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*One afternoon, on the banks of the Mura River near Ižakouci, the Sunday fishermen noticed a noble white mare tied to a tree. It was soon discovered that the mare came from the Rakičan stables and was the property of my father, Ivan Spransky, the Chief Water Inspector from Murska Sobota. Not long afterwards, a woman's white salon shoes were found on the pebbles beneath the bank. My unfortunate father immediately recognized them and, as a result, was convinced until the end of his life that his young wife, Elica, had been taken by the waves of the seemingly calm, though often unpredictable and voracious Mura River. For many years after this mysterious event, he wandered alone along its shores, its quiet tributaries and pebble banks, searching for the body that the river never washed up. This tireless but vain and, for many people, incomprehensible search turned him over the years into a madman, a man who even in the harshest of winters only rarely distanced himself from the river and came home even less.*

*He died in 1935 at the age of fifty-one.*

*I grew up in Murska Sobota, which was occupied by the Yugoslav Army in August 1919 following the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and, in June of 1920, with the signing of the Trianon Peace Treaty, became, along with most of the territory between the Mura and Raba Rivers, part of the Kingdom of Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs. I was raised by Miss Rosa Brumen. At least until the first grade, I was convinced that she was my real mother. After my father's untimely death, I inherited his property which made it possible for me to continue my schooling in Ljubljana and then in Graz. In 1939, I became employed as the Chief Engineer of the Mura Waterworks in Murska Sobota.*

*Eng. Julian Spransky in his statement for the investigative proceedings of 1946.*



# The Bridge

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“God knows if we can ever completely comprehend what a magnificent work we have accomplished here.” Engineer Lavoslav Pichler, Senior Technical Adjunct, was momentarily enraptured, rather like a water bird after a long flight. “And you, young sir?” He turned a bright eye for affirmation onto his trainee, Engineer Julian Spransky, with whom he was strolling across the bridge in the evening quiet. “Do you even realize it? That from the start you have collaborated on the completion of the largest structure of its kind in this country? Just think of all that awaits you in life!” He lifted his eyebrows meaningfully. “You are beginning where I am ending. The human era is no longer so short.” He struggled to convey his excited thoughts. “Everyday some new fangled thing is manufactured in German factories, everyday in Japan a higher level of engineering is achieved...”

His trainee nodded at length, though the speech did not move him.

The main span across the river, on the middle of which the two had stopped, measured precisely one hundred metres. On the right, there followed five inundation bridges with a combined length of one hundred and forty metres. All had a width of 6.5 m, the foundations reached 4.5 m into the river bottom, and at certain points the steel walls penetrated a full seven metres into the depths. Built into all of this was one-hundred and seventy loads of cement which contained a massive 7,100 m<sup>3</sup> of concrete – and it was the latter upon which Julian most relied during all the time he had spent at the building site. But how could he explain this to his supervising engineer who didn't have the same connection as he did to this line of business? Julian's sole desire was to harness the river, he longed for the instant when it would at last be vanquished, he longed for the moment when the river

would be clad in armour so strong that the water could never break it. All the physics and calculations that he mastered satisfied him during his waking hours, but in his nocturnal dreams the water was always stronger. He sometimes pondered, calculating how to adapt the plans, how to use more material in order to strengthen the construction. But what with the constraints of the architects and the builders, the civic authorities and the bankers, that was not possible, and it would have only been a greater madness since the enormous bridge was already sufficiently magnificent and seemingly invincible.

“All the wise men will come tomorrow.” The old engineer gently tugged on Julian’s sleeve and pulled him into his stride. “Believe me when I say that such praise as will be heard tomorrow among these ministers, councillors, and company directors has never been heard before on these plains.” He chuckled through his nose. “But there is something else I must also tell you, right here on our bridge.” He stared into Julian’s face. “I intend to find the right ear in which to sing your praise.”

“Mine?” The young man winced as if he had only now woken up in the placid silence of the construction site resting after the day’s labours. The river blueness of his eyes flashed and widened at the question, surprise suddenly opening up his sunburnt and manly face that before had been veiled by melancholy.

