



**A Little
Local Difficulty**

Geoff Bamber

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by

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Chapter One

“You can’t stay in there forever.”

“I can. I will if I have to.”

Was it an order or an observation? It was hard to tell. The tone of voice was characteristically drained of affection. There was certainly no hint of genuine concern.

“You can’t stay in there forever, *surely*.”

Now, that might have been better, but it was not like that at all.

Marek Poljovka came out of the lavatory and faced his wife for the first time that morning.

“Best suit.”

“Only suit.”

“Best tie.”

“Don’t fuss, woman.”

She picked at an imagined stain on the tie. She licked her finger and rubbed at the stain.

“Such things matter in the Provincial Capital.”

Did he not know that? The Provincial Capital was full of the self-important in their best suits and their best ties. He also knew that *their* best suits would be, by some considerable distance, better than his.

He further knew that his wife’s tone was not completely unconnected with a view that, if he were to listen to her, he would be able to travel to the Provincial Capital in a far better suit and for an entirely different reason to the one he was to address on this particular morning.

“You should have a car.”

“I am going to my office first and then to the railway station. Both are easy walks. Besides, I do have a car. It is petrol that we are short of.”

“Nonsense. You are the Mayor. You have a position. Special allowances are available.”

“I’ll see.”

“Speak to that man, Smidek.”

“I’d rather not.”

“That nice Mr. Kreissl, then.”

“Elena, stop telling me what to do.”

The conversation was at an end. Elena Poljovka turned on her heel. Her husband had had the temerity to snap at her. Mayor or not, he was not going to snap at her. Thus he found himself outside his own front door wondering why he had been telling her not to tell him what to do when she had been telling him what to do for years.

“And another thing,” he called through the door. “That ‘nice’ Mr. Kreissl, as you call him, is a member of an occupying army. I am not about to go grovelling to him for a can of petrol. What would people take me for?”

There was no reply. Just the usual frosty silence. For good measure, the long-absent farewell kiss extended its absence by another day too.

It was indeed an easy walk to his office. Ten minutes, no more. En route he would greet his townsfolk with a cheery wave and a handshake here and there. He would exchange a caring word or two.

Marek Poljovka had never wanted to be Mayor of Krupka but his predecessor had disappeared in mysterious circumstances and a hasty replacement was needed. By way of a contrast from a string of shady local politicians prone to fill their own pockets from municipal coffers, the cry went out for a well-respected and eminent citizen; well-known, well-liked. A Krupka man born and bred. The role was made for someone who, despite the troubled times the population lived in, actively wanted to be the civic figurehead of a relatively prosperous, peaceful and easy-going rural backwater. In the conspicuous absence of such a candidate, a schoolteacher was as good as could be expected.

“Everyone knows you. Everyone trusts you,” he had been told. “Besides, we have arranged for a replacement teacher. She starts tomorrow. So do you.”

Barbara had cleared the way for him. Thank God for Barbara, he thought, as he made his way up to his office in Krupka’s faded Hapsburg-Baroque town hall. Barbara – secretary, organiser, walking encyclopaedia of matters civic; blonde and well-rounded, Barbara was the dew on the morning grass, the sparkle on freshly fallen snow. When things were less than wonderful at home, it was Barbara who cheered him. Nothing inappropriate, of course, though when Madam Poljovka was showing little response to his,

by now, infrequent advances, it was to Barbara's charms that his thoughts turned. For day after endless day – days in which, in truth he had little to fill his time, he quietly lusted after Barbara or maybe just somebody *like* Barbara.

Today, the fifteenth of August 1944, Marek Poljovka's fantasy world would be allowed to surface only briefly, no matter how many blouse buttons Barbara left undone. Today there were other things on his mind in an unusually active day. There was the monthly visit to the Provincial Capital and the regularly loathed meeting with Deputy Smidek.

Today he would only be in his office briefly before catching his train. Before that there was that nice Mr. Kreissl. Even now Barbara would be disengaging another button.

"Do I have any appointments?" He stared at the top of a desk entirely bare save for a large, much blotted jotter and a pen rack.

"Just the one."

"The Farmers' Association?" he suggested apprehensively.

