

Paweł Huelle

MERCEDES-BENZ

translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones

Pages 7-10 (*opening section*)

My dear Mr Hrabal, once again life has turned an extraordinary circle, for when I recall that evening in May, when for the first time I sat all scared and atremble behind the wheel of Miss Ciwle's little Fiat - the only lady instructor at the Corrado driving school ("We guarantee a driving licence for the lowest price in town"), the only woman among all those self-important males: ex-rally drivers and racetrack aces; so, once I had fastened my seatbelt and positioned the rear-view mirror according to her instructions, to move off seconds later down a small, narrow street in first gear in order to stop at once, forty metres on, at the crossroads where only a narrow stream of air, like an invisible flight corridor, ran between the trams and the thundering lorries over to the other side of the city-centre inferno; so, as I set off on that very first car journey of mine, feeling as ever that the whole idea of learning to drive made no sense at all, because it was too late in life, and I'd already missed the moment; so, when right in the

middle of the crossroads between the No 13 tram, bells clanging as it braked suddenly, and a great big TIR transporter lorry, which by some miracle managed to miss Miss Ciwle's little Fiat by a hair's breadth, while sounding its awfully deep, piercingly loud horn like a battleship siren; so, when I stalled at the very centre of that crossroads, I immediately thought of you and those charming motorcycling lessons of yours, when with the instructor behind and the wet cobblestones ahead, you gave the 250cc bike a good dose of petrol and off you sashayed down those Prague streets and crossroads, first up the hill towards Hradčany, then down towards the Vltava, and the whole time, without ever stopping, as if inspired by the Muse of motorisation, you told the instructor about those wonderful vehicles of bygone days, on which your stepfather had so many fantastic spills and smashes; so when, the driver of the TIR slammed his ten-ton monster to a halt and, leaving it in the middle of the roadway, jumped down from the cab and ran towards Miss Ciwle's little Fiat, waving his fist at us in a threatening manner, and indeed, in his rage coming close to self-harm by pummelling his own head with it; so, when I saw his face, purple with fury and pain, pressed to the window of Miss Ciwle's little Fiat, and right beside it another face, also pressed to the window, and belonging to the driver of the No 13 tram, who like the TIR driver had abandoned his vehicle and his passengers, sent flying by the sharp braking; so, when I saw those two faces through the Fiat windows, which with great foresight Miss Ciwle had already wound up, with yet more looming up behind them, because the drivers of other cars blocked by the tram and the TIR had also left their vehicles and run up to us now, to shower us in all their anger about traffic jams, broken bridges, rising petrol prices and everything else affecting them since the recent collapse of communism; so, when these Bosch-like faces had all but crushed us into the seats of the little Fiat, which was adamantly refusing to start, I turned to Miss Ciwle and in a perfectly calm tone of voice

I said, “You know, when my grandmother Maria was learning to drive in a Citroen in 1925, she had a similar experience, except that the Citroen stalled on a railway crossing and from the right, that is, where the instructor, Mr Czarzasty, was sitting, the Wilno-Baranowicze-Lwów express was fast approaching from round the corner when Mr Czarzasty made a rapid assessment of the situation and said, ‘Miss Maria, let’s jump out immediately or we’ll be killed’, so they jumped out,” I went on, “and the express, although it braked, showers of sparks flying from under its wheels, completely flattened the beautiful car. So there they stood by the field crossing: my grandmother Maria and Mr Czarzasty, watching the train driver’s eyes grow bigger and bigger as in this whole pile of tin, nickel, chrome, plush, leather and broken glass he failed to find any crushed-in heads, chopped-off legs or driver’s caps - not even a single splash of blood; only when he looked a little harder did he notice my grandmother Maria and Mr Czarzasty giving him a friendly wave, and a very fine scene it was,” I said, reaching the finale, “because right behind them by that field road at the foot of the Eastern Carpathians stood the chapel of Our Lady of Perpetual Succour.”

“Goodness, how beautiful,” said Miss Ciwle, neatly sliding herself across into the driver’s seat over my knees, while I deftly performed a similar movement in the opposite direction beneath her. “Goodness, how well you tell a story,” she went on, checking the gears and the ignition, “but why doesn’t it work in my dual control either, yeeeeeaaah, very interesting.” She finally got the engine started and, showing our entourage of drivers that most mannish, indecent and shameful of signs with her middle finger, she slowly advanced along the human avenue, skilfully weaving her way between the throng of our would-be tormentors, eager to flog us right there at that dreadful crossroads, that first car-driving Golgotha of mine.

