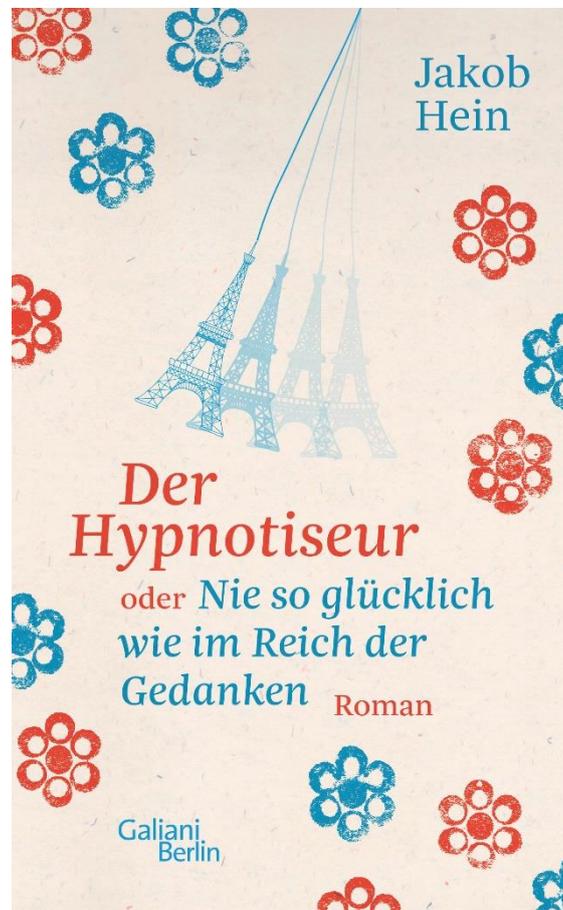


**The Hypnotist**  
**or: Never So Happy as in the Realm of**  
**Ideas**  
**by Jakob Hein**

Sample Translation by Simon Pare



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*Lieselotte Sawidski*

Here in the Lower Oder Valley our relationship with cranes has a lot in common with how the Indians feel about monkeys. Other people come here to take photos of them and tell us how wonderful these creatures and their habits are, but we find living with them nothing special and also know how much damage they can do. In ancient Byzantium they used to say it was easier to farm a rock than it was to farm fields and hills with a nearby colony of cranes. In the Middle Ages the British tried for centuries to exterminate the birds because they considered them pests and their eggs a delicacy. Whether you believe in nature conservation or not, those creatures are thieves and behave like them. Hundreds of cranes visit us here in the Oder Valley every year. They gather in the autumn on the broad water meadows before heading south, with the males flying to Extremadura in western Spain and the females even farther to Africa. Although mating pairs stay together for life, they spend the winters apart. The migrating birds are our region's biggest draw, as the grey birds assemble here for a few days before setting out on their great southward journey.

There used to be more going on here in the past. Far more. Mind you, further back in the past there was of course nothing but countryside here. Then, in the twelfth century, everyone who settled here was granted 'German rights'. This was quite something: suddenly the settlers, wherever they came from and to whichever people they belonged, became free people and received a hereditary title to the land they colonised. The dukes

of Pomerania needed timber and grain, and as the Oder Valley was so sparsely populated, they devised a plan.

It was always hard to live here. Back then it was probably high water and flooded fields that made life tough, and there were probably even more cranes passing through back then to pilfer the crops. Another reason it was tough is because our region is so remote - even today very few roads lead here, and there are always a few more roads leading out of here. Only for a short period of time, from the tobacco farming of the eighteenth century to the end of the polder system in 1945, did things look up for the locals here. It was possible to get nice and rich in the Lower Oder Valley and people flooded into the area to earn some money. That's totally unimaginable today. Those times also saw the construction of magnificent buildings and great churches, some of which are still standing to this day. Yet by the time the locks and bridges were destroyed in the war and trade in Silesian textiles and wool from Görlitz had in any case become unviable, that brief and plentiful historical anomaly was definitively over. Suddenly one bank of the Oder was German and the other Polish. On the Polish side, the valley was left for nature to reclaim - much to the cranes' pleasure, no doubt - but this resulted in the reclosure of the recently opened waterway from Stettin to Görlitz.

