It wasn't quite so easy after all.

In only four days, on 31 March, Seelig was to defend his middleweight title; the evening match in the Neue Welt at Hasenheide was long since signed and sealed, and had been very well promoted. The Chairman smoothed his trouser seams, tugged at the knot of his tie, and went over to the window. The window gave onto Lindenpassage and he looked out at the building at the end of the passage and the archway leading through it to the boulevard Unter den Linden. Both the Association and the Authority had a conference room in the building. You couldn't, it's true, see the boulevard from the conference room, but it was gratifying to sit there, because it was fitted out with exquisite wooden panelling and intricately patterned parquet, while at the head of the room, the German flag and the swastika flag, each as tall as a man, were mounted with crossed masts. If the Chairman let that Seelig compete once more, it would be the end of the purges and the end of the Chairman. He'd had too many informal talks now, and wherever he'd gone, he'd announced the most ruthless measures with

immediate effect – even at the regulars’ table at Mueck’s, a little on the tipsy side. Intoxicated by his new autonomy with the Führer behind him, he had talked very big. Now Seelig’s title defence would be the acid test of the purges!

The match was to be a sensation. Erich Seelig was German champion twice over; he held the half-weight title as well as that of middleweight, and if he were defeated in the match – by a knockout, a technical knockout, or an injury – he would lose both titles. Seelig’s opponent Seyfried was also highly rated; the fight was expected to be a first-rank sporting event, extremely close and extremely exciting; the outcome was wide open. This match was the best form of propaganda for boxing imaginable. The event was all set to draw large crowds. It was going to be a great success in ideological, sporting and financial terms. There could be no knuckling under now! It was imperative to stand by the purges, come what may; the main thing was to strike Seelig off the list! A replacement boxer had to be found. And all of a sudden it occurred to the Chairman how hard it was going to be in general to keep the entire boxing business going once the ranks had been decimated by the purges. The Chairman felt out of his depth. He turned away from the window. He was overcome by the craving for a juicy gammon steak. He took last week’s marble cake out of his bag and began to eat it, drinking a slug of tap water with every mouthful. The crowd would have no time for a second or third rate replacement boxer – the press even less so; the damage to boxing would be catastrophic. There was only one boxer who could possibly replace Seelig and that was that wretched gypsy with the difficult manager. The two of them caused him enough trouble as it was. The Chairman decided to postpone the problem for the time being. He screwed up the paper wrapping from the marble cake and lobbed it into the waste paper basket. Then he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and continued to purge the list of members. He didn’t eliminate the Seeligs until the very end, which brought him up against the problem again. The evening match mustn’t be jeopardised. If it was made known in the three days before the match that Seelig was not going to compete, the crowd would stay away and they’d

get a very bad press. They'd just have to land a brutal surprise blow on the evening itself. And then – the Chairman belched marble cake – then, they'd have to bring on Trollmann – the carrot to the stick – in order to prevent any kind of animosity towards the purges. That was what mattered. He packed his things and went home.

He went on foot. His posture needed improving: his shoulders were hunched forward slightly, his ribcage always seemed a little sunken. On Unter den Linden he just about managed to distract himself by looking at the cars, window displays, banking houses and pastry shops, and at the people coming the other way, but by the time he'd reached Pariser Platz he was back to thinking about the problem. That Zirzow! The Chairman was dreading having to negotiate with that slippery businessman it was so hard to get a hold on. It was true that Zirzow threw himself into the national cause with verve and commitment, but he wasn't from the movement, and when he said, "Heil Hitler," it never sounded entirely serious to the Chairman. He walked through Tiergarten alongside Charlottenburger Chaussee and turned into Bellevueallee. A short distance from the palace, he sat down on a bench. He was in no hurry to get home. A children's maid was pushing a pram, smiling into the trees; two SA men marched past. If he didn't get Trollmann, the whole thing would backfire. And if he wanted to have him, he'd have to talk to Zirzow straight away – the sooner, the better. But that would put paid to the surprise blow – Zirzow really did know every last man in the business.

The next day, Zirzow and Trollmann were sitting in a pub in a street off Kurfürstendamm. Trollmann was eating meatballs, Zirzow a bockwurst. When they'd finished eating, Zirzow began to hold forth about Association life and then said, "Look here, we can take advantage of these purges. They need you on Friday as a replacement for Seelig – I can ask for the half-weight title fight."

