

SAMPLE
TRANSLATION

ALOJZ IHAN
PICTURES AT AN
EXHIBITION

PUBLISHED BY: ŠTUDENTSKA ZALOŽBA, 2013

TRANSLATED BY: GREGOR TIMOTHY ČEH

ORIGINAL TITLE: SLIKE Z RAZSTAVE

NUMBER OF PAGES: 253

Alojz Ihan: Pictures at an Exhibition

1. The Gnome

Just as well I am no longer young, David Breznik thought.

It was the moment he had decided to step into the large glass revolving doors at the Hotel Plaza and was kept outside by the greeting of a pretty blonde. "Doctor Breznik! Good morning! I was told to meet you here for Moscow."

Just as well I'm no longer young, he repeated to himself as if he was afraid that the thought alone was not effective enough in preserving a composed calm. There are women who can instantly stun a man because the play of nature created them from pure elements of delight. Their combination of seductive flesh, inviting lips and child-like wide and sparkling eyes. It hits like a storm!

"Breznik," he nodded dignifiedly when the blonde girl in a white woollen dress with lacy holes against her skin came skipping towards him.

"I am Svetlana and am the translator for Moscow."

He squeezed the dainty hand she was offering him. It almost disappeared into his paw with its jungle tufts of wiry hair growing at the knuckles. It was these that made Breznik swiftly drop her hand, even before looking into the girl's eyes – thinking about the habits of new generations of men who seem to shave and pluck anything hirsute. So it comes as a shock to women their age when, on an old-school kind of man, they see a naturally hairy part of the body. Armpits, chest, belly, back. All the areas Breznik was amply adorned in.

Of course it never occurs to these women that an old-fashioned hairy bird might be allowed to come pecking into the depilated cage below their navel. No way, you must be mad! No chance! Even less so that they might take a cock with such a primeval display into their mouth. Abhorrent and repulsive to them, they would moan all the time that there was

something pricking their tongue, spit and sputter and hysterically search for the hair in their saliva. Such a fuss and goodbye joy, all the pleasure gone!

But this is what their effeminate, depilated companions have got them used to. The same ones who can't even take a relaxed shit naturally without the beautician first scraping away the last hairs in between their buttocks. This was why Breznik felt uneasy when he noticed the long hairs on his knuckles. Especially because some of the longer ones were very obviously grey. This had come as a surprise to him too, a shock at an inappropriate time. Hence he quickly, too quickly in fact, let go of her and moved his hand away before even looking into Svetlana's eyes as would have been appropriate for old-school etiquette.

"Let's go inside, the other two gentlemen are already having coffee in the hotel foyer. What can I order for you?"

Svetlana was already stepping into the revolving door. With an entrance this big it would be ridiculous for Breznik not to step into the same compartment with her and instead wait for the large glass circle to rotate another third of its circumference. It really would be silly and senile. After all, Breznik was not that old, he was still a year or so off sixty, though even he would have to do some calculating with dates to give his precise age. In any case it was not an age where it would be acceptable to groan and find excuses about knee or back pain. Or to wait for the huge glass carousel to turn. So Breznik boldly stepped in right behind Svetlana without waiting for the glass wall. Without safely confining the sight of the pleasing line of her back, which smiled amidst the white crocheted flowers of her tight woollen dress.

"Espresso with milk. Cold milk, slightly more milk than coffee!" he continued the conversation they had started outside, inside the glass cage. Incidentally he noticed a large black tattoo that spread from the young lady's shoulder onto her back.

Just as well I am no longer young, he sighed for the third time at the sight of the cute, I mean really cute, figure of the fair-haired Svetlana (How did her parents know this name would be so fitting!) But it was this sigh of his that was the ultimate sign of his weakness. In fact it was immediately after the suggestive sigh that he, almost as if to order, stopped thinking about Svetlana's youthfulness, concentrated in her firm and seductively swaying tits. Even the tragic sense of his own age, centred on the pain in his hips, now no longer got to him. These hips now resisted the synchronized and somewhat rigid steps following Svetlana's well-rounded buttocks

inside the pivoting glass drum. Once Breznik repeated his sentence for a third time, the seemingly simple thought had a miraculous effect. It was a proven mantra that Breznik had successfully been using for at least the last five years, ever since, after his failed second marriage, he decided that men of a certain age should know how to keep their cock inside their pants when this was appropriate. A man without discipline is destined for ruination. Breznik knew this well from his personal disasters and also as a doctor when he tried to persuade fat-arsed patients to stop stuffing themselves with greasy sausages that helped them clog up their arteries. Usually to no effect – right until the inevitable heart attack.