This area was actually Swedish for over a hundred years, even if very few people here know that nowadays. Mainly, though, we were on the margins - and this has only grown gradually more pronounced since 1945. First, Pomerania was transferred to Poland and the border moved to the Oder, which put us officially on the eastern edge of Germany. When the border was closed in 1981 because

of striking Polish dockers, we found ourselves that little bit more on the margins, and we thought we couldn't be pushed out any farther. After reunification, however, we almost ceased to exist: barely any inhabitants, no jobs, no railway line, barely any roads. An intact landscape, that's how people think of the Oder Valley today. Which is all very nice for outsiders who fancy spending a few days here.

Since then, the beautiful buildings of the past hang around like a wedding dress in a wardrobe. They are of no further use, but no one makes a move to demolish them because they're so beautiful to look at despite their uselessness and stand as a reminder of happier days. My husband and I married shortly after the war before I'd even turned twenty, and I wore the dress I had on that day to every festive occasion until, one day, it was threadbare. He's been dead a long time.

I've known Michael from when he was small, which is why I'm still allowed to call him Micki. He's the son of my neighbour's daughter which, put like that, makes it sound as if I've only seen him a few times, like some distant relative. Gerda - that's his grandmother - and I have always got on well, though. Both our husbands survived the war. We got on well and we spent even more time together after her Siegfried died of the Hong Kong flu in 1969.

By then her daughter Ilona had already moved in with her future husband Thoralf in Schwedt, because Micki arrived in 1960. If you lived in Schwedt, it was clear that you worked at the Petro-Chemical Combine. Thoralf had first built up the PCC as a young activist and later trained as a skilled petrochemical production worker when the enterprise got properly up and running in 1964.

Ilona was a dispatcher in the in-house laundry. They both earned decent wages.

She stayed in Schwedt after their divorce, which I can understand because why would a single mother with a small child want to go back to her village? Anyone can live in a town, but a village is tricky. In a town there's a cultural life and other young people and your neighbours don't care if you sleep in late, dye your hair this way or that, or have a man over once in a while. Here in the village, you're always on display. No one says anything, but everyone always knows everything. It's horrible. Now I'm an old woman I don't care, but when word got out back then that Ernst and I couldn't have children and everyone gawped at us with pity, I sometimes felt like bursting into tears and sometimes I felt like yelling at them all. But that's just the way it is, so what are you going to do?

That may have been part of the reason we enjoyed looking after first Ilona and then Micki. The boy was always over at our place; he liked coming to the village. He was spoiled not only by one grandmother but by three grandparents because he could always come and see us too. I'd have loved it if Ilona had moved back to Soldin after her divorce because that way Micki would have been at my school. He was already friends with Maik Klempow, the son of the then chairman of our agricultural cooperative and later chairman himself. Like father, like son. Ho-hum.

Maik and Micki. They'd run around the village, thick as thieves, but the little rascals never ran riot. They climbed trees, had a smoke together, drank beer - the kind of things young people usually get up to. They always believed no one noticed, while in fact the whole

village was in the know, but we were happier for them to let it all out here than for something to happen to Micki in Schwedt. When they were boys, and I mean young boys, hardly a summer went by without one of them ending up in our fire water pond. From sunup to sundown, the two of them were constantly up to tricks.

Micki was really clever and from what I could gather he always found school a drag. He understood everything far too fast and was too independent-minded for the school authorities. When even his school had cottoned on that he was clever, he was accepted at the EOS Friedrich Gauss, which then was the best school in Schwedt even. The boys and girls there were supposed to become mathematicians and engineers, but Micki had got it into his head that he wanted to study psychology. I said, 'Micki, you're not much of a talker. You can't go seeking out your biggest problem and make a career of it,' but if he was anything, it was stubborn.

I saw him as more of a nerd. He was never practical and something would get broken just about every time he tried to help me out in the kitchen. And yet I always imagined him sitting in the PCC, solving some complex chemical problem or other, or holding a test tube up to the light on TV. In Western Pomerania we only had East German TV, and although people really meant the Elbe Valley when they talked about 'the valley of the clueless' where West German TV wasn't available, we were no better off. The only channel we could get besides DDR1 and DDR2 when the weather conditions were right was TVP, but none of us spoke Polish.

So I'd always pictured my Micki as an engineer in lab glasses and a white coat, but then one day he came to see me and said he wanted to be a psychologist, and no

one knew where he'd got that idea. Why would any sensible person want to become a psychologist? Are you unhappy? we asked him. Something wrong with your mum or dad? But he said it had nothing to do with that and not all psychologists had a screw loose, or whatever other expression he used.