“Yes,” his supervisor nodded. “I have been watching you since the very beginning and I know that I am not mistaken.” He spoke with conviction now. “You have studied well but that isn’t the only thing that matters. There is something in your nature that will make you an extraordinary builder.” He lifted a crooked index finger and paused. “You are ready to fight and you want to win.” He said this last with a changed tone of voice.

Julian looked away nervously and took a step back. He had an account to settle with this river and he wanted to defeat it. He was obsessed with the hope that he could humiliate it, and, because of this strange desire, he felt a certain shame now that the Senior Technical Adjunct was congratulating him. Or perhaps he had simply never seen the project in this light before and no one had ever been there to hold up a mirror.

“Don’t think I didn’t notice.” Julian heard his supervisor’s whispering voice somewhere through the echoes of his spasmodic rumination. “All those nights when the river rose, you stood on the bank or dozed on the escarpment. You were always the first to come to work when the water grew angry and threatened to flood the trenches. You gave me your support even when the other workers abandoned me and when that bloody councilman demanded a temporary work stoppage.” His voice was suddenly louder. “Precisely because of that, young man, I will sing your praises tomorrow!” he exclaimed. “For how did the Führer himself infuse confidence in his generals before the attack on Poland? ‘Harden your hearts!’ he commanded them. ‘The mighty are always right!’ And what happened to Poland next? German tanks and Luftwaffe shattered the Polish Army in a single week. And next? The Danes hardly resisted. Belgium and the Netherlands fell in a matter of days. Even Paris is German now! Don’t tell me that you are not aware of this.”

“Of course I am,” Julian shrugged. He hadn’t yet gathered what the connection was. Hitler’s army might be better compared to the river than the bridge. It was the river that eroded, pounded, and destroyed, that flowed wherever it could, compelled by an unstoppable inner urge. But these were uncertain times and even seemingly discerning people were easily misled. At least that is how Julian explained it to himself when someone got ensnared, and until now the explanation had satisfied him. In such encounters, it was better, in any case, to keep his opinions to himself.

“Even England cannot hold out much longer,” his superior continued to discuss the war despite the younger man’s obvious restraint. “German planes have dropped twenty-five thousand tons of bombs on London. Two thousand buildings have been destroyed, three thousand damaged to the extent that nobody can live in them anymore.” He seemed to take an eager and incomprehensible pleasure in these accomplishments. “And that’s just the beginning. Why the world has never seen such a thing!” He lectured with a raised forefinger spattered with ink. “The Führer would not have started his campaign if he had not planned it down to the last victory.”

Julian, biting down on his lip until it hurt, could barely conceal the discomfort that had become as suffocating as the

autumn damp dragging like mist over the surface of the river now traversed by the bridge. He had grown fond of the old engineer who over the years had confided his worries and sometimes even shared his bonuses with him. He saw in him a master who had a genuine inclination to bring up his underlings, who always disclosed at the right moment the expertise which many others, out of stubbornness, carried with them to the grave. But what he was saying now bewildered Julian. Suddenly they were standing there like two strangers. The sense of rapture that had pleasantly filled Julian's belly during this victorious stroll now settled in his intestines. He felt the sudden famished need to relieve himself. As if he were in a photograph watching villagers raise the last triumphal arch behind the altar, the hammer falling without a sound, the girls laughing silently, hearts trembling though he could not hear anything at all.

"What's the matter?" Lavoslav Pichler inquired of him. "You look as if you're going to shit yourself!"

"No, no," Julian Spransky shook his head. "I'm fine." He attempted to gather his wits.

"You'd better be!" The old man poked a finger into the younger's sternum.

"All of this is rather strange to me," Julian confessed. "We are builders." He drew a deep breath and searched for the words that would express his anxiety. "We have worked for a good year building together," he began again, "and during that time the belief that I will be a builder my whole life has grown within me and indeed I can think of nothing more beautiful." This last he said with a pure strong voice. "And now you speak to me about destruction with the same passion!" Julian lifted his gaze and stared almost threateningly into the pale eyes of the older man. "You speak as if there is also something beautiful in destruction!"

