

PART SIX: Kotska: Ch. 18¹

It was an autumn day in 1956. I saw Ludvik for the first time in five years, in the dining car of the Prague-Bratislava express. I was on my way to a factory construction site in eastern Moravia. Ludvik had just finished his stint in the Ostrava Mines and had gone to Prague for permission to resume his studies. Now he was returning home to Moravia. We scarcely recognized each other. And when we did, we were amazed by the resemblance of our fates.

I still remember the sympathy in your eyes, Ludvik, as you listened to my tale about leaving the university and about the state farm intrigues that led to my becoming a bricklayer. I thank you for that sympathy. You were furious, you spoke of injustice, of stupidity. You blew up at me too: you reproached me for not standing up for myself, for surrendering without a fight. We should never leave anywhere voluntarily, you said. Let our opponents do the dirty work themselves! Why make their consciences any easier?

You a miner, I a bricklayer. Our stories so similar, and the two of us so different. I forgiving, you irreconcilable; I peaceful, you rebellious. How outwardly near we were, how inwardly distant!

You were far less aware of this inward distance between us than I was. When you gave me the full details of why you'd been expelled from the Party, you took it for granted that I was on your side and equally indignant about the bigotry of the Comrades who punished you for making fun of what they held sacred. What was it that made them so angry? you asked, sincerely astonished.

Let me tell you something: In Geneva, at the time when Calvin ruled, there lived a boy not too different from yourself, an intelligent boy always game for a laugh. One day they found a notebook of his filled with jeering at Jesus Christ and the Gospel. What was it that made them so angry? he must have thought, that boy not so different from yourself. He'd done nothing wrong, it was all just a joke. He had very little hatred in him. Only mockery and indifference. He was executed.

Please don't think I approve of such cruelty. All I'm trying to say is that no great movement designed to change the world can bear sarcasm or mockery, because they are a rust that corrodes all it touches.

Only examine your own attitude, Ludvik. They expelled you from the Party, from the university, put you in among the politically dangerous, then kept you down in the mines for another two or three years. And you? You became bitter to the depths of your soul, convinced of the great injustice done you. That sense of injustice still determines every step you take. I don't understand you! How can you speak of injustice? They sent you to a black insignia battalion among the enemies of Communism. Granted. But was that an injustice? Wasn't it more like a great opportunity? Think of what you could have accomplished

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among the enemy! Is there any greater mission? Didn't Jesus send His disciples "as sheep in the midst of wolves"? "They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick," Jesus said. "For I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners..." But you had no desire to go among the sinners and the sick!

You will argue that my comparison is invalid. That Jesus sent His disciples "in the midst of wolves" with His blessing, whereas you were first excommunicated and damned and only then sent among the enemies as an enemy, among wolves as a wolf, among the sinners as a sinner.

But do you want to deny you were a sinner? Don't you feel any guilt with regard to your community? Where do you get your pride? A man devoted to his faith is humble and must humbly bear even an unjust punishment. The humiliated shall be raised up. The repentant shall be purified. They who are wronged have the opportunity to test their fidelity. If the only reason you turned bitter towards your community was that it placed too great a burden on your shoulders, then your faith was weak and you failed the test that was set you.

I am not on your side in your quarrel with the Party, Ludvik, because I know that great things on this earth can be created only by a community of infinitely devoted men who humbly give up their lives to a higher design. You are not, Ludvik, infinitely devoted. Your faith fragile. How can it be otherwise, when you always refer to yourself alone and to your own miserable reason?

I am not ungrateful, Ludvik. I know what you've done for me and for many others who have been hurt in one way or another by today's regime. I know you use your pre-February connections with high-ranking Communists and your present position to intervene, intercede, assist. I like you for it. But I tell you again for the last time: Look deep into your soul! The deepest motive for your good deeds is not love, but hatred! Hatred towards those who once hurt you, towards those who raised their hands against you in that hall! Your soul knows no God, and therefore knows no forgiveness. You long for retribution. You identify those who hurt you then with those who hurt others now, and you take your revenge on them. Yes, revenge! You are full of hatred even when you help people. I feel it oozing from you. I feel it in your every word. But what are the fruits of hatred if not hatred in return, a chain of further hatreds? You are living in hell, Ludvik, I repeat this, you are living in hell, and I pity you.