But it could not be them. Visitors to the Mayor's office in Krupka did not generally make appointments. They just called in assuming, quite reasonably, that he always had time for them. The visits of the Farmers' Association were even less formal. They would simply stamp in, bringing an interesting range of agricultural dirt on their shoes, gripe at him for half an hour about whatever they had thought to gripe about in the bar the night before and which he could do nothing about and then stamp out again, droning on about rural deprivation when they could each buy and sell Marek three or four times over out of the spare change that rattled in their pockets. A delegation from the Farmers' Association was always to be regarded as a social visit without any real significance. Thus Marek's role was just to sit and nod, rock back in his chair, steeple his fingers thoughtfully and nod some more. He would tell them that he would look into the problem and see what he could do. He usually had no idea what they were talking about, but such meetings always followed procedures and Marek expressing real and sincere concern was one of them.

"No, it is not the Farmers' Association. It is Hauptmann Kreissl, of course."

“He didn’t call to cancel?”

“Why would he?”

“He knows that I have to go to the Provincial Capital today.”

“Yes, he knows. He *did* call but only to say that normally he *might* have cancelled, possibly coming over tomorrow, but, in the circumstances, he would still come today. But you were not to worry. His business here will not take long. He will be here at ten and you will still be able to catch your train at half-past, arriving in the Provincial Capital at precisely twenty-seven minutes past eleven, if the train is on time, which it won’t be.”

Barbara was jabbering. She knew it. But she *had* been speaking on the telephone to Hauptmann Kreissl, so that explained it.

“What circumstances?” asked Marek.

“He couldn’t say. Something military.”

“To do with The Uprising?”

“We aren’t supposed to know about The Uprising, so it could be.”

Barbara returned to her typewriter, but only to apply another coat of nail varnish from the bottle standing next to it.

“Post!” shouted a youthful voice. Barbara barely looked up. An almost imperceptible inclination of the head directed Josef the post boy into Marek’s office. Normally she would have received the post and despatched Josef about his duties herself but Hauptmann Kreissl was on his way and a girl had to look her best. She manoeuvred a tiny compact into the optimum position for a check on the lustre of her deep red lipstick

Josef was fifteen and was blessed with a gangly, spare, somewhat disjointed frame and the sort of face to match that only a mother could love. It was doubtful whether such a level of affection actually applied in Josef’s case.

“Your post,” he repeated, depositing a pile of mostly opened correspondence on Marek’s desk. “Nothing urgent. It’s mostly from the Provincial Government and there’s an official petition from the Farmers’ Association. They must have got somebody to write it out for them. It will be full of crosses for names.”

“Don’t be so cheeky. Elders and betters and all that,” snapped Marek, trying to convey the impression that that had not been his first thought too.

“They want petrol.”

“They know there’s a shortage.”

“I’ll tell them to piss off then.”

“You will not; and why are you opening the mail, anyway?”

“Can’t rely on her today.” He nodded back towards Barbara. She was still preening herself. “And you’re off to the big town. Besides, that’s what I’m here for. Post boy.”

“Only insofar as you go to the Post Office to collect the post from the Postmaster and carry it the vast distance across the market square to here, where you bring it up unopened. The rest of the time you do odd jobs beneath the dignity of anyone else we can find.”

“Can’t you promote me to office boy, then?”

Marek shook his head. Office boys came into offices. He did not want Josef in or anywhere near his office any more than was absolutely necessary. And if that meant not at all, so much the better. Josef was not to be encouraged.

“I can take over when she’s busy dropping her drawers for anybody in a pair of jackboots.”

“Go away, and don’t be so coarse. I’ll tell your mother.”

The threat was more than a shade ironic, as it was Josef’s mother who had persuaded Marek to take the boy on.

When it had been decided that Josef and school had little left to offer each other, Josef should have gone into the family business. Josef’s father owned the bakery across the square. It was the finest such establishment in the whole of the region and Josef’s mother and father presided over the production of a matchless range of breads and cakes, the heady aroma of which never failed to lure Marek through the door whenever he attempted to pass by.

“It isn’t like it was when you were teaching at the school. My Josef isn’t getting anywhere.”

“He wasn’t getting anywhere when I was teaching him. He was beaten every day.”

“Not by you though. By Vyatcil, the Headmaster. If you had stayed, you could have been Headmaster.”

