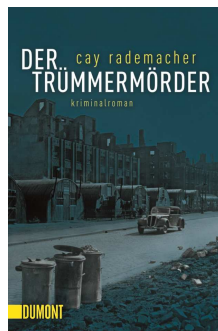


The Rubble Murders

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Sample Translation by Sheridan Marshall for *New Books in German*

Cold Awakening

Monday 20th January 1947

Still half asleep, Chief Inspector Frank Stave feels for his wife's body, until he remembers that she burnt to death three and a half years ago. He balls his hand into a fist, then pushes back the blanket. Icy air drives away the last haze of his nightmare.

Grey dawn light filters through the threadbare damask curtains, which Stave has salvaged from the rubble of the house next door. For five weeks he has secured them to the window frames every evening with some drawing pins he got on the black market. The panes are as thin as newspaper and crusted over on the inside with a shell of ice. Stave is afraid that sometime the glass might crack under the weight of the ice. An absurd worry: the windows have rattled under the shock waves of countless exploding bombs but they have never shattered.

The blanket is frozen onto the wall in places. The layer of frost is so thick that in the dull early morning light the walls of the room look as though they are covered with hard skin. Beneath there are odd strips of wallpaper with a pattern that would have been modern in 1930, stained plaster, and, in a few corners, the naked wall, black-red brickwork and pale grey mortar.

Stave walks slowly to the tiny kitchen, the icy floor tiles cut into the soles of his feet, despite two pairs of old socks. He gropes around in the wood stove with stiff fingers until a fire blazes in the tiny barrel-shaped oven. It reeks of burnt furniture polish – the wood which Stave is using was once a dark chest of drawers from the house next door, which was hit by a bomb in the summer of 1943.

By *the* bomb, Stave thinks. The bomb which took his wife from him.

While he waits for a block of ice to melt in the old Wehrmacht kettle on the stove and bring a little warmth into the lodging, he takes off the old woollen pullover, the police track-suit, the two vests and the socks in which he has slept. Carefully he drapes them on the rickety chair next to his bed. As he is only allocated 1.95 kilowatt hours of electricity per month – precious energy, reserved for his hotplate and the

evening meal – he does not switch the light on. And he always lays his clothes out ready in the same way so that he can put them on properly in the gloom.

Glacier-cold water, splashed quickly onto his face and body, where the drops sting. Stave shivers involuntarily. Then he puts on his shirt, suit, coat and shoes. Shaving in the half-light, carefully, slowly, as there is no foam and the blade is old and jagged. New ones won't be available on ration coupons for a few weeks yet, if at all. In the meantime he lets the rest of the water heat up further on the stove.

Stave would have liked to drink ground coffee, like before the war. But he only has ersatz coffee, which he mixes with the lukewarm water to make an insipid grey brew. He stirs in a couple of ground acorns he'd already roasted days ago so that it at least tastes bitter. Two slices of crumbly rye bread with it. Breakfast.

Stave exchanged the last of the real coffee at the railway station yesterday for a couple of worthless pieces of information. He is a Police Chief Inspector – a rank which the British occupying authorities have introduced and whose sound always bothers Stave, who grew up with titles like 'Criminal Inspector' or 'Chief Police Sergeant'.

Last Saturday he arrested two murderers. Refugees from East Prussia who had got into black market dealings and strangled a woman who owed them something, then thrown her into a canal, weighted down with a lump of concrete from a ruin. They had gone to great efforts beforehand to hack a hole in the half-metre-thick ice in order to sink their victim. It was their bad luck that they didn't know about the tides – and that was why at low tide the body was there for everyone to see in the sludge at the bottom of the canal, under the ice as though under a magnifying glass.

Stave had rapidly identified the victim, found out with whom she had last been seen, and arrested the two culprits barely twenty-four hours after the murder.

Then, as with every weekend which was not completely filled up with investigations, he had gone to the railway station and mingled with the endless stream of humanity on the platforms, asked around among all the residents of Hamburg on foraging trips in the surrounding area and the soldiers coming home. Asked after a certain Karl Stave, whispering, hesitant.

