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# DOSSIER: ANTUN ŠOLJAN

## The Mannheim Story

Antun Šoljan

I went out in front of the audience and stopped.

A man goes from place to place as if led by a certain logic, his steps seem to follow one another until he finds himself somewhere and stops, looks around and wonders, »Where am I? Why here? How did I come to be in Mannheim? Why Mannheim? Was it all so random, so arbitrary as it now seems as I stand before this audience?

And not only why Mannheim, but why am I, as a writer, standing before an audience? What is a writer supposed to do before an audience, after all? He is a writer by the fact of what he has written... anyone so moved can read it. So what is there to talk about! The age of oral literature, as they used paradoxically to call it, has passed. As a matter of fact, I am not here to speak, but to be shown to the young German Slavic scholars as an exemplar of the fauna they are studying or, say, as a museum piece removed from the display cases of literary history, which, as the dust is brushed off, rather unexpectedly shows it is still alive, and starts droning in its sepulchral, conserved voice, instead of sitting at home and writing, if he has anything left to write about.

Well as I stood there before the audience, suddenly there appeared in my writing steeped spirit the old adage that has long nourished our guild entrenched arrogance: things happen only so they can become a story. Not »to become«, but rather as they happen they *are* a story — for if they weren't nothing would have happened at all. And sensing its sly, back-stage squirm in the convoluted labyrinth of the spirit, its clumsy egress, I decided to tell it to this audience of mine like some folk story teller at a village yam-spinning

bee. For, what else do I do after all? What else should a writer's job be?

When I started talking, drawing it out of the ground like an earthworm, the first thing I realized was that the story had been wriggling out from greater depths, from an older geological stratum than I had thought, extricating itself from the sediment of the past and the tangle of pathways by which we had reached this very spot. And I realized that I was not in Mannheim by chance at all, indeed there was something different at play, a kind of logic or instinct that had led me here in the autumn like a turned-round swallow. The story was an old one and seemed to be about getting old.

For although I was here for the first time, my ties to Mannheim went back. I mustn't admit how far back, for that would show how old I am. As old as a boat, let's say. My story begins, you see, at a time when I was still young, but the boat I bought then was already old, not to say a museum piece. The boat was a worn-out, wooden sailboat for transporting freight, mostly sand and lime, a thirty-five-foot Dalmatian boat called a *štelica*, a one-master with the stern of a bragazzo and the prow of a cutter, with a jutting bowsprit and unbleached canvas sails. Infinitely romantic when seen from afar, she was coming apart at all her seams, rust had eaten away at the fittings, worms had gnawed through the keel. Other sorts of boats had long since been transporting sand and lime. She had stood at her little berth on Šolta for ages and was probably waiting for her ninety-year old owner to die so that she could sink, on her own, into the bay.

She was called *The Swallow*.

I bought her not because I was wealthy, but because she was cheap.

It was not in fashion then, especially not in Yugoslavia, to buy old boats, *oldtimers* as they were later dubbed, and re-tool them into luxury yachts, flaunting them the way some people flaunt period furniture they have not grown up with, or the portraits of someone else's ancestors on the walls.

I am telling all this because the boat had a motor. The motor was, in all honesty, a former cement mixer adapted for use on a boat, and now, after all the years of work with heavy cement and the heavy seas it was spent, fastened with bits of wire, blossoming into patches of rust, equipped with all sorts of improvised odds and ends, so that it most resembled the elaborate contraption Walt Disney constructed in his first sadistic films and called a *wolf pacifier*, through which a wolf would pass as through a meat-grinder. No one knew how to start the motor except me, fledgling sea wolf that I was — I'd inherited its secrets from the former owner — and it gave me as much trouble as the other contraption had given Disney's wolf.

The motor was made by MWM, made the same year as the boat, more or less the same year as me. Perhaps, I muse now with nostalgia in chilly Mannheim, we could have braved the seas, peers of the same generation until our natural, common, end. The motor would putter with its two aged cylinders, *The Swallow* would creak lazily over the soft swells, over the warm sea, into the sunset, to the end of a long summer, as long as its slower and slower flywheel and its wrinkled sails would last. Who knows, the boat might have outlived me, perhaps I even could have left it to my grandson. But we must have been destined to part ways. We did not have enough time for one another, there

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never was enough money. New things engaged us that seemed more important or at least more necessary. I may have even over-eagerly hastened our parting. Even my move that I will now recount seems a little, no matter how well-intentioned, like a betrayal of our union.

For one day, in a German paper that just happened, fatefully, to find its way into my hands, I read how the motor factory in Mannheim — the very MWM, *Motorwerke Mannheim* — was celebrating some sort of jubilee, presumably an anniversary of its founding or something similar, and on this occasion they were starting a museum collection of its venerable products. With no further ado, I wrote a letter to the factory about how I had their motor, a retooled cement mixer, manufacture date so-and-so, serial number such-and-such, and should they be interested, I was respectfully informing them that yes, it still worked, and how by all natural laws it had earned a deserved rest, in their museum, perhaps. I felt, I say, a bit of a swine toward my old motor, but I was already sick of being passed by everyone else on the seas (who knows where I was in such a hurry to go?), sick of patching the old can (as if a new motor wouldn't age just as quickly), and was urged on by human greed at the prospect of something for nothing (as if doesn't cost more in the end). I cherished a secret thought (and always do, as one of my German friends says, *so einen hinterforziger Gedanke*) that the factory would not only take the mo-

tor for their museum, but in their jubilee generosity would reply: Marvelous! How commendable! If you send us the motor we will send you a brand new one since you have taken such excellent care of it for so long, keeping it working and demonstrating our quality o'er the wide Mediterranean seas.

Ten days later I received their reply: Dear sir, we are pleased to hear that our motor is doing so well. We are also proud to tell you that there are a considerable number of motors manufactured that same year of the same series in the land of Germany, which are still, you will be pleased to know, functioning smoothly. Should you need spare parts or wish to make a general overhaul, we are at your service. Some spare parts are available from our warehouse... we will gladly make those no longer stocked to order. Price list enclosed. Best regards, Sincerely yours, etc. etc.

Polite, reasonable, but disappointing.

I saved the letter for many years until it yellowed around the edges and got tattered from creasing... it grew gradually illegible and was then misplaced at some point during one of my many moves. I moved here and there and was myself creased this way and that, the boat and the motor have long since gone, and the letter, too — as if nothing was ever there to begin with. Until this moment there was not even a story. Only a part of my heart bonded to that boat remained irrevocably damaged.

And now, though such was not the fate of my motor, I am here in person in the autumnal city of Mannheim — older than I was then and with a more damaged heart. And I wonder whether I am here now because I am old enough myself for a museum should such a museum exist, or perhaps because I already am an exhibit in the Museum of Modern Literature as Enzenberger calls it, on display to students at this symposium? Another secret thought (*ach, diese Hintergedanken*) has been nagging at me. Perhaps there is a factory here with spare parts in stock for me, perhaps here is the place where I can undergo a general overhaul, and afterward maybe I'll feel retooled, like new, ready to ply the seas with replenished vigor while in me pounds, if not a new heart, at least a brand new *pace-maker*. Perhaps Mannheim, a city rebuilt from the ashes, is the place where this should happen.

But I don't know who to turn to, I never seem to know the address I'm supposed to write to, and I fear that all the addresses where I keep sending my secret, sly calls for help will stay silent as usual, and should they reply, that their response will be, as usual, a polite, perfectly reasonable but rather disappointing answer.

That's why I am turning to you, now. But I fear that this story, too, like that letter long ago, has been concocted to no avail.

Translated by  
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