

Auf der Strecke: Ein Fall für Berlin und Wien
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Sample Translation

Extract 1, pp. 14-23 (discovery of corpse and first glimpse of Anna Habel, suffering from the effects of a bad cold)

Anna hit the snooze button on her alarm but the shrill ring persisted. 5:10 am. What the hell is this, can't you all just leave me in peace? Suddenly she was wide awake: shit, it wasn't an alarm; somewhere, her mobile phone was ringing. She sprang out of bed, her pyjamas, damp with sweat, clung unpleasantly to her skin; the phone rang off. I could always pretend I didn't hear it, Anna thought to herself, heaving a sigh as she began the search for her ubiquitous companion. She was far too conscientious for that sort of carry-on. At last she found it between the sofa cushions: "1 missed call, Kolonja". Anna pressed call, and after the first ring her colleague answered, wheezing into her ear:

"A corpse. In the *Weinviertel*. On the train."

"And a very good morning to you too, Inspector; might you provide me with a little more detail?" Even after three years working together, Robert Kolonja's *Floridsdorf* council estate slang still managed to provoke Anna into adopting a more refined tone when they spoke.

"I'm at one of the *ÖBB*'s sidings, somewhere between Bernhardsthal and Hohenau. Corpse is male, between 25 and 30 years of age, found in the sleeper car." Even Kolonja could speak properly when he made the effort. Anna barked at him all the same out of sheer force of habit.

"Was he shot, strangled, stabbed to death; raped even?"

"Dr. Schima isn't here yet, but our corpse got on the train at Vienna West and was dead soon after. Now he's got the whole carriage to himself."

Very droll today, Kolonja, Anna thought. "OK, give me ten minutes; I'll call you from the car and you can tell me how to get there."

A quick trip to the bathroom, a despairing look inside the fridge, and then the search for her car keys could begin. With her jacket and shoes on, she went back into the kitchen, laid a plate on the table and cut two slices of bread from a slightly stale loaf. "Had to leave early, have a good day! Won't be too late, get yourself something to eat", she wrote on a slip of paper, which she slid under the plate together with a ten euro note.

There on the spur stood a lone *ÖBB* carriage, leaning a little crookedly into the bend and somehow looking faintly absurd. A door stood open and people were bustling around; music from *Radio Niederösterreich* was blaring from a car stereo. The medical examiner, Dr. Schima, was just stepping out of the carriage. He seemed cheerful as usual.

“So, a nice young man, housewives’ favourite. Probably strangled with a thin wire. No sign of the murder weapon yet though. The train guard discovered him shortly after it happened, around 10:45pm. There’s not much more I can tell you. He’s got no need of a doctor now, I’m afraid. But you, on the other hand... Should I prescribe you something?”

Anna smiled ruefully. “At least one week’s sick leave and a good whodunit.”

A pale trench coat complete with cap and walrus moustache approached.

“Morning; Kronberger’s the name, from the St. Pölten office.”

“Good morning; Habel, murder squad, Vienna.”

She tried to sound friendly, she wanted to get rid of this Lower Austrian police official as quickly as possible and get a look at the murder victim.

“Aye, the Wieners are here. Guid news, this.”

Here we go! Anna thought, and glanced over towards Kolonja, who just shrugged his shoulders. She tried her best to force a smile and offer her colleague a warm handshake. But the latter went straight on the attack.

“How come you’re so late?”

Anna realised she was about to lose it. She was always quick to gauge her mood during an investigation. And whenever a new case began like this, with an over-zealous official in a trench coat, she knew the portents weren’t good.

“Late, Herr Kronenburger? It’s still pretty early as far as I’m concerned.”

“My name’s Kronberger! An’ ah informed you as soon as I saw the deceased was from Vienna. There’s something no right wi’ your alarm system, that’s the problem. You didn’t react until hours later.”

Kolonja blushed. “Yeah, must have pushed the wrong button. But we’re here now, aren’t we?”

Kronberger was really getting into his stride now.

