



THE

MARTIN KOLACEK

RUNNER

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Martin Kolacek

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this book to my great-grandfather who gave his life in the resistance against the Nazi occupation.

Furthermore, to interwar avant-garde artists who bravely showcased the horror of fascist regimes in their art, risking their lives for their critique. Many paid the ultimate price for their courage.

CHAPTER 1: BRNO



It all starts on Rue d'Alsace. This street is kind of high up, and you can get onto the roof of the first platform by making a big jump. But it's not easy. The jump is pretty far, and when you land, you're on a slanted surface going down into a place you don't know. Plus, there's usually a gendarme keeping an eye out, so you gotta be quick after you jump. The strategy dictates a close-to-the-beginning jump, then you need to hide under the edge of the roof until it's safe to move.

Moving from one platform to another takes some clever thinking. You might use the handles on street lamps or even climb onto the roofs of trains if you can. But...

"Can we return to the actual challenge?" Tonda interjected, interrupting Pierre's discourse. "Paris lecture can wait."

"But this is the Gare!" Rose protested.

"I understand, but we're not done with Brno yet."

"When else will you encounter someone who's actually been there?"

"Been there but never actually managed to run the whole thing. No one has."

Pierre shook his head disapprovingly. "They claim the great Georges accomplished it."

"Yeah, too bad no one witnessed it!"

The two men locked eyes, tension palpable.

"Fine," Rose broke the silence, "let's concentrate on Brno."

"Hooray!" Tonda retorted with a hint of sarcasm, striding briskly toward the station.

"Apologies, Pierre," she conveyed to the foreign guest. "He's a bit abrasive, but rest assured, he's an exceptional runner."

Despite the nocturnal setting, the truck platform adjacent to the station emitted residual warmth from the preceding summer day. Rose, crawling along it, regretted her choice of a thick turtleneck. Nevertheless, in a sea of black attire, it provided the necessary coverage for her arms. And if they are exposed and forced to hide and wait through the night, warmth would prove advantageous.

Reaching the train building, she rose and cautiously surveyed the surroundings. The air remained clear.

Signaling her companions, they advanced to the railroad tracks, diverging paths. Tonda traversed the tracks, while Pierre leaped onto a dormant passenger car.

Barely two meters into his run, the Czech runner signaled urgently. The Frenchman descended like a stone, the roof edge suddenly illuminated by a flashlight.

Close call!

A watchman approached from the switchmen's house, his inebriated state evident from the erratic light swings. Rose frowned. After all, running isn't just about the sweet adrenaline rush. It's about the prestige you get after a successful event. She was looking forward to going to Boleslav and mentioning to the local arrogants that she had heroically run through the Brno railway station. But with this chain of events unfolding, they'll laugh at her. The guard was drunk as a skunk, so where's the heroic?

Worse still, he sat right in her path, eyes fixed on her hiding spot, preventing access to the first train.

She glanced at Tonda, he just shrugged. Stalemate.

Evaluating her surroundings, Rose noticed a metal canopy above her. With subtle protrusions in a decorative arch supporting it, it provided a potential escape route. Acting swiftly, she leaped, fingers protesting but holding firm. Like a monkey on a liana, she swung, reaching the canopy within moments. The torchlight narrowly missed her.

Silently progressing to the canopy's other end, she jumped to a fence, then to the ground.

Inhale, exhale.

Two steps to the corner.

Peering ahead, the guard remained puzzled, still fixated on the mysterious noise.

First obstacle surmounted.

She approached the carriage where Pierre descended.

"Tres bon," he whispered in approval.

Together, they moved toward a parallel train two tracks away, meeting Tonda at the junction.

"One guard down," the Frenchman remarked, nodding toward where the bewildered guard was likely stationed. "How many more?"

"One on the main platform for sure," Tonda responded. "Another inside the building."

"And don't forget the switchman," Rose added.

The next leg traversed the exposed track. They were running several yards apart to exploit poles and switches. Suddenly, the tracks vibrated wildly—an approaching train. Pierre aimed for the nearest platform, Tonda for the switchmen's house. Rose hesitated, the locomotive's light exposing the station.

Instinctively, she fell onto the track, hoping to escape notice.

The train approached, light engulfing her. Another deafening rumble. The earth shook. Everything rumbled around her.

This is the end!

The rumbling persisted, but not directly overhead. Turning her face, she saw a freight train speeding on the adjacent lane. The sight made her queasy. As the train vanished, she lacked the strength to rise, possibly even fainting momentarily.

Someone shook her. Tonda's white face came into view. "You're alive!" he exclaimed in relief, sitting beside her on the track.

"Yeah, no problem!" she feigned confidence, her shaky voice betraying her.