“Now you sound like my wife. But higher office called. It was just a shame that the job became free at the time that I was taking up civic duties.”

It certainly was a funny week, that one. First Krupka has a mayor, then it has not. And similarly first its school has a Headmaster, then it has not. Of course, something else of significance happened that week; but Marek’s predecessor as Mayor was not there to see it and neither, most sadly, was Headmaster Vyatcil. The whole business was a traumatic initiation to the trials and tribulations of public office but Marek Poljovka had survived. And, to show his gratitude and to ensure a steady and preferential supply of fresh, finely baked bread and a rich choice of confectionary, he took Josef on as a general underling to keep him, in his mother’s words, ‘out of harm’s way’. There were, of course, the interests of public health to consider as well, and maintaining an appropriate distance between Josef and saleable food was a sensible option.

“He isn’t working here, that’s for sure,” she said with a determined finality; and that was that.

“Make the most of me. I might not be here next week.”

Marek looked up from his desk. He allowed himself a thinly veiled smile. “The bakery needs you after all. Congratulations.”

“The Uprising. Lads like me are in it already.”

“It’s a way from here.”

“I have a bicycle.”

“Fine.” Marek’s attention went back to his post. “How about getting on it and going to do something useful.”

He could sense the juvenile scowl without having to look up.

“Hauptmann Kreissl is coming over, isn’t he?”

“Indeed he is.”

“Do you think I should blow his car up?”

“I should ask him first.”

At four minutes to ten Marek looked up at the fine antique clock adorning the mantelpiece of his office. Then he checked his watch. Synchronisation, perfect synchronisation. If nothing else, Marek Poljovka’s term as Mayor

would be remembered for the fact that all the town's clocks agreed with each other.

"He's here! He's here!" shouted Barbara. The shriek was that of an excited thirteen year old opening a surprise present. It never failed to cut through him and possibly make him drop anything that he happened to be handling at the time.

The ritual never changed. She would watch Hauptmann Kreissl alighting from his car. She would watch him checking that his cap was at the correct angle and that the more obvious elements of his personal appearance were just so. Then, as he entered the building, she would rush to the landing but hang back in case he saw her. From there she could hear those immaculate boots marching up the marble staircase.

"It is wonderful, that sound," she would often tell Marek. "So masterful. So masculine. It makes me moist."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, woman," he would think. "Get a grip of yourself."

Then she would leap back to her desk as Hauptmann Kreissl reached the head of the landing. She would pause to check that her bosom was suitably displayed and pretend to be doing something vital.

When Hauptmann Kreissl actually arrived on this particular day he was accompanied by an escorting corporal, Schmidt by name. Schmidt carried with him a large brown paper parcel secured by a meticulous arrangement of knotted string.

Kreissl exchanged the customary smooth pleasantries with Barbara, who was no more than slightly miffed that he did not kiss her hand. He had never kissed her hand before but she could sense that, week by week, it was growing more likely. She put his reticence today down to the inhibiting presence of Schmidt, who, though probably a decent sort, was obviously an enlisted man and certainly not about to be treated to Barbara's charms. Accordingly, she self-consciously held a protective hand to her throat as he passed by.

Schmidt deposited the parcel with a thump on Marek's desk and withdrew. Marek felt himself recoiling as if he had been presented with a dead cat. He did not like anonymous parcels.

“No cause for alarm, I do assure you,” said Kreissl by way of reassurance. “All is well here in Krupka, I trust?”

Marek found that he could not pull his eyes away from the parcel.

“And yourself? And the lovely Madam Poljovka?”

Mention of Elena’s name induced a ripple of instant consternation, but at least it caught his attention.

Hauptmann Kreissl normally settled himself in one of Marek’s green leather armchairs at this point and gestured Marek to come over and occupy the other one. Their conversations were to be friendly and informal.

“It is important that we are all comfortable with each other,” he would often say. If Barbara were around she would nod enthusiastically as if, in the right circumstances, she could be more than comfortable.

On this occasion, however, Hauptmann Kreissl had taken up a standing position by the window overlooking the town square.

“What do you see out there?”

There was a lack of specific or obvious focus to the question, so Marek felt that he had to come out from behind his desk and share the view.

