

Thomas Brussig
Das gibts in keinem Russenfilm

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Translated by Daniel Bowles

It was a boy and they named him Thomas
(1964–1987)

I have clear notions of the day I was born. We're in a time when curbs of streets were nothing but one big parking space, when telephones still rang and mops were still rung out with one's bare hands. On the morning of the nineteenth of December 1964, the first snow lay in Berlin's Esmarchstrasse. My grandma, who would have won every Helene Weigel lookalike contest, was pacing through the rooms of her prewar apartment, chain smoking (Salem Reds), looking back and forth from the empty crib in my parents' room to the black Bakelite telephone. Her son Maximilian, who waged a lifelong though ultimately futile battle against his nickname Maxi, geared himself up for the wave of baby photos by continually arranging and rearranging the chemicals in his darkroom. His fiancée Renate did what she always did when she was close to losing it: she went to the kitchen and outdid herself. Such wild fits of baking weren't ever objectionable, so close to Christmas. And then there was the domestic aid, a kind-hearted neighbor from the adjacent building who thought she was helping provide reassurance with her don't-panic!-It'll-probably-go-wrong blather.

Then the telephone rang. My uncle, who had the furthest to go; my grandma, who was already past sixty; and my aunt, who had to drop the egg beater first, rushed to the phone. A open race: only the housemaid, who didn't hear the ringing phone over the rattling of the floor bucket, had no chance. There was jostling that degenerated into an acrimonious jockeying for position at the last door frame before my aunt's dough-smearred hand picked up the receiver first. On the other end of the line was my father, who announced the birth of a Thomas. Back then Thomas was quite in vogue, alongside Andreas, Frank, Martin, and Ralf. Michael, Matthias, and Stefan were also popular names to give – the latter was given to my brother, who came four years later. But this time it was a Thomas.

Three days later my dear sweet mother came home – without me. “So where is he, our little rascal?” “Can we see him” – “No, I had to leave him there,” my dear sweet mother said. In fact she was sent home to celebrate Christmas while I, at the instigation of the resolute head nurse, Marianne, was not released due to low birth weight. “What're people supposed to think of our hospital if we send home such a twig? The boy needs a little meat on his bones, it's unseemly!”

But the boy didn't get any meat on his bones. On my first birthday, the scale yielded such unsettling results that I was to be fed yellow fruits, so-called “bananas.” The pediatrician wrote a prescription every week for “3 bananas” and sent my

father to a ominous stand in the Berlin market hall whose display windows were covered over with newspaper. My father knocked on the window pane. It was opened just a crack. A hand appeared. Thinking himself in a spy movie, my father wordlessly surrendered the prescription and a cloth bag – and a minute later he got the bag back, full. He never succeeded in sneaking a peek at what else was stored behind these windows, but stories like these were doubtless what led to whispered tales “in the Republic” that “the Berliners” got “shit shoved at them from all sides” and “everything blown up their ass.”

My first memory: was it that Mr. Schiffing from the ground floor showed me how he took off and strapped on his prosthetic leg? Or the five kittens at our next-door neighbor's, whose cat Minka had given birth? Or how the pharmacist couple, the Pfeifahrers, who “didn't have any children of their own,” took me behind the counter and showed me which drawer in their wall-sized apothecary cabinet I needed to open when a customer made a request? Or that the opera singer Keumich from the second floor let me watch her grand piano being tuned, or that once a couple of gardeners let me ride on the loading bed of their pallet truck? No, that happened later, on the day we moved – from the Bötzwow neighborhood in Prenzlauer Berg to right on Alexanderplatz at Rathausstrasse 7, the TV Tower right in front of our window. It was like winning the jackpot in the lottery. After six years of marriage, just before I entered school, my parents got their very own apartment.