The lust that drives the body's instincts needs discipline. And discipline is nothing more than a precisely determined calendar of events that every person must follow in order to save face. Allowing the body to improvise beyond discipline leads to chaos. Any such slackness with the spirit has similar grave consequences.

What else is the spirit if not an obedient serf that, prompted by this or that master, finds some excuse? For any deed, however foul. All human atrocities happen only after the human spirit blesses and approves them. Places them in the service of rationality and sense. In most cases also in the service of some wonderful deity. All kinds of slaughter, exploitation and destruction. All invented and blessed by the very spirit humans are so ready to praise. Why should we then allow this caitiff to guide us along as it sees fit? Phew! No way, the soul is even less reliable than the body. It at least has its own natural limits of endurance and strength. It cannot go beyond these. Some relieving ailment inevitably appears – and that's it.

The spirit though is weightless and has no physical limits. This is why it is capable of boundless stupidity of which Breznik had some particularly bitter experience. The spirit of love, for example, that during his first marriage had cost him a nice flat in the centre of town. He had magnanimously bought it for the love of his youth who, after a few months, had some ruffian move in with her. She wouldn't even hear any suggestions of returning the flat. There was little he could do, especially since he had skilfully erased any proof of his investment to avoid problems with his wife.

The spirit of enterprise also brought Breznik nothing but an unpleasantly tough meeting in the Hospital Director's office where he was accused of only treating his heart patients with new and expensive drugs because the pharmaceutical company supplying them paid for his luxurious trips to conferences, all allowances and fees included. To avoid gossip round the hospital and risk spilling the affair to journalists and prosecutors, the meeting had ended with a conciliatory agreement. From being Head of Department Breznik inconspicuously retreated to a small private clinic. The Minister, who was informed of the matter and also did not wish a media racket, granted him a sizable state concession – enough for the clinic to amply provide for both him and Darinka, the nurse he was having an affair with at the time.

This last thing in particular was the last drop. The Director obliquely hinting that he knew all about him, his wife and Darinka. About his new car. Even about the infamous flat he had bought for his former lover. The staggering degree of the Director's informedness finally convinced Breznik that he needed to agree the soonest possible to a dignified withdrawal into the private sector. With such a well-organized intelligence service network that the Director clearly seemed to have access to, this surely went beyond his own pharmaceutical arrangements and contracts for new drugs, and was connected to some much larger story, as yet unbeknown to him. One in which it was probably decided in advance that Breznik was to lose his position as Head of Department to make way for somebody else. Breznik knew enough about hospital conspiracies to realize that a conflict over such a trivial matter as his project with the new drug for a failing heart was only an excuse. The Hospital Director would surely not engage in a war against him over such an insignificant and harmless contract. After all, there were far worse cases of autocratic abuse in the hospital. For example the imperious surgeon in the neighbouring department who in a state hospital allowed exclusively operations for patients who had first visited him in his private clinic and paid 300 euros for a brief examination. By comparison Breznik, with his moderate royalties on his pharmaceutical project, was an angel!

Similarly by comparison with the pharmacist who bought all the medical supplies for the hospital exclusively through her husband's agency. As a result his company had profits in the millions. Little need to say that the pharmacist wife was so very generous in the prices negotiated for drugs that her husband had a large financial margin. Especially if the negotiations took place in the pleasant environment of their home dining room or bedroom, or even their huge holiday home with a private mooring for their yacht on the beautiful Dalmatian coast.

