

Sample Translation

“Key” from: *Deceptive Figures* by Rudolph Herzog

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KEY

Stiebel had a recurring dream. A giant spider was sitting in front of him on his pillow. He cried out in fear and turned the light on. For a moment he could see the creature directly in front of his face, but then it was transformed into the folds of the rumpled bedsheet.

Once while backpacking through Argentina, Stiebel came down with a high fever. During the night, he woke up and again saw a gigantic spider directly in front of his face. When he switched on the light, it remained sitting there. The dream was no dream at all. This apparition was real. Stiebel turned off the light and went back to sleep. The next morning the spider had disappeared - presumably it had crawled under the covers. That made him realize that the panic he felt in his dream had nothing to do with actual spiders.

*

Wondrak was almost one hundred years old. No one knew his exact age, and none of the renters had ever dared ask him. He could remember people going hungry at the end of the First World War, Kaiser Wilhelm II being exiled and the upheavals that followed in the Weimar Republic. When Wondrak limped across the courtyard, he'd talk about all this, gruffly and without pause.

At some point in the 1970s, while drunk, he accidentally plunged down the stairs of the Wittenbergplatz subway station on his bicycle. Since then his left leg was stiff. But the most striking thing about Wondrak was his voice, of which a strained rasp was all that remained. This was a late manifestation of being wounded in the war. "The Russian got me in the neck. Went clean through."

Despite the traces that a century had left behind on his body, he seemed wiry and full of energy. No one could say where Wondrak got his strength. For fifty years, he had been the custodian of the building complex 42 a-e, and he never intended to stop working. He still did heavy lifting, climbed up vertigo-inducing ladders, cut copper pipes to size and bent down on his knees to extract loose cobblestones with a hammer. He insisted on orderliness, although he himself didn't follow any house rules and only begrudgingly obeyed the law. "I'm too old to change," he'd rasp, when one of the renters complained about his brusque manner.

In 2009, after the building complex underwent a luxury renovation, Wondrak's job was cancelled. The property now belonged to Trondheim Invest, a Norwegian real estate company. If tenants wanted to complain about water damage or a broken intercom, they had to call a toll-free number and explain what was wrong. Most of the problems were solved on the building management hotline. Those long-term renters whom Trondheim Invest had not succeeded in legally pressuring from their apartments were suspicious of this sort of impersonal service. Out of habit, they turned to Wondrak, who stubbornly refused to accept money in return for his help. Even some of the people who had bought renovated apartments from Trondheim Invest availed themselves of Wondrak's assistance.

Carlo Stiebel, who had moved to Berlin from Munich, was one of them. There was a dripping faucet in his apartment that made him nervous. Stiebel was a thin-skinned fellow who insisted on peace and quiet, so he opened his laptop and found the email with the details of the helpline. He dialed the number and listened to a dozen renditions of "Für Elise." When no one answered the thirteenth time around, Stiebel gave up.

The following day on the street he ran into Mrs. Belzig from the former coachman's building in the courtyard. She had once leant his wife some coffee, and for a few moments their conversation revolved around the loan and how it could best be repaid. Then Stiebel mentioned the faucet.

"Oh Mr. Stiebel, you should talk to Wondrak."

As he climbed up four flights of stairs to Wondrak's apartment in the rear building, Stiebel remembered the sales brochure for the renovated complex: "Luxuriously renovated *belle etage* apartment with floor heating, stucco, bathtub...small repairs are included in building maintenance costs and will be carried out quickly and expertly."

Stiebel rang Wondrak's doorbell and waited. When nothing happened, he rang again. After a small eternity, Stiebel heard something scurry within the apartment, as if some sort of animal, probably a rat, had been woken up. A shadow appeared in the peephole, then a key rattled in the lock and a chain was pulled back. Wondrak opened the door and eyed Stiebel with mistrust.

"Mr. Wondrak, Stiebel is my name. We just moved into the front building."

"You're the guy with the piano."

"My wife plays. I'm completely unmusical."

“It’s good that she observes the quiet times in the house. She plays well.”

