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Pavol Rankov – Slovakia

*Stalo sa prvého septembra
(alebo inokedy) (2008)*

It Happened on September the First (or whenever)

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Biography

Pavol Rankov (b. 01.09.1964 Poprad, Slovakia)

Pavol Rankov is a writer of prose fiction, essayist, journalist, information scientist and university pedagogue. After completing his secondary schooling in Bratislava he studied library science at the Philosophical Faculty of Bratislava's Comenius University (1983-1987). He worked as a methodologist in the Slovak National Library in Martin (1987-1990) and in the Slovak Pedagogic Library in Bratislava (1991-1992). Since 1993, he has worked at the Department of Library Science and Scientific Information at Comenius University in Bratislava. He participates in projects with Slovak Radio. He lives in Bratislava.

Synopsis

On September 1, 1938, at a fashionable swimming pool in Levice in the centre of Europe, three thirteen-year-old adolescents – Hungarian, Czech and Jewish – decided to compete in a swimming competition to win a claim over a Slovak blonde, Mária. The three friends' contest for love is repeated in virtually every year of the novel's progress, but the race never ends in victory. The novel rushes its characters onward through political tribulations, but never allows them to finish the fateful race. Even though the characters' lives are filled with incredible events, they are never filled with the most sacred emotion of them all – love. Nobody wins Mária and Mária, the most innocent, loses all.

Stalo sa prvého septembra (alebo inokedy)

Pavol Rankov

Epizóda 1951

Prvého septembra bola sobota. Ján si na tento dátum preložil poslednú skúšku z letného semestra.

Vstal z lavice, v ktorej si robil prípravu, a sadol si na stoličku oproti katedre.

Tak kolega, ukážte mi najskôr, akú otázku ste si vytiahli, – povedal bodro profesor Očovský. Ján mu podal papierik a povedal:

Clostridium botulinum.

– *Clostridium botulinum?* ! – potešil sa profesor. – To je zlatý fond predmetu Bakteriológia II. Tak spustíte.

– *Clostridium botulinum* je baktéria rozmnožujúca sa v konzervovaných potravinách, ak boli sterilizované pri nedostatočnej teplote. Spôsobuje otravu nazývanú botulinizmus. Botulinizmus sa prejavuje bolesťami hlavy, smädom, dvojitým videním, ochrnutím dýchacích svalov, problémami pri hovorení a prehĺtaní. Ale vrátim sa k samotnej baktérii.

– Nevracajte sa nikam, kolega, – usmial sa profesor Očovský. – Dajte index, zapíšem vám jednotku.

– Tak rýchlo? – prekvapil sa Ján. Profesor rázne vpísal do Jánovho indexu známku a vrátil mu ho.

– Nech sa páči... Ale nechodte ešte preč. Musíte sa zastaviť na konci chodby v miestnosti číslo štyridsaťdeväť.

Pravdaže, hneď tam idem, – tešil sa stále Ján. – Dovidenia. A ešte raz ďakujem.

Nedakujte, kolega, nie je za čo, – povedal profesor, keď sa dvere za Jánom zatvorili.

Ján sa tejto skúšky, presnejšie nevyspytateľných nálad skúšajúceho profesora Očovského, obával rovnako ako všetci spolužiaci. Preto ho veľmi potešilo, ako rýchlo a ľahko sa dostal k jednotke. Bola to známka, akou sa z Bakteriológie II. mohol pochváliť málokto.

Keď Ján klopal na dvere číslo 49, ešte stále sa usmieval. A úsmev mu nezmizol z tváre, ani keď vošiel dnu a zastal oproti šedivému päťdesiatnikovi, ktorý sedel za úzkym stolom. Muž mal na sebe tmavomodrý oblek, ktorého rukávy boli odspodu tak vyšúchané, až sa leskli. Slnečné lúče prenikajúce do malej miestnosti spoza jeho chrbta sa na predlaktiach odrážali ako na hladine jazera. Na stole pred mužom bolo niekoľko papierov. Niektoré popísané strojom, iné modrým perom.