Had the Director wanted to seriously accuse Breznik of ethical misconduct, he should have first dealt with the Head of Plastics who, during on-call hours in the state hospital, frenziedly operated the tits and facial wrinkles of wealthy Italian signoras. For his own pocket. His greed featured in many a story that circulated of torn arms of factory workers, farmers or artisans involved in accidents that were, after a brief examination by the said surgeon, declared unsuitable for the difficult and time-consuming vascular procedure. Despite the fact that an operation could well have saved their fingers and so on. Of course that would mean they would have to cancel the operation for one of the wrinkled and sagging Italian women, sitting in the waiting room stroking her spaniel. With annoyance the lady might then announce to her equally withered and drooping friends that it is not worth going to such an unreliable surgeon who does not stick to what had been agreed. So all that assistant medics could do beside complaining about how the judgements of the senior doctor's opinions seem more often than not to be influenced by the amount of work he had lined up for the theatre, was to straighten out the bones or cut away dead flesh from the mangled arms of the unfortunate factory workers.

These stories, indignantly spread through the hospital by the surgeon's assistants, were sometimes truly tragic. Almost certainly some also reached the Hospital Director who should, had this been a genuine matter of ethics, have called this surgeon to his office and dismissed

him long before Breznik. But it was clear to Breznik that, with such efficient intelligence gathering he had clearly become the target of, this was nothing to do with him personally. There was some greater game in the background, the true extent of which he would never find out. So the wisest thing to do was to move with the fewest possible losses into the tranquillity of a private cardiology practice. Leave the big boys to their backstabbing wheeling and dealing at the state hospital that attracts many because of the huge amounts of money involved in everything from drugs, materials, medical equipment, tests, servicing, and so on, right down to the toilet paper.

A state hospital is an attractive beast because it can never really fail. The Minister always covers any losses with the excuse that medical services, especially those of the highest quality such as are by definition and unwritten rule only offered at state institutions, keep getting more and more expensive. For this reason any petty scrutinization of doctors, who are, also by unwritten rule, the country's greatest experts in their fields, is entirely unnecessary. Since they thus no longer need to account for their costs, the hospital can pay all kinds of suppliers with unequalled generosity. Everyone was aware of this and to enterprising souls every minor job could turn into big business. Because there are thousands of such minor jobs, none of the bureaucrats who dish out the money can possibly keep tabs on the situation. There is no way they can know which of the hundreds of kinds of surgical needles is justifiably more expensive and which is merely the surgeon's caprice. Or even something less amicable than caprice. A bureaucrat would be unable to make head or tail of his own wife's sewing needles, even if she was up to her neck in corruption, let alone the hundreds of types of surgical needles available.

This is why, for certain gentlemen involved in business, it is very important who heads which department. If a section of the state hospital changes one drug for another, all of a sudden, thousands, if not millions, flow into a different pot. Whether a vascular stent or a pacemaker costs one or five thousand makes little difference to a state hospital. To the person selling it this difference is at least as important as the difference between a wooden fishing boat and a yacht. So it is essential that heads of departments are the right guys from the right cliques.

During his talk with the Director, Breznik soon discovered he clearly wasn't one of these right ones. So whilst there was still time, withdrawal into private practice really was his best option. Before one of those who pull strings somewhere higher up begins to frown and point a finger. Because then not even such a withdrawal would be an option. They would get to him sooner or later. It could be in the form of an audit with a suspicion of documentation not being kept properly, followed by a repeat inspection. Or a slanderous rumour that some journalist would by chance pick up and report on in a gossipy newspaper.

Once the pointing finger comes from some mysterious villa or yacht on the Adriatic coast, no ordinary person can find their way out of the traps set still alive and well or of sound mind. So it is better to resign before it happens, without questioning where you might have gone wrong and why you are no longer the right person to head a department. There is little point in losing sleep over when you might have been just that little bit too keen with an innocent

suggestion about changing the supplier of a certain drug or equipment. When you didn't take seriously enough a request to arrange an immediate check-up or an MRI scan. Or just a better hospital room.