"Eh!" coughed the supervisor, retreating with a nervous gesture of his left hand. This was the way he usually moved when something did not go well for him. It was not a good sign. Generally such dissatisfaction would hold him in its grip until evening and only the next morning would he return to work filled once again with confidence in the perfection of reinforced concrete. But on this occasion, he surprised Julian by stepping forward and bursting out laughing so loudly that

his croaks echoed over the swamps. “Young man!” he cried. “I gave you everything and yet think of all that I have not taught you yet!” He slapped him on the back. “Construction is not the smithy’s trade, it is not cooery, nor gardening – more than anything else construction is politics. You must always remember that,” he concluded, “we would never have made this bridge if our most illustrious governor had not realized that, in order to bring Slovenian heartlands into the world, the ferry must be replaced by the metal cables of this bridge. And now what are you saying to me?” The old man was so close that his forehead nearly touched the younger’s.

“True enough,” said Julian. He felt trapped. “But what of this destruction?”

“What is war if not politics?” the old man exhaled into Julian’s face and his breath carried the stink of his agitation. “The Führer is changing the world, destroying it so it can be built anew!” He released a fine spray of saliva. “And who, if not us, will have work when everything must be built from the bottom up again? Ponder that awhile! The opportunity is too great to be wasted...”

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Julian left the embankment and went on foot to Sobota. If he had gone by the postal road, it would have taken an hour and a half at most. He knew that the way along the Mura River and through the fields would take him until midnight, but he was in no hurry. He wanted to enjoy the walk. Men who sat on the bus or clattered one after another by bicycle were hurrying home to their families. Only Miss Rosa waited for him and at this hour she would already be dressed for bed. These were the times when he suddenly became aware of his solitude; he otherwise rarely permitted such emotions to rise up from the depths where he had kept them stored for so long. Things were the way they were – that was his maxim. Despondency did not make survival easier nor would self-pity change the fact that this river had taken his mother, when he was not yet grown and had taken his father five years ago as well. Not long ago, during his studies, he had decided that he would not return to this place where he had no real roots. The Sreše family had died out with his mother and his father was a newcomer to these parts. But as it happened, he followed his rector's recommendation to return and was pleased to realize that these plains not only made a claim on his fate but also exerted a mysterious and seductive pull on him.

He had grown up in Sobota, a town that did not defend itself from the hinterland with trenches and walls but instead merged with it. The line where the town formally began, not even precisely defined in the land register, meant nothing to the mixed farmers, the cottagers, and the Gypsies who moved to places where there was money to be had and where seeds, when planted, grew. Chickens, geese, and pigs respected the border even less, sometimes wandering right up to the Crown Hotel and the district council in the centre of town. It also goes without saying that it was not possible to stop the flood waters when harsh weather pressed in from all sides. Great shiny watery eyes stalked the streets and remained in the gardens long after the rains were over. As a result, the appearance of the town houses was not very different from that of the houses in the surrounding villages, the ones built on the meadows and swamp lands around the settlement. The plains allowed no scabs to form where her own wilderness could heal a wound and her plants could grow.

It was this quality that had both seduced and terrified Julian since he was a child.

When he was a child, Miss Rosa had never gone into town with him. On school days, he was obliged to wear a uniform that included white knee socks and a starched shirt. If he soiled them as an ordinary child would during play, it was a sign to Miss Rosa of his carelessness, as if he had been infected by some contagion that needed to be eradicated. After his mother's accident, his father no longer slept at home but camped on the shores of the Mura or drank through the night with millers and smugglers, only coming for Julian on rare occasions which became fewer and fewer over the years. When he did come, they usually bicycled to the river or rode on horseback, poking around in the shallows and along the sandbanks. The former Chief Inspector Ivan Spransky only chose companions with whom he was able to speak. Others he ignored or even avoided, which is perhaps why Julian only knew his father's favourite places on the river from a distance. Indeed sometimes they seemed to him even more foreign and inaccessible than the faraway lands described in his school books, than the many peoples that crowded this earth in bondage to their masters. He quietly pitied such people, though their distant but visible subordination and obedience to God's indifference also made him despise them.