Everything went smoothly at first because he signed up for three years in the army, which is what they'd told him to do. They explained it to the pupils as if they were selling indulgences: go to the army for three years and then, *and only then*, could he study psychology. You scratch our back and we'll scratch yours. And the poor sod did as he was told. The minimum stint was eighteen months, but who knows if he'd have come through even that long unharmed. It was supposedly better for the three-yearers than for the minimalists - as a woman, I wouldn't know much about it - but I don't get the feeling Micki coped very well. He drank more from year to year and his skin got worse, and the odd time he did say something, it sounded not like Micki but as if he had a megaphone inside him with some thug shouting through it. He'd always been such a sensitive person and his normal voice was nice and quite high and clear. I don't really know how to explain it, but somehow Micki and his body grew apart during his time in the army. He wore that horrible uniform, his face looked as if he'd bought it second-hand and then this deep voice would rattle off one crass remark after another.

We stopped being close around then. Which was fine, of course. He was a young man who could take care of himself, so why would he need a grandma like me? But it still felt terrible. I'd lost my little Micki, and in his place this young man in a uniform that looked

terribly like a Wehrmacht uniform would pay visits to Gerda. When he did come, he would barely step outside. He usually only came for Christmas and Gerda's birthday, and he didn't even say very much during the birthday celebrations. He would just sit there in a corner, drinking beer and chasing it down with schnapps in the evenings. It also made me sad because I was of course meant to tell my pupils lots of wonderful things about the army, though luckily I only taught at a primary school, not secondary. None of my kids had to sign up, but it still shocked me to see Micki in such a state.

He then went to Rostock to study, and at first it seemed as if things were getting back on track. In any case, he began to look like the sort of young man I'd fancied he would be before the army got its claws into him. He came to see me more frequently and always had a friendly hello for me. Of course I gave him a friendly hello back. Micki wasn't to think that I bore him any grudges.

Then one day - and this was the biggest surprise of all - about two years after he'd started studying, he moved in with Gerda for good. Having arrived on the very first train, he hauled two big suitcases up from the station with and moved in with her. Initially, you might have thought he was on holiday or between terms or something, but after three or four months it was clear it was for the long term. The others pounced on Gerda and tried to question and intercept her and squeeze information out of her. It's rare that something interesting happens in our village and of course everyone discusses it, including the fact that Ilona, Micki's mother, came to visit a lot at the beginning and then less often, and that Micki had set up in Siegfried's old

room, and that he was walking around in his grandfather's work clothes and wellies and the rest of it. People loved gossiping about that kind of thing. How they would have loved to hear all about it from Gerda in great detail.

A village like ours is a tangle of contradictions. No one wants to say anything, but they're all desperate to know everything. Everyone begrudges their neighbour the dirt under his or her fingernails, but as soon as a stranger turns up, everyone closes ranks. Everyone would like to do things exactly as they see fit but will always stick their noses into the smallest cranny of their neighbours' business. No one says a thing, and yet everyone knows what they mean. And supposedly no one's interested in anything, yet everyone has curiosity to burn.

In my experience, you always find out everything eventually and the door to this knowledge often opens inwards and all you achieve by pushing too hard is to shut the door more firmly. It's better to take a step back and let it open from the inside. I didn't bother Gerda, even less so Micki, and it might have looked as if I wasn't curious, but to be honest I was sure from the outset that this approach would eventually yield the most information. If I'd kept dropping in on Gerda with some excuse or other, she would not have told me a thing. Since I was desperate to find out every detail, I sat tight and waited.

One day, Micki popped round to see if he could borrow Ernst's drill. The two of us stood there a little awkwardly without saying much while Ernst was fetching it from his workshop. When Micki brought it back that evening, I invited him in for a beer and then he started talking. And he talked and talked and talked.

Like every other student, he had to take Marxism-Leninism courses - it was more or less our state religion. Everyone had to go to the gatherings on a regular basis and proclaim the faith, regardless of whether you believed in it or not. That's why they always got so worked up about the church - it would have been competition.

Anyway, Micki had also had ML, as it was called, and because it was university, they didn't stick to a few basic tenets but discussed the foundations of the philosophy and knowledge and who knows what else. Marxism was to be held up as the ultimate outcome of all philosophical considerations. When they tackled Schopenhauer and his *World as Will and Idea*, the theory that the world consists only of our idea of it, they were obliged for their homework to reject this theory as bourgeois and wrong. This was still the case in the eighties and shortly afterwards came the billions in loans from the West. It was clear everywhere that we weren't really on the winning side or if we were, there appeared to be distinct advantages to being on the losing side. An unemployed person in the West may have been unemployed, but he or she still drove an Opel and went on holiday to Spain. An engineer here had to pay a fortune for a Trabant and pull strings for a vacation spot in Zingst.