There was an elevator and even a garbage chute! Everything was so great that I never got around to imagining how Rathausstrasse had probably been designed: seven men wearing ties, party membership buttons, and construction helmets are sitting at a table while a woman keeps the minutes. One says, “Comrades, what do we know about the needs of our people?” Another says, “We know everything about them,” whereupon the first says, “I’m listening.” Then another says, “Our workers want to spend their time after work with a convivial evening of bowling,” to which the first guy says, “Then we’ll build them one, no, *twelve* bowling alleys.” Another says, “Our people also want to consume crispy grilled chicken,” and the first guy notes down “build a broiler chicken stand.” Then the woman taking minutes says something too, “that our women also want to go places with their husbands,” at which the circle agrees that such a strolling couple in front of a jewelry case should calculate the number of night-shift bonuses it would take before they could even think about getting those diamond studs. In the end, the whole roundtable is talking at once, and the minute-taker can barely keep up. Nostalgic widows are to chitchat in “Café Rendezvous,” and in the espresso bar, old acquaintances who run into each other by chance in the shopping arcades should be able to have a coffee. And then they stood up and built Rathausstrasse, with fashion, shoe, and gourmet food stores, with a wine bar, a music and sports store, a chicken stand, a jeweler, a coffee house, a post office, doctors offices, a bowling

alley, an espresso bar, and then some. This is where the GDR functions like it was meant to: as an institution that provides for everyone's needs and wants. Not with a general morning workout, but with free central heat. The megaphones screwed onto the streetlights only squawked on May first and the birthday of the republic. In between they were silent.

My father in particular was very proud of the apartment. He invited every visitor to the window to admire the panoramic view, preferably over a cognac. What we could see every day from our window was sold in the stores as picture postcards: TV Tower, Neptune Fountain, Alexanderplatz train station, World Time Clock, Centrum Warenhaus, Hotel Stadt Berlin. And these cards were sent off all over the world, to Warsaw, Prague, and even to Moscow! Cheers to that! (And then the bottle was returned to the cabinet.)

The new neighbor, however, was a stuffy man with a briefcase. Instead of "yes" he said "uh huh." Other neighbors listed obscure government agencies as their places of employment, and it seldom occurred that I was admitted to other people's apartments. My father, by contrast, went to a "plant" where there were "brothers" and "steel beams." At exactly twenty of five he came home, laid down on the sofa with the *Neues Deutschland*, and ten minutes later was asleep. My brother and I never knew whether that happened because work was so strenuous or because the newspaper was so boring.

Living below us was a master upholsterer with his wife. Although parties took place in his apartment at which shrieking bare-breasted women were sighted at the window, he was only ever grumpy to us kids. When the *Eulenspiegel* reported about a snooty “Upholsterer Peter P.,” my parents were sure it was him. Once I waited with my father in the foyer for the elevator, together with one of the many briefcase-carrying men. We could tell an elevator was coming from the singing that drew nearer from the elevator shaft. Someone was singing to a melody I recognized years later as the Uriah Heep song ‘Lady in Black’: “Just fifteen meters square / Mine fields, barbed wire everywhere / Now you know about my home / My home’s in the Zone.” When an unbelievably dramatic “ah-a-ha-a-haha-aaha – aaaah-a-ha-aahaha” rang out, the elevator door opened, and out came the upholsterer from downstairs, who immediately went silent and took to his heels. In the elevator the briefcase-toting man asked my father, “Do you know who that was?,” and my father replied without batting an eye, “Probably just some drunk who wanted to check out the view from here.”

I didn’t think it was bad that my father fibbed because I’d once caught another adult from our apartment building in a lie, Ilka Lux. She was a pop singer, indescribably blond, and wore sunglasses even in November. Once she was singing on the radio: “Horseman, / Stop your horse, / You can tell / I can’t walk anymore.” As if! When she walked from the elevator to her

apartment, I'd see her walking down the long hallway in white stilettos and a miniskirt. Granted: as a horseman I'd stop my horse for her and help her into the saddle.

