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Peter Bichsel

Travelling with my Publisher's Reader Klaus Roehler

«The disadvantage of travelling with the Transsiberian Railway is that in the end you gradually start talking to all the passengers», Otto F. Walter, the author and publisher, told me in the autumn of 1963, «but if you really do want to meet Klaus Roehler, you'll have no choice but to accept this disadvantage – along with others that aren't so important».

I explained to him that I had absolutely no intention of travelling with the Transsiberian, and that he was misinterpreting my great love of the stories about Triboll if he thought they made me feel such an urgent need to get to know their author, too.

He – Roehler, that is – would get on at the second station, which meant sometime during the first night of the trip, Walter said, but nevertheless he suggested that I might as well already board the train in Moscow. «Roehler is extremely stubborn and persistent in his ways», Walter said. «For example, he will on principle only get on trains at the second station, but you mustn't let on that you have found out about his habits – or he is capable of changing them on the spot. Don't let him notice that you are making the trip specially to meet him. And on no account let him take off his shoes in the dining car. He's unpredictable without his shoes. He will take off his shoes. You won't be able to prevent it. He will smile like someone who has just rid himself of the constriction of his shoes. He will stand up calmly. He will say a sentence in Russian and you will only understand one word of it: the word «porcelain». After that, the dining car won't look so tidy anymore and you will assume that he was talking about the bull in the china shop. So it is better if you note down the translation of the sentence right away. He will have said: «I was a porcelain manufacturer.»

«But I won't be travelling with the Transsiberian», I said. Otto F. continued: «The language won't have been Russian at all, but Thuringian, and in Thuringia everybody knows what that sentence means: for if we associate the image of a thin, delicate and fragile material with porcelain, then we are forgetting that porcelain manufacturers are incredibly strong fellows who have to carry whole stacks of heavy plates to the ovens on pallets.»

Of course I cancelled the trip, or rather, I had never had the intention of going in the first place. «That's entirely up to you», Otto F. said. «But no one can avoid meeting Roehler. Wherever you go, he will inevitably board your train at the second station, and, you will see, you will get used to it.»

Since then I have always been travelling with Roehler. If I take the slow train from Solothurn to Zurich, he already gets on at Detingen. If I travel by fast train, he only gets on at Olten. If I want to have a quiet day I choose a train without a dining car. These are the only choices I have, for it would be pointless to try to outwit him by any tricks. For example, I only travelled as far as Detingen one day and got off there. But there was no Roehler waiting to board the train.

Ever since I have known Roehler I have never got around to doing any work any more. I have had to give up my job as a teacher, I have resigned my position as a member of the school committee for dental hygiene, and I can even barely find the time to meet my friend Otto F., who doesn't know anything about my travels with Roehler.

In the zoo at Den Haag I once observed a little chimpanzee pick a banana from the basket at feeding time, then sit on the outermost branch of the climbing tree trembling and holding the banana at arm's length without eating it. The other chimpanzees were munching away happily, and when everything else was gone, the largest one went up to the little one and took away the banana from its hand. The little chimpanzee gave a sigh of relief.

I experience the same kind of thing day after day when Roehler gets on the train at Deitingen, sits down opposite me and says: «Your notebook, please», holding his hand out to me in exactly the same friendly and natural way as the conductor when he wants to punch our tickets. I still cannot remember if I put up a fight the first time, but I think not. At least I am able to recall that Roehler only said the following sentence to me that first time: «Don't worry, I won't read anything, I'll just look at it.» Every time he hands me back my book with the remark: «You have written this; you are the author.»

Now and then he comes in, sits down and says: «Gone on writing?» That sounds almost friendly, and on such occasions I regret not having chosen a train with a dining car. And really only because of that friendly: «Gone on writing?» I have been getting up two hours earlier in the morning for more than twenty years to fill two more pages of my notebook before catching the train.

Incidentally, it is no use if I walk to Deitingen and take the train from there, either – for then Roehler gets on at Oensingen, sits down, and I hand him my notebook. Since I have been travelling with Roehler, I have never read anything in my notebook. I do not write anything in my notebook for myself, just for Roehler.

As I was running to the station last Friday, Otto F. waved to me from the other side of the street and shouted: «By the way, I forgot to tell you, Roehler steals blank lines and he will completely dry out your sentences.»

On board the train I took out my notebook and had a look at it again for the first time. Only two pages had writing on them, which was very cramped and small and without spaces. It wasn't my writing at all any more. When I brushed over it with my fingers in astonishment, the desiccated sentences fell onto the floor and turned to dust.

I didn't even notice that Roehler did not board the train at Deitingen. The conductor only came when we had nearly reached Niederbipp and said: «Our friend Roehler hasn't been travelling anymore lately. He is going to be sixty years old soon and he has settled down. He is working at a publishing house in Frankfurt. He gets the blank spaces sent to him there, that is more convenient for him.»

«You know Roehler?» I asked.

«Everybody knows him», he said, «you know, what happened with your notebook, that's your own business, that doesn't concern anybody but you yourself. But just think what he got up to

with our timetables. They're all in small print without a single blank space now.»

«Did you know that he was a porcelain manufacturer?» I asked, just to say something and to pretend that I did not mind travelling without Roehler.

END