Micki explained all this to me in far greater detail, of course. In any case, he had linked Schopenhauer's theories with the Workers' Party's idea of reality in his clever-clogs essay. Me, I never studied. After the war they needed teachers and when they asked, I stuck up my hand very fast, and then they sent me off to train and when I returned four months later I was a novice

teacher. I only really learned how to be a teacher afterwards, anyway, and kept learning right up until I retired. It's not something you can pick up theoretically and, in my opinion, you can't pick it up by studying. What I'm trying to say is, that of course I didn't understand much of Micki's theory, and maybe he didn't really understand it himself, but at the university at least they understood that he was saying that reality as described by the Party was just the will and idea of the Party and therefore Schopenhauer's teachings ought to be interesting because both conceptual systems shared an aversion to measurable reality.

They understood him to be saying they were lying. He then said that he wasn't saying that, only what was written there, no more and no less, because now there was no going back as, stupidly, he had not only written it down but also handed it in. He hoped to be able to interpret his way out of the mess somehow. If he'd said it in a debate, they might have reframed it as a misunderstanding by a young working-class boy who had, after all, proved his correct attitude towards the Party and the state through three years' service in the peaceful army. But Micki had written it down and submitted it, making it an official document, and German bureaucracy must always officially digest official documents. That was a mistake. Micki was always making those kinds of mistakes.

A phone call can be forgotten, a comment can be misunderstood, but an offensive document is in a different category. That was, incidentally, the secret of the petition system. Someone would sit down and write a letter to the state, and the state was incapable of throwing these letters away. As a teacher you are of

course automatically a bit like the village clerk, and I wrote dozens, if not hundreds of petitions for villagers. Eventually they didn't even attempt to do it themselves but came straight to me. I had a small Erika typewriter in the front room and I would sit down and write the petition for them with a carbon copy. In exchange we were given eggs or vegetables or some cake. I once wrote a petition for Carsten about gravel and when he received the gravel, he gave me a rabbit. All I had to tell him was when we wanted to eat it and he brought it over, freshly slaughtered, skinned and gutted that day. That was how things were done back then.

People came to us for petitions and to Klempows for the phone connection. As chairman of the agricultural cooperative, Klempow naturally had privileges and received a phone, but he had to screw a sign saying *Public Telephone* onto his house, and people would go there whenever they needed to make a phone call. It was his wife who looked after it. He himself made many calls from his office, where he also had a phone, so as to save money at home. Johanna wrote down who phoned whom for how long and took payment. People generally paid more because it didn't make much difference, but Johanna managed to pocket a tidy sum that way. It was actually possible to live on three hundred marks a month back then, and the telephone must have brought in a good hundred.

Anyway, Micki shouldn't have written it all down. It wasn't overtly hostile, of course, but nor was it correct and so they kicked him off the course for a lack of class consciousness, so he said. And then he didn't want to go back to his mum's and her new boyfriend, and he couldn't stay in the student halls of residence and so he moved

in with his grandma, into his old room where he'd stayed every summer. He liked it there and wanted to ponder his next move in peace.

But then he had to register with the local police, which meant that he also had to give a place of employment and so he went to see if old Klempow didn't have a job for him. 'What as?' the chairman asked. 'You can't do anything, Micki.' He was right from his point of view because in the agricultural cooperative you've got to be able to pitch in somehow. Cooking, electronics, gardening, tractors - you have to be able to do something if you want to work in farming, and Micki had never been the practical kind. But then, in Klempow's telling, Micki had spotted the books on the shelf and said, 'Well, take me on as a librarian.' Klempow asked what kind of librarian, we don't have a library. Who cares, Micki told him, there are a few books over there. You don't have to pay me anything, just confirm to social security that I'm your librarian. That'll cost us twenty marks a year, Klempow supposedly said, but Micki had anticipated this and slapped a hundred marks on the table and said, I'll come back in five years. And Klempow did it because they knew each other from before and Maik and Micki were still friends. So Micki could ponder in peace what he wanted to do next and he pondered for so long that he probably forgot what he was pondering, and in the end he just stayed on Siegfried's farm.