Soon another neighbor was famous, Mr. Hagen. He gained fame, in our building, as the – divorced – father of Nina Hagen. A gentleman, quiet, amiable, with graying but full and nonchalantly coiffed hair. Dignified, never strained in his bearing. Always dressed to the nines. If George Clooney cribbed his image from someone, then it was from him. I saw Nina once at Rathausstrasse 7. She, too, wore sunglasses, but I recognized her anyway. She was looking for the name Hagen among the mailboxes, and because the numbering of the 126 apartments in our building took some getting used to, I told her I'd take her there. Her agitation didn't escape my notice. She took off her sunglasses, put them back on, and in the elevator constantly tugged her clothes straight. Her father wasn't there, however, and she asked me what people do when someone's not home. I told her they sit on the stairs and wait, and since she was irresolute, I sat down to show her that the stairs were clean. She sat down next to me, and then she told me all about her father – what she knew about him from her mother, why her parents had divorced, why she hadn't seen him in such a long time, and why she wanted to see him now. I wanted her to tell stories instead about what it's like to be famous and be on TV, but she said the issue with her father was more important, a great deal more important than this whole “baloney about

fame.” Still, I had to promise her that I would keep everything to myself as long as she lived, even if she became world-famous, “which I totally plan to be, buddy.” In my mind she was already so famous then that more fame wouldn’t have helped. She had just performed “You Forgot the Color Film” on the TV show, *Kessel Buntel*! We sat on the stairs for two hours without Nina’s father ever coming, and then I took her back to the elevator. – Of course I dreamt up this scenario, but every time I saw Nina’s father, my imagination went into high gear and continued tweaking the scene where Nina Hagen, in my house, in Rathausstrasse 7, runs into my arms.

Until school began, the only stressful demand was “Eat up!”, but after I had started school, I became intimately acquainted with another new word: “properly.” I was to sit properly, write properly, organize my things properly, line up properly, and even have a proper hobby. Junk collecting counted as such. At the beginning of the afternoon, I conferred with my friends about whether we wanted to peruse the new buildings or the prewar buildings on the other side of the commuter train overpass instead. Not only was the haul of newspapers bigger in the new buildings, because the *Neues Deutschland*, which was frequently read there, had a larger format and as a result was heavier than the *Berliner Zeitung* common in the prewar buildings, but the briefcase-carriers and tie-wearers in the new buildings also secretly liked their booze, which was reflected in a higher yield of empty liquor and wine bottles. And yet the

nearest junk collection spots were always right around the corner from the prewar buildings, while the decision for the (junk-wise) more profitable new buildings always meant miserably lugging our take around at the end of the afternoon. To cheer up my friends, I claimed that junk collecting would take us from socialism to communism faster. “How much faster?” came the logical question from Sandro Hüppenlenk, and I pondered. I didn’t want to jeopardize my authority with an unbelievable reply, so I said, “Ten minutes faster. Every time we collect junk, communism is ten minutes nearer.” For Sandro Hüppenlenk the matter was clear, “Screw up the whole afternoon for ten minutes? That’s not worth the trouble.” Especially since socialism wasn’t terrible enough for us to want to ditch it at any cost. The others, too, and ultimately even I, concluded that it didn’t matter whether communism came ten minutes sooner or later since it was coming, as we had been promised, at some point regardless.

Thus we turned our backs on junk collecting and surrendered ourselves to a new, much more exciting field of activity: the underground dungeons of inner-city church ruins. We discovered forgotten entrances overgrown with birch saplings and crawled through narrow corridors. I was never afraid of getting stuck because even then I was still quite thin. In the parochial church we stumbled upon subterranean crypts, and in the open sarcophagi there were, in fact, human bones. Unfortunately never as a perfect skeleton, but rather as a grab

bag of bones: tons of ribs and vertebrae, an arm or leg bone here and there, but never a real-live skull. I always took a few bones with me; you never know what they're good for. When the sexton of the parochial church caught us, he warned us that our machinations constituted "disturbing the peace of the dead." That was confusing because we considered being dead to be something absolutely devoid of feeling, and in which, of course, a "disturbance" was completely impossible; if I were dead, I'd want nothing more than to be disturbed in my death. It was the first time I encountered religious rhetoric, and I was fascinated how masterfully seeming opposites could be connected. At the same time, the notion of disturbing the dead in their rest was somewhat creepy – and my interest in the underworld came to an abrupt end.