– Dobrý deň. Posiela ma súdruh profesor Očovský, – povedal veselo Ján.

– Potom musíte byť súdruh Ján Bízek, – potešil sa muž a vyskočil, aby podal Jánovi ruku. Zo stola pritom zhodil niekoľko papierov. Ján ich chcel zdvihnúť, ale chlapík sa rozkričal:

– Nie, rozhodne mi to nedvíhajte. Všetko si pozbieram sám. Vy si, súdruh Bízek, sadnite tu do kresla, nech sa páči.

Ján sa posadil a pozoroval muža, ktorý si usporadúval hárky, ktoré zdvihol zo zeme. Potom sa obrátil k Jánovi. Obaja sa usmievali a zároveň si uvedomovali, že vlastne nie je dôvod, aby sa usmievali.

– Tak ako dopadla skúška? – spýtal sa muž.

– Na jednotku, – pochválil sa Ján.

– Veď preto, – zdvihol muž veselo prst, – prihovoril som sa za vás u súdruha Očovského.

– Prihovorili ste sa?

– Áno, sme s ním starí známi. Prízvukoval som súdruhovi Očovskému, aby vás veľmi neunavil a nezdržal, – usmial sa muž a pleskol si dlaňami po stehnách, akoby tým chcel vyjadriť, ako veľmi ho teší, že sa dobrá vec podarila.

– A prečo ste sa za mňa prihovorili?

– Nechcel som, aby ste za mnou prišli v zlej nálade a unavený. Veľmi mi záležalo, aby náš rozhovor bol priateľský a príjemný. Nechcem vás oberať o čas, je predsa sobota.

Jánovi zrazu napadlo, že pred ním sedí tajný. Zaváhal, či sa má na to rovno spýtať, alebo predstierať, že zatiaľ ničomu nerozumie. Rozhodol sa pre to druhé.

– Ale ja vôbec nechápem, prečo sme sa stretli.

– Mám pre vás ponuku.

– Akú?

– V Trenčíne nedávno vznikol potravinársky výskumný ústav.

– Áno? Nepočul som o tom.

– Tak to má byť. Je to tajné vojenské pracovisko. Dobre, že ste o tom až doteraz nepočuli. Muž vytiahol cigarety.

– Zapálite si? – spýtal sa.

– Nie, ďakujem, – Ján premohol chuť na cigaretu.

– Nie? Myslel som si, že fajčíte.

– Fajčím, ale teraz si nedám.

– Ach tak, – pokýval muž zamyslene hlavou. – Tak budem fajčiť sám.

Muž si zopárkrát potichu potiahol. Zadržoval dym v ústach a vychutnával jeho chuť. Ján ho pozoroval a čoraz viac ho mrzelo, že si nedal aj on.

– Ale k veci, – strhol sa zrazu muž. – Výskumné pracovisko v Trenčíne potrebuje šikovných ľudí. Podľa možnosti mladých. Takých, ktorí majú záujem o potravinársku chémiu a zároveň si uvedomujú, že pracujú v poprednom ústave strategického významu, kde je všetko, takpovediac, prísne tajné.

Jánovi sa uľavilo. Takže nejde o výsluch súvisiaci s nedávno ukončeným prípadom Máriinho otca, ale o ponuku práce.

– Spýtam sa vás teda priamo: Chceli by ste pracovať v takom vedecko-výskumnom ústave?

– Áno, – odvetil Ján, – ale čaká ma ešte rok štúdia.

– Diplomovku by ste písali na tému, ktorej by ste sa venovali aj v ústave, – vysvetlil muž. – Samozrejme, museli by sme si dať pozor, aby ste v nej nevyzradili nejaké štátne tajomstvo. Ale to by nebol problém. Prečítali by sme si to a posúdili, či niečo netreba vylúčiť.

