

J. R. Pick
Society
for the Prevention
of Cruelty
to Animals

Translated by Alex Zucker



Jiří R. Pick

Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals

Published by Charles University,
Karolinum Press
Ovocný trh 5/560, Prague 1, Czech Republic
Cover and graphic design by Zdeněk Ziegler
Illustrations by Jiří Grus
Typesetting by Karolinum Press
First English edition

© Charles University, 2018
Text © Jiří R. Pick - heirs c/o Dilia, 2018
Translation © Alex Zucker, 2018
Afterword © Zuzana Justman,
and Jáchym Topol, 2018
Illustrations © Jiří Grus, 2018

ISBN 978-80-246-3699-3 (hb)
ISBN 978-80-246-3729-7 (ebk)



Charles University
Karolinum Press 2018

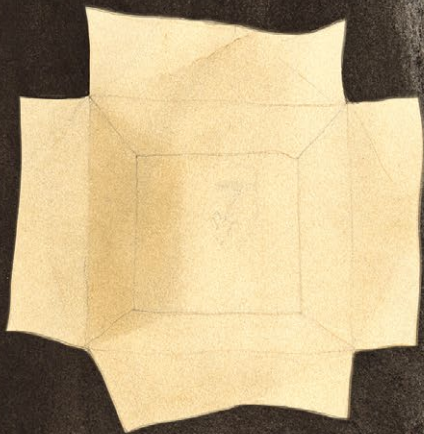
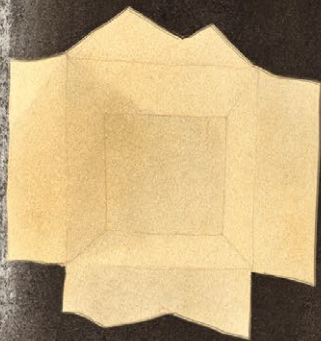
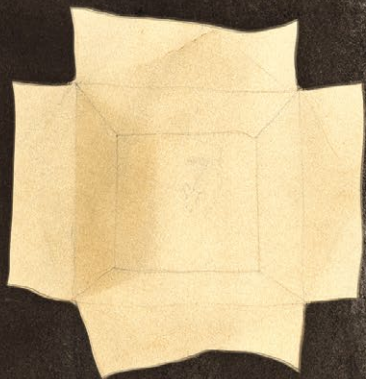
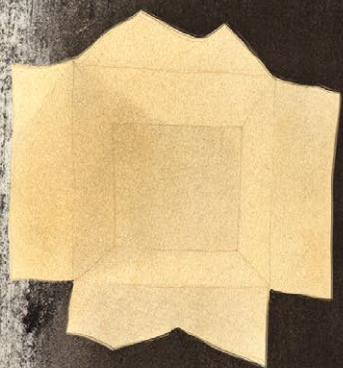
www.karolinum.cz
ebooks@karolinum.cz





CONTENTS

- Chapter 1, in which Tony teaches Mr. Brisch to sing and gets an outstanding idea in the process /9
- Chapter 2, in which Tony tells Ernie about his idea for an SPCA /27
- Chapter 3, in which Tony and company take a trip in search of pigeons /49
- Chapter 4, in which everyone—even Tony—gets a good square meal /70
- Chapter 5, in which we learn about the mysterious box and, eventually, what's in it /91
- Chapter 6, in which we learn about Ernie's plan /107
- Chapter 7, in which we learn primarily about the awkward misunderstanding Tony caused between Mr. Brisch and Nurse Maria Louisa /120
- Chapter 8, which takes place almost entirely at the cemetery /135
- Chapter 9, in which Helga gets a new box /151
- Chapter 10, in which Tony pricks his finger /161
- Chapter 11, in which we learn mainly about the brutality of Horst Munther and the loneliness of Nurse Lili /175
- Afterword: Laughter in the Dark (Jáchym Topol) /197
About my brother (Zuzana Justman) /205



CHAPTER 1

IN WHICH TONY TEACHES MR. BRISCH TO SING AND GETS AN OUTSTANDING IDEA IN THE PROCESS

Tony, the hero of our story, was neither smart nor stupid. When the Germans came, in 1939, he was eight years old. He imagined he was in store for an incredible adventure—getting hold of a gun, say, and shooting one of Hitler’s mustachioed aides-de-camp. Tony pictured all of Hitler’s aides with mustaches like the Führer’s, but looking at photos of them he was disappointed to see that none of Hitler’s closest colleagues had a mustache, and no one ever gave him a gun either. Soon he was wearing a Star of David and attending a Jewish school. He wasn’t much of a student. He tried to explain it away by pointing out that he had transferred from another school, but no one listened, since all the students had transferred from other schools, and they all tried to use it as an excuse. Eventually Tony became a messenger for the Jewish community, which only made him neglect his schoolwork even more. When he was eleven, he and his mother, Liza, left for the ghetto. Tony quite liked it there. Like everybody else, of course, he assumed one day the war would end and everything would be fine again. For Tony, *fine* meant he could go to the movies and eat hard-boiled eggs for supper at least two days a week.