Stiebel felt relieved, although he couldn’t say precisely why.

“Mrs. Belzig told me that you might be able to help me with a little problem I have. The faucet in my bathroom is dripping, and I’m all thumbs.”

Wondrak buttoned up his cardigan without a word and disappeared inside his apartment. Stiebel stared over his shoulder down the hallway, which was illuminated with an energy-saving lightbulb. Newspapers were piled up to the right and the left,

After two or three minutes, Wondrak returned carrying a grey toolbox. He wore an army parka. The two men descended the stairs silently, crossed the courtyard and entered the front building, which was painted in egg-yolk yellow. Stiebel unlocked his apartment with some complex twists of a patent key and led Wondrak to the bathroom. The custodian went to work on the faucet with a rusty pipe wrench.

“Made by idiots, these newfangled things,” he rasped.

Stiebel stood in the doorway. The presence of the old man made him uneasy. Wondrak wiped his hands on a terrycloth towel and looked at Stiebel through narrow eyes.

“Do you work for a bank?”

“No. For an advertising agency.”

“A-ha. The stupidity industry.”

With a magician’s gesture, Wondrak took an O-ring from his toolbox.

“A fiver ring. I bought thirty of them at one go.”

Wondrak muttered something that sounded profane, although it was unclear at whom it was directed, Stiebel, advertising people, the new house maintenance company, incompetent faucet manufacturers or all of humanity.

With a couple of expert hand motions, Wondrak replace the O-ring and screwed the faucet back together. Then he tossed his tools back in their box with a loud plonk.

“Can I offer you a coffee?” asked Stiebel, who was at a loss.

“No thanks. Clogs the arteries. Pure poison.”

“I’d like to give you some money for the materials.”

“Won’t hear of it.”

“Are you sure?”

“Completely.”

“Is there nothing I can do?”

“No. Nothing at all. But there is one area where I’d give you a piece of advice.”

“Please do,” said Stiebel, confused. “Let’s go into the living room.”

He led the old man to a modernist corner sofa next to a grand piano, but Wondrak didn’t sit down. He pointed at the large window that looked out over the courtyard.

“You know that empty patch next to the bombed out garden house – to the left of the parking lot,” Wondrak said.

“I know the one you mean.”

“Building management wants to build a playground there. Completely without call. There are no small children here.”

“Why do they want to build one then?”

“It probably a zoning requirement they forgot when they renovated the building complex.”

Wondrak laid his hand on Stiebel’s shoulder.

“You’re an owner. Join together with the others and stop this idiocy!”

“If I’m honest, a playground back there wouldn’t bother me.”

The old custodian stared at Stiebel angrily.

“Don’t you understand? Young people will loiter around there and shoot up with drugs.”

With those words, Wondrak turned and left.

Stiebel told his wife about this encounter, but at some point it was forgotten. In early October, the complex owners’ meeting took place, but no one raised any objections to planned construction work next to the derelict building in the courtyard. Mrs. Spahn from the side wing, who turned up at the meeting heavily pregnant, even said she was delighted that a playground was going to be built.

A short time later a small backhoe arrived. It started to dig a square trench along the foundation wall of the former garden house, but work had to be suspended because of motor problems on the second day. Then frost set in, and the ground was frozen solid.

Every morning Stiebel put on a thick down jacket and drove to work in the Prenzlauer Berg district in the east of the city. He took hardly any notice of the world

around him along the way, so completely occupied as he was by a campaign for a DIY chain, which was due in November. He needed to present three story boards. Only one had been completed.

Despite the pressure of the approaching deadline, Stiebel kept every other weekend free to spend time with his wife. Sometimes, they drove to Potsdam and took extended walks through the chilly royal park and ate fried liver with onions, a local specialty, in the Posthof restaurant. On Sundays, they frequently attended concerts by the Berlin Philharmonic. Stiebel himself wasn't particularly a music lover, but his wife had given him a taste for it. Schubert's song cycles were what he liked best. When the sound reverberated throughout the concert hall, he felt sublime. In Munich people referred to sensations like this as "quality of life." In Berlin, you could get quality of life for half the price.

