by the same author
(in English translation)

The King of the Rattling Spirits
The Cartier Project
Guarding Hanna
Collector of Names

Miha Mazzini

THE GERMAN LOTTERY

FLR JUGOSLAVIJA

translated by
Urška Zupanec

CB *editions*

First published in 2012
by CB editions
146 Percy Road London W12 9QL
www.cbeditions.com

All rights reserved
© Miha Mazzini, 2010
English translation © Miha Mazzini, 2011

The rights of Miha Mazzini and Urška Zupanec to
be identified respectively as author and translator
of this work have been asserted in accordance with
the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

German Lottery design (opposite and page 49) © Andreja Brulc

Printed in England by Blissetts, London W3 8DH

ISBN 978-0-9567359-0-0

1

No.

You’ve got to tell her: no.

I remember how hard it is; you want to scream it, beg with it, but a true *no* is quite ordinary, normal, neither loud nor soft, though there is something in it that comes from your moral core, as I call it. They’ve dug into you, pushed you, and finally pinned you against your own essence so you can’t shrink any further. This is how you say it:

No.

When you say it, that’s it. End of story. People feel it. But you’ve got to be strong inside, you’ve got to firmly believe, you’ve got to . . .

Oh, how hard it is!

Until you’ve said it, can you be a mature and responsible person at all?

It wasn’t easy, this *no* of mine. Especially because I had to say it to a woman. For the first and . . . well, actually, also for the last time in my life. Once was enough, that’s how strong it was.

Perhaps the time is right for you to hear the story of my success. You’re the right age – as old as I was when I became part of the German Lottery.

I’ll start telling it when you come to visit me again.

2

They sent me here in the beginning of March 1950 to work at the post office. Youths my age from the home for war orphans were drafted into the army, you had to serve three years back then, but I wasn't accepted because of my bad knee. I was disabled, so they decided I should become a postman.

Yes, I know it sounds strange that someone could look at a young man with a limp and think: he'll make a good postman! But those were different times, socialist times. We were all equal and everyone was qualified for everything. There were no differences. These days it's tougher. You have a limp, you can't be a postman. You have no taste, you can't be a cook. You're impolite and slow, you can't be a waiter. If you start sorting people by their characteristics, there will never be enough of them to fill all the jobs. Someone who is impolite and slow will have to pretend to be polite and quick to get the job, which means he'll be lying to himself and to others. People have a tendency towards the truth and the Yugoslav socialism supported that.

I've wandered a little. I'm sorry.

Back then the post office was in the old building, on this side of the river, right next to the bridge. They pulled it down before you were born. Maybe I could find some pictures . . . I'll have a look before next time.

It was small, from Austro-Hungarian times. A single counter by the wall, little piles of forms in the corner. A few pens, a bottle of ink, a sponge moistener for stamps, which was always dry, so everybody had to lick their stamps. Later I heard a joke about why President Tito didn't allow his picture to be put on stamps for a long time. Because people would spit on the wrong side. Ha, ha.

Well.

The room was divided down the middle – wood up to waist height and then glass, a window, and behind the window, Mrs . . . well, *Comrade* Leopoldina. We all became comrades at that time and had to use the familiar form of address with each other, which was embarrassing. How could I address this old lady, who must have personally met Emperor Franz Joseph, as Comrade? When I did, she stopped for a moment, as if to check if I were talking to her. Not that we had many dealings. She came in the morning, at eight – we postmen arrived two hours earlier – closed at noon and came back in the afternoon. Good day, good night, that's about all we ever said to each other. I can still see her clearly; she looked like an owl with those glasses of hers.

Like I've said, we postmen arrived at six. The manager stood at the front door checking his watch, so we were always on time. He unlocked the door and we filed in after him. The three of us turned right into the sorting room and he went straight into his office. Lovro and Janez were old postmen, from before the war. Lovro, the poor guy, would immediately sit down at the counter and shake, whining softly. I can still hear his fingers pattering on the counter, just like rain. He didn't sort the mail. How could he? Just before seven, Janez grabbed him by the arm, helped him to his feet, and took him for a walk across the bridge to the pub.

I sorted their mail. They couldn't deal with that too, old and weak as they were. How quick and skilful I was! I even had time to read the newspaper headlines and the captions under the pictures in peace and quiet before they came back.

When they did, half an hour later, I could hardly recognise Lovro, his step sure and self-confident. He often entered the room making fun of me, calling me beanpole and long Monday.

I sorted the mail by delivery, that's what you called it, into a rack, in the same order we put the mail into our bags, which was again the order of our routes.