Now, Tony lay on his back in the sick room in L 315, watching a fly on the ceiling. The fly was clearly bored. This was no surprise to Tony. He was bored too. Not that he minded being around old men. By now he was used to it. But these old men were boring. Mr. Abeles, for example. All he ever did was rummage around in his suitcase and moan and groan. Yet he had almost nothing to speak of in his suitcase and no reason to complain. He had a bed of his own, all he could eat, and spent his time in pleasurable company. Whereas the fly had no bed, finding food was a major chore (who in the ghetto would leave any leftovers?), and it was all alone. But you never heard *it* moaning and groaning like Mr. Abeles.

Tony grew to like the fly more and more with each passing day.

Imagine the fuss Mr. Abeles would have made if he had to crawl along the ceiling with his head hanging down! At the very least, he would have complained that he was going to fall or get stuck in a spider's web.

"Vatchink flies, eh, Tony?" said Mr. Hans Brisch from Berlin, Herman Göring Strasse 7. He used to play violin in a bar. "Zat cannot be a very interesstink occupation."

"Actually," said Tony, "this fly is pretty interesting. It reminds me of Mr. Abeles."

“Come now, Tony,” said Mr. Glaser and Sons, “you shouldn’t say such things. Whatever you may say about Mr. Abeles, he isn’t a fly.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Mr. Abeles objected. “I’m a respectable businessman. Just ask anyone in Kolín: Abeles, on the square.”

Mr. Abeles and Mr. Glaser and Sons bumped heads in similar fashion at least three times a day. All Mr. Abeles had to do was remark on how blue the sky was that day and Mr. Glaser and Sons would reply that thank God his eyes were still good and if Abeles couldn’t see that cloud he’d better get his eyesight checked, and on it went from there.

At first, Tony found it funny. Sometimes he would even provoke the two men, asking Mr. Abeles, who had an alarm clock in his suitcase, what time it was, and Mr. Glaser and Sons, who didn’t have one, whether it was correct. But eventually Tony realized that once they were finished shouting, it always ended up either with Mr. Abeles storming out of the room to the toilet, or the two of them angrily turning their backs on each other, and he felt sorry he’d ever started it.

So now Tony paid no attention to them, instead focusing on the fly. Then a new source of entertainment appeared on the horizon. Actually, not on the horizon but on Tony’s leg. A flea bit him. Tony, being an expe-

rienced flea hunter, began to toy with it. Of course he could have caught it right away. But why not have a little fun with it first?

The men, noticing this, broke off their argument.

“Another flea, eh, Tony?” said Mr. Abeles grumpily. “No doubt that’s because you’re always washing yourself.”

He was referring to the fact that Tony washed relatively often, and thoroughly. Most people think that fleas like filth. But they’re mistaken. The truth is, fleas love a freshly washed body. Probably because it makes it easier for them to find their way around.

“I’ve got the little beast,” said Tony, pinching the flea between his fingers and drowning it in a glass of water on the nightstand. The nightstand was the envy of every patient in the hospital. In L 315 there were only two: one in the doctors’ room and the other one here, in room 26.

Apart from the glass for fleas, the table was also occupied by a thermometer, two books, and three toothbrushes: Tony’s, Professor Steinbach’s, and Mr. Löwy’s.

Among the patients in room 26 there were also significant differences of opinion concerning the brushing of teeth. Mr. Abeles and Mr. Brisch believed it to be a needless extravagance.

Brushing your teeth, according to Mr. Brisch, damaged the enamel, and besides, you lost the bits of food stuck between your teeth. “I’m not so vell-fed zat I can afford to spit out my food,” he would say.

For his part, Professor Steinbach thought brushing one’s teeth was essential to good hygiene. Mr. Löwy took the compromise position: Brush your teeth, yes, but insofar as possible, don’t spit out the bits of food.