“Wuid ye have a look at that? Pushed the wrong button... An’ we’re the ones doing a’ the work here. There’s nothin’ left for you to do.”

Anna sniffled and let out three volcanic sneezes. It was time to put a stop to this.

“That, my dear Kronenburger, is for us to decide. Besides, we’re talking about a murder here; solving it is going to take a little more than securing the crime scene and phoning the right people, don’t you think? What do we know about the identity of the victim?”

Kolonja beat Kronberger to it.

“Everything, I mean, nothing apart from his particulars.”

“And they would be?”

“Xaver Pucher, born 30th August 1973 in Salzburg, resides in Vienna, first district, Bäckerstraße, number 7.”

“What did you say? Xaver Pucher? *The* Xaver Pucher?”

“What do you mean? Do we know him? Has he got form?”

“Come on, don’t you ever read the papers? Listen to the radio? Watch TV?”

“Of course – but apparently we have different tastes.”

Kolonja never grew tired of mocking Anna for her “culture-mania.” Books, plays, intelligent radio, he loathed it all and was deeply suspicious of anything that had even the slightest to do with art and culture.

“Go on, tell me then: who is this guy?”

“Xaver Pucher is – sorry, was – the shooting star of the German literary scene. His last novel, *Herodotus and his wild travels*, was reviewed everywhere; it’s been flying off the shelves.”

“Far be it from me to interrupt your literature lecture, but perhaps you would like to take a look at the victim and crime scene?”

This Kronenburger is becoming slowly more impatient, he’s probably longing for the warmth of his St. Pölten office, for his coffee and *Kipferl*, Anna thought as she trudged past him over the rain-sodden ground, before using the carriage door handle to haul herself up into the brightly lit train. The deceased lay half in the compartment, half in the gangway, body covered by a spotless white ÖBB bed sheet. Anna was annoyed that she was so late on the scene; she felt robbed of her first impression, that feeling for a case which comes with seeing the victim just as the murderer had left them. The train compartment hardly resembled a crime scene anymore and even the deceased, so neatly wrapped in his sheet, looked strangely normal. As if he was supposed to be there. Anna carefully pulled back the cloth, but the face underneath was only vaguely reminiscent of that of the young author whom she had seen just a few weeks previously, at a signing session in one of Vienna’s biggest bookstores. He had looked young that day, and clearly enjoyed his moment in the sun, even if his friendly smile had seemed a little arrogant. But there was nothing youthful about his face now. It was ashen and distorted; his eyes were bulging and his tongue hanging out of his mouth. Then, all of a sudden, a memory flashed before her eyes: there had been death threats made a few months ago by some Islamic group or other who felt violated by Pucher’s latest offering.

Not very flattering, Anna thought, he wouldn’t like this one bit, the vain young pup. Kolonja looked over her shoulder.

“An elegant one, this guy. Have you seen his clobber? Two weeks’ wages for the shoes alone.”

“He’s earned good money these past few months, and he wasn’t exactly broke before. Find anything of note in the compartment?”

“Certainly did! There wasn’t only clean underwear in his nifty little travel bag,” Kolonja said, brandishing a pouch containing white powder.

“And I don’t think it’s so he can do his laundry either.”

“There’s a fair bit there. More than just a little something for the trip. Anything else?”

“The usual. Clothes for three, maybe four days, wallet, bottle of red, hip flask full of sweet-smelling liquor, coat and mobile phone. It’s beeped a few times already.”

“Who found the corpse?”

“The sleeping car attendant. He’s back there in his compartment.”

Anna stepped carefully over the deceased and knocked on the open door of the train staff compartment. The young man, who was sitting slumped on the narrow seat, leapt to his feet straightaway and took a deep breath.

“Good morning. My name is Anna Habel, I’m from the murder squad. Were you the one who found the deceased?”

“Yes ma’am! I knock and no answer, I knock again, then open door and there is dead man! I quickly make door shut and go straight to train manager. And he make emergency stop. But: perhaps better go to station?”

“And how did you know the man was dead?”

“Was eyes of course! He look me. I know how look when dead.”

