

The Tourists

by Josef K. Strosche

There was only one road that led in and out of town, and though it was paved, it was decrepit and not wide enough, in any practical or official sense, to handle more than one vehicle at a time. Someone passing through could read zátyní on the sign standing at the town's entrance. The same name with a diagonal line running through it was posted a quarter mile down the road to signify that one was already leaving it. There were houses—twelve, thirteen, or fourteen, depending on how one defines a house—lining the sides of the road, sheltering the forty or fifty inhabitants that still called the place home. The town would be a stellar candidate for a Hollywood film about a post-apocalyptic wasteland, zombies, or a nineteenth-century shtetl.

Recognizing the car immediately, the boy instinctively hid on the far side of the house as it approached and finally pulled over and stopped. He looked at the license plate for confirmation. It bore an **S** at the beginning of the license number and a **D** inside of a blue square on the left, making it probable that it was the same car that had visited last fall. After they'd left he asked his mother what the letters meant, and she told him that they represented where the people came from. But she didn't know where exactly and simply told him somewhere across the border.

He observed that there were new people in the car this time. Last fall there were two men, one middle-aged and one elderly. This time, the boy noticed as he crouched in his vantage point, obscured by the shrubs and the side of the house, a teenaged boy wearing shorts and a T-shirt got out of the passenger seat and helped the old man out of the backseat. Then a woman got out from the other side of the backseat, and finally the middle-aged man from the driver seat. They moved slowly to accommodate the old man. He bent over as he walked, hooking his arm inside the teenager's. Last fall, the boy noted, the two men just stood in front of the house, exchanging only a few, unintelligible words. The old man pointed

now and again, and the man who was likely his son nodded his head, perhaps signaling that he was listening, perhaps signaling that he understood even.

That was on a Sunday too, the boy remembered. His mom had wanted to go for a walk—something they seldom did, which she claimed was regrettable. So when she'd finally convinced her husband that his mother, who had a room upstairs, was feeling well enough to come along, they fetched their jackets and changed their shoes. That's when they first noticed the presence that the Mercedes carrying the two foreign men, parked in the exact spot where it was parked now.

Furtively the boy continued to eye them from the safety of the house's far corner. Owing to their distance, lack of mobility, and apparently singular interest (his house's front door), he doubted there was a chance they would discover him. Their return to town was a shock. Their first visit was, for numerous reasons, more than enough to satisfy any visitor, not least of all considering they'd only taken interest in three of the town's structures before moving through. He thought of his field trip from the previous year, of Prague's museums, statues, squares, architecture, restaurants, and various modes of transport. The town offered none of these and surely no cinema, no crowds of people, not even an old church. Why a second visit?

I could tell them, the boy thought, to stop wasting their time and go to the metropolis instead. But he said nothing. He continued watching them, trying too to listen. The old man held his face close to the teenager's ear as they positioned themselves directly in front of the house and seemed to be whispering to him. The teen's father, unlike the other three, roamed around, recording the house with a minute digital device. The mother hovered about the car, her heavy purse slung over her shoulder, holding her elbow in one hand with the other one up at her mouth. Occasionally she inspected a part of the house more closely, but then backed up with a horrid look on her face, as if she were scared of getting dirty.

He thought back to the first time they were there. Jackets and shoes preceded a look out the window to check for rain. He was about to throw open the door when his father's arm came swinging down and blocked his body from the handle. Wait, he said. The boy crept over to the adjacent window to see what was going on, mimicking his father and spying for the first time the shiny Mercedes with the foreign license plate. For a minute no one spoke. Then his father ejected the word *Fascists!* from his mouth and stomped into the living room. Seated again in his recliner, he resumed the newspaper that his wife had just a few minutes earlier beseeched him to put down. Mother and grandmother were as confused as the child, until they too went to the window and saw the car and the men standing and chatting in front of their home. The boy watched as his grandmother began to pace and mumble something incoherent under her breath. His mother took her upstairs to calm her down. Why aren't we going for our walk? he asked his mother when she returned. She ignored him, so he braved the trip into the living room to ask his father who the men were. Fascists, he repeated.

Nothing had ever happened prior to that episode to which he might compare it to gain some comprehension. His grandmother remained hole up in her room for the twenty minutes that the men stood outside of the house, the boy's mother doing her best to pacify her. The following day he mentioned it to Tomaš at school. Those weren't tourists, his friend claimed. They're rich city people looking for a village where they can build a villa. The boy tried to disagree, to argue that this couldn't be the case, since they just stood outside the house and stared at it. Then maybe they want to buy your house, the friend replied and laughed. The idea sounded absurd at first. What city people would want that house? It might be big, he was able to admit, but it was old and run-down. Then the idea sank in that it might be renovated and he got scared, as if he could truly be forced to move some day. Tomaš agreed and reinforced the idea, if only to antagonize his friend. That's when Mrs. Novaková overheard their conversation and interrupted. Nobody is going to

buy your house or build a villa here. They can build a villa back home if they want to. Now you two get back to work.