– Takže by som mohol nastúpiť už počas štúdia?

– Presne to vám ponúkam. Užite si ešte letné prázdniny a začnite pracovať od prvého septembra.

– To by bolo práma, – rozžiarili sa Jánovi oči.

– V poslednom ročníku už máte len zopár predmetov. Možno by sme vám vedeli vybaviť, aby ste chodili do školy len každý druhý týždeň. Ján súhlasne pokýval hlavou.

– Mimochodom, – pokračoval nezáväzne muž, – povedali ste, že by to bolo práma. To je také české slovo – práma. Vy ste pôvodom Čech, však?

– Áno, – odvetil Ján.

– Takže Jan, a nie Ján, – usmial sa muž.

– Už dlho žijem na Slovensku, – vysvetlil Ján.

– Ale dospievanie ste cez vojnu prežili v Protektoráte, však?

– Áno, v Brne.

– Tam ste stratili rodičov, však?

Ján pokýval hlavou:

– Vidím, že o mne viete všetko. Armáda je armáda.

– To teda máte pravdu, vieme skoro všetko, – zasmial sa muž. – Len vaša sestra je pre nás veľká záhada.

Ján mlčal.

– Čo by ste mi o nej vedeli povedať?

– Skoro nič. Zmizla počas vojny. Obávam sa, že tiež zahynula.

– Ale hovorilo sa o nej všeličo, – povedal muž a zahľadel sa na Jána.

– Naposledy som ju videl niekedy v štyridsiatom druhom alebo treťom. Nebývala s nami.

– A kde pracovala?

– Tak toto naozaj neviem, verte mi.

– Predstavte si, že vám verím. Ani nám sa o nej nepodarilo nič zistiť.

Muž znovu vytiahol balíček s cigaretami.

– Naozaj si nedáte?

– Dám.

– No vidíte, – muž sa potešil, akoby získal Jánov súhlas v nejakej mimoriadne závažnej veci. Keď Ján vydýchol prvý obláčik dymu, ticho sa spýtal:

– Vadí to?

– Čo? – spýtal sa nechápavo muž.

No... – hľadal Ján slová, – Protektorát a tak.

– Ale kdeže, – zasmial sa muž, – skôr naopak. Pracovali ste predsa v konzervárni. To sa vám ráta ako prax. Ján spokojne pokýval hlavou.

– Ale je tu ešte čosi, – povedal muž, keď zatlačal ohorok do popolníka. Otvoril zásuvku a chvíľu sa v nej prehraboval.

– Aha, už to mám, – usmial sa, keď sa vystrel. Ján na neho nedôverčivo pozeral.

– Toto, – povedal muž a podal mu novinový výstrižok.

Jánovi stačil jediný pohľad na fotografiu a nadpis Krysy utekajú, no hrdinovia sa vracajú. Bol to článok, v ktorom Peter písal o Jánovom pobyte v Izraeli.

– Takže vy ste hrdina, – povedal muž bezfarebným hlasom.

– Ja som to nepísal, – hlesol Ján.

– Aby sme si rozumeli, nič vám nevyčítam. Všetci sme očakávali, že sa Izrael stane baštou boja proti americkému a britskému imperializmu na Blízkom východe. Aj súdruh Stalin predsa podporil vznik židovského štátu. Ide o to, že je to úplne iný štát, ako sme predpokladali.

– Ja za to nemôžem, – povedal Ján a sám sa pousmial nad hlúposťou svojej odpovede.

– Máte tam asi mnoho priateľov. Čo si oni myslia o vývoji v Izraeli?

– Nemám tam žiadnych priateľov.

– To nie je možné. Za dva roky ste sa s nikým nezblížili?

– Zblížil som sa s jednou arabskou dievčinou. Keď sa rozpúťali boje, jej rodina z Izraela ušla. Nemám potuchy, čo je s ňou teraz.

– Čo si myslíte o sionizme?

– Sionizmus je sťahovanie Židov do Palestíny?