After Gerda died a few months later, he was all alone on the large farm in fact. Gerda was a few years older than me and had never really been ill. No one's really ill in our village because there's no doctor to determine that kind of thing. If someone gets something, they go to the hospital in Pasewalk where they're operated on or

someone writes a prescription. You used to wait there for hours, which meant you'd have a long, hard think whether you were really ill. For little aches and pains or to renew a prescription, we'd go over to Rosow, but there was no point because Dr Mühler didn't have anything to examine you with there.

It was the heart in Gerda's case, apparently. One evening she felt sick and the next morning she was dead, that's what Micki said. Not even seventy, but what are you going to do? They took her to the cemetery and the whole village was there, Ilona too of course, and after that Micki was all on his own on the farm. What's he up to? everyone asked. Why's a young man without a wife and without a clue about anything living alone on Siegfried's farm, is what everyone said because of Gerda's husband. The only one who didn't ask himself that question was Micki. He just sat around. Didn't take care of a thing, not the house and not the garden.

In his first January he ran out of coal. Where does he think the coal comes from? everyone wondered. We were already hooked up to the district heating system from the coal-fired power station over there, like most people around here, but Gerda couldn't get connected, and Micki didn't know where to get hold of coal. He came over to see me and for starters I gave him what we had left over, and then he rang up Schmölln where the coal merchant was and because Klempow put in a good word for him, a week later he had his coal. If Micki had cleared up the farmyard and driven away Siegfried's Wartburg and maybe had twenty francs, they would probably have dumped the coal directly outside the cowshed, which is where the coal belonged on that farm. I don't even know how I know that, but that's just how it is in our village, sooner

or later everyone knows everything. I mean, we've been neighbours for decades and we know that kind of thing.

But Micki didn't and so they tipped out the coal in front of the gate, ten hundredweights of half-briquettes, as broken lignite was called. And then he came out and tried to persuade them to bring it into the yard, but of course they just burst out laughing. They were kings; they weren't going to take any orders from someone like him. So Micki appeared with his coal bucket and spent a few hours lugging it into the yard, but he got fed up and just left the rest of the heap lying there outside the gate for a day, then a week. After that he must have noticed he couldn't get his car out of the yard with the coal lying there, and so he slowly lugged the rest of it into the yard too. Nothing much goes on here in winter because people aren't out and about much, so they were really happy to have something to chat about at the cooperative shop. I felt sorry for Micki, but he didn't feel sorry for himself. He didn't care.

Then in the spring of '83, the business with the visitors started. Outsiders wandering through the village with rucksacks or suitcases, asking for Micki or Siegfried's farm. I can clearly remember a woman suddenly standing in the middle of the village, like someone out of *Sibylle* magazine. Short black hair, long coat, heels, lipstick and one of those little artificial leather suitcases in her hand. It was a shock. Her kind belonged in films, in photos or in Berlin, but what was she doing on Upper Street in our village?

When she asked for Micki, it set off a lot of conflicting rumours. There were arguments at the shop about whether she was a girlfriend from his student days

or a prostitute he'd called, even though they didn't really exist here. What was clear to everyone in the village was that she and Micki had sex - with a striking-looking woman like her, people couldn't really imagine anything else. From time to time she went for a walk along the Oder and smoked cigarettes, but she spent most of her time on the farm. Hopefully she didn't realise the villagers were registering her every move.

People tried to wheedle it out of Micki at the shop or elsewhere, but he was the silent type and had little interest in stoking the gossip and tittle-tattle. Everyone was convinced that she was going to move in with him, but then after about a week she left, leaving the entire village silently mourning her departure. A few weeks later the next person turned up, a young man. And that's how it all started. It wasn't a mass movement, oh no, not at first anyway, but now and then a man, or more usually a woman, would turn up and knock on Micki's door. Most of them went home again after a week.

They never let anything slip. We didn't know them, of course, and we only really met them in the shop when they were buying cigarettes or wine. They were townies and they bought posh things like Duett or Goldkrone. They said they were friends of Micki's with these unnatural smiles. They were the kind of people who went for walks. Just like that, in the middle of the week. They would put on their jackets and walk along the Oder. I could understand that in the cold season because he won't have been heating his place very much, and I thought they must be taking a walk to get warm. But they did it when it was warm too and at the most ungodly times of day. They went out for walks between noon and one, when normal people are having lunch.

No one in our village goes for walks. We go to the cemetery to look after our parents' graves or we go to the shop or we go over to the neighbour's to borrow a cake tin. Many a person here would see that as a huge provocation because if you go for a walk, what you're saying is you've taken care of everything on your farm and can now go for a walk with a clear conscience. But there has to be something, your gutter is blocked up with dirt or your back fence needs mending or the shoots need pinching out on your tomato plants or a window is still hanging crooked on its hinges. That's what everyone's thinking, though no one would ever say it. I've never ever been for a walk here.