Trollmann threw up his arms in annoyance. What was all this about? Everyone knew it was his turn for the title – even his mother knew it; it had been in the papers for two and a half years. And as a proper Reich German with papers to prove it, he wanted to get his title fight

the proper way – not by the back door! He wasn't in the mood for any of this – to hell with the bloody title; he couldn't bear the word any more. Let the Chairman get in the ring for Seelig!

Zirzow had to laugh. He ordered two cups of coffee. Although it was the first time Trollmann had turned down an ad hoc replacement job, Zirzow reacted calmly to Trollmann's outbreak. He thought Trollmann was absolutely right, but he also thought he couldn't afford to be right, because he was a gypsy. Zirzow preferred to stick to the facts and make the best of them. With a soothing smile he said that there was nothing could be done about it; what mattered was that it was an opportunity. The waitress brought the coffee.

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As the gong outside at the ring sounded for the sixth round, Pfitzner pointed to the bucket of rosin in cubicle number one that was used to dust the floor to stop the boxers from slipping, and asked Trollmann whether he didn't want to rub some on his body. Trollmann declined. In the course of the match, the rosin would inevitably get into someone's eye, and it didn't matter whether it was Eder's or his – it would be a nasty end.

Shortly afterwards Schmidt returned, beaming with victory. It was break time outside – Bishop was eating a bratwurst. Zirzow wanted to go to Trollmann in the cubicle, but Dirksen stopped him. Zirzow was a bundle of nerves; Dirksen calmed him down – it was the best thing he could do for Trollmann. Once the break was over, Pippow and Griese took up their places at the judges' tables, and Koch, who was refereeing at the Chairman's request, entered the ring with Grimm. Grimm announced the match and introduced the boxers. Eder climbed through the ropes, bowed to all sides and was applauded. Then Grimm called out, "Please welcome into the ring – Johann Trollmann!"

Trollmann left the cubicle, followed by Pfitzner with the equipment. A few heads turned to look at him and gave their neighbours a tap: “Look, that really is the limit.” And then the ones who’d been given a tap turned to look at Trollmann and, finding in turn that it really was the limit, told all those who hadn’t yet turned to look at him. A whisper broke out and spread like wildfire in all directions; the crowd was buzzing like a hive. Trollmann walked slowly; he didn’t bounce, he didn’t shadow box; he strode along ceremoniously, carrying his blond hair through the buzzing crowd to the scene of the battle. He held it high, his Aryanness, his blondness – the racial superiority which he’d boxed the living daylights out of six weeks ago for twelve rounds. He held his Aryan blondness high, like a policeman holding up his signalling disc, and he walked especially slowly, almost in slow motion, so that everybody, but *everybody* saw it. He made no contact with the crowd; he stared over their heads and saw neither Bishop, nor the girls from the baker’s. And by the time he reached the ring, everybody, but *everybody* had seen it and commented on it and found that it really was the limit.

Kurzbein and Plaschnikow put their whistles back in their handbags and murmured an appreciative “Heil Hitler” and “Sieg Heil”. They revised their predictions and began a whispered speculation as to when he would lie down and stay down.

Plaschnikow: “Ten-rounder... hm, in the fifth round at the latest.”

Kurzbein: “Depends what Eder has to show for himself.”

The befuddled Radzuweit was confused. Should he make his mincemeat remark again, or better not? It was a tricky question and the alcohol in his blood was keeping him from thinking straight. He looked across at the Chairman to see if he was maybe signalling what to do. Then it suddenly went quiet, because Trollmann was walking up the steps to the ring and just the way he walked up them was enough to provoke you. Then he bent down and climbed between the ropes, and as he entered the ring, you could see smoke rising from the floor. A murmur went through the crowd. Trollmann bowed on all four sides, displaying his blond

tresses to the onlookers. Bishop hoped it would be short and painless. A hand hitting your chin at the right moment, your lights out the moment you start to fall – providing the back of your head doesn't hit the ground, that's the best kind of knockout there is, and the least painful.

Koch, the boxers, and the seconds gathered in the centre of the ring; the preliminaries were completed as if nothing had happened – the well-known phrases uttered, the rules recalled, and finally Koch said, “Protect yourself at all times!”

Trollmann: “Me too?”

Koch: “And now return to your corners and come back fighting!”