It could have been the bakery, as popular with Kreissl and his men as it was with the locals. It could have been the church next door to it. Saint Jakob’s was Gothic-Romanesque or maybe Romanesque-Gothic; Marek could never remember which. The rusting corrugated metal section, added after a suspicious fire some years ago, was neither Gothic nor Romanesque. It just looked awful. Its replacement was a permanent feature on Marek’s ‘must see to’ list but it had never got farther than that.

Saint Jakob’s was presided over by Father Antonin Holusa, a cleric of forthright views who had been known to harangue both Marek and, somewhat injudiciously, Hauptmann Kreissl on the street.

“Do ask Father Holusa to moderate his tone,” Hauptmann Kreissl had suggested politely. “Or we might have to shoot him.”

Marek had promised to pass on the advice but had somehow neglected to do so. Father Holusa was not particularly popular in the town and, if he were conveniently shot, it would be no loss.

Closer to the Town Hall was Hauptmann Kreissl’s car – indeed his pride and joy – or, rather that of his superior, Colonel Malz - A shiny black

Mercedes 500K convertible that was to gleam no matter what the circumstances. Marek could see Kreissl's driver and Corporal Schmidt in idle though animated conversation with the boy Josef. It was to be hoped that Josef was only negotiating a fee for polishing the vehicle and not distracting the driver and Schmidt while some similarly half-witted accomplice put a bomb underneath it.

“Your flag.”

Marek's attention was drawn to the limp and largely colourless rag hanging from the middle of three flagpoles jutting unevenly from the front of the Town Hall. It was the town flag, new only some twenty years previously when the design had last been altered. As far as Marek was aware, it had not been taken down for two decades now. Bedraggled, battered and torn, it seemed to say everything there was to say about Krupka.

“It is a disgrace.”

“Thank you. It could do with a clean. I'll have it taken down and seen to.”

“You'll have it taken down and destroyed.”

Now Kreissl turned and stepped across to Marek's desk and pulled at the knots holding the mysterious parcel fastened. He folded the paper back and revealed the contents.

“*This* is a flag.”

There was no arguing with that. As it stood this was *the* flag. Bright red; white centre circle; crisp, black, angular swastika.

“This will go on the middle pole. It will be flanked by the new town flag on one side and a new Provincial Government flag on the other.”

“We don't have a new town flag.”

“You are going to the Provincial Capital today. I have spoken to Deputy Smidek. Arrangements have been made. An official unfurling would be acceptable at a convenient date.”

Barbara came in with coffee. She placed the tray on Marek's desk, bending forward to allow Hauptmann Kreissl as pleasing a view as possible. Then she walked out, offering a perceptible wiggle of her behind as an encore.

Neither of them commented. Refinement and culture in a man precluded such coarseness. They simply exchanged glances and moved on.

“Good coffee, Marek. Where did you get it?”

“You brought it,” Marek pointed out.

“Of course. I do apologise, but High Command are increasingly concerned about the black market.”

“Sufficiently concerned to give us a flag?”

“They feel that, in the current circumstances, a higher profile might be appropriate.”

“Oh, circumstances. Right. That wouldn’t have anything to do with The Uprising, would it?”

Hauptmann Kreissl could not disguise his look of discomfort. Matters such as The Uprising were far removed from the normal and harmonious nature of life in Krupka. The Uprising was a small and disagreeable cloud in an otherwise clear blue sky. It was a cloud that Kreissl had a vested interest in not letting get any bigger.

“What do you know about The Uprising?”

“Only what I have heard on ... ” Marek pulled himself up short and stared hard at the clock. “My word, is that the time already? Well, Hauptmann, it has been, as ever, a pleasure... ”

“Yes, what you have heard on Free Radio.”

“We are not allowed to listen to Free Radio.”

Hauptmann Kreissl now permitted himself a broad smile.

“Very good, Marek. Very good. Suffice it to say that anyone undertaking similar actions in this area would be misguided in the extreme.”

Marek shook his head vigorously.

“Oh, we wouldn’t want that.”

“Good. I’m so glad that we understand each other.”

And with that - and a final swig of coffee - Hauptmann Kreissl was gone. There was no need to overstay his welcome. The good people of Krupka were being good; provided that their distinguished Mayor, Marek Poljovka, made sure that they stayed that way, there would be no problems.