– Nie, sionizmus je židovská doktrína ovládnutia sveta, – povedal muž ostro.

– Nikdy som sa tým nezaoberal, – Ján si nervózne začal čistiť okuliare.

– A čo si myslí o sionizme váš priateľ Rosenberg?

– Len pred pár mesiacmi ho prepustili z pľúcneho sanatória. Mal tuberkulózu. Bojoval o život. Jeho politika nezaujíma, za to sa vám môžem zaručiť.

Ján si spomenul na chvíle, keď spolu s Gabrielom stáli na lodi pred britským veliteľom. Kričal vtedy, I am not a Jew.

– Neviem, či ste o tom informovaný, – povedal napokon Ján, – ale ja nie som Žid.

– Viem to, – pokyvoval muž pomaly hlavou, – ale neprikladám tomu veľký význam. Rovnako ako ja viete, kto sú Židia. Bankári, veľkopodnikatelia, milionári. Pre nich nie je problém kúpiť si kohokoľvek. Čecha, Slováka, Araba. Rosenbergovi jeho otec poslal drahé lieky.

– Mňa si nekúpili. Ani mi nechceli dať štipendium na štúdium.

– Tak študujete u nás. A to je dobre, aspoň môžete prispieť k budovaniu socializmu vo svojej vlasti, – povedal muž. Ján ho nepokojne pozoroval. Čakal ďalší útok. Muž vstal od stola a podišiel k oknu.

– Súdruh Bízek, dúfam, že vám nevádi, že vás takto, takpovediac, spovedám. Musíte nás chápať. Ponúkame vám predsa dôležitú prácu v ústave s vysokým strategickým významom. Všade okolo nás zúri studená vojna. Na Kórejskom polostrove ju dokonca imperialisti premenili na horúcu. Zomierajú tisíce nevinných ľudí. Teraz sa rozhoduje nielen o budúcnosti Kórey či Československa, ale aj o budúcnosti sveta. Muž si sadol za stôl. Opäť prehovoril hlasom zbaveným všetkých emócií:

– Váš budúci svokor dostal len sedem rokov. Keď si predstavíme, z čoho všetkého ho obvinila obžaloba, nebolo to veľa. Aj vy ste čakali viac, však? Jánova tvár očervenela. Napadlo mu, že by mal vyskočiť a chlapa oproti sebe udrieť. Mal by ho

zabiť. Asi by sa mu to podarilo urobiť skôr, než by ten podliak stihol vytiahnuť revolver, ak vôbec nejaký má. Ján si predstavil, ako jeho ruky pomaly púšťajú mužovo hrdlo a bezvládne telo sa zosype pod stôl. Ten obraz ho upokojil, takže mohol povedať:

– Čakal som, že pána Belaja oslobodia. Nebol som síce v Leviciach cez vojnu, ale som si istý, že neurobil nikomu nič zlé. Nebol fašista.

– Na súde to tvrdil aj Rosenberg. Ján vstal:

– Odchádzam.

– Počkajte, – rozhodil muž prekvapene ruky. – Vy ste ma nepochopili. Ja vás z ničoho neobviňujem. Nič proti vám nemáme. Ba čo viac, ponúkame vám spoluprácu. Chceme, aby ste svoje schopnosti rozvíjali v prísne tajnom armádnom laboratóriu. A zároveň od vás očakávame aj ďalšiu spoluprácu.

– Akú? – spýtal sa Ján.

– Chceme len toľko, aby ste napísali o všetkom, čo ste z-ažili v Izraeli. Samozrejme nemusíte písať o vašej arabskej milenke, ale len o veciach súvisiacich s armádou. Mená osôb, názvy jednotiek, spôsob boja.

– Radšej nie.