On one such evening, the second Sunday in November, wet snow was falling as the Stiebels left the Philharmonic. Stiebel spread his overcoat over his wife's head to keep her from getting wet while she got into their car.

A quarter of an hour later, they parked in the courtyard of their building complex. It was snowing harder and faster, and an icy wind was blowing in from the west. Stiebel took a small umbrella from the glove compartment. He got out of the car and went around to the passenger's side. But when he opened the umbrella for his wife, a gust of wind tore the handle from his hand and blew the umbrella some distance up in the air. Stiebel ran after it, approaching the remnants of the garden house. The snow was falling so thickly that he could hardly make out the outlines of its crumbled walls. Squinting, he tried to make out his umbrella amidst the shadows. Again and again Stiebel wiped the snow from his face. Gusts of wind blew in quick succession across the parking lot. He heard his wife call out. Stiebel turned around, but all he could see was darkness. A cracked brick crunched under the leather soles of his shoes.

Suddenly, Stiebel recalled a pair of blue wolf's eyes from fairy-tales he had heard as a child, and he became convinced that someone was watching him through the windows of the dilapidated garden house. Stiebel tried to suppress the fear rising within him.

He peered into the twisting labyrinth of the ruin. White light escaped through the cracks in the old walls, although the moon was concealed behind a bank of

clouds. Stiebel heard the sound of gentle steps like those of a child in snow. When he turned around, something seized him by the wrist, pulling at him, dragging him further and further into the house. Snow-covered branches stretched from a fissure in the wall, or were they fingers grabbing out at him? Stiebel tore himself loose and ran, too scared to think. The steps behind him accelerated. Stiebel plunged into the darkness and fell, raising a cloud of fine snow all around him. As he lay on the ground, helpless and shivering, feeling a sudden pain in his ankle, his pursuer approached. This hunched figure was dressed in black from head to toe.

When Stiebel looked up in horror, he saw his wife's face. She helped him get up out of the little trench and wiped the snow from his overcoat. Stiebel was shivering. For a moment he had to lean up against the cabin of the little backhoe and catch his breath. His wife looked at him, concerned. Then she linked her arm with his, and they walked silently through the snowstorm to their building. Whatever it was that Stiebel had sensed in ruins of the garden house, it was gone.

It was only after Stiebel had warmed himself on the heating element in the kitchen and his wife had made him a hot cup of tea that he dared speak. The deadline and all his many appointments had rattled his nerves.

"You have to take some time off at Christmas," his wife said. "Promise me."
"I promise."

November passed, and Stiebel tried to repress what he had experienced, but he couldn't completely. He had twisted his ankle in his fall, and even though he didn't need crutches, every step reminded him of what had happened.

In early December the ground thawed, and since the backhoe had been repaired, work on the playground resumed. One morning on his way to work, Stiebel said hello to a pair of workers who were digging around and setting up the frame for a swing set.

On December 6, St. Nicholas Day, Stiebel left the office in a celebratory mood. His project had been brought to a successful conclusion. When the clients had left, there had been an informal meeting in his department, and Stiebel's boss had praised him in front of the entire team. The only bit of business left before Christmas

was a pitch for Fitness Universe. Stiebel had been assigned a young team he regarded quite highly. If all went well, he could safely declare this year a success.

Stiebel tossed his overcoat over a chair and strolled into his living room, where his wife was skyping with her mother in Garmisch. They were talking about her application for a job at the Ministry of Developmental Aid. When she saw Stiebel, she waved at her mother and ended the Skype call.

“So how’d it go?” she asked.

“Perfect. Couldn’t have been better.”

“That calls for a toast”

Stiebel’s wife got a bottle of sparkling wine from the fridge and poured two glasses. They sat down on the sofa, and she put her pale arm around his shoulders, Stiebel felt the warmth of her skin on his neck.

“And how was your day?”

“Nothing special. There was a bit of commotion outside.”

“Where?”

“Down in the courtyard. The police came. Not here. Over there.”