Interesting, Anna thought, though she decided not to ask the sleeping car attendant how he knew so much about corpses.

“What were you doing in the compartment anyway? The train had only just left.”

“He ask for cushion. Although first-class already have two.”

He gave a disapproving shake of the head.

“Then thank you for the time being; we may well have to ask you some more questions. Did one of my colleagues take down your details?”

“Yes, but I not know more, I see nothing, I hear nothing.”

The sleeping car attendant obviously wanted to have nothing to do with the police.

“OK, I believe you. You can go now.”

When Anna returned to the deceased’s compartment, they were carrying him off the train. The two men were having trouble manoeuvring the stretcher through the narrow aisle. Once upon a time they would’ve just heaved him out the window, but you couldn’t open them on trains anymore, Anna thought, as she took a look round the compartment. As Kolonja had rightly said, there was a pair of expensive shoes under the bed, stuffed with the salmon-coloured sheets of the “people’s newspaper”; a somewhat tattered camel hair coat was hanging on the back of the door, along with the crumpled-looking travel bag – all these items seemed like props from a bad play.

There was a bottle of red on the small window-table, though it appeared the deceased hadn’t managed to finish the glass he was drinking. On the carpet, an ugly red wine stain.

“Shall we, then?”

Anna jumped from the train and headed towards Kronberger, who was standing morosely under his umbrella, smoking.

“I suggest we divide the questioning up between us.”

Somewhere behind Kronberger’s shoulder, Kolonja rolled his eyes and tapped his finger pointedly against his forehead.

Kronberger took one final drag on his cigarette before treading its remains purposefully into the mud.

“The other passengers are long since in Berlin. No need to worry though: we carried out the questioning while your lot were still dreaming away. No-one saw or heard anything.”

“You did what?”

“Here’s a list containing the names and telephone numbers of all the passengers.”

Anna felt just about ready to explode; she had to make a conscious effort to retain her composure. Just stay calm.

“And why on earth, might I ask, did you allow the train to resume its journey? Unbelievable! The perpetrator’s probably laughing it up in Prague right this minute. Or maybe you think our young man here strangled himself to death? And where’s the train manager?”

“On the way to Berlin, eating breakfast, what do I know? Incidentally, I did discuss all this with my superiors beforehand. You were the ones in dreamland.”

Kronberger looked offended. Anna was livid.

“Mark my words: there’ll be consequences for both you and those dim-witted superiors of yours. The list, please.”

Three pages of names, addresses and telephone numbers. Impossible to question them all within 24 hours.

“Come on, Kolonja, there’s nothing more for us here. Our colleagues have done all the work anyway. Ah yes, Inspector Kronenburger, would you be so kind as to hand me the phone of the deceased? You can send the rest of his things onto me at headquarters!”

“Ma’am.”

“And one more thing: no press! Don’t go ringing your mate from the pub who also happens to work for the local rag. We need a few hours’ head start before we have that mob on our backs.”

Kronberger had doubtless realised that any more out of him would only make things worse.

Extract 2, pp. 25-32 (initial telephone exchange between Anna Habel and Thomas Bernhardt)

Armed with an *Extrawurstsemmel* and takeaway coffee, Anna marched into her office, slamming the door behind her. There were numerous pink-coloured Post-its stuck to her desk, on which Susanne Schellander had neatly transcribed the names of everyone who had called that day.

Anna switched on the computer and began rummaging in her handbag for the confiscated mobile phone. Through the plastic cover she could see there had been several missed calls and various messages received. "Mailbox." She hesitated for a moment; should she really be listening to Xaver Pucher's voicemail? Nonsense, what the hell: celeb or not, the poor man was dead. The first message came from a withheld number: "Hey, Philip-Peter here. Are you awake yet? I was thinking maybe you could come a little earlier? Before the whole bloody lot of them turn up. That way, we could have a minute or two to ourselves. See you later, bye."

And it was the same voice on the second message: "Philip-Peter again. Why haven't you switched your phone on yet? Do you have everything? I'm pretty excited, give me a quick call when you get this."