Karl, who in April 1945 as a 17-year old grammar school boy had voluntarily signed up to a unit on the Eastern Front, which by then had already reached the outskirts of Berlin. Karl, who had lost his mother and despised his father as 'apathetic' and 'un-German'. Karl, who since the battle for the Reich capital was missing, a ghost in the no man's land between death and life, perhaps fallen, perhaps held as a prisoner of war by the Red Army, perhaps on the run somewhere, disappeared, with a false name. But in that case would he not have been in touch with his father in the meantime, despite their arguments?

Stave had wandered around, had spoken to emaciated figures in coats that were much too big, men with the Russia face, shown a greasy photo of his boy. Headshaking, tired gestures. Finally someone who claimed to know something. Stave had offered him the last of his coffee and then heard that there was a Karl Stave in Workuta, in a prison camp. At least somebody who could once have resembled the boy on this picture and whose first name was Karl, perhaps, and who was still imprisoned there perhaps, or perhaps not.

Suddenly there are three knocks on the door, startling Stave from his thoughts. The Chief Inspector has unscrewed the fuse to the bell to save a couple of milliwatts of electricity.

For one moment he entertains the absurd hope that it could be Karl who is knocking at such an early hour. Then Stave restrains himself: don't let yourself go, he warns.

Stave is in his early forties, gaunt, grey-blue eyes, with short blond hair in which the first grey strands are hardly noticeable. He rushes to the door. His left leg hurts, as it always does in winter. Since the injury from that night in 1943 his ankle is stiff. Stave has a slight limp, although he fights with dogged determination against his deformity, forcing himself into jogging, stretching exercises and even – when the Schulzes have left the apartment below – skipping.

In the door frame stands a policeman with a shako, the tall, cylindrical helmet. At first Stave cannot see anything more. The stairwell is gloomy since somebody stole all the bulbs from the lights. The policeman must have felt his way up the four storeys.

‘Good morning, Chief Inspector, Sir,’ he says. His voice sounds young, it trembles slightly with excitement. ‘We have a dead body. You should come right away.’

‘Good,’ answers Stave mechanically, before he realises how inappropriate that sounds.

Feelings? In the last years of the war he has seen far too many mutilated corpses – among them his own wife's – for the news of a murdered person to be a shock to him. Excitement, yes – the excitement of the hunter who takes up the fleeting trail of a wild animal.

‘What's your name?’ he asks the policeman, as he pulls on his heavy woollen coat and reaches for his hat.

‘Ruge. Police Constable Heinrich Ruge.’

Stave looks at the blue uniform, the metal service badge with the number on the left side of the chest. Another innovation from the British which all the German policemen hate: the four-figure number

on the heart. A shining target for every criminal with a pistol. The officer, whose uniform is much too big, is young and thin, scarcely older than Stave's son.

After the invasion in May 1945 the British let hundreds of policemen go – anyone who was in the Gestapo, who had a senior position or who had been involved in politics in any way. People like Stave had stayed: people who were classed as 'left' under the old regime and who had been kept out of harm's way in insignificant positions. And new officers were appointed – boys like this Ruge, who knew nothing about life and absolutely nothing about police work. Eight weeks training, a uniform, and out onto the street. Beginners who have to learn what it means to be a policeman on the job. Among them show-offs, who were hardly in uniform before they were yelling at citizens and swaggering through the ruins like Prussian gentlemen. And shady characters who might well have been seen with the police before, during the Weimar Republic and in the German Empire – not behind a desk at the police station mind you, but rather in the cells.

'Cigarette?' Stave asks.

Ruge hesitates briefly, then helps himself to the proffered Lucky Strike. He is clever enough not to ask the Chief Inspector where he got the American cigarette.

'You'll have to light the fag yourself', Stave adds apologetically. 'I'm short of matches.'

Ruge lets the cigarette disappear into a pocket of his uniform. Stave wonders whether the boy will smoke it later or swap it somewhere. But for what? Then he calls himself to order: I'm starting to think that everyone is a suspect.