Instead, inspired by my dear sweet mother, I began to read. She always kept a brick of a book close by, and these books were always Greek to me. How unimaginable it was that so much could be said about a single person named Anna Karenina. *Naked Among Wolves* I figured to be an experience that'd be over after a few minutes. Books were a mystery, though an exhilarating one. I read everything I could get my hands on: hardback books, paperbacks, journals, and encyclopedias. I read standing up, sitting down, lying down, on the bus, on the escalator, and of course with a flashlight under the covers in bed. I secretly read in class by concealing my book in a textbook. The best was when I was sick – then I could read

all day. I read Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn* three times, as I did Wolfgang Schreyer's *Great Garage Southwest* or Erich Kästner's *Emil and the Detectives*. I only made it halfway through *Mohr and the Ravens of London*, and with many penny dreadfuls I couldn't get beyond the first page despite having read it five times. I thought Jules Verne was terrific; only he unfortunately always depicted the Germans in a negative light. Alexander Volkov's *Urfin Joos and His Wooden Soldiers* I read in a single day; for Strittmatter's *Tinko* I needed three months. I read Günter Prodöhl's five-volume *Unprecedented Crimes*, Liselotte Welskopf-Henrich's six-volume *The Sons of Great Bear*, Stanisław Lem's *The Invincible*, B. Traven's *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Jack London's *Burning Daylight*. I read fantasy and non-fiction, especially about archaeology, since I myself could already boast a find of bones. I read books about Nazi hunters, prospectors, presidents, and balloonists, about freedom fighters and mountain climbers, about martyrs and inventors, about runaways and captains. But my favorite books to read were about Ernst Thälmann. The pleasure offered by an engrossing read – here it was granted to me for the first time. It all started with *Teddy and His Friends*, joined later by *Red Front, Teddy* and *When Thälmann Was a Boy*, as well as *Buttje Pieter and His Hero, Then I'll Be a Crane, Thälmann Never Died*, and the *Memories of My Father* by Irma Thälmann. From these books I learned how Thälmann gave the poorer children his big

sausage sandwich or paid for their rides on the carousel. How he diligently read books late into the night and how the lanky children of workers liked to ride on his broad longshoreman's shoulders. How, after the fascists had imprisoned him, he kept hope alive for the inmate languishing in the adjacent cell by tapping signals on the wall.

At some point I was old enough that my parents didn't send me out anymore when they switched over to West German television stations and let me watch with them: whenever "The Big Prize" was on, for instance. An incredible show: three contestants competed against each other, each an expert in his field of knowledge. One knew everything about the Alps, the other knew everything about Kaiser Wilhelm or Charlie Chaplin or the Tower of London. For each correct answer they earned money. In the first round, the contestants had to demonstrate their expertise in a chat with the host, the second round was about general education, but in the third round each contestant was locked in a kind of space capsule, received headphones, and had to answer a three-part question about his special field within three minutes, whereby he either doubled the money he had earned – or lost everything. Some contestants were two, three, even four thousand deutschmarks richer after the show.

Of course Western TV ran the news, too, and one day they showed a picture of a guy who could have come from my books: guitar, sleeves rolled up, mustache that seemed to hang down to the back of his knees. With his black hair and dark eyes

he had the air of a hussar, and his name was an assemblage of such serious terms as “Wolf,” “Beer,” and “Man.” He was in the news because the GDR had “expatriated” him. He had lived in the GDR, traveled to the West, and hadn’t been allowed back because, as I learned from my parents, he “said things about the GDR.”