Well, well, there's someone out there just dying to see our star, Anna thought, as she typed "Xaver Pucher" absent-mindedly into Google's start page. 270,000 hits – and right at the top, the homepage of the young author himself. Very professional, not overly voyeuristic but visitors would still feel it provided an insight into the author's private life.

This isn't going to get us anywhere, time to set the wheels in motion. Anna fumbled around in her drawer, before eventually unearthing a blue plastic folder. Someone had scrawled "Murder Squad, Federal Republic" in blue across the top. Let's hope this isn't as old as the cover, Anna thought, as she dialled the Berlin number in bold print.

"Thomas Bernhardt," a deep voice sounded after the second tone.

"Hmm...either I've dialled the wrong number or...actually, no, Ingeborg Bachmann here."

"Not bad at all, though I've heard better. Murder squad, Berlin, fifth division, my name is Thomas Bernhardt. So, Ms Bachmann, what can I do you for?"

Anna didn't know quite what to make of the voice at the other end: not unpleasant, quite friendly actually, yet detached at the same time. She took a sip of lukewarm coffee from her plastic cup. She sighed.

"I'm not sure I've got the right number, we're talking about murder here, Mr Bernhard..."

"If it's murder you're after, then the murder squad's usually a good place to start, don't you think? It's Bernhardt with a "dt" at the end, by the way."

"Well, anyway. I'm Chief Inspector Anna Habel from Vienna."

"I thought your name was Bachmann."

"That was a joke."

“How come?”

“Because your name’s Bernhardt.”

“So what?”

“Thomas Bernhard was a famous Austrian author, you know that, don’t you?”

“Yes, of course.”

“And Ingeborg Bachmann was...”

“Ah, yes, I get it. *Tell me, Love; Bohemia Lies by the Sea; Invocation of the Great Bear; Undine’s Valediction...*”

“*Undine goes*, we normally say.” Anna sniffed loudly and sneezed. Then she took a deep breath and bawled: “Why do you pretend to be so stupid?” If it had worked with Kronenburger, surely it couldn’t fail with Bernhardt.

“Oh that’s just a minor occupational hazard. Makes it easier to deal with criminals – and women. In my experience, anyway.”

Anna sincerely regretted that her cold, together with the early start, had made her so weak. She swallowed dryly, to suppress the sudden burning pain in her throat, and was just about to retaliate when Bernhardt got there first.

“Is that dialect?”

Anna couldn’t believe it: what was this guy’s problem?

“It’s what they speak in Upper Austria, with a twist of Vienna thrown in. Do we need to swear in an interpreter? Or can we finally get to the point?”

Bernhardt started laughing, which to her surprise, Anna didn’t find altogether disagreeable.

“I can only speak High German, maybe a tiny bit of Hessian as well.”

“Well, then you have my sympathy. Listen, are all you Prussians this sluggish?”

“Why? Is everyone in Vienna so frenetic? There’s still a little time before the review. We can use it to get to know one another. It seems like we’ll be working together after all. Just one last thing before we get cracking: what are you taking for your cold? It sounds really bad. I recommend Linden flower tea.”

“Thanks. And now you listen to me: if you interrupt me one more time, I will be very angry indeed. So...”

Thomas Bernhardt sat back, put his feet on the desk and listened to the steady stream of words emanating from the receiver. Tenacious, this one, won’t let up until she knows everything; that was his impression. He tried to imagine what she looked like. More the alpine type perhaps: brown hair, brown eyes, brown complexion; sharp, pointed nose? Only thing missing’s a dirndl, he thought to himself, before quickly erasing the image from his mind. He glanced over at the rain pouring down his window. In Berlin, winter began in September and didn’t finish till the end of April; that’s just the way it was.

His reflection, distorted ever so slightly by the window, did little to improve his mood, though he had to say he liked wearing his hair this short: it didn’t look so grey anymore. The bags under his eyes, only further magnified by his glasses, were probably here to stay.

Although, with a little less alcohol... But, then again, was there a single person here in Keithstraße, home of the Berlin murder squad, who could live without alcohol? Thomas Bernhardt doubted it.