– Nie? – muž sa zasmial. – Vy si asi neuvedomujete, nakoľko od nás závisí váš život. Bojovali ste v cudzej, dokonca izraelskej armáde. Váš najlepší priateľ dostáva balíky z Izraela. No ja zatiaľ netvrdím, že ste sionistický špión. Vaša sestra bola fanatická nacistka. Otec vašej frajerky je zavretý za zločiny, ktoré spáchal v uniforme šíповých krížov. No ja zatiaľ netvrdím, že aj vy ste zakuklený fašista. V tejto chvíli ešte veríme, že ste na našej strane, veď vám dovoľíme, aby ste naďalej študovali. Dokonca aj vašej frajerke. Mali by ste však svoj vzťah k ľudovodemokratickej vlasti a našej robotníckej triede nejako

prejaviť. Možno stojíte na križovatke a ja vás nabádam, aby ste vykročili správnym smerom. Ján horúčkovito uvažoval. Podľa procesu s Máriiným otcom vedel, ako málo stačí na obvinenie z akéhokoľvek zločinu.

– Dáte mi aspoň čas na rozmyslenie? – spýtal sa Ján.

– Pravdaže, – usmial sa muž. – Stretneme sa v pondelok o jedenástej. Tu. Ale neurobte zatiaľ nijakú hlúposť. Rozhodne nehovorte nikomu o našom stretnutí. To by sa mohlo považovať za ďalší dôkaz proti vám.

Ján svoju prvú správu musel odovzdať do polovice augusta. Uviedol v nej všetko, o čo ho eštebák žiadal: mená osôb, názvy jednotiek, spôsob boja, s akým sa v izraelskej armáde stretol. Napísal dokonca ešte viac. Ak si na nejaké meno nevedel spomenúť, vymyslel si ho. Vedel, že týmto opisom nikomu neublíži. Na ľudí, ktorých v správe spomínal, nemohla mať žiaden dosah československá Štátna bezpečnosť, presnejšie jej zložka zameraná na vojenskú kontrarozvedku, kam zrejme patril muž, ktorý Jána riadil.

Najviac však Ján písal o ceste z Izraela domov. Trikrát uviedol, že sedel v lietadle spolu s nositeľom vyznamenania Hrdina Sovietskeho zväzu Antonínom Sochorom. Tešil sa, aký zmätok v Štátnej bezpečnosti táto informácia vyvolá. Na Sochorovu hodnosť si však už presne nespomínal, a tak ho raz označil za majora, potom za kapitána a tretíkrát za dôstojníka.

Stretnutie, na ktorom Ján správu odovzdal, bolo krátke. Prešedivený muž si ju len zbežne prehliadol a uškrnul sa:

– No vidíte, ani to nebolelo.

It Happened on September the First (or whenever)

Pavol Rankov

Translated from the Slovak by Heather Trebaticka – Episode 1951

The first of September was a Saturday. Ján had postponed his last summer term exam until this date.

He got up from the desk where he had been preparing his notes and sat down on the chair in front of the examiner's table.

'Well, colleague, first show me what question you have drawn,' said Professor Očovský genially. Ján handed him the slip of paper and said, 'Clostridium botulinum.' 'Clostridium botulinum? !' the professor repeated with evident pleasure. 'That is the gold reserve of Bacteriology II. Well, let's have it.'

'Clostridium botulinum is a group of bacteria to be found in food that has been sterilized at an insufficient temperature. It causes poisoning known as botulism. The symptoms of botulism are headaches, thirst, double vision, paralysis of the respiratory muscles, difficulty in speaking and swallowing. But I'll come back to the bacteria itself.'

'Don't come back to anything, colleague,' Professor Očovský said, smiling. 'Hand me your student record book. I'll write a first in it.'

'That quick?' Ján was surprised.

The professor briskly wrote in the grade and returned the book to Ján.

'Here you are... But don't go away yet. You must stop by at room forty-nine at the end of the corridor.'

‘Of course, I’ll go there right now,’ Ján said, still feeling elated. ‘Goodbye. And thank you once again.’