Saying things about the GDR: my parents did that, too. And how often had they impressed upon me: don’t say that at school. So what would we do if one day we were also expatriated? If we were standing on the street in the West, surrounded by unemployment, criminality, and drug addiction, and desperately needed the winnings from “The Big Prize”? With this in mind I delved into Ernst Thälmann with even greater fervor, the sole topic of which I felt I had a good grasp. I didn’t just know how Ernst Thälmann had gotten so brave. (Because as a kid he had to go into the forest at night to fetch an axe that had been left there.) I also knew what had happened to the shirt he got married in. (He tore it into bandages to care for those wounded in the Hamburg Uprising.) I even knew the best Thälmann joke. (“In all Earnest-ness, that must be my husband,” said Mrs. Thälmann, as she heard clattering in the stairwell.) Countless times I imagined the space capsule closing around me and being asked the hardest, most far-flung Thälmann questions over the earphones, and answering them all.

Of course I already suspected then that life never does you the favor of reenacting the scenes produced in your imagination. Life even seemed to want to taunt me, the great Thälmann connoisseur. One time, a TV crew from the West was to accompany our class on a walk through an exhibition in the newly opened Palace of the Republic. The topic of the exhibition was – I could hardly contain my joy – Ernst Thälmann. Naturally, the walk through the exhibition was rehearsed in the presence of important comrades. It went fantastically. I knew everything. But after the rehearsal I was told that I wasn't going to be present when the TV crew came. You see, I was still so skinny that the comrades were afraid the TV crew would make me out to be the pale boy who raised his bony little arm only because he'd get bananas for it.

In school I kept up effortlessly. After tenth grade I was able to do professional training along with a university entrance certificate. I decided on construction work because I saw in that a chance at experiencing physical labor, since I wanted go into the criminal investigation department later.

As a prospective criminal investigator, however, I was supposed to get "acquainted with police work" by becoming a "Volunteer Assistant of the People's Police," which was just about the most uncool thing that could be asked of a long-haired teenager like me.

My first deployment was late at night on a Thursday in April. At police headquarters I got a red armband with a sewn-on police star and an assignment: I was to go on patrol with Bodo Hoppe. Bodo Hoppe was an “experienced volunteer assistant”; he was supposed to introduce me to the world of the volunteer assistant. I knew Bodo Hoppe from school, he was good-natured and clumsy, and in ten years of schooling he had somehow successfully managed to be held back twice. He had a receding chin, and whenever his mind was wandering, he pointed his toes inward. He had the irritating mannerism of involuntarily touching people while talking to them. He was, furthermore, unbelievably companionable, always offered his help, and was downright grateful if someone accepted it. Once, when my bike had a flat tire, he frittered away half the afternoon to buy me the right valve. Because his personality could be reduced to the formula “simple-minded but with a good heart,” he was never ridiculed, and if he was, then someone turned up right away to give the ridiculer such a dressing-down that he never made Bodo Hoppe the object of his derision and scorn again.

As I experienced on that evening in April, Bodo Hoppe had the habit of sniveling the final syllables of a sentence through his nose rather than actually enunciating them. He talked incessantly on our patrol. He walked a dachshund on a leash with him, and I envied him, Bodo Hoppe, for his ability to let the trivialities flow without an awkward silence ever arising.

What loyal animals dogs are, they can run until they fall over, and even when they're completely exhausted, they start running again if their master commands it. It was like that the whole time, only that he showed tremendous alertness in spite of his stream of chattering. Every few paces he'd smack at a sign that he'd temporarily reattach after it promptly fell off. Or a he'd notice a streetlight that was out, and he'd tap on it lightly with his shoe so that it would in fact start shining again. Or he'd blurt out, "oh, this guy forgot to lock his car," open the car door, and depress the door lock. He kicked a piece of wood with a nail protruding from it out of the street and pulled a half-open window in a ground-floor apartment to. He found one wallet, and his dachshund found the other. I walked along next to Bodo Hoppe and felt like he was leading me through an obstacle course he had prepared beforehand to impress me. Nothing seemed to escape his notice. He had an amazing eye; he was born to be a beat cop. Our tour lasted two hours. We walked through Rosa-Luxemburg-Strasse, Rochstrasse, Spandauer Strasse, Münzstrasse, Weinmeisterstrasse, and Rosenthaler Strasse, Pieckstrasse and Mollstrasse, and I only hoped no one would see me with the armband and with Bodo Hoppe.