The night was darker than he expected. He knew he would meet nobody save the occasional stray cat or roe deer. The silence of the evening fog collected in each and every hollow, broken here and there by the sound of water lapping up against the embankment and gushing over where it could. The sound of the water was strange at night, recalling human voices. Some thought that the dead spoke through water. Julian remembered the times when he stayed late at the construction site and heard strange voices that he could not explain. For him, it was the voice of the river – the babbling and sobbing and raging of an irrational creature that had been sent on a journey with no return, a creature with no understanding of its own eventual demise, no compassion for all it mutilated along the way. At such times, he knew one thing: that he hated this irrational creature far too much to fear it. Which is why he now found himself standing calmly, without really wanting to, right at the bend in the river where

he had last seen his father alive. It was if he had been guided there by some mysterious force.

“I don’t understand how, after so many years, you still hope that mother is alive?” Julian had asked his father then. Ivan Spransky lifted both his hands and ran them through the beard that had grown past his ears. He stared at the boy as if he would thrash him. It was a question that he did not expect and still less wanted to hear. It condemned his seventeen years of wandering, years during which he had changed from a reputable Sobota leader to the madman of the Mura River.

“It’s time that you accepted it,” the boy insisted.

“Yes.” The father was visibly moved by his son’s courage. He combed his beard with spread finger as if to untangle it. Then he bent his knees and, without using his hands to steady himself, sat on the bank. He mutely stared into the waves and the current of the water pulled his gaze as if he were following something carried along by the water. After a while, the water twinkled brightly and his gaze once again found a spot in the water and flowed with it.

Julian recognized this rapturous spell. Sometimes it lasted hours before the unfortunate man was able to rouse himself. Afterwards, his azure eyes would be bloodshot from fatigue and unshed tears. High on his forehead remained the deep traces of his ceaseless squinting. As a child, Julian used to wait out these spells, suffering patiently beside his father. But eventually he grew insensitive to them and found ways to help his father to escape from these strange absences. This time he only said: “Please, I beg of you.”

His father squinted and the water released his gaze. It looked as if he were pondering something, searching for words. Then he gestured with his hands to counsel patience. Finally he said: “I know there is no hope. But there are moments when hope resurfaces. That is what I wait for.” After a while he continued with a flicker of a smile: “I have to be always ready. A man can never know when it will happen.” He leaned forward and looked at his son under his bushy brows. “I never told her how much I loved her. It would have been different if I could have just found the words...”

At that moment Julian realized, more from his father’s look than from what he said, how hard it went with him. There never again would be anything in that face with its

recognizable human shape but his father's characteristic incomprehension of all that did not accord with his judgment. But this judgement had been completely perverted and could no longer be trusted. Now standing here five years later and remembering all the pain, Julian was convinced that he had done the right thing in refusing to succumb to his father's madness, in refusing to give him any encouragement. And yet despite all of this, he still missed his father.

Today, for example, he would have wanted to show him his bridge.

But instead he addressed the thousands of traces that Ivan Spransky had left along the pathway and the pebbles banks of the river's tributaries and its dead pools: "We showed the river our power. And it is only the beginning..."

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Night over the Mura was as black as pitch. That's how it felt to Julian with his lingering memories of despair. No horizon could be discerned that would visibly divide the black weight of the plains from the black emptiness of the sky. Even the internal border that he could always count on had somehow strangely withdrawn. The past about which he had no say and the future which should be his alone had become strangely close during his walk and were now almost overlapping. A long feared premonition that the strange fate of his family would leave an indelible trace on him made him break into a sweat. It occurred to him that he must take measures to prevent it. But what could he do? Is it even possible to recognize the unmarked turns and hidden traps in this life? He believed it should be possible and yet he wondered. He was twenty-four years old. He had a diploma and a good state job. He had enough savings in the bank to easily buy three Chevrolets of the kind owned by the factory owner Cvetič. The estate in Rakičan and the many-storied villa in Sobota were worth even more. He was in all ways well-supplied and prepared for life. It was only necessary to enter it. But what would this life be? He felt anxious again. Was it possible to choose?