In any case, I always thought Micki must be getting money from his visitors. Because like everyone else he smoked and he drank and he bought things at the shop and he had to pay for his coal as well and all the rest. You didn't necessarily have to pay for electricity back then. You were meant to, but you could also choose not to. But Micki always paid and I guessed it couldn't come from Gerda because she didn't have much of a pension, she wouldn't have put much aside and when she died the money stopped flowing to Micki. His official job was unofficially to bring Klempow money so Klempow could pay his supposed librarian's social insurance. He hadn't sold anything, he hadn't traded any goods, so I was far from the only person in the village who wondered where he got his money.

That made me wonder *why* his visitors would pay him. It can't have been for the food, as I don't believe Micki was that one-in-a-thousand man who did more than cook at Christmas or tend the barbecue. He bought every readymade food the cooperative shop stocked, which at the time

meant beef roulade in a jar, tinned fish, soups or who knows what else. He always bought lots of potatoes. Pomeranian folk like potatoes, but Micki stood out because he bought them at the shop, whereas most people got them direct from farmers or the agricultural cooperative and stored them over the winter. It wasn't legal to go straight to the cooperative and cut out the normal supply chain, but it was common. After all, everyone had a trailer, and people were used to scratching one another's backs. Manfred was promised a ten-mark note if he lent a hand with loading, and someone would crack a joke about 'public property'. At least when the entire village is involved in shady business, you can be sure no one is going to split on you. At home we would place the potatoes carefully in the clamp by hand because the things taste better if they haven't hit the ground a thousand times before ending up on a plate. Karlena was a good variety for keeping in a clamp. The villagers' personal potatoes were very nice and handpicked. No one really wanted the ones from the shop.

So it can't have been the food that drew people to Micki's, that much was clear. And it wasn't because of the nice accommodation either, as the house had long been in need of more than just a lick of paint. Which is why I'd always guessed those people were up to something psychological because I'd given a little thought to what Micki could and couldn't do, and the psychological stuff was the only skill that came to mind. They might have kicked him out of the university, but they couldn't remove the knowledge from his brain before he left. They would surely have liked to and if they'd been able to, they would have done so. What's learnt is learnt, though, and thought is free, and I always reckoned those strange

characters must be up to something psychological at Micki's. They all had a slightly dissident look about them, Western-style parkas and dyed hair and the like - what I mean is that they didn't look like good comrades or young activists. Now I've no idea what good comrades or young activists look like, but these characters looked more the dissident kind, although I couldn't be any more specific.

I asked Micki straight out when he came round to borrow the drill a second time. He wanted to put up a shelf in his grandma's old room for his visitors. Oh right, visitors, I said innocently. Yes, he had visitors from time to time now, I must have noticed, Micki said. Oh, now you come to mention it, I had, I said. There was always someone or other dropping in, I thought they were old schoolfriends or from his university or something. No, he said, these people came to him for hypnosis. Hypnosis? You only used to find that kind of thing at the fair, I said. Why are they coming to you? See, Micki said, that's what everyone thinks, but in fact hypnosis is a completely normal form of psychotherapeutic treatment, but the demonstrations at fairs still made people still think it was hocus-pocus. But he had met an old professor at university who could still do hypnosis, and he was immediately interested and asked the professor if he could teach him, and the professor hadn't put him off or anything but gladly taught him straight away, which is why he, Micki, could now do hypnosis and it was great.

Well, you must be the first and only person in Soldin to practise hypnosis, I said, even counting Rosow. But what are these people after? Why do they come to you for hypnosis? Because not many people can do it, Micki said,

and he offered it for all purposes and personal circumstances. But the people who go walking around here all look very healthy, I said, not at all like nutters or whatever you're meant to call them. That may be true, he said, but everyone had some secret wishes, and hypnosis allowed him to fulfil them.

We were standing in my hallway, Micki in Siegfried's work clothes, which would always be too big for him, holding Ernst's drill wrapped in an oilcloth, and me in my house dress because I had to go out later to cut the nettles. Ernst had always sworn by oilcloths to protect his machines, and why shouldn't I keep up the tradition for his sake, even if he was dead?