Gradually the father was making his way toward the boy, but because he still held the camcorder to his eye, his vision was limited, the objects in his view diminished to a fraction of their actual size. It gave him a chance to lie down flat on his stomach, as he'd heard soldiers learned in basic training, still tucked securely behind the shrubs. He watched the man as he continued down the road to get shots of the field on the opposite side. When he finished he pushed a button on the camera and held it at his side. He called out to the others. The boy realized that he couldn't understand a word of their speech. The old man and his grandson came into his view, joining the man with the camera. There the old man started talking, this time louder, confirming the group's foreign speech, and pointed at the field, to what the boy could not imagine.

It was the old man that spotted him. He smiled and then laughed a little, alerting his son and grandson to his presence. The three approached. Terrified, the boy rose and made to run to the back of the house and into the back door, but faced with his second opportunity to confront what he now knew were fascists, he stopped, turned back to them and shouted: Halt, fascists! I am in command here and I warn you, this perimeter is secured. I order your unit to rejoin its transport and return the way you came or you leave me no choice but to defend this position. The old man laughed and looked back at his son, who also seemed to be quite entertained. The trio took two more steps forward, and the old man brought forth a series of noises that sounded to the boy like the hostile speech of wild Indians.

Before he could repeat his warning his mother had seized him by the arm from behind, yanking him to the back of the house with warnings not to speak to the strangers.

School was over by the end of the month, leaving the rest of the summer for the usual activities, comprised mostly of play but now the added preoccupation with several of his environment's

curiosities. Until the second encounter with the tourists these had gone wholly unnoticed. Now, however, the roadside Virgin Mary shrine outside of town and the hieroglyphic-like carvings in the sandstone walls of the gorges surrounding his village took on urgent importance. What did all these specimens mean? What was their ancient origin? And more important: whose corpses occupied the graves of the area's cemeteries, the ones that bore markers in that same foreign script, with dates ranging from the 1800s through the middle of the last century?

At home his questions fell on deaf ears. Once during a meal he brought up a carving he'd discovered along with Tomaš in one of the sandstone cliffs outside town. It included the year 1924 and what appeared to be two names: Georg and Anna. In response his mother told him it wasn't polite to speak during dinner, to which he replied that they often conversed while eating. His father's look was enough to end the debate before it could begin.

On another occasion he attempted to approach his father alone, to see if he could excite him the way the tourists' visit had done, thinking that he might be able to make him lose his cool and again erupt with at least some scrap of information. He found him watching soccer one evening and asked him about the shrine outside of town. I know you say they're fascists, he ventured, but I sure wish I could read what's written out there. What he hadn't accounted for was his mother's presence in the darkness of the adjacent room. She sat in a rocker and pounced on the comment, shoos him into the kitchen under the guise of not disrupting his father's treasured match.

The grandmother proved more forthcoming. That he'd pay a heavy price from his mother if she caught him upsetting his grandmother he knew, but the odds of satisfying his mission proved too strong. His father away at work and his mother outside sweeping, the boy found her one afternoon in August seated at the kitchen table drinking a glass of grapefruit juice. He told her he'd spent the entire day at the cemetery over in Dubá. There are graves there that no one pays any attention to, he said. Ancient ones.

They're covered almost entirely by weeds and groundcover. Tree branches hang down, obscuring the names. But if you're brave enough, he told her, she all the while listening, her face cold and pale, you can get close to them, peel away the overgrowth, and look at the names. They all range from the same time, he said. And you can't understand what's written on them, except for the numbers and a few of the names. Some have the place names engraved on them, I think, he said, and a few of them look like misspellings of places around here. I think Dauba means Dubá, for example. Sakschen must be Zakšín, and Sattai Zátyní. And if you compare the dates to the dates on our graves, the ones that are new and at the front of the cemetery, where the groundskeeper bothers to cut the grass and trim the weeds, where the living place candles and flowers and photographs, you begin to understand that something must have happened, I think at the end of the war, to make it the way it is. One type stopped and the other began. How did that happen?

The grandmother stared back. At first he didn't expect an answer. You kids don't know how lucky you are, she said. Don't know how lucky you are! She screamed it and the boy's mother heard. She rushed through the front door and looked at them. What was I supposed to do! the grandmother shouted. The mother backhanded the boy, slashing the skin to the left of his eye with her ring, before dragging her mother-in-law up the stairs. What was I supposed to do!

In the fall he caught a hedgehog in the field behind their house. When the tourists returned—this time the middle-aged man, his wife, and their son only—he wanted desperately to go to them and show them the animal. Instead, however, conscious of his mother's warnings never to approach them again, he retrieved from his field kit one of two sticks he'd sharpened weeks before. He held the tiny animal down and pierced its torso, driving the stick right through and into the lawn, holding the writhing creature in place. The boy then walked around the house, stood plainly in front of the trio of

tourists, allowed them to recognize and greet him solemnly, and returned to the backyard. He examined the hedgehog once again. Its left hind leg twitched. He wondered if it had a soul, which made him wonder if he himself had a soul. As he pierced its heart with the second sharpened stick, finishing it off, he decided that it likely did, which made him feel better about not only the hedgehog but the entirety of thoughts clouding his mind.