At that moment, he made out the first lights of the town.

It was a few minutes past eleven, Saturday night, and there was a big dance at the Crown Hotel. The fiddler Baranja would be playing with his Gypsy band at the Sočič tavern. The students were probably still holding down the fort at the new bowling alley at Benkič. He could visit these places that had never attracted him and thus shorten the night that, despite his fatigue, would probably not be visited by sleep. Though the very thought that he might now have to look upon people showing off their wallets from under their waistcoats or, God forbid, flatter the ladies flaunting the latest fashion from Modeblatte, was unpleasant to him. The only place he could go without such feelings was Faflek's, though since the declaration of neutrality and the prohibition on listening to the radio, fewer guests came there and the place would probably be closed at this hour. He was already past the Turopolje cottages and hadn't even bothered to turn down Aleksandar Street, having decided to forgo a glass of white wine from the Jerusalem hills and just go home, when he

spotted a bonfire surrounded by shadows on the field behind Garany's garden shack. From a distance, it looked as if the shadows had come to put out the fire but when he stepped closer, he realized that they were warming themselves.

The fire had been made from a number of great logs that were just now beginning to catch. The men, most of them young, stood by the pit and kicked at the logs that the flames had not yet engulfed. At this point, Julian noticed a stocky Gypsy holding a bear on a chain. The animal, which otherwise would surely have been taller than the Gypsy, sat on the ground like a man, chewing on the stick with which it was tamed and calmed. A good deal of saliva flowed from its muzzle and its clipped ears trembled. It was a dancing bear who had probably been travelling with his owner from market to fair. In other words, it was certainly not trembling from fear of all the people. Perhaps the fire had unnerved it or it did not feel like being up at this late hour.

"Varaždinec was paid to bring water to this brute," someone near Julian said.

"What are they thinking?" another man added with some irritation. "The world has never seen such a thing!"

"Why would it need water?" another asked.

But no one answered. The thing was clear: somebody had got the idea to bring the bear to the party. One of three Gypsy women took some ginger cake from her apron and placed it in a basin. A bottle of rum, perhaps also meant for the bear, travelled from hand to hand. Those gathered around the fire gradually grew warmer and more childish – at least that's how it seemed to Julian who pitied the animal even more as it would soon be pricked by the human lust for sensation. He was wondering whether he would even stay and watch the spectacle when he felt a hand on his shoulder.

It was the hand of a woman.

"Let's listen if the bear will fart or not," a familiar voice breathed in his ear.

"Zinaida!" He nearly shouted when he turned around. He never would have dreamed that he would meet her of all people at this hour and in this place – the girl from his street who was never allowed to play with any of the cottagers or other tenants.

"We were at the Crown but they were playing Czech music and nobody wanted to dance," she said breathlessly. She

had also apparently been drawn in by the present madness. “And then Garany made a bet with Hanc that he could make the bear dance,” she explained to Julian, her nose against his neck. “Now you can see what came of that bet?” She pinched his shirt and pulled him closer. “Our boys are really losing their minds...”

The flames now flickered high over the heads, illuminating slices of laughing faces. The Gypsy rattled the chain and struck the drum. The dancing Gypsy women teased the bear with the ginger bread soaked in rum. It was obvious that this wasn't the first time they'd done this – the beast recognized the crazy food and saliva foamed under its snout. Its heavy paws moved to the rising rhythm and its jaws snapped hungrily. “That an animal can be such a drunkard!” The company shook with laughter. “She has no idea of the hangover she'll have in the morning!” they howled. “If we let her off the chain, she'll certainly run straight to Nadey's wine cellar,” they warned the Gypsies. One with a pointy moustache gestured to the women and the bear smacked its lips.

“Isn't it nearly human?” Zinaida stamped her foot. “Isn't it cute?”

The whole thing seemed terrible to Julian so he didn't answer.

The Gypsy now banged on the drum faster and began to sing with a course voice. No one present understood the song – it was probably a child's counting song as Gypsy lyrics were generally clever but simple – but everyone thought it funny and clapped along. The bear, of course, was accustomed to all of this and began to sway all the more.