He is ready, half turning towards the door, but then reaches for his shoulder holster which is hanging on a nearby hook. The policeman stares at him as Stave fastens the leather belt holding the 7.65 millimetre calibre FN 22 pistol. Ordinary policemen carry 40cm long batons on their belts, no firearms. The British have requisitioned almost everything, even the air-rifles at funfair stands. Only a few police detectives are allowed to carry pistols.

Ruge seems to become even more nervous. Perhaps, Stave thinks, because he senses that it is becoming serious. But perhaps also because he would like to have a weapon himself. Stave suppresses this thought.

'Let's go', he says, and feels his way forwards into the stairwell. 'Careful on the stairs, or you'll slip. And I'll be stuck with another dead body.'

The men stumble down. Stave hears the young policeman curse quietly but he cannot tell whether Ruge has slipped or bumped into something. He himself knows every creaking step and could make out the banisters even in complete darkness.

They step outside. Stave lives at the front right, on the top floor of a four-storey block of flats on Ahrensburger Straße: *Art Nouveau*, the wall plastered white and lilac, barely discernible under the layer of dirt; a decorative façade, high, white windows; on each flat a balcony with a curved stone balustrade and wrought iron above. Not a bad house. The next but one is similar, only plastered a lighter shade. The house in between was also built in this way, but now there are only a couple of walls left, stumps of bricks and rubble, charred beams, a stove pipe that is so tightly jammed into the ruins that no plunderer has managed to steal it yet.

Stave's former home. He lived there at number 91 for ten years until that night when the bombs fell and took the houses away: sometimes here, sometimes there, leaving gaps in the rows of buildings like badly cared-for teeth.

Why number 91, but not 93 and 89? No point in wondering that. And yet Stave thinks about it every time he steps out of the building. And about how he pulled his wife out from under the rubble – or rather what remained of her body. Later someone had offered him the flat in number 93, he did not even know who – he could hardly remember anything clearly about that week in summer 1943. Where might the people be who had lived there before? Stave had forced himself never to think about it.

‘Chief Inspector, Sir?’

Stave hears Ruge's voice as though from a long way off. Then the surprise – in front of him stands a patrol car, one of the five cars remaining to the Hamburg Police which are still fit for use.

‘That's what I call luxury’, he murmurs.

Ruge nods. ‘We should hurry, before anyone gets wind of this thing.’ Stave thinks he sounds excessively proud of himself.

Then he flings open the door of the 1939 Mercedes Benz. Ruge, having made no move to open the door for him, walks instead around the box-like car and sits himself behind the wheel.

He drives off in a zig-zag. Before the war Ahrensburger Straße was straight and had four lanes, a little too wide, the houses and the trees on both sides a bit too low for a splendid boulevard, but all the same. Now rubble litters the carriageways: facades which have toppled forwards like fallen soldiers, chimneys, heaps of indefinable debris. There are bomb craters, cracks, tank-tracks, charred tree stumps, as well as two or three burnt-out wrecks of cars.

Ruge swerves around the obstacles, too quickly, Stave thinks. But the boy is nervous. Even where they are still standing, the street lamps are broken. The sky is low, an icy north-east wind whistles over Ahrensburger Straße. The back window of the old Daimler must have a crack in it somewhere, drawing the Siberian air into the interior. Stave turns up the collar of his coat, he is shivering. When was the last time he was warm?

The car headlights sweep over brown rubble. People are already walking like phantoms along the side of the road, despite the early hour and the temperature of minus 20 degrees: gaunt men in dyed Wehrmacht-issue coats, one-legged ghost-like figures shrouded in rags, women with woollen shawls wrapped around their heads and in front of their faces, laden with baskets and tin cans, more women than men, many more.

Stave wonders where they all want to go so early. The shops – if you can get anything whatsoever on ration coupons – only open between 9am and 3pm to save on power for the lighting.