"Of course," her friend chuckled. "You just nearly got run over by a train. But aside from that, everything's fine."

She stood up, shaky legs barely supporting her weight. "Let's keep moving!" she ordered.

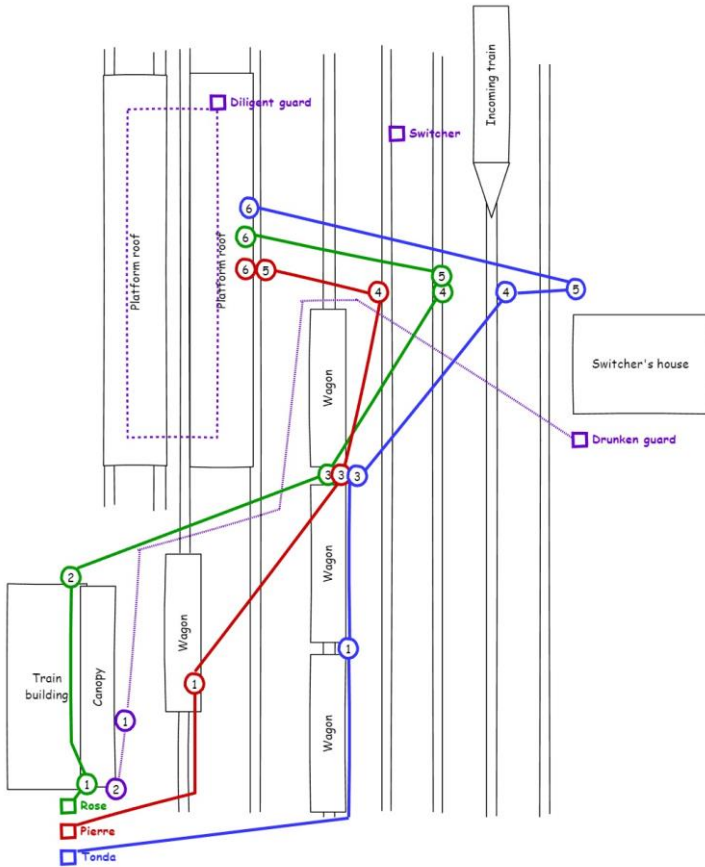
Rejoining Pierre on the old freight platform, she assured him she was fine, her voice now firm. "You're a freaking badass," the Frenchman praised.

The second guard, more vigilant than his colleague, patrolled the area. Rose and Pierre circled the platform's concrete colossus while their friend continued along its roof.

And then it happened.

Tonda slipped on the sloping roof, tumbling uncontrollably over the edge, flying three meters into the track. Any semblance of stealth vanished. The noise and the injured runner's scream alerted two guards, now rushing towards them.

Rose and Pierre dragged their friend onto the platform. He was barely conscious, moaning in pain, yet able to move his limbs—a positive sign. There was still a possibility that consequences of their Brno station escapade might only entail a disciplinary record and the mockery of the Boleslavs, who, unlike them, had triumphed over the challenge.



CHAPTER 2: FRENSTAT



Two years had passed.

"Mom!" she called out over the fence to the woman tending to the freesia bed.

The lady turned toward her, a surprised expression on her face. "Rose! What a pleasant surprise!"

She straightened up, wiped her hands on her work apron, and walked over to open the gate. When her daughter came into full view, she sighed, eyeing the headgear that clashed with the rest of her outfit. "Is that the latest fashion in Brno?"

"Haha, sure."

"You do realize that wearing a Masaryk cap could land you in trouble, right?"

"Oh, come on, it's just a regular military cap."

"With that visor? You really are incorrigible."

"I can always claim I'm using my cavalryman dad's clothes due to a shortage of textiles."

"So, you're going to remind the Germans how they're impoverishing us? One would think that if you're attending college, you should be smart."

"Relax, nobody in Brno is making a fuss about this. Plenty of gendarmes have seen me like this, and they haven't said anything. Well, are you going to invite me in or not?"

Some widows, after losing their husbands, neglect their appearance and homes with no one left to appreciate it. Not Beata Lidicka. When left alone, she perfected home maintenance. Not a single cobweb could be found in the room where Rose now sat at the table.

"Are you hungry?" Mom asked.

"You can't even imagine. I'm dying of starvation," Rose laughed.

"Come on, girl, don't joke about such things."

"Jesus, Mom, it's just an expression."

"Don't call upon our Lord either."

"Your paranoia..."

"No paranoia, that's what the Bible says!"

"According to the Bible, you can't say you're starving to death because it might happen?"

"Well, that too... it's gotta be in there somewhere."

"Well, if you think so," laughed Rose. "So what are you going to feed me?"

"You're lucky I'm so thrilled to see you. Otherwise, I'd have sent you to the corner to contemplate your cheekiness."