Traps within the state hospital are usually very complicated and complex. It could well be that there was no mistake or resentment at all. Perhaps those who planned their business through his department simply didn't perceive Breznik as someone accessible enough. It could well have a reason as banal as his moderate social life so someone didn't see him as approachable enough, or that, for some other imagined reason, somebody didn't believe he would be a suitable part in their business network. So the mysterious gentleman somewhere from the background and without further enquiries ordered his replacement. Purely preventatively. Though this is not to say that Breznik would not have happily and quite nicely fitted into the company of gentlemen who wish to do good business through selling drugs and equipment to state hospitals. Had he been openly asked, he would probably have been keen to solve the whole issue in a manner that would satisfy everyone. After all, with the state picking up the bill in the end, state hospitals are set up in a way that they cannot collapse. So entrepreneurs who sell equipment and supplies to hospitals are not harming anyone in particular if they happen to sell at a slightly higher price.

All they are doing is forcing the miserly state to dig slightly deeper into its coffers. This way they all have more money to carry out their plans and projects, their scientific congresses, travels and the occasional treat. So, honestly speaking, Breznik would not have been expressly against any sensible group arrangements that would benefit all. He was not a stranger to dialogue, in his student years he supported pacifism and living in communes, though with studying medicine he never had the time to apply any of this in practice. Still, over the years he had become experienced enough to realize that nobody can achieve anything of essence by working alone. Only teamwork is effective nowadays. The individual, with their small supply of will, energy and time, sooner or later gives up. Especially with having to take care of the heating every autumn and making sure the car is serviced if you don't want to get stuck on the road. Visiting the dentist, attending meetings at your children's school and so on and so on. So the individual soon, far too soon due to their very nature, runs out of energy for any more permanent surplus.

Beside this, the individual must also surmount the obstacles thrown into their path by all who are allergic to people who wish to achieve something on their own. A person not assimilated into organized society always signals trouble. This is the prevalent thinking. That is why one needs to keep providing proof that they are not doing anything dishonest and that their work will not spark any rumours or dissatisfaction of neighbours and colleagues, or that they will in any other way disturb the established social order.

At the same time nobody is concerned with even the most idiotic behaviour in certain bizarre groups. As long as there is some official stamp behind it all. Once approved, such a group can, if it so wishes, declare that the moon is about to fall from the sky. An individual would be

sent to the lunatic asylum, but with a group it is acceptable, because we are tolerant and democratic and know that within groups people look out for each other. In any case, it is common for large enough groups to also include some well-meaning informer who would immediately let those higher up know if something was seriously wrong. This is the reason why the work of groups has huge support in society and why we see groups as trustworthy, regardless of what they actually do. The individual though, regrettably, can uncontrollably conceal countless unpredictable dangers inside their head.

This is why individuals should be preventatively and strictly surveilled. If an individual points out that the hospital is unnecessarily purchasing new equipment this is unacceptable regressiveness and an obstruction of development. And if someone maintains that the boss should not receive pharmaceutical money on behalf of the state hospital and then spend it as a private firm, this is an insult to the hospital and its leadership. Of course such a person has it coming to them. Who do they think they are, standing up with their insignificant self to the might of the state hospital?! Action against such presumptuousness is essential and always successful. In time the person concerned can always be sent a notice forbidding this or that, and let the little man get all upset and lodge as many official complaints as he wishes. Of course the little man with his weak and fickle will, attention and energy cannot survive the slow, slight and subtle shifts that eventually crush him like a tanker might crush a fishing boat. So the individual despairs and the tankers continue unabated in the same direction.

This is particularly true in the case of a small sub-Alpine country where only the opinion of the collective counts and it is the individual's duty to make sure they do not deviate from the opinion of the group. Where would we get if in a snowdrift each person started digging in their own direction? That is why Breznik, as a member of his national tribe, would have been quite happy if any of the entrepreneurs had wanted to include him into any of the business organizations. He would have happily participated in bold plans. But the problem of such business organizations is that they do not operate through public tenders. One cannot just write an application to join the club since formally the club doesn't even exist, though it is common knowledge who is part of it.