Koch should have answered Trollmann's question, because strictly speaking a boxer's consent is necessary if a match is to take place, and with Trollmann's question unanswered, his consent was inadequate. Koch didn't answer, because he didn't know what to say; he couldn't even bring himself to look Trollmann in the eye. But Trollmann had spoken loudly and clearly – Pippow and Griese, the press table, the officials' table, and everyone in the front rows had heard him quite plainly. Bötticher looked down at his notepad, and Biewer turned to the crowd and then back again straight away, while the two boxers exchanged silent glances.

Gong. Even before he'd reached the centre of the ring, Trollmann yelled, “Go on, Gustav, thrash the Aryan!” Eder said nothing; it was impossible to know what he was thinking. He had to act as if Trollmann hadn't dyed his hair, and he had to be doubly attentive, because Trollmann was unpredictable and it was dangerous to assume he had his win in the bag.

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Trollmann came out and surprised Eder straight off with a furious volley of blows that went on and on and on. The blows came from every which way – a firework, a colourful spray of flowers. It looked as if he had six arms and hands like an Indian god, and one hand was

quicker than the others. There was tremendous excitement and confusion in the crowd, at the press table and at the officials' table, and there were worried glances from Eder. Only Eggert said to his fellow boxers, "What did I tell you?"

Wemmelsdorf: "No one disputed it."

Eder was having trouble coping. He flung his arms up and down, swayed from side to side, and tried to lean against Trollmann to get into the infighting, but Trollmann used his rather longer reach to great advantage; he kept Eder at arm's length, letting fly straight lefts like a machine gun and interspersing them with hooks and swings from both hands, while the crowd booed and cheered and held their breath all at once. After laying into him like that for some time and taking an extremely painful counterpunch in the process, he began to run. Aha! The press table and the officials' table were alarmed.

Kurzbein: "This is our round."

Plaschnikow: "Parting gift."

Koch ran with him. He wondered whether to intervene, because Trollmann shouldn't be running and Eder was in danger. The referee's job was a tricky one: he had to run, keep an eye on the fighting, and come up with grounds for intervention all at once. But there *were* no grounds for intervention. He couldn't cite spoken agreements in the ring – and highly irregular ones at that. The ring was too small; the ropes were in the way. Trollmann threw himself in and jumped out again in the opposite direction, and Koch didn't intervene – not yet. He ran with him, and Eder decided to postpone the knockout he'd been aiming for, contenting himself instead with getting used to Trollmann's new tactics.

At the press table the words "licence withdrawal" were going the rounds amidst much frowning and raising of eyebrows. This wasn't part of the plan. He'd been warned! Index fingers were raised, heads shaken, and there were stony-faced expressions at the officials' table. The Chairman was not delegating that evening, so he couldn't make any mistakes, except to encourage Radzuweit to make more mincemeat remarks. The Authority had

appointed Lämpsche to delegate in his place; Lämpsche was an old hand and his idea of the job was to sit and watch how the match went. He saw Trollmann run backwards after the horrific attack – saw Eder follow him, and Trollmann fend off Eder’s unremitting attacks in reverse mode, or parry them or dodge them, slipping him the odd punch here and there, and then suddenly, out of the blue, switch from reverse to forward just as the combatants were out of reach of one another. A step forwards, a straight left, another step forwards – just the one – and, zip, Eder was in reverse mode.

Now Trollmann was propelling him along in front of him. He switched to southpaw; it was the only way he could lead with a right jab at Eder’s head, turn away from the counter attack area on Eder’s left, land Eder a blow in the stomach with his left hand, and then switch back into reverse and the basic stance. But Eder was on the ball and pirouetted out of his next attack. The match conditions, the dyed hair and all that it implied – it had all been forgotten. In the crowd, pulses were racing; in the ring, punches were coming from the boxers’ legs. There were shouts and screams. Eder copped one on the chin, his head snapped backwards, and Koch could bear it no longer – he went between them.

Koch interrupted the match. He stopped the time and pretended that the laces on one of Eder’s gloves had come undone. He sent Trollmann into the neutral corner and accompanied Eder back to *his* corner, where he got the seconds to retie the bows and knots on his gloves. There were boos and whistles. Eder was able to get his breath back, and Trollmann was knocked out of his stride.

Zirzow: “Typical!”

Smirnow: “Oh là là, zey are frrightened, verry frrightened!”

At that, Koraljow uttered an untranslatable Russian swearword, and Heitmeier said to himself, “Pathetic cowards!”