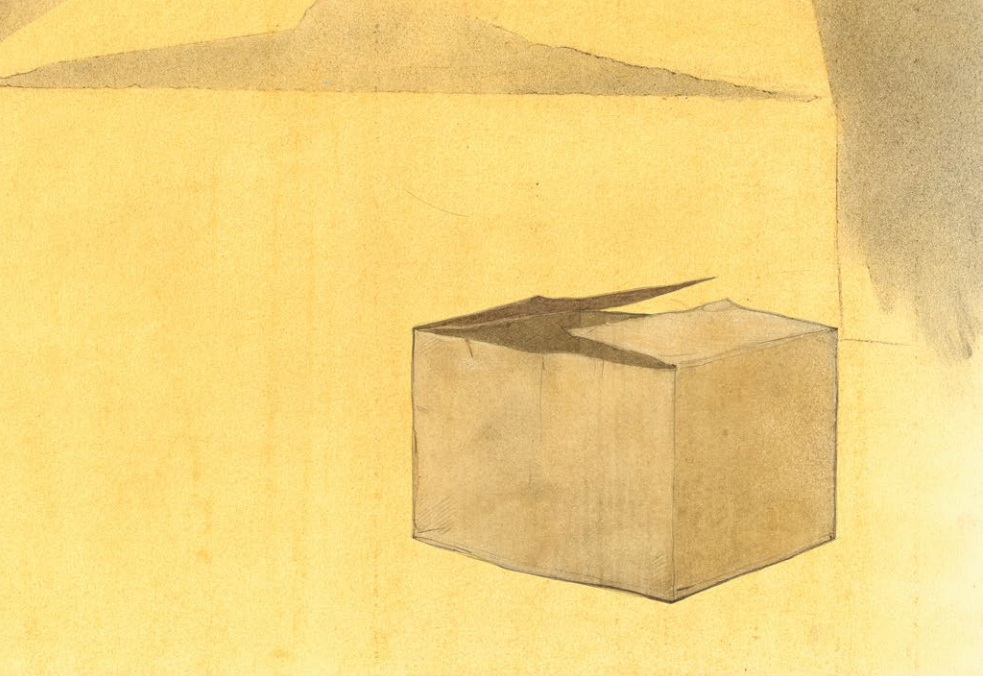
“You must be pretty experienced,” Professor Steinbach said to Tony. “I couldn’t have caught it so quickly.”

“I’m bored,” said Tony. “Just sitting here catching fleas all day long.”

“What else are you going to do,” said Professor Steinbach, “with it raining all the time?”

It was always raining in the ghetto. And when it rains in the ghetto, it’s bad. For one thing, you can’t go outside or you might catch a cold and make yourself even sicker. For another, the potatoes get wet and rot. On the other hand, though, if all the potatoes were to rot, it wouldn’t be so bad. At least then they could have dumplings.

Tony closed his eyes and imagined it raining dumplings: a whole mountain of them pouring down, so many they wouldn’t even fit in the yard at Hannover Barracks that they used as the soccer field—puffy and white, and when you poked them with your finger,



the sweet, brown plum preserves inside would come oozing out.

Next, he imagined assembling two soccer teams from the men in L 315: Mr. Brisch, lying by the window, at left wing; Mr. Abeles, by the door, on the right. Tony, of course, would play center forward. Opposite him would be Professor Steinbach, with Mr. Löwy, by the door, at left wing, and Mr. Glaser and Sons, by the window, on the right. The men from the other rooms could play halfback and fullback—maybe the head doctor at center half, with Nurse Anna and the ex-nun Nurse Maria Louisa as defenders. The only position he left open was goalkeeper. With an all-star like Albie Feld in the ghetto, it seemed almost blasphemous to consider anyone else.

Tony's thoughts were interrupted as Mr. Löwy, who used to own a grocery store in the village of Dolní Počernice, told a joke with a double entendre, which Tony didn't get. None of the other men seemed too impressed either. Maybe it was Mr. Löwy's delivery. If Johann Sprengschuss, from the Freizeitgestaltung,¹ had told the same joke, they probably would have split their sides laughing. But then again, maybe not.

1) Administration for Free Time Activities, a Jewish-run organization, set up by the SS, which mainly promoted soccer and the arts.

“Goot joke,” said Mr. Brisch. “Just not fery funny. But zat doesn’t bozzer us, does it, Tony? Now vee are goink to sing.”

Every day, from eleven o’clock to eleven thirty, Tony and Mr. Brisch sang Czech songs. It may have seemed more logical for Mr. Brisch, a former musician, to teach Tony to sing, but in fact it was Tony who taught Mr. Brisch. It wasn’t just about singing, you see. For Mr. Brisch it was also a way to improve his Czech. Either way, the bottom line was that Tony knew the Czech songs and Mr. Brisch didn’t.

“What have you got planned for us today, Tony?” Mr. Löwy inquired. He was the only one who listened to them. Professor Steinbach always stuffed his ears with cotton, and neither Mr. Glaser and Sons nor Mr. Abeles had much of an ear for music.

“‘Broken-Down Oven,’” said Tony.

“I’m not sure this is the right time for that one,” said Mr. Abeles. “Yesterday my cousin Magda Sauersteinová went with the transport, even though she had a serious case of sciatica.”

“How about ‘Fast Flows the Water,’ ‘Little White Dove,’ or ‘Hey, Slavs,’” Mr. Löwy suggested. “Those are a little more serious.”