She gestured in the direction of the rear building.

“What did they want?”

“I only know what I heard. Mrs. Belzig said that the construction workers unearthed some bones.”

“Bones?”

“Human bones. They used to make seats for airplanes in the garden house. In 1944, it was bombed. A direct hit. Apparently, the remains of half a dozen people who were buried alive were there.”

Stiebel reached for the sofa armrest.

“Not a very pleasant story, I know. Maybe I shouldn’t have told you.”

Her arm slid along his collar and went away. She got up. Stiebel looked at his wife, but he couldn’t read anything in her face. She folded a paper napkin and wiped away the traces of her pink lipstick on the glass.

The days had grown shorter. It was still dark outside when Stiebel left the house the following morning, carrying a garbage bag in his hand. When he approached the bins in the courtyard, he saw a flickering light in the distance. He opened the largest bin, and the stench of putrefaction assaulted him. Stiebel was

overcome with nausea. He threw the bag in the bin. Then he went to the parking lot, using the remote key to unlock his car's doors. Its back lights blinked. Just before he got in, he threw a glance over his shoulder at the little ditch by the construction site. There stood Wondrak, absolutely motionless, with a tea light in the palm of his hand. Behind him fluttered a striped bit of plastic tape that had been used to cordon off the ditch. Wondrak stared out into the darkness.

For a moment, Stiebel was about to say hello to the old man, but then he thought better of it.

When he returned home that evening, Wondrak was still standing in the same position.

In the stairwell Stiebel ran into Mrs. Belzig, who had just returned from doing her shopping at a discount supermarket.

"Can I give you a hand?"

"How nice of you. Gladly."

Stiebel relieved her of the large shopping bag.

"Say, Mr. Wondrak is standing outside all alone."

"Yes, I know."

"He seems to be waiting for something."

"I think he's worried that someone will disturb those people's final resting place. Surely you've heard..."

"Yes my wife told me about it."

"Young people are always loitering around here. Last month they sabotaged the backhoe."

"Really? How do you know that?"

"From the workers. One morning the carburetor and some other parts of the engine didn't work. They'd been cracked open and destroyed."

Mrs. Belzig felt around in her jacket pocket for the key to her apartment.

Stiebel put her shopping down beside her.

"That's funny. I've never seen any young people around here. Have you?"

Mrs. Belzig thanked Stiebel nicely without answering his question.

That night, Stiebel lay awake in bed thinking about Fitness Universe. He had come up with an idea in which two well-known boxers were pumping iron. A cartoon duck offered them both isotonic drinks when they took a break. The two men toasted

one another and then the duck, who was now working away at a futuristic machine in the background. Actually chin-ups were just as effective for building up muscle, but market researchers had determined that customers wanted machines that were as complicated as possible – otherwise they didn't think they were getting their money's worth.

Stiebel had rejected the illustrator's latest draft because the duck look too small and non-athletic.

Then he remembered an article he had read about the Holy Roman Emperor Rudolf II of Bohemia, whose army included one regiment comprised of dwarves and one comprised of giants. The giants would attack first and bludgeon everything in their path with cudgels. But because they were so big and tall, they were easy prey for archers. The casualties among the giants were enormous. The second wave of the assault came from the dwarves who scampered over the bodies of their enemies and the giants who had been shot down by the archers and attacked their enemies' legs with swords. This part of the assault was very effective. The dwarves weren't all that strong and the wounds they inflicted on enemy soldiers were rarely fatal. But as every good military strategist knows, a wounded enemy is worth more than a dead one. It only takes twenty minutes to bury a corpse. An injured enemy ties up enemy capacities for months. Hospitals are needed to treat him, and supply chains are necessary to take care of him, and while military doctors, nurses, cooks and orderlies see to his welfare, he himself is incapable of fighting. Useless. The dwarf regiment was thus significantly more effective than the giant one. But at victory parades, people cheered the giants while only laughing at the dwarves.

At five AM the next morning, garbage men discovered Wondrak's body in the construction site ditch. His corpse was frozen stiff. His left hand clenched the tea light, which had burned out. The zipper of his army parka was open.