On my second and final deployment, this hope was lost from the get-go. That's because I was supposed to accompany the community policeman, the ABV, who stood in the entranceway to Rathausstrasse 7 as if he were serving himself up on a platter. It was during the National Youth Festival in

1984. A zillion teenagers were in Berlin. The whole of Rathausstrasse was Pioneer blue. Yet in the sea of blue shirts a multicolored point came closer. It was a swirling blonde, about as old as me, wearing batik clothes, a brightly colored patchwork satchel, lace-up sandals, and tons of necklaces and bracelets. Someone they'd call a "dirty hippie chick." As she approached us, the community policeman stepped toward her and blocked her path. "Identity card." Her name was Carola, and she came from Rostock. Flipping through her ID with distasteful disdain, he asked her what she was doing here. At that Carola laughed loudly and said with a Northern German accent, "duh, it's a youth festival!" This scene was incredibly embarrassing to me.

That same evening I went to Alexanderplatz, where a few rambunctious people were splashing in the fountain after the official program. Guitar players sat on the concrete edge of the flower beds, and someone was playing trumpet melodies into the mild evening at the World Time Clock. I stopped to watch a little theater troupe playing Grimm's fairytales. There was a narrator who chose people from the audience to join in. For "Mother Hulda" I played the apple tree. I wanted to play the appletree-est apple tree in the history of theater. Still skinny, I wanted to generate sumptuous branches and foliage with my long arms and thin fingers, and I wanted to make allusions to Renft's "Apple Dream," too, by depicting the very apple tree under which the singer of that song lay and slept. After the end of the performance, before we all went our separate ways, the

storyteller went around with a hat. The money ended up in a little trunk decorated with the sticker “Dare to Have Faith” – the motto of the most recent church congress.

When I left the throngs of Alexanderplatz a half hour later, two men descended upon me from behind: “Comewithusstaycalmyouareunderarrest.” My ID was collected, and I was taken to the inner courtyard of the Alexanderhaus. There was a truck there – and sitting on its bed was the theater troupe: the golden girl, the pitchy girl, the well, the oven, and of course Mother Hulde and the narrator too. Only the left archway was missing. But they brought him too, and then we were all accounted for. Our offense consisted in having publicly collected money without an official permit to do so. The chief arrester and chief admonisher said he was with the criminal police. We got our IDs back and were released individually in intervals of two or three minutes.

The following Tuesday, at my next consultation with the ABV, I returned my red armband with the police star and informed him that I wasn’t going to join the criminal investigation unit.

I’d probably only have become the source of inspiration for a crime comedy. That’s because I became aware of a weakness during those months, one that got worse in the years and decades that followed: I can’t remember faces. A criminal investigator who can’t remember faces – that’s the sort of thing

people gladly shell out their money for at the box office. For me, though, it's terrible. I've spoken to relatives without recognizing them. I've long-windedly introduced myself to people I'd put up for the night three weeks prior. At our first meeting, I asked the woman of my dreams to wear the same earrings the next time we met – so as not to mistake another woman for the one with whom I had a date.

I first grew aware of my blindness for faces after a spat about a sort of visa for a vacation in Hungary. On applying, I was quoted a turnaround time of two or three weeks: inexplicably long for a slip of paper with a bit of typed nonsense, a stamp, and a signature. The clerk handling the case turned out to be the mother of my schoolmate Ruth Schmelzer, a fact to which I was, however, oblivious. A few days later, I sat for hours at the same table with Ruth and her mother at the tenth-grade graduation party and talked about my career plans. I didn't recognize her as the employee at the registration office, and when I went to pick up the visa from her two weeks later, I didn't recognize her as the woman with whom I'd been sitting together for hours at the graduation party. The visa wasn't ready yet, and so I made a gigantic fuss, lodge a complaint, talk to the boss, that sort of thing. Then when I ended up getting my visa after an hour and saw the signature *Schmelzer*, I asked her, now in a conciliatory mood, whether she was perhaps related to my schoolmate Ruth. To which she replied, "My goodness! The world sure can look forward to a great criminal investigator."