"Oh yeah, and I'd definitely go there, wouldn't I? So what's for the meal?"

"I roasted a goose yesterday. There's some left over, and it should be eaten today."

"You're doing this on purpose! You know I hate goose; the fat and the bones sticking out make me sick."

"One would think you'd grow up a bit in college. But you don't. It doesn't matter who rules us and steals our bread; you'll always be fretting over food."

"In my opinion, there are better ways to fight an occupying power than to goose yourself. So what else you got there?"

"In-cor-ri-gi-ble! There's still some leftover strawberry shortcake."

"Why didn't you just say so? Bring it on! And some water, please. I say, Mum, you call this a leftover? There's nearly half a tray! Where did you get the sugar? It's hard to come by nowadays."

"I traded it for the first half."

"Just so you can give me the other one? Thank you! Mom, you're the best!"

"You're unreal!" Mom laughed. "What do the professors say about your cheekiness?"

"You mean the teachers? You see, only some of them are professors, the old ones, the ones with merit. I avoid those."

"That's probably a good idea, given your disrespect for authority. You'd be expelled the moment you'd speak to one."

"I don't have issues with authorities," murmured Rose with her mouth full. She swallowed. "They just have to earn my respect."

"Well, I guess I'm a complete failure as a mother."

"Oh come on, don't exaggerate. Even if you haven't had it yet, you've definitely earned my respect with this pie..."

"You really are a mouthful."

"...Although I have to say, that crumble did get a little baked."

They both burst into laughter.

"Lucky I've come by," Rose said when she finished the cake. "You'd never eat this by yourself. Now that I'm thinking about it, I thought you didn't like cakes at all."

"Mr. Roth and his daughter were visiting. She looks so much like you... Anyway, I made the cake for him... er... them."

"Ah," she laughed cheekily, "Mr. Neighbor. Mom, I'm telling you, he's a bore. You'd have more chance with his dog."

"Excuse me! I'm a proper Catholic! I didn't even think of such things!"

"What kind of things? I was talking about fishing. Doesn't the Lord let you even think about catching carp?"

"You're such a beast, Rose!"

"I know how you always looked at him! You're without a man, he's without a woman, come on!"

"Stop it!"

"But it doesn't matter, because you invited him over for a romantic dinner, but he was talking politics the whole time anyway, right?"

"Not all the time."

"Sure he didn't, he just discussed everything from München to the arrival of Neurath, then he started swearing at Austria-Hungary and finished by saying that if he were younger he would have gone straight to Prague and shown everyone."

"Yeah, something along those lines. But I don't mind. Would you rather he glorified the Nazis?"

"Oh my God, no! When I heard on the radio how K. H. Freak told Neurath that 'in this great time we entrust ourselves with respect and great seriousness into the hands of the Great German Empire, so that together we can walk towards greatness'... Blah, I felt worse than after your goose."

"Little girl, you can say whatever you want here at home, but I hope you don't say jokes like K. H. Freak in public."

"Only in front of my friends."

"Are you crazy? You don't know who's a collaborator today."

"I can tell. I have only screened people around me."

"Whatever." She got up and opened the pantry door. "You want anything else? There's not much here anymore, but I'm sure there's a

chunk of cheese. And I have my own tomatoes. I grow them in my garden just off the fence so they can't be seen from the street."

"Mom? What's wrong? We were laughing, having fun, and suddenly it's like in that Poe's poem. '*Suddenly the air grew denser.*'"

"You know I don't have your talent for languages. I don't speak French."

"That's English!"

"Well, so much the worse."

"It means the air has thickened. What happened? I was just kidding when I said I was surrounded by people I've screened. No, I don't call the guy Freak in public."

Beata turned around, sighed, and took the chair opposite her daughter. "What did you mean when you said there were better ways to resist the occupation than goose-eating?"

"That was a joke too!"

"Rose, I'm not stupid. You showed up here unexpectedly in the middle of exam period and you're masking your nervousness with humor."

"What nervousness?"

"Stop pretending. I raised you. I spent twenty years in the same household with you. I know you. And I know why you came here. You want to see me again because this may be the last time."

"How did you come up with this, please?"

"Come on, spit it out. What are you up to?"

Rose leaned back in the chair she was sitting in. "I joined a group..." she began uncertainly.

"What group?"

"As I am good at languages, a man from Paris contacted me..."

"A man from Paris?!" Beata put her face in her hands. "You joined the resistance?" she whispered.

"Not exactly the resistance. It's a one-off. We're four people, each with different talents. We're not going to do any sabotage. Just to get a message through."

"Is this the kind of message that the Gestapo executes for on the spot?"