In the door he spied Cornelia Karsunke, who signalled to him: meeting! Due to her slanted eyes, Bernhardt referred to her inwardly (and there alone) as "The Tatar". She was only just into her mid-twenties and highly gifted; sometimes her work was a little sloppy, and every now and then she would arrive late, smelling of alcohol. She had two small children, two girls. How she coped with everything was a mystery to him. She had grown up in Neukölln, somewhere between Hermannstraße and Karl-Marx-Straße. "Old working-class gentry," she had once said with an embarrassed grin, "not so easy to knock off our stride." Just peeping over her shoulder he could see his deputy, Volker Cellarius, early thirties, known to Bernhardt as "The Dynamo" or "The Professor." Both of them would go far. Mind you, they'd have to last as long as him first.

He gestured towards them: there in a minute.

"...and then this idiot Kronenburger allows the train to resume its journey."

Thomas Bernhardt took his feet off the desk and began to stretch. Right then: time for some work.

"Well, I'm not sure that's such a bad thing. If he really did take down all the names, then he did a good job. And while we're on the subject, I think we can safely assume that the murderer..."

"...or murderess."

"Or murderess...Are you a feminist by the way?"

"Why? Are you a chauvinist?"

"No, I just like to know exactly who it is I'm dealing with."

"Because you think it's helpful to pigeonhole people straightaway?"

"Why don't we get back to the case for a minute? So: the murderer would have to be pretty stupid to have remained on the train. But, on the other hand, how did he get off? How did he make his escape? Did he have a car parked nearby, did he hitch a lift, take a taxi? The fact that he was strangled to death with a metal wire suggests the perpetrator was male, but I must admit women have made considerable progress in the last few years. They could just as easily have been female."

"I'm going to have to interrupt you there, you don't mind do you?"

"Absolutely not. And by the way, Linden flower tea. Make sure you get real lime blossom from a pharmacy and not just these bags with powder in them. The best stuff's from Provence."

"Would you give it a rest? We're not stupid in Vienna, you know. The murderer, murderess, whatever – either they continued on or they didn't. We don't know. But we do have a list containing the names of all those on board at the time of the murder. I'm guessing whoever it was didn't jump out of a moving train."

"OK, fax me the list and I'll get someone on it right away."

“The investigation needs to be watertight, that way there’ll be no pointing fingers when it’s over.”

Thomas Bernhardt gave a loud groan. “My dear Habel, we’re perfectly capable of scanning a list of names for links to the victim. We do have EDP in Berlin too you know, as well as access to all current databases. I mean, we’ve even got internet.”

“Oh, don’t get all upset. I just think we need to get a move on. We’re trying to get a DNA sample here. We’re analysing his laptop, going through every number on his mobile phone; my colleague Kolonja’s already in town trying to trace his friends, especially his lady friends. But I’ve got a more concrete assignment for you.”

“Oh, isn’t that nice?”

“We’ve had a look at the appointment app on his iPhone; he had a meeting today at 5 with his Berlin agent. His name’s Philip-Peter Weber. He left several messages on Pucher’s voicemail, seems like he couldn’t wait for him to arrive. So, that’s Philip-Peter Weber, OK?”

“Could you spell both names for me?”

“I’m sure you can manage that on your own.”

“Well, near enough. With or without a hyphen? And could you tell me what questions to ask too?”

Anna answered with an almighty sneeze. And another. And another. After that, there was a stony silence.

“Right then, I’ll work it out myself. I bid you adieu, Ms Habel. Let’s be in touch again tonight, around 8 I suggest. Does that fit in wi’ your schedule? Or will you be gettin’ fou by then?”

“Ach, would you cut it out! Talk to you tonight.”

Anna slammed down the receiver and leaned back in her chair. What an arsehole, what an absolute arsehole. She shuddered as she took a sip of coffee. This cold swill was enough to turn your stomach.

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This translation was commissioned by *New Books in German*. For more information, please contact Charlotte on nbg@london.goethe.org