This is precisely where the demonic power of select groups lies, in that it is not possible to simply gain access to them, because it is the groups themselves that decide who is suitable to join them. Clearly Breznik wasn't. He was aware of the negative effect and inappropriateness of the fact that, despite being the head of an important department, he did not mingle and connect with important gentlemen at dinner parties, tennis tournaments and on golf courses. Honestly speaking, he didn't have a clue where to start with any meaningful networking. Without it though, it is not possible to succeed in a country where business and all important jobs are only dished out to approved good old friends of certain approved good old friends. Nobody relies simply on verbal recommendations or trusts written documents such as school reports, degrees and doctorates in a country where any kind of certificate can be bought. And it has become almost a tradition through history that people continuously betray their neighbours and other

locals to their foreign masters as a cheap way of getting rid of them and taking over their tiny piece of land. Later, under the Communist authorities, people, with their own interests at heart, informed on one another to the political commissars and the notorious state security service UDBA.

This is why in this land even today nobody trusts anyone who is not either a close relative or a tested acquaintance. Not even those who were never part of UDBA, and those who were even less because they have inside knowledge of how things work. Managers thus do not consider it safe to employ someone they do not know, regardless of their qualifications or references. It was precisely such well-educated and cosmopolitan people, artists and journalists, who were once UDBA's most prominent informants. It was following what seemed to be innocent enough intellectual, literary and philosophical conversations in innocent-looking artists' hangouts that people were denounced, sent for questioning and imprisoned. People soon found out about it and became firmly convinced that in front of strangers, especially clever ones, one should keep their mouth shut. This is why even now people make sure they only bring people they have checked into a group, a job, a joint project or business. Friends or kin who are unlikely to go rushing off to inform on them if the company happens to get itself into an awkward situation with its taxes or business that often veers towards the boundaries of legality. It is also common knowledge that the rules of bureaucracy are such that one cannot make a living in this country by strictly adhering to all the laws.

Breznik understood all this when he became Head of Department. He had kept to himself ever since his youth and upon his promotion didn't have any real perception of how to acquire a collection of important friends that would, now that he had suddenly and unexpectedly reached such a high position (by sheer necessity of circumstances with the previous head committing suicide and there being no other specialist and professor available at the time), ensure that he would also remain in this important position in the long-term.

From his first day in the position Breznik was certainly aware that to stay in it he needed to gain a circle of influential acquaintances. Only he was not entirely sure how to go about doing so. Previously, in the old regime, there was at least the Communist Party. Someone without a real clue could at least quite calculatingly join that and then wave the most prominent flag and cheer loudly at official celebrations, and thus get noticed. But these days, in the chaos of democracy, there are no more rules on how to access select circles. It's not a case of getting close to them by standing at a bar and waiting for someone to come by that you can start talking to.

Breznik had never even managed to pick up a woman in this manner, though at times it would have suited him to, and actors in films seemed to do it all the time. Despite often trying, in practice Breznik never managed to actually meet anyone in this manner apart from a few drunken bores. So it was even less likely that he would make any useful and influential business connections in this way. In this respect he really envied those who were, so to say, born with connections and acquaintances. Ardent Catholics, for example, whose parents would send them

from an early age to Bible Studies and other courses in religious education at all levels. Then, in any larger kind of gathering, they would instinctively seek each other out and start talking about pilgrimages they had been on together, scouts and religious holidays. Once they felt more intimately comfortable and trusting of each other they would also start mentioning crimes that had been committed by Communists and the killings of members of the anti-partisan, anti-communist Home Guard and their families after the Second World War. In the end they would, of course, also meet on common projects which would allow someone to come from the background into influential circles where decisions were made about who to place in what position and why.

Similarly Breznik in a way also envied the Communists. Their parents would also immediately enrol them into the Pioneer movement, youth clubs and all kinds of other Communist Party-sponsored organizations. There they would drink beer and sing of young girls who had joined the partisans, nodding at one another when the conversation brought up executive committees, people in town halls, the university, various chambers and ministries. Having sung of young female partisans together, it was clear to all that they could rely on one another.