The farmer from Mecklenburg shook his head, but he was otherwise satisfied with the round so far. Bishop said to himself that in a normal match, Trollmann would have taken advantage

of his southpaw position to make Eder fall on his behind for a second, the way Domgörgen had made him fall on his. He would have put his front right foot on Eder's front left foot, pinning him to the spot, and at the next blow to his head, Eder would have had no choice but to sit down. If Koch had seen their feet, he wouldn't have counted it as a knockdown – just as a blunder. But Eder – and this is what mattered – would have got a taste of the floor.

Koch: “Time! Box!”

Eder, it is true, had been able to make the most of the break and even managed to hit Trollmann fairly hard at one point, but in the last third of the round he got a pretty good feel for the difference between Trollmann and Nekolny, namely that Nekolny was over the hill and on the way down – and Trollmann wasn't. Like all the others, Eder had to learn that you couldn't get a hold on Trollmann – while you were still preparing your attack, he'd be ready with his counterpunch. And although Eder was cunning enough to be fooled by Trollmann less often than most, he did have to pause for a split second, when Trollmann, out of reach of Eder, suddenly left the basic stance and assumed that of a runner – a sprinter – and began to run on the spot with exaggerated arm and leg movements and a wild look in his wide open eyes. What was going on? This didn't belong here; it was a different kind of sport – Trollmann was coming towards him – or was he? He made a feint, and then, zip, Eder found himself paying for his momentary confusion – and zip, it happened again. When the last ten seconds were announced, Eder stood there on shaky legs, doing his best to summon up his talent for regaining his cool. Amidst uproarious mincemeat remarks and shouts of Sieg Heil, he held one hand to his guts and the other to his temples. They'd been hit more or less simultaneously, and the combined pain shot through his hips and knees to his feet like a bolt of lightning, making his legs wobbly and soft and heavy and jelly-like. Gong.

Zirzow was happy, although he did miss having Dirksen as a second; Pfitzner never really used his loaf. Trollmann said, “I know, I know.” Eder had two ice bags held to his head and his legs stretched out and massaged. The press table was appalled. For two weeks they'd been

trying to prevent this from happening, threatening to withdraw Trollmann's licence, and now here he was running after all. It really was a disgrace. Lappsche sat motionless. The crowd did exactly what the General Secretary had predicted; they always supported whoever was on top. The General Secretary himself was not present. Pippow, Griese and Koch gave the round to Trollmann – Koch only just, Pippow and Griese by a clear margin. Trollmann had shown that a match against Eder could be very interesting in the right circumstances and that he was probably going to win it – with clenched teeth and a black eye.

The gym teacher: “And now, back to business. Pay attention to the falls!” Gong.

Eder had recovered as best he could in sixty seconds and made no effort to conceal it as he came out of his corner for the fourth round. Trollmann alternated between double cover and a crouching stance, his left hand almost in front of his face, his right at his chin. He didn't run; he occupied the centre of the ring, taking blows he'd seen coming – hard hands, direct hits, grazing shots – on his arms, head, belly, chest, sides. The focussed strength of a blow – willpower and physics. The boxer's body clenched in his fist – mass. Mass halved multiplied by velocity squared. Punching technique – the acceleration of the fist as it moves from start to finish. Impact. Maximum velocity equals maximum destructive power, and Eder knew how to hit; his blows were short, sharp and accurate, while Trollmann kept giving a start as if about to make a move, dodge a blow, land a blow, spin around, swing his torso – and then suppressed the impulse, fighting down his reflexes, fighting down the sequence of movements trained from childhood, the reactions to his opponent's every move that were now second nature.

The farmer from Mecklenburg asked Bishop what they thought they were playing. Bishop feigned ignorance.

At the press table and the officials' table were radiant faces, relieved and happy. A heroic match. Trollmann, as usual, didn't know how to react. The editor-in-chief said, “You see, it's going to be all right!”

It went on for two minutes and eight seconds, Trollmann throwing soulful glances of Aryan desperation into the crowd from under his blond hair, irrespective of whether he'd been hit or not, while Plaschnikow, Kurzbein, the apprentice, the young dancer, Heitmeier and a whole host of others responded with shouts of Sieg Heil.

