

David Myers

THE MEAN MACHINE

Some of us are born adventurous, some of us become adventurous and others have adventure thrust upon them. Hans-Adolf was at a time in life when most men are counting the pennies and the days to their old age pension. When they splurge, they buy wool-lined slippers, recliner chairs and remote control panels for their TV. Outwardly there had been little in Hans-Adolf's life to suggest that he would deviate from this conformist pattern. He had organized his years on earth like a solid but uninspired marathon-runner. Suddenly in the last ten kilometres of his marathon he began to hop, skip and turn cartwheels like a circus clown with an excess of energy. Hans-Adolf became adventurous at fifty and I had adventure thrust upon me.

But how was I to know? Who would have expected it from a librarian for God's sakes? Librarians are meek little people with a passion for order. They line up their books and their reader regulations like bulwarks to protect themselves from life's chaos. Then they withdraw ever deeper into silent archives where they spend decades acquiring the pallor and the breath of Egyptian mummies.

I should have known something had gone wrong with Hans-Adolf's body chemistry when he first started a private collection of Iranian revolutionary pamphlets. He snorted with derision when I suggested over a glass of wine that he had become a born-again Marxist. "Nonsense!" he replied, perhaps a shade too brusquely. "On the contrary. I'm a bibliographer and a capitalist. And that's the truth." I was lulled by the wine and didn't see the ironic twinkle in his grey eyes.

A year later and he had his first book on the market. It was a bibliography of propaganda sheets written by exiled Iranian Marxists in opposition to Khomeini's Islamic dictatorship. The topic itself was suspect enough, but the disturbing thing was that he published and sold the book himself. What's more, he did it in after-office hours when he should have been swigging on a beer with his feet up. "Oh well" I thought to myself "it's only a touch of midlife crisis. When the book's a flop and he does his dough, he'll soon be back to normal."

But the book sold like hot cakes. Every university library in Western Europe and North America bought it. Hans-Adolf made a tidy profit. He bought a Vespa scooter and a tent and took his wife on a totally unplanned tour of Yugoslavia and Greece. Imagine that for a librarian: unplanned and without any maps apart from a page he tore out of a school atlas. I got a postcard from Delphi and I was impressed. When he came back two months later to his desk at the Prussian State Library of West Berlin, he had somehow changed. It wasn't just that he was tanned and fit, there was a strange excitement in his eyes. His wife Gerlinde whispered to me "Last night he was muttering in his sleep something about white water and kayaks." She was looking very nervous. I said "Perhaps it's just something he saw on TV" and patted her on the shoulder.

In the Winter he founded his own publishing house and put a brass plaque on his apartment door for the postman. His study desk was always choc-a-bloc now with correspondence from all over the world. Six months later he showed me his new book. He had obviously worked long and hard through the midnight hours. But the strange thing was that the harder he worked, the younger he looked. The book was a bibliography on the origins of Zionism and the Palestine problem. I've never heard of a bibliography being a bestseller but Hans-Adolf was able to up the price as sole owner of copyright and publication and distribution and made a real killing. Cambridge and Tel Aviv rang him and offered him professorships. He just laughed.

It was Springtime and Hans-Adolf went out and spent the profits on a bright red, 650 cc BMW motorbike. He also lashed out on a specialist racing kayak and a wetsuit and had them sent immediately by train to the white-water rapids of the lower Pyrenees. I had to stay in Berlin that Summer and rewrite a novel as a radio drama or else I would have gone with him. Riding pillion on a powerful BMW through all weathers for 4000 kilometres wasn't normally my cup of tea, but somehow the newly fermenting germs in Hans-Adolf's body chemistry were beginning to infect me too. He sent back two coloured photographs of that holiday and both photos proved he had become quite insane.

The first photo showed his head and a paddle tip thrusting up indomitably through a thundering inferno of wave and rock. Two minutes after the snap was taken, his kayak was broken in half and he was swept through some kind of devil's canyon on his back before he was washed ashore.

The second photo showed him leaning against his red BMW with a topless blonde playing Lady Godiva on the saddle. There were palm trees and the deep blue of the Mediterranean in the background. But the crazy thing was he sent this second photo to his wife. He said afterwards that he'd meant to put it in the letter to me but he must have got the envelopes mixed up. Anyway, he said, it was all perfectly innocent and the girl just happened to have a thing about red BMWs. Besides, he went on, a holiday was a holiday and a selfmade man who had worked hard all Winter needed to relax in the Summer.

"Relax!" growled Gerlinde when she rang me spluttering with rage. "I'll give that pint size macho beast *relax* when he drives his red piece of scrap iron home."

