How I Lost My Fear

It happened in 1996 when in Breslau’s main square a group of young lads from local ´respectable´ families decided there wasn´t much fun to be had and they gave a young Roma married couple a hiding – by a coincidence also from a local ´respectable´ family. The father of the badly beaten husband, a local esteemed entrepreneur in the building trade, acquired more than one contract, if not from the fathers of the afore-mentioned lads who wreaked violence upon his son directly, than for sure from assorted relatives – so, the question as to who are the folk getting a hiding and who the culprits was crystal clear from the outset. Funny business came to a full stop though when it came to pass that the young man who ended up black-and-blue had lost an eye as a result. That´s always bad news, but when the afflicted is an otherwise healthy young man living his normal newly-married life and his handicap arises solely because he is a Roma/Gypsy and happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time it seems… a pity.

I took on the case of the couple P. with the knowledge that it concerns one of the first examples where the racist attack was carried out by so-called „normal people“, that is someone who did not claim to be a skinhead or a member of populist phoney right-wing parties. In other words, that we are dealing with an example here which demonstrates a stance of „run-of-the-mill hatred“.

Surprisingly skinheads who also ´analyzed´ this situation came to the conclusion that this is a fine example of „youth engaging“, moreover off their own back and it is necessary to offer such youngsters security and ideological support.

On the day when the proceedings were to take place I arrived in Breslau by a morning train. I didn´t own a car at the time and I found out well in advance that the distance from the railway station to the court is a mile or so and saw no problem in completing this journey on foot. Very quickly I realized that very precise information about my arrival had circulated and subsequently found out that steps were taken even in case I arrived by bus. The entire route from the station to the court had plenty of skinheads lining the way and from a throng an ever-growing group broke off and partly started to overtake me and partly kept behind bravely screaming at me in unison: *„Samková, you want screwing first and then slaughtering or the other way round? …I´ll rip your guts out and hang you by them on a lamp-post! Gypsy whore… swine… cunt… I´ll cut your head off… if you peep a word in their defense I´ll cut your cunt out! “*

I remember very well that I was wearing a white coat. The boys were fitted out in their usual black anoraks and khaki gear, particularly individuals with an ideological streak had Doc Marten or army boots with red laces. I got the meaning. It signifies that the wearer of these boots had unclean Roma blood on his hands – because of acts carried out by this particular red-laced individual. It must have looked like a canine posse ceaselessly attacking the weakest animal which they managed to steer away from the herd. Perhaps that is why every person we met on the pavement crossed to the other side pretending not to notice.

My heart contracted with fear. Then dread, then horror. The aggressors kept reducing the distance between me and them until they completely encircled me and only hesitatingly retreated in the direction of my footsteps. I stopped and… Something happened which evidently shouldn´t have. Somewhere inside something snapped in me. I really felt a little noiseless „snap“…  And the fear had gone. Disappeared? Dissipated? No. It was me who had stepped out of my body. I was looking at myself as I stand surrounded by about thirty bodies filled with hatred, shaved clean, podgy, clad in falsely glittering attributes of physical power. Suddenly it was all the same to me if they kill me. If they rape me, torment me to death - all this in broad daylight in the middle of a peaceful south Moravian town with totally disinterested passers-by.

I just didn´t care… I saw myself moving forward, how I walk through that person standing exactly in the direction of my steps, how I pass her or she stands aside, or I genuinely go through her. I was somewhere else. The screaming stopped and only in the corner of my eye, near my face, I glimpsed some shrieking mouths. I reached the court building in front of which stood the judicial special guards armed with shotguns. The screaming must have carried on as one of the guards showed his displeasure and made a movement with his weapon. My guides surged around me and through me into the court building, but I didn´t mind. Their bodies couldn´t offer any resistance to me – ever again.

This weird and never repeated feeling of total splitting of one´s personality had permanent consequences. I never felt fear again. Never. My life, my Self, my Being and Mind has stayed split in some way for good. I now look permanently at all my failures, embarrassing situations, sanctions and unpleasant events as problems concerning someone else but me. The last time I reminded myself of this was when the Law Association´s Disciplinary Committee damned me for discrediting the reputation of a fellow lawyer when I commented that the investigation of the Opencard case, in the hands of the State Prosecutor, Dagmar Máchová, meant that the official body responsible for the prosecution was either stupid or paid off. I couldn´t help laughing. Who are you condemning - me? Because of a complaint made by someone whose activities are being investigated by a Parliamentary Committee and is about to be charged? Once again that strange feeling presented itself, same as when I experienced it the first time in front of the Breslau court building: it begins with goose-pimples running up the spine of one´s hand and continues with one feeling removed from one´s body. You wish to do me harm, sweeties? Really? Even if you killed me you won´t succeed. Because the life inside my body is only an unusual surrogate life. Life in which exists passion, fear, endeavor, commitment to something that is only – a surrogate life. Pretending, an absurd theatrical piece, waiting for Godot at a garden party where it is really me who decides when the curtain falls and the play ends, where it is really me who decides whether there will be a round of applause. When actually it´s irrelevant whether there will be one or not.

The case of the P. couple in Breslau truly had an absolutely fundamental impact on me, personally and professionally. I genuinely stopped becoming scared. One could even say that I lost my self-preservation instinct. If you something think I am behaving like a lunatic – no, I´m no lunatic. I have just lost the capacity to be afraid. I no longer care about my own self. From that day on I am capable of tolerating any form of iniquity, hatred, double-cross, insults, and always I feel sorry – for those who engage in such behavior. Because they believe they are leading a real life of their own, that the hatred which they throw at me IS a real life – and I know that they are most profoundly wrong.

I truly hope that all those I ever meet, all who read my stories, never work themselves to a feeling which became a permanent part of me. Because I know very well that from that point on it is only a negligible step towards death. A death I do not fear.