Hans fetched a chair and sat down next to the editor-in-chief. He was somewhat tense when Trollmann lashed out at one point, landing Eder a swipe that blew the snot out of his nose and made it fly across the ring – and again, later on, when he almost knocked Eder off-balance with a hook at the back of his jaw; if Eder got knocked out now, life at home with his father would be unbearable. When, after two minutes and eight seconds, blood finally flowed from Trollmann's mouth, Hans felt something like relief. The blood was a sure sign of Trollmann's defeat, and Hans was briefly taken aback that blood – the seat and bearer of the race – should be a sign of defeat rather than victory. That was something he'd have to raise with the editor-in-chief. The will to knockout radiated from every pore of Eder's body. The third round had kept him on his toes, but at least Trollmann was letting himself be clobbered now. It was a filthy job, but somebody had to do it. It was atrocious, and the crowd was a disgrace. Eder managed to plant quite a hard straight left on Trollmann's chest, level with the upper half of his lung. Then he landed a slanting right-hander on Trollmann's mouth from below, as Trollmann gasped for breath, making him bite his lip. The blood flowed in a thin trickle from the left-hand corner of his mouth and dripped onto his chest; he wiped his mouth with his glove. Purely in terms of colour, blond hair showed up the blood better than dark hair.

The gym teacher: "Oho!"

Bishop closed his eyes briefly. Heitmeier applauded enthusiastically. It was a good thing there was blood, and a good thing he wasn't bleeding from a cut on his eyebrow or near his eye, because then the blood might have run into his eye and he'd have been incapable of defending himself. They'd have had to call off the match before Trollmann had gone down, and the whole evening would have been for nothing. With a wound near his eye, of course, more

blood would have flown, and it would have gone all over the place; Karl would even have got a splash or two on his white shirt. A mouth wound, on the other hand, was innocuous, but it produced enough blood to liven things up; the sight of blood pumps adrenaline round your body, sends your pulse racing, makes you breathe faster – it's the same outside the ropes as inside, where it gets smeared from gloves onto bodies and its sweet metallic smell gets into the boxers' noses. Trollmann stamped some onto Eder's cheek; Eder hit Trollmann in the face and got some on his glove. To and fro, back and forth, it went, and then the gym teacher yelled, "Now!"

They were standing in the centre of the ring, diagonally opposite one another – Eder with his back to the corner between the officials' table and the brewery, Trollmann with his back to the corner nearest the cubicles. Trollmann left his crouching stance for an upright one, letting his hands drop in front of his belly. At that moment Eder dived into reach, flinging alternating right and left hooks at Trollmann's head. Eder of all people, who was rightly famous for keeping his cool in the heat of the match, was just now so keen on a knockout that he was a little overexcited; his first four hooks were too close together by a minuscule but crucial margin, and didn't hit their target at the right angle, so that they hardly had any effect. But this was also because Trollmann – his legs some way apart and a little more weight on the back one than on the front one – stood there as if rooted to the ground like a lithe young sapling, and let the first four hooks fizzle out. He was taller than Eder. He folded his arms in front of his solar plexus and bent his head further and further backwards – bent his spine backwards too, as if he was going to go into a bridge, so that Eder didn't stand much of a chance with his short arms. When Eder's fourth hook slid off Trollmann, the crowd leapt up from their chairs and benches, amidst unspeakable screaming and shouting. Bishop didn't shout; he drew in the air through his teeth with a hissing sound. The exceedingly drunk Radzuweit had now got onto, "Lie down, Aryan, or we'll make mincemeat out of you!" His SA comrades elbowed

him and tried to shout him down, and the boxers in the crowd held their breath so as not to miss anything.

So as not to miss the way Trollmann leant further and further back after making Eder's fourth hook slide off him with a slight movement of his head. Or the way he reduced Eder's fifth blow to a weak grazing shot on his chin, letting his own right hand continue the trajectory and slide off his solar plexus towards the floor. Or the way he spun on his own axis, just as he was about to stop leaning and start falling – or the way he touched the floor with his right hand and supported himself, softening his fall, and then lay down full-length on his side, like a marionette that's been lowered to the ground. Or the way he continued to spin on his own axis, ending spread-eagled on his back, his head turned towards the press table. After this – amidst screams and shouts of outrage and jubilation on all sides – Trollmann first squinted and then showed the whites of his eyes and let his tongue hang out.

Instead of being glad that they'd finally got what they'd hoped for, the press table and the officials' table sat there stony-faced, as if transfixed.