At half past seven sharp, the manager walked into the sorting room and dragged his finger across the sorted mail. The first time, when I was new, he had to ask me if there was anything special; afterwards he just looked at me and I would shake my head. Lovro and Janez would do the same. I thought the manager looked like a mountain, his finger with the closely-bitten nail like a red hook on white envelopes. Always only the right index finger. He never used his left hand for official purposes, only for smoothing his slightly grizzled hair, shiny with brilliantine.

How softly the envelopes rustled when he bent them. His finger slid and stopped – maybe against a stiffer letter or for no apparent reason – then he drew out an envelope and held it up to the light. Each day he took out a small stack and took it into his office.

A minute to eight, the time for our rounds, he returned the letters, freshly sealed.

The town wasn't big back then. Before I arrived, Lovro and Janez divided it between themselves. After I started, they took over the new apartment block quarter, here, on this bank, where all the customers were in one place and you didn't need to go from house to house to deliver each letter.

I was left with the old side, or the village side as they called it. Before socialism, the farmers built their houses and stables on the slopes; they didn't want to waste the flat, fertile land. But that was pre-revolutionary, old-fashioned, big-landowner thinking; now they laid concrete and asphalt on the fields.

The houses near the river still huddled together, but those along the slopes were dotted further and further apart. If you take a good look, you'll see the mountains reach towards us like the paws of a cat or a dog. Mail delivery was an endless trudge up and down.

I ate at the People's Kitchen which was built for the factory workers. When I looked down over my delivery route from the highest hill, I saw all the rooftops from under which the smells of cooking climbed up, something different from each house; how confusing and uneconomical, each family making their own meal, while the People's Kitchen served the same to everyone. We were getting communism even in the kitchen!

Postmen should have taken turns in the evening emptying of the mailboxes in the town, but my colleagues had families, so I went back to the post office every evening, took the company bicycle and my bag, and went to collect the mail. When the weather was fine, there was nothing better than a bicycle. What I miss most is the feeling of pushing yourself uphill with your own muscles. The wind, the slope, everything, everything wants to stop you, but you won't give in. Beautiful. How beautiful. Well . . .

I went back to the post office with my bag and sorted the collected mail into four piles: for abroad, other republics, Slovenia, and sometimes for our home town, if necessary. This wasn't often; people still visited each other back then. The manager always came out of his office at eight sharp and went through the piles again. Occasionally, he took a letter or two with him, but less than in the morning, because he knew there would be more managers between him and the addressees, who would try to prevent correspondence between hostile elements.

This is what we did every day, except on Sundays.

That's it.

Have I forgotten anything?

You can yawn away, but I have to explain how the work was organised for you to understand the secret of the German Lottery. If it hadn't been like that, and if the times had been different, it wouldn't have been possible.

Yes . . . one more thing, as I've already started explaining about the times. On the wall there was the picture of Marshal Tito and next to it a large stain where two years earlier Comrade Stalin used to hang. They took him down because he and Tito had a fight. We were all shouting 'Long live Stalin!' and then we suddenly weren't supposed to do it any more, without anybody telling us. After a while it was criminalised, without any law being passed. Those must have been strange times, but they didn't seem so. Probably because of youth, which blinds you somehow. You only see yourself, I think.

Do they teach you any of this in school?

I'll refresh your memory: first Tito and Stalin were friends. Tito was ours and Stalin was the Soviet president. Soviet is what we used to call the Russians back then. They had both quarrelled with the Americans, who isolated Yugoslavia because of it. The borders were closed with the tanks and the army. Then Tito stopped bowing his head to Stalin, and the Soviets isolated us as well. So we had Soviet tanks on our eastern borders and American tanks on our western border. It sounds official, but think about it; the West is right over there, just beyond that hill. The American planes kept flying over our heads. One day our men started shooting and brought one down. Really. We were waiting for the Americans to strike, but nothing happened. They kept flying their planes – they are a superpower after all – but on their side of the hill.

Those were different times . . .

But in spite of the tensions that had continued after the war, I wasn't afraid. I thought we were all in the same boat. Each of us alone, but still in the same boat. Now, I think I've never belonged to something bigger than me, though I've tried. Only when I got mixed up with the German Lottery did I learn about fear. I wasn't just alone, I was unique, separated from the crowd, and with this came responsibility for my actions. A mortifying feeling.

You've got to go already? Stay a little longer. Let me just show you my delivery route.

First, I would stride over the bridge, which seemed big and beautiful. Sometime last year, when I felt my legs wouldn’t carry me much longer, I paid for a cab and went to see it. How small and dreary it looked. I didn’t even want to leave the car. Maybe it’s good that memory and truth go their separate ways sometimes.