“Where are you now, Garany?” someone cried out. “You said you would dance!”

Vendi Garany was Julian's peer and had been his school mate for two years during gymnasium. He was the only son of the lawyer Elemer Garany whose second wife was the widow of the trader Cigüt and, for some time therefore, the man had not needed to work in his venerable profession. Vendi had had difficulties with his studies and continued his schooling in Szarvar, Hungary where his sprawling clan lived. He supposedly studied harder there and was accepted to Sopron, one of the most renowned universities in this part of Europe. As a result, Julian hadn't heard much about him

anymore except for the report that he borrowed his father's car one Sunday and drove the girls through the neighbourhood pumpkin patches. He saw him at the occasional village parties where he and his Hungarian comrades were usually raising a rumpus. His famous foppishness was a combination of the latest Magyar fashion and a sort of cosmopolitan reserve. It also served as an exhibition of the wealth that his father had not even earned. Julian opposed one and the other. Once again, he made an effort to leave but Zinaida grabbed his sleeve as if she had designated him her protector. He thought it would be impolite to leave her.

Young Garany strode into the yellow fiery light, smoothing between his thumb and forefinger a moustache as black as a crow's feather. He lifted his chin and looked down at the Gypsy and then at the bear that was swaying drunkenly. This was a sure sign for the czardas dance which the drummer then beat out with his quick fingers on the pigskin. "*Ä-za-sejþ, ä-za-sejþ, ni-ka, ne-ga, sä-mo kejp.*" The Gypsy sang the familiar Hungarian lyrics in his own way, pulling the drunken bear, who could no longer keep pace with the rhythm, behind the dancers around the fire. "*Ä-za-sejþ, ä-za-sejþ, ni-ka, ne-ga, sä-mo kejp,*" sang the Gypsy women, swinging their arms above their heads.

At this moment, the foppish young man suddenly kicked the Gypsy with his heel. "Are you making fun, Gypsy?" The silence after the question was broken only by the crackling of the flames.

"No, I am not making fun, young sir," the small-eyed Gypsy feigned ignorance. "Not at all – as God is my witness – I meant no harm." In an instant, the Gypsy who had been holding the leash, pulled the hat from his head, and pressed the crumpled thing against his chest.

"Once more like that, Gypsy, and you'll be sorry!" Garany bristled and waved a menacing finger. "You'll get it on your bare ass and you'll return my money!"

"I am without sin, I swear to you, sir!" The Gypsy gestured with his hat. "Let my wife die, let my children grow sick, let my hands and feet wither..."

At this point, the bear, who no longer felt the leash, began to sway more broadly. Its rear paws escaped it. Its heavy head hung low. It began to rock back and forth and it almost

seemed that it would begin to dance again. A woman's voice giggled in the pained silence and turned to loud laughter. The unpleasantness of the moment had become overwhelming, and the animal, ignoring the comic relief, lunged into the emptiness, seeking its balance. The Gypsy jumped after it and pulled on the chain, brandishing the stick to keep it away from the fire to which, during its convulsive dance, it had come dangerously close. In vain: for the animal was now utterly intoxicated and the Gypsy was too weak for its drunken mass. The wavering fur-covered body inclined forward and then tried, at the touch of the heat, to lift itself up. Then flailing paws and gaping muzzle plunged straight into the embers.

A wave of ashy heat rose with the dull blow to the ground and everyone around the fire retreated or fled. Then from out of the smoke there came a heart-rending wail and a swarm of sparks flew up to the sky. The Gypsy, the only one to remain near this particular hell on earth, hoarsely cried out to the animal and pulled on its chain. The other men who ran to his assistance could do nothing because the glowing logs had ignited the bear's fur. Every so often, the animal let out an indescribably sad and mournful sound.

Julian, staring silently at the dying body, felt Zinaida's sharp nails digging into the flesh of his back. She clung to him, pressing her face under his arm, her whole torso trembling with her sobs. He held her around her narrow shoulders, almost lifted her, and pulled her into the darkness.