And so people pay you for this? I asked, figuring that now we'd got this far I might as well spit out my question. For heaven's sake, no, Micki said, shocked, of course not. That would be illegal for several reasons. I'm not a psychologist because I was kicked off my course, these people aren't recognised patients, and only recognised psychologists are allowed to take payment from recognised patients for therapeutic treatment. None of which applied in his case. However, his visitors sometimes made a contribution towards their living costs, and if they gave a little more than he'd spent, you couldn't ban that between friends. I see, I said, so how much do they give you? You're a nosy one, Lilo, he said, and then he said it was hard to say exactly, but it probably came to a couple of hundred marks per week. That's the price of a hotel, I said then, but he said it wasn't a price, it was splitting costs between friends, and I said I wouldn't tell anyone and he should bring the drill back quickly because he knew

Ernst didn't like lending his things and I didn't want to stab him in the back, even now he was dead.

## *Anika*

Just before she had to raise her clenched fist to knock on the green wooden door, the whole thing not only struck her as silly and pointless, but she was suddenly conscious of the silliness and pointlessness of her cause, as if she were waking from a daydream, from a baseless whim, a kind of utterly assured delirium. It was as if reality were slowly and painfully emerging from its perfect cover, forcing a distraught Anika to acknowledge that it was not reality that had been hiding the whole time within this landscape but that this whole time reality had *been* this landscape. Everything was in flux and nothing was what it appeared to be because she had succumbed to an illusion.

How on earth had she imagined that she might find a way out behind a weather-beaten wooden gate in the Lower Oder Valley? With a little luck no one would shoot at her and the only harm would be getting a splinter from knocking, but there was no chance of anyone opening this gate and taking her on a trip to Paris. Anika felt a powerful urge to turn around, get out of here and go home. How had she managed to ignore reality and block out the fact that nothing about this stacked up? She had handed in a request for leave and bought a train ticket and packed her holdall, as if she were a character in a film she was watching, not understanding the plot but having a certain stake in the outcome.

One night she had, not for the first time, knocked back one vermouth and lemon juice after another with Doreen while smoking packet after packet of Clubs, and sooner

or later, as always when she was totally wasted, she'd started talking about her great trip to Paris. She had described arriving in Orly, taking metro line 7 to Villejuif, the hotel in Montmartre, the wonderful days around the Eiffel Tower, paying a visit to Morrison and Laurencin at Père Lachaise cemetery, the incomparable *café au lait* at the Café de la Paix and so on and on and on. She could list every centime, what she had spent it on, how much a week's metro pass cost and the entrance price to the Louvre (it was cheaper after six on Tuesdays).

Anika realised she got on Doreen's nerves. That she got on everyone's nerves in fact. Her France monologues were amazingly gauche in every respect. They weren't really a winner with men either. They would back away anxiously from her when she got into this state, unable to figure out what to make of her pernickety accounts of imaginary travels. Were they the crazed thoughts of a mentally ill person, or the travelogue of a woman who was on the one hand sitting here, chatting about her job as a secretary at the state-owned Lacquer and Paint Company over glass after glass of Grey Monk, and yet privileged enough to take sightseeing trips to Paris? Or was she just an 'informal collaborator' trying to make them talk when silence would be the sensible option. Either way, it was better to have nothing to do with a woman like her and try their luck elsewhere.

Anika too found it a little risky to lapse into inebriated, hours-long monologues about her dream journey to Paris. It was no secret that the secret services spent a lot of time eavesdropping on the populace and that informers might be anywhere. She

thought it unlikely that her old schoolfriend Doreen was one of the eyes-and-ears gang, but could she be so sure?

When drunkenness got the better of her inhibitions, she didn't go in for bellowing drinking songs or flashing her boobs at men. Instead she talked about Paris, the arrondissements, the buses, the parks, the rude waiters, the toy boats in the Jardin du Luxembourg and so on and so forth. She had assembled this trip from an infinite number of tiny pieces - TV reports, novels, newspaper articles and small radio items. The slightest mention of Paris sparked Anika's attention. If the French president - who, since 1981, had been François Mitterand, whom Anika liked a bit less than his predecessor despite having no political opinion about either; it was just that the name Valéry Giscard d'Estaing was so magnificently and unnecessarily complicated and French - had announced a nuclear strike on East Germany, the news would have exercised her less than the question of whether he had entered the Élysée Palace, with its wonderful view of the Champs-Élysées, via the Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré or through the side entrance in the Rue de l'Élysée.

She couldn't help herself. She had planned and made this journey so often in her mind, honing the details and perfecting the route, that she oozed Paris from her every pore. Matters were not improved by the fact that this journey had never taken place and nothing in the next forty years or so was going to change that.