Almost one and a half million people live in Hamburg. One hundred thousand died in the war or in the bombings, many more have been evacuated to the country. In their place are refugees – and DPs, displaced persons, liberated concentration camp prisoners and prisoners of war, mostly Russians, Poles, Jews, who do not want to or are unable to return to their homes. Officially they live in camps which the British have set up for them, but many would rather struggle along in the devastated metropolis on the River Elbe.

Stave looks out of the window: the jagged remains of a house, walls like those of a mediaeval ruin, only thinner. And behind them even more walls, and even more, and even more. It will take hundreds of years to rebuild it all, he thinks. Then he starts.

‘Peter 1’, barks a tinny voice, louder than the groaning eight-cylinder engine. The radio.

For the last year the British have allowed the police to broadcast from the regional headquarters in the historic Stadthaus with the old Telefunken boxes.* Since none of them has a transmitter on board, the five radio patrol cars can only receive messages, so that in the head office they never even know whether the messages arrive.

‘Peter 1’, the voice blares on. ‘Please confirm when you have reached the location.’

‘Damn bureaucrats’, Stave says. ‘We’ll have to find a telephone there then. Where are we going anyway?’

* Telefunken is a German radio and television apparatus company founded in Berlin in 1903.

Ruge brakes as a British jeep rumbles towards them. He makes room and greets the soldier at the wheel, but the driver ignores them and drives on, pulling a banner of dust along behind him in the dry air.

‘To Baustraße in Eilbek’, the policeman answers. ‘That’s...’

‘...near Landwehr Station. I know it.’ Stave’s mood worsens. ‘There isn’t a single house standing in the whole of Eilbek anymore. What are those idiots thinking? How can we report back? By carrier pigeon?’

Ruge clears his throat. ‘I regret to have to inform you that we can’t even drive up to Baustraße, Chief Inspector, Sir.’

‘No?’

‘Too much rubble. We’ll have to go the last couple of hundred metres on foot.’

‘Oh great’, Stave mutters. ‘Let’s hope we don’t tread on an unexploded bomb.’

‘Lots of people have been hanging around the scene of the crime recently, nothing more will blow up there.’

‘At the scene of the crime?’

Ruge turns red. ‘The place where the body was found.’

‘At the location of the find, then’, Stave corrects him, although he endeavours to adopt a conciliatory tone. Suddenly his mood improves. He forgets the cold and the rubble and the ghostly figures at the roadside. ‘So do you have any idea what’s waiting for us?’

The young policeman nods eagerly. ‘I was there when the report came in. Children playing – God knows what they were playing at this time of day, I have my suspicions there. But anyway, these children found a body. Young, female. And’, Ruge hesitates, blushes again, ‘well, naked.’

‘Naked at minus 20 degrees. Is that how she died?’

The policeman’s face flushes an even deeper colour. ‘We don’t know yet’, he mumbles.

A young woman, naked and dead – Stave is overcome by the feeling that he is about to get involved with a terrible crime. Since he was made leader of a small investigation team by the Chief Constable a few months ago Stave has worked on several murder cases. But this one here sounds different from the usual knife fights among black market dealers or jealous scenes by soldiers returning from the war.

Ruge turns left into Landwehr Straße. He finally stops in front of the remains of the railway tracks that cross the road.

Stave gets out and looks around. He shivers. 'St. Mary's Hospital isn't far', he says. 'They must have a telephone. You'll report from there after you have taken me to where the body was found.'

Ruge clicks his heels together. A young woman who is pulling a mangled tree trunk behind her with a handcart stares at them both mistrustfully. Stave sees that her fingers are swollen with cold. When she notices him looking she grips the cart and pulls it quickly away.

Stave and Ruge climb over the railway lines: stone ballast, the stones stuck together into great clumps by the ice. Bombed tracks like bizarre sculptures. Behind is Baustraße, just about discernible as a boundary line of burnt-out, roofless tenement houses whose black walls extend for hundreds of metres. After so many months it still reeks of the bitter stench of burnt wood and fabric.