Well, over that large and beautiful bridge I went. It had two arches made of concrete; later I saw similar ones in American movies. I was always temped to walk over them like a tightrope walker, but I never dared. Even now, when I think about it, I become nostalgic. You know, I’ve been thinking about all the things I have to tell you so you’ll understand the secret of the German Lottery. Remembering these arches I realised something that may help you, young as you are: memories are about the things you’ve done, while nostalgia is about the things you haven’t done, but should have.

Halfway over the bridge I always looked down at my reflection in the river. Is it still as slow as it used to be? I admit, I was thrilled when I saw the buttons on my postal uniform shine! I didn’t linger there long. The bag was full and heavy. I could barely drag it along. I carried it over my right shoulder, so it would weigh down the opposite side of my body, making me limp evenly, or so I thought.

A few days after I started my job, a registered letter arrived addressed to Zora Klemenc, 12 Hero Stane Street. By then, the larger part of the town was named after national heroes who gave their lives for our freedom. That house is gone now; it stood outside the settlement, further up the hill. Not very old, but its grey colour seemed sad to me. Like every house, it had a stack of firewood piled up by its side for the winter, but here the wood was turning rotten and black, as if nobody had used it in several winters. The house had a nice big terrace facing the hill, the woods, and the path that led to the mountains. The blazes had faded by then, but before the war there must have been groups of hikers pouring along it. A little further up the path stood a bunker from the Second World War, but you couldn’t see it any longer; the forest was reclaiming the land. The border guards used these paths, but civilians were not allowed into the zone.

Well, the letter was addressed to Zora, so I rang the bell. It was one of those bells you had to wind up and release, like an alarm clock.

I was probably still thinking about the firewood, because I was surprised by how scantily clothed she was for the time of the year in that skimpy red dress of hers. Spring was coming and warmth was spreading from noon towards morning and evening, but it hadn’t gotten very far yet. The hills were still covered in snow, an icy wind swept down from the mountains, and I felt a shiver under my uniform. There were plenty of poorly dressed people around, but she didn’t look poor, though I saw only basic furniture behind her, no luxury.

‘Good day, comrade. Are you Zora Klemenc?’

‘Yes?’

‘A registered letter. Can you prove your identity?’

‘Gladly, comrade postman. Just a minute.’

What pride I took in saying those words! A profession doesn’t only need a uniform, it needs its own language. Language that sounds strange to the uninitiated, new words that knit us into a community. ‘Your identity’ – how beautiful it sounds! What does it actually mean?

Zora brought her identity card and held it in front of her chest. She was really cold, the poor thing, there were goose bumps all over her bare skin, spreading all the way down to the white bra, too small to keep anything except the lower part of her breasts warm.

I took the document and looked carefully at the photograph and then at her. Hair a bit different, the shape of the nose – a strong, proud nose – right, the forehead straight, the lips full and – it occurred to me that she must have pouted too much as a child – somewhat twisty, the chin rounded, the hair dark and curly, the colour of eyes brown in the flesh, but the photograph was in black and white. I also worked out her age, twenty-seven, but she didn't show it.

I gave her the delivery form and showed her where to sign. She had a very loopy signature, twisting to the left.

I gave her the letter.

'Thank you comrade and good day,' I said, starting to turn away.

'Comrade postman?'

She surprised me. I wasn't completely sure of myself in my new job yet. Had I done anything wrong?

'It's cold. Why don't you step in for a drink?'

'No, thank you, comrade. Postmen don't drink on duty. It's against the CP.' I revealed one of our Code of Practice rules to her.

I took leave by touching my peaked cap.

Oh, you're leaving too? OK. Next day, there was another registered letter for Zora. I'll tell you about it next time.

Will you take this cod with you? It's good cold too. They still keep bringing it to me on Fridays, though I've told them a hundred times I don't eat fish.

3

How could I have mentioned my mailbag so briefly last time? It means the world to a postman! She's a postman's best friend.

First, defence. Even the most peaceful of dogs go crazy when they lay their eyes on us. Once a St Bernard jumped on my back from the first floor and knocked me to the ground. I didn't know what hit me, but I pushed my bag into its jaws before they snapped.

The owners always say dogs just want to play, and if I had believed that, they would have gnawed me to the bone in my first year. There must be something special about the mailbag, for dogs too. They go after you, but when they bite down on that leather, they don't let go. And you're saved.

There's nothing better than a mailbag beating against your side. In the morning she's heavy, pounding as if she wanted to bring you down, but she gets lighter with each house, and in the end you don't even feel her. Tell me, is there any other job that lets you measure your efficiency so precisely and immediately?

And the smell – what fragrance! Everything is up there, on top of her, the smells of the whole town, the paper, the sweat; but on the bottom, when your nose is alone inside