‘Don’t thank me, colleague, there’s nothing to thank me for,’ said the professor, when the door had closed behind Ján.

Ján had been as apprehensive about this exam as all his fellow students, or to be more exact, apprehensive about the unpredictable moods of the examiner, Professor Očovský. Which is why he was very pleased to have got a first so quickly and effortlessly. It was a grade that few people could boast of having for Bacteriology II.

When Ján knocked on door number 49, he was still smiling. The smile didn’t even disappear from his face when he entered and found himself standing before a grey-haired man of about fifty, who was sitting at a narrow table. The man had on a dark blue suit, the sleeves of which had been rubbed so smooth on the underside that they shone. The rays of sunshine penetrating the small room from behind his back reflected off his forearms as off the surface of a lake. On the table in front of the man lay several sheets of paper. Some typed, others covered with writing in blue pen.

‘Good afternoon. Professor Očovský sent me here,’ Ján announced cheerfully.

‘Then you must be Comrade Ján Bízek,’ said the man, looking pleased, and he jumped up to offer Ján his hand. In doing so, he knocked several of the papers off the table. Ján went to pick them up, but the fellow cried out, ‘No, no, don’t pick them up. I’ll collect them all myself. Please sit down here in this armchair, Comrade Bízek.’

Ján sat down and watched the man putting in order the sheets he had picked up from the floor. The man then turned to Ján. Both of them smiled, at the same time aware that there really was no reason to smile.

‘Well, what did you get for the exam?’ asked the man.

‘A first,’ Ján boasted.

‘I should think so,’ the man said, cheerfully raising a finger. ‘I put in a word for you with Comrade Očovský.’

‘You put in a word for me?’

‘Yes. He and I are old acquaintances. I urged Comrade Očovský not to wear you out or keep you long,’ the man said, smiling and slapping his hands on his thighs, as if to show how delighted he was that his plan had worked out.

‘And why did you put in a word for me?’

‘I didn’t want you to come and see me tired and in a bad mood. I was anxious that our talk should be friendly and pleasant. I don’t want to take up your time. It is Saturday after all.’

It suddenly occurred to Ján that the man sitting in front of him was a secret policeman. He wondered whether to ask him outright, or pretend for the time being that he had no idea what it was all about. He decided on the latter.

‘But I don’t understand why I’m here.’

‘I have an offer for you.’

‘What kind of offer?’

‘A food research institute has recently been set up in Trenčín.’

‘Really? I haven’t heard about it.’

‘That’s how it should be. It’s a secret military establishment. It’s a good thing you haven’t heard about it yet.’

The man pulled out a box of cigarettes.

‘Will you?’ he asked.

‘No, thank you,’ Ján suppressed his longing for a cigarette.

‘No? I thought you smoked.’

‘I do, but I won’t have one now.’

‘Ah, so that’s it,’ the man nodded his head pensively.

‘Then I’ll smoke alone.’

The man quietly drew on his cigarette a couple of times. He held the smoke in his mouth and relished its taste. Ján watched him, increasingly wishing he had lit up too.

‘But to get down to business,’ the man suddenly stirred himself. ‘The research institute in Trenčín needs clever people. Preferably young. People interested in food chemistry, who at the same time realise they are working for a leading institute of strategic importance, where it could be said everything is strictly top secret.’

Ján felt relieved. So it wasn’t an interrogation connected with the recently concluded case of Maria’s father, but an offer of work.

‘So I’ll ask you directly. Would you like to work in such a scientific research institute?’

‘Yes, I would,’ Ján replied, ‘but I’ve still got a year of studies ahead of me.’

‘You’d write your degree thesis on a topic you’d be dealing with at the institute,’ explained the man. ‘Of course, we’d have to make sure you didn’t reveal any state secrets in it. But that would be no problem. We’d read it through and judge whether anything needs to be omitted.’

‘So I could start work while I’m still studying?’

‘That’s just what I’m offering. You could still enjoy the summer holidays and you’d begin work from the first of September.’