Pp25-28

The narrator tells Miss Ciwle how his grandfather Karol, an engineer working away from home in Berlin, read an unclear report in the Times newspaper and thought his fiancée, Maria, had been killed in the car accident. A telephone conversation at cross-purposes with her father then led him to believe that the family was refusing to tell him the truth. In fact she was alive and well and had been presented with a brand new Citroen...

After this conversation with his future father-in-law my grandfather Karol was convinced of his fiancée's death and couldn't come to terms with the thought that he had been treated so appallingly, first that they had failed to inform him of the accident and the funeral, then that they had lied to him on the telephone. He found it simply inconceivable that such an upright person as Maria's father could behave so improperly, quite frankly, indecently. Why hadn't he told him the truth, why had he lied?, grandfather Karol kept thinking all evening and all the next day, until at last he bought a ticket and boarded the train full of the blackest thoughts. When he changed trains in Warsaw to catch the express to Lwów, he bought a few newspapers in the station hall, including the latest issue of *Le Monde*, in which he saw a picture of his fiancée standing in front of the bonnet of a brand new Citroen. Immediately he ran to the station post office to order a wire to Berlin, in which he asked his German friend Schwarz to send a telegram to the Lwów address of his would-be father-in-law, saying "Karol deceased stop funeral day after tomorrow stop colleagues from corporation in deepest sympathy stop". Having got this message through to Schwarz, he managed to catch the express to Lwów at the last second, and now felt completely calm about the scene of welcome ahead of him, because he really had designed it all with an engineer's

precision. Next morning as he was travelling by hackney cab from the main station with two bouquets of flowers he had bought, one a funeral wreath and the other a normal bunch, while as always on his return he was casting an affectionate eye about his home town, the flat on Ujejski Street was already in a state of pandemonium. Grandmother Maria had fainted several times now and the doctor had been summoned, Aunt Stasia was making compresses and looking for the smelling salts, and my great-grandfather Tadeusz had already placed an order to send a telegram through the consulate in Berlin, and was nervously pacing the drawing room as he waited for a response, when the doorbell rang and there stood Karol with his two bouquets. And then a real rumpus broke out, because when Maria shouted at him, "How could you do this to us?!" he took out first the page from *The Times* and then the page from *Le Monde* and asked, "And how could you do this to me?!" And so they went on quarrelling loudly and couldn't come to any sort of an understanding, because every now and then one of them would cry out, "You don't love me!" to which the other would even more noisily object, "No, it's you that doesn't love me any more!" And so this fugue went on developing to and fro, until finally Grandmother Maria handed Grandfather Karol the keys of the new Citroen and said she never wanted to see him again, because just like a man, of course he was more interested in the fate of a car than of his fiancée, to which Grandfather took offence, thrust both bouquets into the umbrella stand and saying "all right then, good bye for ever!" ran out of the building, jumped into the car and was off like a shot. And so, my dear Mr Hrabal, they would certainly have broken off their engagement for ever, which would have had a fundamental significance for me, because I would have been someone completely different, and not their grandson many years later, but once again in Maria and Karol's life, and so in a way in my life too, motorisation played a decisive role, because Grandfather Karol stepped hard on the gas

just as the milkman's van was emerging from the gates of the house next door. Grandfather slammed on the brakes, but those were Citroen brakes, block brakes rather than hydraulic brakes, and so the French marvel went smack bang into the pyramid of milk cans, there was a terrible grinding of flattened tin, a clatter of broken glass, and the horn was stuck blaring. Grandmother Maria, who had run out into the street after Grandfather Karol to shout into the car's rear window, "and good bye for ever to you too!", her hair streaming, was now rushing to the site of the accident, where she pulled her fiancé out of the sticky white ooze, stroking his bleeding forehead that had struck the windscreen and whispering, "Karol, my sweetheart, you're the only one I love in the entire world!", to which he, trailing his broken right leg and leaning on her shoulder, whispered that he had never doubted it for an instant and that more than anything in the world he loved her too. And then he added that never again would they take their seats together or separately in a Citroen or any other French car, because French technical thinking, just like French politics, is nonsense, nothing but empty swaggering, as evidenced by the simple fact that despite having front-wheel drive, such a modern invention, the Citroen had archaic brakes that didn't stand up to the test in time of need, unlike the Horch, the Bentley or the Mercedes Benz.

Pp 82-86

Sitting by the sea, the narrator tells Miss Ciwle how in September 1939 his grandfather Karol, now the owner of a Mercedes Benz, was working as an engineer in Mościce when the Nazis invaded Poland...