Pippow and Griese silently docked Trollmann for going down without reason. It was true he hadn't gone down without being hit, but it wasn't because of Eder's punches that he'd gone down. Then they cancelled the docked point and docked him instead for being floored. It worked that way too, irrespective of the dyed hair. Trollmann looked awful, lying on the floor like that, blood on his face and his eyes rolling. Koch began to count, the crowd groaned, Trollmann rallied, and the young dancer screamed into the apprentice's ear, "I knew it!" while Eder stood in the neutral corner, resting his elbows on the ropes and breathing like billy-o.

At nine, Trollmann was on his feet again. Koch grabbed him by his wrists, wiped his gloves on his shirt by rubbing them against his belly and let the match continue without a caution, which meant that officially, Trollmann's controlled fall counted as a regular flooring. But of course no one believed that; there were boos and whistles once again. The farmer from Mecklenburg yelled, "Disgraceful! Now he has to give him a clobbering!" Eder was preparing

to hit, even before Koch withdrew his hand from between the boxers and yelled, “Box!” But Trollmann met him with a showy upwards hook that acted like a conductor’s baton on the crowd, and then quite deliberately he hit two hands’ breadths wide of the mark, because if he hadn’t missed, the match would have been over. The crowd went, “Oh” and “Ah”, and by now Zirzow could no longer deny the reality that was taking place before his eyes; he had to recognise the ugly fact that Johann was going to go down and stay down, and although he fully endorsed the statement his boxer was making, he didn’t want to see him on the floor. He kept closing his eyes, or averting them from the ring.

Eder fainted, Trollmann went into a crouching stance and held out his chin to Eder – not to provoke him, but because he wasn’t properly guarded.

Kurzbein: “Now he can’t be bothered any more.”

Plaschnikow: “It’s been going on long enough as it is.”

Kurzbein: “We’ll go and see him afterwards and say good bye though.”

Plaschnikow: “Definitely.”

Eder was furious. It was always the same with Trollmann; he made you look like a beginner. He was really going to have to floor him now if he wanted to save face. Eder made no sign that he was going to throw a punch. He landed one of his completely unexpected right-handers that were so feared in German rings, slamming it onto Trollmann’s unguarded chin. Before you could say Jack Robinson, Trollmann was lying on the floor. Eder ran straight into the neutral corner while Koch rushed up and the crowd went wild. Precisely a third of the crowd – including the Ullstein apprentice, two SA men, Kowaljow, Heitmeier and Dirksen – were unshakable in their conviction that there was absolutely no way of proving whether Trollmann had lain down or whether Eder had hit him, and that no one but Trollmann himself would ever be able to answer the question. Zirzow hadn’t been looking; Heitmeier was worried and screaming like a stuck pig, “That’s enough! Call it a day! Stop!” Another third of the crowd – including half the boxers, the gym teacher, the young dancer, Smirnow and the

befuddled Radzuweit, who had now moved onto chanting, “Shame about the curls!” were equally unshakable in their conviction that Trollmann had of course gone down of his own accord; it was obvious that he’d seen the blow coming, because he’d jerked his head backwards.

The young dancer: “You see!”

The gym teacher: “Well, I’m not so sure.”

And the rest of the crowd – including the other half of the boxers, a handful of SA men and the operator from the Jockey Club – didn’t have the shadow of a doubt that Eder had hit him properly, had really floored him.

Trollmann was lying on his back again. He turned his head, and as Koch counted, he stared with vacant, wide open eyes right through the Chairman – stared through the point between his eyes, which he’d screwed up to slits. The Chairman turned away and looked in the other direction. He was overcome by a craving for a gammon steak. He hadn’t seen what had gone on, but made up his mind at once that it had been a regular flooring. Hans was ashamed when he saw the blood-smearred blond man on the floor again and saw his father avert his gaze. His father should have kept his eyes looking straight ahead, like on the Führer’s birthday, but he was a wimp; he couldn’t even bear the sight of that gypsy lying on the floor. The more Hans learnt about boxing from the editor-in-chief, the more he found himself losing respect for his father, for it was clear that he didn’t have a clue about boxing and only ever talked nonsense. Two rows behind the Chairman, Bishop was wondering whether to buy a third set of train and ferry tickets and take Trollmann back to England with him. He knew an excellent trainer in Sheffield and two promoters in London – he could ask him later on. But Trollmann had even turned down an opportunity to go to America.

At seven, Trollmann rolled from his back onto his belly and drew up his legs until he was on his hands and knees. At eight, he drew his right foot up onto the floor, and at nine, he got up – not without difficulty. Koch asked, “Do you want to carry on?”