Two policemen stand in front of a crooked, three-storey high wall, stamping their feet and clapping their hands against the cold. The wall looks as though it could cave in at the slightest cough and strike the policemen dead.

Stave does not call out, but merely raises his hand in greeting. He climbs cautiously through the rubble. At least here he doesn't have to make an effort to cover up his limp. A straight step is not possible anywhere.

One of the two policemen salutes Stave with his right hand, while pointing with his left. 'The body is in front of the wall.'

Stave's eyes follow the officer's outstretched hand. 'Ugly business', he mutters.

The Nameless Body

A young woman, Stave puts her between eighteen and twenty-two years old, 5 ft 3 inches tall, mid-blonde medium length hair, blue eyes staring into nothingness.

‘Pretty’, murmurs Ruge, who has stepped beside him.

Stave stares at the policeman until he squirms. Then the police detective looks again at the dead woman. There’s no point embarrassing his young colleague, who is only trying to hide his fear.

‘Go to the hospital and report back’, he orders. Then Stave bends down to the dead woman, being careful not to touch either her body or the rubble on which she lies as though on a bed.

It’s as though it were staged, it occurs involuntarily to Stave. And yet well-hidden at the same time, concealed by the wall and some of the higher piles of bricks all around. As far as he can tell her body is almost unharmed, not even scratched or bruised, her hands spotless. She didn’t put up a fight, he thinks. And those are not worker’s hands. Not one of the women who clears away the rubble, not somebody who has done much cleaning, not a worker.

His gaze moves slowly down her body. Her flat stomach with a line on the right: an old, well-healed appendix operation. Stave gets out his notebook and writes something down. Only on the dead woman’s neck does he find any mark, a dark red line on pale skin, barely three millimetres wide, once around the neck at the height of the larynx, more pronounced on the left than on the right.

‘Looks as though she’s been throttled. Perhaps with a thin cord’, Stave says to the two shivering policemen as he jots the observation down in his book. ‘See if you can find a wire around anywhere, or a cable.’

The two of them rummage morosely around in the rubble. Stave is temporarily free of them. He doesn’t believe that the two officers will find anything. Dark lines in the white frost – which unfortunately have been partly trampled over by the unobservant policemen – could be dragging marks. The murderer probably moved his victim here after killing the woman somewhere else.

‘Nice corpse’, says someone behind him. The rattling voice of a chain smoker. Stave doesn’t need to turn round to know who is standing there.

‘Good morning Doctor Czrisini’, he says, getting up. ‘Good that you’ve come so quickly.’

Doctor Alfred Czrisini – small, bald, his dark eyes huge behind round horn-rimmed glasses – does not trouble himself to remove the glowing British Woodbine cigarette from his bluish mouth when he

speaks. 'It looks as though I had no need to hurry', he mumbles. 'A naked body in this cold – I could have given myself another couple of hours.'

'Deep frozen.'

'Better than the mortuary. It won't be easy to establish the exact time of death. It hasn't been warmer than minus 10 degrees for six weeks. She could theoretically already have been lying here for days and still look fresh.'

[...]

Stave likes the pathologist, who has to endure endless jokes about his name – pronounced 'Chisini'. In the time after 1933 these were mostly threatening insinuations about his Polish heritage. Czrisini works fast, a bachelor whose twin passions are corpses and cigarettes.

'Are you thinking the same as me?' the doctor asks him.

'Rape?'

Czrisini nods. 'Young, pretty, naked and dead. That would fit.'

Stave shakes his head back and forth. 'At minus 20 degrees even the most depraved rapist is going to be worried about his privates. On the other hand, they could have done that to her in a warm room somewhere.' He points to the drag marks. 'She's just been put here.'

'We'll soon find out more when we've got her on my dissection table', said the pathologist cheerfully.

'But not her name', Stave mutters. What if the murderer hadn't undressed his victim out of murderous desire? But in cold blood? A naked body in the middle of a rubble field which has been uninhabited for years. 'It's not going to be easy to identify her', he declares.

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