“And as for the Mercedes,” I said, pre-empting Miss Ciwle’s question, “that was also the farewell photograph.” “Yes,” she interrupted me, “the Germans must have requisitioned it.” “Not at all,” I explained, “once the bombs had started falling my grandfather received instructions for all documents containing secrets of chemical technology to be taken east, where they would be safe, because everyone assumed that the front would hold on the river Dunajec or at worst on the San, and would remain there until the relief troops arrived from France, but that was wishful thinking. So, as the Mercedes ploughed its way along roads full of refugees on whom the Luftwaffe pilots had already tested their skills, my grandfather was sure he would never complete this task, and that he’d never get to Lwów in time, where an Intelligence Department agent was supposed to be waiting for him at the Hotel Georges, but things turned out quite differently. About twenty kilometres outside Lwów, past Gródek Jagielloński but before Zimna Woda, he caught sight of a Red Army cavalry detachment ahead of him, a reconnaissance party, and wanted to turn around at once, because of the two evils facing him he thought it would be better to hide and complete his mission somewhere on the German side of the line. But it was already too late, the Red Army men spurred on their horses and surrounded the Mercedes, while their commanding officer, a lieutenant with a pockmarked face, all but clapped his hands with joy at the sight of the car. ‘We’re in luck today all right, the commissar will be delighted,’ he said to his men, and shouted at my grandfather in

Russian, ‘Get out, you swine!’ So just imagine,” I said to Miss Ciwle over the steady roar of the waves, “that lieutenant wrote out a requisition receipt and said, ‘Here’s a document for the Polak so he won’t go round telling tales about our army stealing’, then smiled and clapped my grandfather on the shoulder, saying ‘We know what your hostile propaganda is like.’ So there stood my grandfather before that pockmarked lieutenant and silently accepted the requisition receipt, while the soldiers ransacked the car and, to my grandfather’s amazement, threw everything they didn’t need into the ditch: into a clump of burdock a Bosch spanner set in an ebonite box went flying, followed by Grandfather’s moth-eaten overcoat, a pair of galoshes, an oilcan, an empty goggles case, and also a bundle of documents tied with a paper string; luckily they didn’t look through them after removing them from the leather briefcase, which they kept, of course. And all this took no more than seven minutes,” I explained to Miss Ciwle, “and as soon as they had set off back to Lwów, Grandfather lit a cigarette and stared after the clouds of dust billowing from under the hoofs of the lieutenant’s riderless horse, which now ran freely behind the Mercedes while its master freely changed the gears, switched on the indicators and tried out the horn; meanwhile the soldiers escorting the car fired into the air and sang a fine, catchy song about how the Polish gentlemen will never forget those wild dogs, the Cossacks. Only when they had disappeared around the bend did Grandfather jump down into the ditch and recover his things, then he slowly started walking towards Lwów in the hope that in spite of the unexpected Soviet occupation he might yet manage to complete his mission, and that’s how I imagine him on that road: walking along slowly in his old overcoat, stopping now and then as the ebonite toolbox is very heavy, and in the other hand, or rather under his arm, he’s holding the sheaf of secret documents from the National Nitro-Compound Factory in Mościce tied with a paper string, which the Intelligence Department agent would be waiting to receive from him at the Hotel

Georges.” My instructress’s pretty little feet, bathed like mine in the chill wave of the Baltic, vanished from time to time beneath the wet sand; absorbed in this childish game of burying and uncovering her own extremities from the amorphous grey mass Miss Ciwle seemed not to be listening to this story, but as soon as I fell silent after mentioning the intelligence agent, she immediately asked, “So did they meet at that hotel?” “The Hotel Georges,” I went on, “was already full of Soviet officers and the entire dining hall was like military headquarters once the war is over and won. Grandfather went there by tram from Ujejski Street where earlier he had changed his clothes and rested, but he didn’t go into the hotel, he just stood on the pavement and stared in the windows of the dazzlingly illuminated hall as if he were a passer-by, and he couldn’t believe his own eyes: waiters young and old, pageboys and clerks, literally everyone was dancing attendance at the tables, serving the Soviet officers with beef *stifado*, joints of roast meat, mutton, Hungarian wine, French cognac and Baczewski vodka, and they were paying most obligingly with some strange bits of paper; Grandfather stood on tiptoes and with his face pressed against the window he saw that they were Red Army requisition receipts, just like the one he had received for the Mercedes, and it was an extraordinary sight...

pp. 114-117

The narrator tells Miss Ciwle about his father's attitude to cars in post-war, communist Poland.