‘That’d be marvellous. Prima.’ Ján’s eyes lit up.

‘You’ll only have a couple of subjects in your final year. We might be able to arrange for you to attend classes just every other week.’

Ján nodded his head in agreement.

‘By the way,’ the man went on noncommittally, ‘you said that would be ‘prima’. That’s a very Czech word – prima. You’re Czech by birth, aren’t you?’

‘Yes,’ Ján replied.

‘Then you’re Jan and not Ján,’ the man said with a smile.

‘I’ve been living in Slovakia for a long time,’ Ján explained.

‘But you grew up during the war in the Protectorate, didn’t you?’

‘Yes, in Brno.’

‘You lost your parents there, didn’t you?’

Ján nodded. ‘I see you know everything about me. That’s the army for you.’

‘You’re right there. We know almost everything,’ the man laughed. ‘Just your sister is a great mystery to us.’

Ján said nothing.

‘What could you tell me about her?’

‘Hardly anything. She disappeared during the war. I’m afraid she must have died as well.’

‘But there was all kinds of talk about her,’ the man said, fixing his eyes on Ján.

‘The last time I saw her was in forty-two or three. She didn’t live with us.’

‘Where did she work?’

‘That I really don’t know, believe me.’

‘It might surprise you, but I do believe you. We didn’t manage to find out anything about her either.’

The man took out the box of cigarettes again.

‘You really won’t have one?’

‘Yes, I will.’

‘You see,’ the man looked as pleased as if he had got Ján to agree to something of exceptional importance.

When Ján had breathed out the first little cloud of smoke, he asked quietly, ‘Does that matter?’

‘What?’ the man asked, puzzled.

‘Well...’ Ján was searching for words. ‘The Protectorate and all that.’

‘Oh, no,’ the man laughed, ‘rather the opposite. After all, you worked in a canning factory. That counts in your favour as experience.’

Ján nodded, satisfied.

‘But there’s something else,’ said the man, stubbing out his cigarette in the ash tray. He opened a drawer and rummaged around in it for a while.

‘Ah, here it is,’ he announced, smiling as he straightened himself up.

Ján looked at him distrustfully.

‘This,’ said the man, handing him a newspaper cutting.

Ján only had to glance at the photo and the heading Rats run away, but heroes come back. It was the article Peter had written about Ján’s stay in Israel.

‘So you’re a hero,’ the man said in a colourless voice.

‘I didn’t write it,’ murmured Ján.

‘Let’s get this right, I’m not reproaching you for anything.’

We all expected Israel to become a bastion in the struggle against American and British imperialism in the Middle East. After all, Comrade Stalin also supported the founding of a Jewish state. The thing is, it's quite a different state from what we expected.'

'I can't help that,' said Ján, himself smiling faintly at the stupidity of his answer.

'You've probably got a lot of friends there. What do they think about the developments in Israel?'

'I haven't got any friends there.'

'That can't be true. In two years you didn't make friends with anyone?'

'I made friends with an Arab girl. When the fighting broke out, her family fled from Israel. I've no idea what's happened to her now.'

'What do you think about Zionism?'

'Zionism is Jews moving into Palestine?'

'No, Zionism is the doctrine of Jewish world rule,' the man said sharply.

'I've never thought about it,' Ján uneasily began to clean his glasses.

'And what does your friend Rosenberg think about Zionism?'

'They only let him out of the lung sanatorium a couple of months ago. He had tuberculosis. He was fighting for his life. He's not interested in politics, I can assure you of that.'

Ján remembered a moment when he and Gabriel had been standing before a British commander on a ship. On that occasion he had shouted, I am not a Jew.

‘I don’t know whether anyone has informed you,’ Ján said eventually, ‘but I am not a Jew.’

‘I know that,’ the man slowly nodded his head, ‘but I don’t consider that to be very important. You know as well as I do who are Jews. Bankers, big businessman, millionaires. It’s no problem for them to buy anyone. A Czech, a Slovak, an Arab. Rosenberg’s father sent him expensive medicines.’