But Tony still wanted to teach Mr. Brisch “Broken-Down Oven.” For one thing, he had the feeling

Magda Sauersteinová wouldn't mind, and for another, he wasn't so sure Mr. Brisch could learn "Fast Flows the Water" or "Hey, Slavs." His Czech was pretty good, but dialects still gave him trouble.

In the end, Tony won out.

It's doubtful whether any musicologist would have approved of Mr. Brisch's singing. Doctors, too, would likely have objected to having a tuberculosis patient sing. But none of them could deny its beneficial effect on his mood.

Mr. Abeles, however, was outraged. Mr. Brisch sang out of tune, he said, and it didn't seem right for a German Jew from Berlin to be singing Czech songs.

"At least shut the window," he said.

"Open it wide," said Mr. Brisch. "It's a vonderful song."

"But what if it's forbidden?" said Mr. Abeles.

"Vhat forbid?" said Mr. Brisch. "Cherman songs zey could forbid. As members of an inferior race, vee cannot sing Cherman songs, but Czechish songs are all right. Ze Czechs are also an inferior race."

"Prove it," said Mr. Abeles.

"It is not me who says so, but Adolf Hitler," said Mr. Brisch.

"And naturally whatever Hitler says is sacred to you,"

said Mr. Glaser and Sons. “You ought to be ashamed of yourself.”

Mr. Glaser and Sons didn’t like Hitler or Mr. Brisch. There was nothing odd about that. He didn’t like anyone.

But Mr. Brisch was no fan of Hitler either. “Hitler for me is not sacred, he is an agent of imperialism.”

Mr. Brisch was a member of the Communist Party and made it clear whenever he could. Still, Tony liked him best of all the older men. Even if Tony didn’t believe that Hitler was an agent—he made too much of a ruckus to be an agent, in his opinion—and the revolution seemed more distant to him than it did to Mr. Brisch—especially when, in a fit of magnanimity, he declared Mr. Abeles, Mr. Löwy, and Professor Steinbach to be members of the proletariat—he fully agreed that Mr. Glaser and Sons was a stuck-up capitalist and as such should be liquidated.

“Gentlemen, gentlemen,” said Professor Steinbach. “There you go again, making a mountain out of a molehill. Why shouldn’t Mr. Brisch be allowed to sing? Especially when he enjoys it so much.”

“We should open the window,” said Tony. “Maybe a nightingale will fly in, or a canary. I read somewhere that they’re drawn to beautiful singing.”

“Beautiful singink,” Mr. Brisch repeated, plainly

flattered. Tony had meant beautiful singing in general, of course, but Mr. Brisch took it to be about him. To be praised for his violin playing, or winning a new convert to communism, had never made him that happy. But for Tony to compliment him on the way he sang “Broken-Down Oven” put him in a state of near rapture.

“You like animals fery much, don’t you, Tony?” he said. “I haf seen you vatchink zose flies. You also treat ze fleas fery gently, I see. Are you a member of ze society for ze prevention of cruelty to animals?”

“No,” said Tony. “I didn’t know there was such a thing.”

“They have them in nearly every capital of Europe,” Professor Steinbach said.

“Huh,” said Tony, pondering the idea. If they had them in every capital of Europe, why not here? The ghetto wasn’t a capital, but it certainly was international. As Mr. Glaser and Sons liked to say, all the dregs of Europe were represented in Terezín. Albie Feld even claimed there was an Englishman in the camp.

“Every Englishman cares first about his dog and only then about his butler,” said Tony, thinking out loud. “Even if he doesn’t have a dog here in the ghetto—or a butler, for that matter—I’m sure he would join the society. Of course, first someone would have to found one.”

“Vell, go on zen, Tony,” said Mr. Brisch. “Why don’t you do it yourself?”

“And whom would he protect?” Mr. Abeles said. “As far as I know, there are no animals in the ghetto. Only Jews.”

“The Hannover Barracks used to have a horse,” said Mr. Glaser and Sons. “But it died of dysentery. I remember, because that was when I stopped eating rotten potatoes.”

“That’s right, you always have to take the opposite side, don’t you?” said Mr. Abeles. Putting on an insulted air, he stormed off to the toilet.

“In the ghetto,” said Professor Steinbach after Abeles had left, “horses’ work is done by men. They even hitch them to the wagons.”

“No one gets too worn out, though,” said Mr. Löwy. “I’ve done it. Usually the wagon is empty and half the men just hold on while they walk alongside.”

“Would you mind telling me how the wagon moves, then?” said Mr. Glaser and Sons.

“Usually it’s going downhill,” said Mr. Löwy.

Tony laughed, imagining the men chasing after the wagon as it sped away from them. Then he realized there were no steep hills in the ghetto. Maybe they pulled the wagon up onto the ramparts. But why would they bother dragging an empty wagon up there? he