"Well... yeah, it is." She added quickly: "But the chances of someone bugging me to find a small envelope are minimal."

"Does anyone in the group know you personally?"

"Tonda."

"Tonda Skopal?"

"Yeah, him. But I trust him more than anyone."

"Even your best friend can betray you. Three people who know where you'll be taking your message? You might as well turn yourself in."

"These people voluntarily decided to fight against the occupiers. Betraying me would equal to abandoning everything they ever believed in."

"Either you're naive or you think I'm stupid. I guess you don't remember that I was without my dad for five years. Because of a friend who betrayed him."

"This happened during the time of the monarchy. Many Czech people were happy in Austria-Hungary before the war. But everyone hates the Nazis."

"My dad's friend was no admirer of Kaiser. All they had to do was put a little pressure on him during the interrogation, and he spilled the beans. Look," she grabbed both of her daughter's hands, "I know I'm not going to convince you not to do this. You've always had a mind of your own. And worse, some sort of perverse desire for danger. I'm just begging you: Take care of yourself. If you start seeing weird guys in long coats around, destroy the message. No dirty Frenchman is worth your life."

Rose laughed. "Mom, you should really consider the romance with your neighbor."

"What?"

"A dirty Frenchman? Really? Have you heard of Freud? You certainly need to let off some sexual energy."

"Sometimes I think fondly of the times when I could have sent you to the corner."

CHAPTER 3: OSTRAVA



The journey to Ostrava was nothing short of a nightmare. The second-class carriage was brimming with drunken German soldiers who bellowed from the train windows, making it clear that Czech individuals should maintain a respectful distance. Consequently, the third-class compartment was overcrowded.

Due to a shortage of trains, Bohemian–Moravian Railways had removed partitions and some seats from the lowest category carriages. Now, up to four hundred people crammed into one carriage, with the few remaining seats mostly occupied by Germans. Rose observed with disbelief an imposing blonde woman sprawled on a wooden

bench, admonishing a girl in German not to slouch. Periodically, the girl sent apologetic glances to an old lady standing near their seat.

Various odors permeated the entire space, dominated by a mix of passenger sweat and the stench of long-unwashed toilets. The upturned door did little to contain the source of the smell.

Finally, the sign announcing the "Ostrau - Haupt Bahnhof" station appeared. Rose eagerly anticipated getting off, despite knowing what awaited her.

The crowd spilled into the station like an avalanche, and a few individuals even stumbled as they disembarked. Though the train's scheduled end was here, German soldiers continued shouting from the second-class windows. Their cacophony persisted even as the train departed from the station area, heading towards Hlucin, now part of the German Reich since München. Presumably, the soldiers were heading to a nearby marshalling yard.

Rose couldn't help but think, 'I wouldn't want to be in your skins, boys, when your proud Great German officers see how you have trashed yourselves on the road.' A small sense of satisfaction accompanied that thought.

Rose had arrived early, intending to inspect the location for delivering the message. The designated place for her secret meeting was just behind the gate of the Immaculate Conception Catholic Church compound. Even a novice agent on her first mission knew to

be extra cautious, considering the unpredictability of the Catholic Church, harboring both heroic resistance agents and despicable collaborators. You often couldn't discern who was who until facing an interrogation.

Street signs, now boasting German names like "Bahnhof Str." instead of "Station Street," greeted Rose. The square, once named after a famous Czech writer, Svatopluk Cech, was now named after Nazi collaborator Konrad Henlein, adding insult to injury. Suppressing her frustration, Rose thought, 'I hope this news makes the Nazis uncomfortable, and perhaps Konrad Henlein Square will witness the birth of the new republic.'

She proceeded to the church, well aware that the square offered limited concealment. Anyone moving around it could be a German agent. However, she felt temporarily safe. If stopped and searched, all they would find was a bag containing her papers, money, and train ticket.

The yellowed plaster of the church bore numerous inscriptions, both German and Czech, at eye level. Apparently, the sanctity of the place didn't deter hooligans. To the left of the building stood a rectory with a garden, separated from the street by a locked gate. Although it might seem unobtrusive for meetings, Rose knew better. Entering through that gate would expose her to everyone across the square.

She circled the rectory and found a hidden spot—a low wall, a garden with trees, and empty school windows opposite. Within seconds, she was concealed behind the wall, nestled in the depths of an ornamental bush.

For half an hour, she listened to street sounds, occasionally hearing German dialogues discussing school. It made her a bit uneasy as the 'school' was a password, the key to proving her identity to the agent.

When the voices faded, she emerged from the bush, climbed a tree branch for a view, and keenly observed the surrounding streets.

She stayed on the branch for another half hour, watching. During this time, she saw only one Czech policeman on his regular rounds. Dusk eventually fell.