But Hans-Adolf was Don Juan enough to come home laden with presents. He brought his wife silver jewellery from Spain and two silk dresses by Yves St. Laurent. A compromise was reached that stopped well short of divorce. As for Hans-Adolf himself, his cerebral batteries were freshly charged and his tanned legs and arms were pumping away with new ideas. He showed me his newly modelled office: it featured a gigantic word-processor with infinitely extendable memory and a printer that could churn out a page of print every thirty seconds.

"If my next project comes off" he grinned "I'm ready to buy the ultimate." He pointed to a lifesize pinup poster of a 1000cc Harley Davidson chopper with stereophonic radio, cassette deck and drink bar. It must have weighed a ton.

He wouldn't tell me what the project was, but more and more of the correspondence on his desk seemed to be coming from Tel Aviv and Washington. Our after dinner drinks were often interrupted by long-distance telephone calls that went on for half an hour at a time. He worked right through the Summer this time without so much as mentioning kayaks, windsurfers or even motorbikes. Sometimes I almost thought that he had begun to slow down again and get sensible but then I would catch him drooling mesmerized over the poster of his Harley Davidson and I knew that the crisis hadn't gone away. It had just gone underground to gather strength like a volcano before the eruption. Other times when I rang him, Gerlinde said glumly he was away for a week on business or conference leave from the library. She didn't seem to know quite where. I got into the habit of taking her out for pizza and drinks and we tried to find things to talk about apart from Hans-Adolf.

It was almost two years later when he made the telephone call to me. I had just had my first anthology of selected poems published and I was feeling modestly successful in my own way. My poems had a run of five hundred copies and I had already sold ninety five which gave me enough royalties to buy a matchbox toy of a Porsche. I wanted to tell Hans-Adolf about my Porsche, but he was too excited to listen. "It's ready!" he yelled "D'you want to see it?" I rushed over. "I had it done by an Israeli publishing house this time" he said. "There should be enough profit for both parties."

The dust jacket was divided by a bold blue and white diagonal line. On one side was an atomic explosion and on the other side was a glorious grove of orange trees in full fruit. The title read: *Armageddon or Utopia? Some Strategies for Counter-Terrorists*. "I thought it was time to go a bit beyond bibliography" he chuckled over our gin and tonics. "We've sold the rights to five book of the month clubs, paperback to Penguin and flimsy script option to MGM. When you get to be 55 years old like me, it's time to come out and put your cards on the table."

The cards were on the table all right and to me they seemed to be screaming aces and eights. The book got rave reviews in *Time* and *London Review*. Sales were sky-rocketing and New York University rang to offer Hans-Adolf a vice-presidency. But then the hate mail started flooding in and the more sinister threats on the telephone. Gerlinde's emotional states changed quickly from ecstasy and pride to terror and then to permanent depression. Even Hans-Adolf ceased to be quite his ebullient self.

One night without warning they both appeared at 4 a.m. in my tiny flat. They looked pale and shaken. "Bomb threats from Libyan terrorists" muttered Hans-Adolf. "I thought it best to go underground for a while and you're the most anonymous man I know. D'you mind awfully?" Hans-Adolf grew a beard and made his telephone calls at night from a quiet booth around the block. He had long since resigned from his job at the library. Three weeks later Gerlinde seemed to have calmed down and I was on the point of suggesting they might perhaps like to return to their own spacious apartment now, when the first rock came smashing through the window and minutes later the first threatening telephone call. "Death to Zionist Jew-lovers and all imperialist enemies of Islam" menaced a sadistic voice spitting with white-hot hatred.

“Plan B” said Hans-Adolf. “We’ll leave tonight by the sub-basement heating shafts. I have the keys. Terribly sorry to do this to you Karl, but you can’t stay here now. They arrange accidents for you in the subway, you know. Well, in for a penny, in for a Tel Aviv shekel is what I say.”

He’d already bought and secretly garaged the Harley Davidson of course. The only shock was the sidecar and the forged passports. Gerlinde jumped into the sidecar like an eskimo climbing into an igloo and pulled the leather cover over her head. I decided to die brave and indeed, after we’d passed over the Communist GDR border, I began to feel that I was cutting quite a dashing figure. After all, I comforted myself, a poet must ride with the unknown rhythms of life or he’ll only ever be a candy-ass.

A day and a night later and we were over the Yugoslav border into Greece and the sun was warm. Gerlinde poked her head out of the sidecar for the first time and shook her fist weakly at her husband.

We’re at a bar in the Piraeus now and Hans-Adolf has just confided in me that we are expected in Tel Aviv. The Harley Davidson will be shipped over by a reliable nephew of Onassis. Hans-Adolf says that I shouldn’t worry about the future because the Jews have a great literary tradition and it shouldn’t take me long to churn out as many bad poems in Hebrew as I have already produced in German. In the meantime there were always his royalties to support us in the style to which he had become accustomed. Besides, he said, he’d been toying with a new idea we could discuss tonight over a bottle of retsina. After Gerlinde had gone to bed of course.