‘They didn’t buy me. They didn’t even want to give me a grant to study.’

‘So you’re studying here. And that’s a good thing. At least you can contribute to the building of socialism in your own country,’ the man said.

Ján observed him anxiously. He was expecting another attack.

The man got up from the table and went over to the window.

‘Comrade Bízek, I hope you don’t mind me, you might say, questioning you like this. You must understand. After all, we’re offering you important work in an institute of strategic importance. A cold war is raging all around us. On the Korean peninsular the imperialists have even made it a hot one. Thousands of innocent people are dying. Now it is not only the future of Korea or Czechoslovakia that is being decided, but the future of the world.’

The man sat down at the table. Once more he spoke in a voice void of all emotion: ‘Your future father-in-law only got seven years. When you consider all the things he was accused of by the prosecution, it wasn’t much. You yourself expected more, didn’t you?’

Ján’s face flushed. It occurred to him that he should jump up and hit the man facing him. He should kill him. He could

probably do it before the rat could pull out his revolver; that is, if he had one. Ján imagined his hands slowly letting go of the man's throat and his lifeless body collapsing under the table. The image had a calming effect on him, so he was able to say, 'I expected Mr. Belaj to be released. I wasn't in Levice during the war, it's true, but I'm sure he didn't do anyone any harm. He wasn't a fascist.'

'That's what Rosenberg claimed in court too.'

Ján got to his feet. 'I'm going.'

'Wait a minute,' the man said, throwing up his arms in surprise. 'You misunderstood me. I'm not accusing you of anything. We've got nothing against you. What's more, we are offering you a chance to work for us. We want you to develop your talent in a top secret military laboratory. And at the same time we expect you to cooperate in another way.'

'What way?' asked Ján.

'All we want is for you to write down everything you experienced in Israel. Of course you needn't write about your Arab girlfriend, but just about things concerning the army. Names of people, units, the manner of combat.'

'I'd rather not.'

'No?' The man laughed. 'You probably don't realise to what extent your life is in our hands. You fought in a foreign army, the Israeli army even. Your best friend receives parcels from Israel. But as yet I'm not claiming you are a Zionist spy. Your sister was a fanatical Nazi. Your girlfriend's father has been jailed for crimes he committed in the uniform of the Arrow Cross Party. But I'm still not claiming you are a fascist in disguise. At present we still believe you are on our side. After all, we are allowing you to continue your studies. Even your girlfriend too. But you should show your attitude towards our

people's democracy and working class in some way. Maybe you are standing at a crossroads and I'm encouraging you to go in the right direction.'

Thoughts raced through Ján's mind. He knew from the trial of Mária's father how little it took to be accused of any crime whatsoever.

'Will you at least give me time to consider?' he asked.

'Of course,' said the man with a smile. 'We'll meet on Monday at eleven. Here. But don't do anything stupid in the meantime. You should definitely not tell anyone about our meeting. That could be considered further proof against you.'

Ján had to hand in his first report by the middle of August. He included in it everything the secret policeman had asked of him: the names of people, units, the manner of combat he had met with in the Israeli army. He wrote even more. If he couldn't remember a name, he made it up. He knew this information could do no one any harm. The people mentioned in his report were well beyond the reach of the Czechoslovak State Security, or more precisely, its branch specialising in military counter-intelligence that the man in charge of Ján clearly belonged to.

Ján wrote, however, at great length about his journey back from Israel. He mentioned three times that in the plane he had sat next to a bearer of the title Hero of the Soviet Union, Antonín Sochor. He thought gleefully of the commotion this would cause in the State Security. But he couldn't remember exactly Sochor's rank, so he once referred to him as a major, then a captain and the third time as an officer.

The meeting at which Ján handed over his report was short. The grey-haired man just glanced over it and smirked.

'You see, it didn't even hurt.'



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