“...whenever my mother, my brother or I said to my father, ‘Oh, how nice it would be to go to the beach, even in a Syrenka, instead of being squashed into the tram for an hour, how good it would be to come back from Kashubia with baskets full of mushrooms, even in a Trabant, without waiting in the pouring rain for the last bus that’s crammed to bursting and flies past the stop without even slowing down,’ and whenever we rather timidly mentioned that such-and-such a neighbour had finally bought a Syrenka or had had the luck to win a Wartburg on the lottery, my father would tell us that not every two-stroke engine-powered vehicle automatically deserved to be called a car, just as not everyone who speaks from a tribune is purely by that token a statesman, and he would cut off further debate with the statement that if he were ever to drive a car, then it would only be the sort his father used to have, so we could moan as much as we liked, because the very idea, the very dream of going to Sopot beach or the Kashubian lakes in a Mercedes belonged to the realm of the phantasmagorical. Years went by; Polish Fiats had appeared on the streets by now, you only had to queue once at the delicatessen’s to buy two packets of coffee and a tin of pineapple chunks, a few people had brought clapped-out old Volkswagens across from West Berlin, and some of the sailors used to swish along Gdynia’s Świętojańska Street in Talbots or Pontiacs, but my father hadn’t changed his mind at all. So just imagine,” I said, and drove barely five metres forward before getting stuck in the traffic again, “that April afternoon when under the windows of our little flat

we heard the typical whirring sound of a finely tuned diesel engine, when we heard the joyful choir of screaming children running after a slowly approaching Mercedes 170 DS and chanting, “It’s the Gestapo! It’s the Gestapo!” Yes, that was a really great moment for my father, his time had turned an extraordinary circle right before our eyes, a high-pressure fuel injection one-hundred-and-seventy, a post-war vintage, it was almost identical to the old one with the petrol engine; it had the same bulbous mud-guards as in the photos, the same elongated nose with the radiator, and just the same large rear end, all of which gave you the feeling that any minute now Grandfather Karol would step out of it. But instead of him my father appeared and joyfully beckoned us over, inviting us on our first outing along the streets of Wrzeszcz. We drove down Chrzanowski Street, then Polanki, admiring the dashboard and its Bosch dials, the steady purr of the engine and the gentle swaying of the suspension, while my father told us how difficult it had been to find certain missing parts, how he had hunted them down at scrap-yards and old workshops, and how there were parts that couldn’t be bought or found anywhere that he had turned on a lathe, because you have to realise,” I said, switching off the Fiat’s engine, “repairing that Mercedes, which my father bought after an accident from a mechanic friend of his, took two years, and it was all done in secret, because it had to be a big surprise.” “Incredible,” said Miss Ciwle, lighting a roll-up, “your father must have been a real romantic.” “Well, actually, he was an engineer,” I replied, starting up the engine to move two metres before stopping again, “nothing gave him greater pleasure than breaking down. If we went on a long journey to the mountains and nothing happened, nothing broke, my father would drive in silence, plainly bored by the monotony, but as soon as the gearbox started grating, or the brakes started squealing, or the differential gear started knocking, straightaway with a gleam in his eye he would reel off various conjectures, make diagnoses and develop hypotheses, and once we had reached our destination,

instead of coming hiking with us, he would unpack his tools and rummage about in the engine from morning to evening, covered in oil stains up to his elbows; he was happy if a few days later when it was time to be getting home, he had finally found a tiny crack in the rubber seal on the brake pump or a broken thread on some screw. That was when the real battle against time and matter would begin, but my father never lost it, the repair was always completed at five to twelve, when we'd set off down the highway home, and the slightly gloomy mood into which my father would now fall for lack of any subsequent breakdown, was fully compensated for by the impression that the shape and look of the old Mercedes made on other drivers. Sometimes they flashed their lights at us, sometimes they waved and sounded their horns, but the greatest emotion was aroused by overtaking; a Trabant, for example, or a Zaporozhets would get close to our car, and for a while its driver would keep at a safe distance, surprised that such an old relic could churn out as much as ninety, but suddenly he'd step on the gas, flash his indicator and start overtaking, upon which my father would gently accelerate and at somewhere around a-hundred-and-ten we'd see through the left-hand window the flustered, sweaty face of the Moskvich or Trabant owner, who would literally be goggle-eyed, stick out his tongue and scowl horribly, for our speedometer would already have reached a-hundred-and-twenty-two kilometres an hour...