'You know what?' Doreen finally said during a momentary lull in Anika's account while she contemplated whether you changed from metro line 4 onto line 2 at Gare du Nord or Barbès-Rochechouart. 'I've heard something that might interest you. Apparently there's this guy in the

Oder Valley who can organise any trip you like. Anywhere.'

'In the Oderbruch?' They were almost yelling at each other by now because their cerebellums were too numbed to facilitate any more subtle tongue movement.

'Nooo, in the Lower Oder Valley,' Doreen said. 'That's north of the Oderbruch.'

'Same difference.'

'Maybe, but not the same thing.' Neither of them really knew why this made them giggle, but after two bottles of Gotano Bianco and lemon juice, it was a bit too late for analysis.

The subject was quickly swept from the table, but the other subjects it saw that evening were many and varied. The two young women struggled to focus.

Nevertheless, the next time they met, Anika asked her friend about the guy in the Oder Valley again. Fortunately they had planned to have an ice cream so this time, apart from the advocaat in the Swedish sundae, there was no alcohol involved.

'Remember that night at the Harmonie?'

'Not a thing,' Doreen said in disgust. 'The Thuringians may be talented at some things - you know, Goethe and all that - but they should leave making vermouth to other people.'

'Maybe we just drank too much?'

'That too. But look, when I drink Nordhaus brandy - another Thuringian product - all I need the next morning are a glass of water and an aspirin to make it through the day. After an evening of Gotano I get headaches in every colour of the pain rainbow the next day. Thuringians should be banned from making foreign

liqueurs. Not that I want to lay into our southern friends alone. The Berliners should concentrate on making clear brandies and stay well away from juniper. To call that Schilkin stuff gin is like declaring war on the British Empire.'

'A completely different subject: you said something about a guy who can arrange any trip you like. In the Under Valley or somewhere? Is that right, or were you just drunk? Or was I?'

'The Lower Oder Valley,' Doreen confirmed. 'I heard about it from my mum's aunt who lives somewhere nearby. She said the guy lives on an isolated farm, but he isn't dangerous. And apparently he can take you anywhere you want with hypnosis.'

'Hypnosis?'

'That's what I understood, but you know how it is - my mother told me after supposedly hearing from her aunt Margrit about a man who lives nearby. It might just be Chinese whispers and it'll turn out it was nothing but a guy in low-cut jeans walking through her village.'

'But if so why would they bother telling each other about it?'

'I agree there must be something to it or I wouldn't have told you.'

'Because of course you know how long I've dreamed of going to Paris . . .'

'Anika,' her friend cut in, 'anyone who's been with you for more than two glasses of wine knows how you dream of going to Paris. Everyone. You know how much I like you. You're my best friend, you're clever and beautiful and we've had lots of great experiences together and lots of shit ones too, but somehow you've got to shake off this obsession with Paris. It's going to be a few

decades before you retire, so you're either going to have to cope for the next thirty years until you can finally realise your dream or we need to start looking for a different solution. Because I don't know how many more times I can listen to you talking about taking the Rare K to Versailles.'

'The *RER*,' Anika said with a French accent, 'and it's line L.'

'Whatever,' Doreen said impatiently. 'The fact is that you're not going to take K or L or any other line before 2023, and 2023 is a very long way away. In any case, I am not going to put up with listening to those stories of yours for just under another forty years.'

'Forty years.'

'Just under.'

'Okay.'

They fell silent. Being silent in each other's company was almost the nicest feature of their friendship.

'So that's why I pricked up my ears when my mum told me about this guy in the Oder Valley who might be able to help you. I thought it couldn't possibly do you any harm, and hopefully it'll be useful. I mean, it's not like there are any other holiday plans you can make that will help.'

'True,' Anika said. 'It's not like a metro is going to pull up alongside me on Rügen or in the Thuringian Forest. I might as well try my luck in the . . . Lower Oder Valley.'

'Go for it! Try it out. I'll ask Mum for the exact address.'

Then Anika ate a Black Forest cherry sundae and Doreen a Swedish sundae, which was apparently the favourite dessert of East Germany's first leader, Walter Ulbricht.

A few days later, Doreen did indeed hand Anika an address and postcode. Fabrikberg 2, 1321 Soldin.

'Fabrikberg?' Anika asked. 'Weird name.'

Doreen shrugged. 'That's what she wrote down.'

'All right then. Off I go to the factory on the hill.'

**[END OF SAMPLE]**