Trollmann's reply was loud and clear: "Yes, I still have to go down and stay down."

There were yells from the front rows. Koch wiped Trollmann's gloves on his belly and said in a whisper, "Go to hell, you filthy gypsy!" Then he waved Eder over and yelled, "Box!" It had slipped out of him; it had been a mistake. At least no one had heard him but Trollmann – and no one was going to believe *him*. A knocking signalled that there were ten seconds to go. Just as before, Trollmann threw an upwards hook, blocking Eder's attack, and the next time Eder attacked, Trollmann clinched him. He took him in his arms. He was taller and stronger than Eder and crushed him with his weight. Eder strained and struggled. Trollmann gripped Eder's torso with his right hand, squeezing Eder's ribcage against his and pushing Eder's left arm up with his elbow to stop him from hitting him in the liver. He pushed his own left arm up against Eder's throat. It really was amazing – it worked on everyone, every time, producing a strange and wonderful combination of paralysis and desire for action, and Trollmann made it hard for Koch to separate them, drawing it out for as long as he could, so that when at last the boxers were separated, the gong sounded.

In the Schlorumpfweg in Hanover meanwhile, the entire family was gathered in the kitchen. They were all thinking about Rukelie and trying hard to talk about something else, but then Mother made one of her rousing speeches on the evils of boxing, and for once in his life Benny didn't contradict her. Instead he assured her that Rukelie was skilful enough not to get seriously hurt – she shouldn't worry herself. Carlo got out the playing cards. Lambkin was silent. She'd feared as much. She fought back her bitterness with memories of his triumph after the title match. At least no one could take that away from her. That triumph was a fact. One thousand five hundred people could bear witness to it. They themselves had lionised him. In the end it was Goldi who proved to have a true boxer's heart. They'd explained everything to her; they wouldn't have been able to keep it from her afterwards anyway – he was too famous for that. Goldi held her head high, exuding optimism; she was quite sure her uncle would show them – even from the floor.

Break time. Zirzow felt himself going weak and trembly and braced himself against a surge of immense sadness that was threatening to sweep him away. He rinsed Trollmann's gumshield himself, wiped away the blood and cleaned his face. He dabbed and massaged; he whispered, "Johann, my Johann, everyone's got the message. You can stop now."

"I know, I know," Trollmann replied, breathing heavily.

Zirzow fanned him with his towel. Pfitzner was suffering like a dog. Instead of stretching out Trollmann's legs and massaging them, Pfitzner suffered along with Trollmann – all the hefty blows he'd been dealt, the swellings, the bruises, the heavy look about his eyes. However much he supported Trollmann, Pfitzner was turning out to be a hopeless second.

Opposite, over by Eder, it was quietly bustling. Not a word was spoken, except, "Breathe deep!" and Eder breathed deep. The crowd was restless, but Englert knew how to keep his eyes fixed straight ahead, and the way he talked, you'd think the match was sold out and all was well; he played the part of the elegant host, just as he always did. The waiters were moving more quickly now; knockdowns often pushed up the turnover, especially when they came at the end of a round like this one. Radzuweit was supplied with reinforcements. The gym teacher went to the lavatories, not because she needed to, but in order to get away from the ring for a little while. She was glad when she had to queue. When it was her turn to go in, the gong sounded outside.

White with anger and determination, Eder was in the centre of the ring before the round had even begun, his arms at the ready, his legs limber, his gaze cold and menacing. His opponent had taken a beating. Now he needed to be given a real clobbering – and that required ruthlessness.

Trollmann, however, waited until the gong sounded to come out of his corner, blond-headed, red-skinned from the blows he'd been dealt, a victor's smile on his smashed-up lips. Now all he had to do was stay down.

Eder attacked immediately. Trollmann dodged him. He dodged to one side and stood still, and then, suddenly, hands flew with full force, leather slapped against flesh, groans followed one another in quick succession, feet stamped, and blows were dealt, leaving bodies shaken. It was insane. Eder dealt every one of his blows with all the force he could muster, but Trollmann gave him a clip around the ears to teach him that that wasn't fair play. After that, Trollmann had said enough and he'd taken enough of a beating too; Eder's blows were coming thick and fast. He let his fists drop, straightened up and gasped in vain for breath after a heavy blow in his solar plexus. His diaphragm was momentarily paralysed, the blood vessels in his abdominal cavity widened, his blood pressure dropped, his brain was undersupplied. He snapped together like a penknife, leapt up again after a punch from Eder had whizzed over his head, and then saw Eder's left hand aiming straight for his liver.