Otherwise there was nothing notable about Wondrak's corpse. It was a banal sight. Late that afternoon, a hearse arrived and took the body away. It was all part of the routine for the morticians. Every winter, people froze to death in Berlin. Most of them were homeless. Wondrak's case was treated as an accident, the result of the old man's growing dementia. Stiebel learned of the custodian's death from a note posted in his building. Someone had noted the date of the funeral in pencil. Stiebel memorized it. It was the following Tuesday.

When the day in question arrived, he took the afternoon off, not telling anyone, not even his wife, that he was doing so. His satnav led him in twenty minutes to the crematorium, located in a new building that had won a number of architectural prizes. When he entered the sober, white atrium, he discovered two other mourners.

Mrs. Belzig, wearing a black stole, cordially motioned for him to join her, introducing him to Dr. Weissmüller, the former director of the Berlin city library. The three of them were then invited by a crematorium employee into the funeral parlor. There was Wondrak's coffin, which seemed surprisingly small considering the man's bulk. No flowers or wreaths could be seen. The crematorium employee indicated that Stiebel, Mrs. Belzig and Dr. Weissmüller should take a seat on one of the pews. Then he disappeared discretely through a side door. Classical music played over a loudspeaker –first Liszt, then Mahler. After a short pause, the coffin rolled through a hatch on metal rails.

For a moment, Stiebel remained still. As he noticed that the other two mourners had gotten up, he followed suit and went to the exit.

Outside in the pillared atrium, Dr. Weissmüller and Mrs. Belzig were waiting.

"Did you know him well?" Dr. Weissmüller asked.

"Hardly at all. We only moved in last August," Stiebel said.

"Really?"

Dr. Weissmüller gave Stiebel a surprised look.

"And you?"

"I knew him since the Eighties. He was a master of survival. No one knew our neighborhood better than he did."

"Dr. Weissmüller has an interesting project," said Mrs. Belzig.

"I was trained as a historian and have been reconstructing our neighborhood's past for several years. I always wanted to ask Mr. Wondrak about your house."

"Why?"

"Because of the slave laborers."

"Ten Polish POWs," Mrs. Belzig said. "They were forced to make airplane seats for Juncker in the garden house."

Dr. Weissmüller looked at Stiebel's inquisitive face.

“To the left of the small factory was a wooden barrack. That’s what someone from the adjoining street told me. Every evening after their shift, the laborers were locked in there.”

“Dr. Weissmüller provided the police with this information when the bones were discovered,” Mrs. Belzig added with a self-important look on her face.

“One night during the penultimate year of the war, a bomb hit the factory. The explosion was so powerful that the entire building collapsed. An exterior wall buried the barrack. The slave laborers who were locked in there didn’t have a chance.”

“Did Wondrak live at our address back then?” Stiebel asked.

“He was the block supervisor. At least that’s what the residence lists from ’38 say. I would really have liked to ask him, but well - that’s no longer possible...”

“I’m positive he didn’t do anything wrong,” said Mrs. Belzig. “Such a fine person.”

“Everyone is innocent until proven guilty,” said Dr. Weissmüller.

At the moment, a crematorium employee appeared with a plastic bag in her hand.

“Are you relatives of the deceased? The mortuary gave us his jacket.”

Stiebel reached out.

“I’ll put it in the clothing donations bin.”

Dr. Weissmüller and Mrs. Belzig had both come with public transportation, and Stiebel gave them a ride home. Then he drove his Audi onto a side street and parked. Before he got out, he put on a warm ski cap. He crossed the street. A cold drizzle fell from the grey clouds. When he reached the Red Cross clothing donation bin, he took Wondrak’s parka from the plastic bag. He opened the flap of the metal container but hesitated. He had felt a small object in the parka’s left pocket. He reached in and removed an ancient key covered in rust. He stared at it, bewildered.

Five minutes later, he was standing next to the dilapidated garden house. Again he hesitated for a moment. Then he threw the key into the ditch.