Like all of my classmates, I was also supposed to start my military service on November 1. I was mustered into the riot police, owing to my application for the criminal investigation unit, but wanted to avoid military service for the time being. I felt so unprepared, so completely unready to enter into this brutish, coarse man's world for a year and a half. I didn't have a girlfriend. Instead I read books. To top it all off, I was abstinent, didn't smoke, and didn't drink a drop. I was a real target, and whenever I thought about my future, I was overcome with sheer panic. I imagined all the talented, happy boys, sons of my dear sweet mother's girlfriends, who at some point strayed from the predetermined path and landed either in prison, the psychiatric ward, or the cemetery, following a senseless car accident, a pointless scuffle, a silly test of courage. I saw myself ending up like them, and I had no idea what to do.

I was twelve or thirteen when I saw a movie in which a doe-eyed, gentle female teacher, in a tone of great significance, asked a man who, though very well-equipped in the muscle department, always screwed things up, "Can you shape your life?" What a beautiful idea, that something between cradle and grave can be "shaped"! What I had done up to that point had been anything but shaping my life. With my friends I drove to the countryside around Berlin, searching for derelict estates to convert and use for our life in a commune. Or we drove somewhere else, only to realize that nothing was there either

and to turn right around again. We were in Dessau and Anklam, in Cottbus and Halle. We drove to Eisenhüttenstadt, the Ironworks City, to find out whether it really lived up to its name, and in Eisenhüttenstadt we went to a cinema to find out whether the movie “Crimson Bat: The Blind Swordswoman” also lived up to its name. Then we heard that Jena was a dangerous place to be – that you’d be arrested after ten minutes if you were standing in the town square in a crowd of three. Man, that’d be great! OK, so off to Jena. There were four of us, actually, and that evening at six we stood around the main square. We all had long hair, and whoever (like me) didn’t have a hippie satchel had borrowed one for the occasion. After half an hour we still hadn’t been arrested, and we were freezing. So we sat down in a tavern, drank tea, and tried to find out why we hadn’t been arrested. We asked the waitress whether there might be another main square in Jena. She said no. I pointed out the window and asked whether that was the square where people always got arrested, and the waitress said that business with all the arrests, that might have been like that five years ago, but we had come too late. We were familiar with this issue. Then there was a church congress in Wittenberg. We also drove there to see if, as the grapevine was reporting, a real smithy was going to hammer a real sword into a real ploughshare. The masses thronged as if the Beatles were reuniting. Even Western TV was there. The smithy was wearing a giant leather apron. The sparks flew, it went *plink plink plink*, and we knew that

regardless of how much longer it went *plink plink plink*, we'd soon be in the army.

Following my last day as an apprentice, I went on my yearly vacation, and afterward I started as a doorman in Berlin's Natural History Museum. I also moved out of my parents' house; a girlfriend of my dear sweet mother, who wanted to try living with her boyfriend, lent me her apartment in Prenzlauer Berg until further notice. Three weeks before November 1, I registered my address again at my parents' in Berlin-Mitte to avoid the draft notice. But I had miscalculated – the draft notice was delivered to me personally by the community policeman at my parents' apartment, on October 26, 1984.

What the army did to me I can see upon comparing the before-and-after photos. In the pictures from the last day of school, we were laughing, beaming heroes. We had bright faces and an infectious optimism. We sparkled with charm and joie de vivre. We had it, the elixir. But at our first class reunion after our stints in the army, nothing was gleaming anymore. Something had been shattered. The elixir had been taken from us. We sat there, having become dull and ordinary, and were left with only the faded charisma of disenchanting men.