His only knockout defeats had been liver hooks. Your legs go, you can't breathe, and inside you, the horrific pain in your guts expands like a never-ending internal explosion, as if your guts might tear at any moment. That's what it must be like in hell – and in order to send your opponent to hell, you have to hit the little tip of liver hanging out below the bottom-most rib – the end of the liver, every boxer's Achilles' heel. The important thing is to angle the punch so that it comes from below – ever so slightly from below, because then you're aiming the thrust at just the spot where the hepatic artery and the portal vein enter the liver, and the paralysing effect and the pain are strongest, and often, although not always, it's at this point that defeat slowly sets in. When Trollmann saw Eder's hand coming, he jerked his elbow down, simultaneously moving his pelvis away in the direction of the punch. Thus prepared, he took the liver hook, moved diagonally backwards out of reach – first one step, then another – paused, froze, grimaced, lifted his harrowingly pain-contorted face slightly, and clasped his belly with both hands. When Eder saw this, he relaxed immediately, and with furiously pounding heart, he breathed out, let his fists drop, turned around, raised his left hand above

his head, and went into the neutral corner, so that he was the only one who didn't see Trollmann thrust his right hand in the air in salute before his inexorable collapse.

First he let his chin drop onto his chest, and then he bent his knees. He held his left knee steady and went down on his right knee. He struggled to hold this position, then he loosened his clasp on his belly and let his hands drop, and at this moment it occurred to Dirksen that Rukelie had actually practised this – that he'd dropped to the floor hundreds of times in the sports school and at home, and that the sequence of moves were as much second nature to him as the combinations. The fall following the liver hook seemed perfectly natural, but at the same time it was a parody of a liver hook fall, and it was patently obvious to Dirksen that it had been carefully rehearsed. Into the dust with the Aryan hair! Dirksen saw Trollmann slowly bend his torso forwards, one knee and one foot on the floor, and his arms dangling; he saw the intensity with which he displayed the effect of the pains specific to a liver hook – down, down, down, into the abyss – so that he had no alternative but to let his left leg follow suit, and to lay his foot, calf and knee on the floor, let his backside drop onto his heels, and at last, bending forwards with agonising slowness, reach the floor with his dangling fists.

There it cowered, the wretched blond bombshell – defeated. Trollmann could only support himself for a brief moment, just managing to clasp his belly with his left hand again, before dropping further forwards still and finally laying his lower arms on the floor as well, and stretching out his abdominal cavity. Crouching like that on all fours, he let his head drop and began to wipe the floor with his Aryan hair. Filth to filth, race to dust. The SA yelled, “Yesss!” Radzuweit lay under the bench vomiting. The crowd shrieked; you could always depend on them to make a great deal of noise when a boxer went down. Plaschnikow yelled in Kurzbein's ear, “Learning from Trollmann means learning how to win!” and Trollmann now sank right down to the floor, and lying there on his side, curled up in pain, he claimed he'd been hit below the belt.

The Flank Vault

After the results had been announced, the boxers left the ring amid viciously loud applause, each from his own corner. Eder climbed through the ropes and made himself scarce. But Trollmann put his right hand on the turnbuckle of the uppermost rope, touched the floor again with both feet, bent his knees slightly, let his hips lead him as he soared up, breathing in with ease, shot into the air, threw up his legs – the right one in front of him, the left one behind – swung his left arm in the opposite direction, like a bird spreading its wings, positioned his centre of gravity directly above his supporting hand, hung almost horizontally in the air above the rope, looked up into the roof above the stage, twisted his hip out of the ring at the zenith of his vault, let his centre of gravity glide through the air, lowered his legs on the other side of the ropes as he breathed out, landed with both feet on the ground and went off, leaping as he went.

Epilogue

In 1939 Trollmann was conscripted to the Wehrmacht. In 1942 he was discharged and deported to the concentration camp of Neuengamme. In 1944 he was killed in the concentration camp Wittenberge.

Honour to his memory. May he rest in peace.

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For further information on international rights for this title please contact:

Hoffmann und Campe
Foreign Rights
Harvesthuder Weg 42
20149 Hamburg, Germany

Contact:

Nadja Kossack

nadja.kossack@hoca.de or

foreignrights@hoca.de

Tel: +49-40-44188-266

Fax: +49-40-44188-319

www.hoca.de