In this respect Breznik was unlucky. In other respects he was a competent and clever doctor, but still only an unconnected individual. In Slovenia this was worse than being any idiot with any kind of connection, born into some clan, no matter which. Communist or Catholic, content is irrelevant anyway, but people benefit from these connections. It was these that Breznik lacked. Because of this he envied even other interconnected communities, Jews, Albanians, Muslims and all sorts, all of them stamped from birth with a specific upbringing. It forces them to connect with each other, since they cannot live with other normal people anyway. Their strangeness and maladjustment prevent them from blending into some average norm and mingling in the herd as individuals because the herd excludes them on account of their distinctness. Their peculiarity more or less compels them to interconnect and participate in an organized common persistence. This very soon turns out to be an advantage. Whilst ordinary normal people get lost in the disorganized herd of other ordinary normal people, their particular maladjustment forces Jews or Albanians or Muslims to link into orderly, organized groups. Breznik often saw what wonders can be achieved by formations that organize a herd of blind cattle used to keeping their heads low into a proper unit. One that knows what it is heading for. And knows why it has to stick together.

As Breznik was neither a Jew, nor a Communist, nor a Christian, nor gay, he had no idea about how and with whom he might connect. He could not bring himself to push his way into the Freemasons or Lions or Templars and similar groups because he found all those ceremonies with swords and candles ridiculous. He could not possibly keep a straight face during such an initiation, nor had he the money for all those swords, garments and events. On the other hand there was also not enough time for him to start chipping in with some newly fledged political party. There are so many losers crowded at the trough there that any novice can expect years of

endless wasting of time. Every novice wants to prove themselves as a zealous and devoted member, and in such an onslaught of grovelling one needs special talent. One also needs a lot of time and not regret fruitless debates and flimflam among members about who is more true and loyal to their leaders. No, Breznik had his profession and political parties were not for him. So he remained unconnected and was quietly aware that one day this would hit him on the head.

He was thus not really surprised when the Director called him to his office and advised him to withdraw. He was aware of his weak position in which nobody would help him and nobody would stand up for him, one in which he was quite alone. He was neither Catholic, Communist, homosexual, a Freemason nor a party fanatic. Only an old fashioned guy in a herd, one of the thousand of cattle that stay staring at the ground and helplessly move their arse out of the way or squeeze into the corner when an organized bovine formation storms in and takes over their place. What else is the poor animal to do?!

This was why, immediately after his talk with the Director, Breznik agreed and confirmed that he was prepared to withdraw. This happened straight away whilst there was still time to quietly equip a small, friendly, private clinic. In it he employed Darinka, the nurse who had by then also become his wife, and he began to live a pleasant family life he had never known before. Regular breakfast and afternoon lunch. Regular walks and running at the stadium. Regular Saturday sex with the occasional Tuesday one too, when he was in the mood.

In the end he had to admit that this kind of systematic married life paid off. Never before had he felt this kind of serene peace inside. Never before had he slept so easily at night. All this thanks to acknowledging the necessity for discipline. There could have been a little more money though; the clinic was not exactly a gold mine. With his former lover swindling him out of the flat and his wife walking off with much of what was left during the divorce process, he wasn't exactly basking in cash with which he could just pay upfront for the yearly supply of heating oil for the clinic he rented in town. Or for the small weekend house he had bought himself in the countryside.

In that grandiose revolving door at the hotel into which he followed Svetlana's stunning figure, Breznik thus decided to stay firm in his conviction that a man's world needs to adhere to discipline and make it part of its schedule, so it is clear at all times what and how much of it is right. Animals can live without discipline when nature triggers all that is necessary through switching on hormones and nerve reflexes. People however are tormented beings who only seemingly live as individuals. But the true living entity is not the individual but the tribe to which we belong. Without it we do not exist. Neither our parents nor our children would exist without the survival of the tribe. We are cells and these cells belong to a collective that, whether we want

to or not, we serve with mind and body – and this is no longer a matter of our will, we simply have no choice. Thus what we think are also the thoughts of our tribe, everything, down to the last drop that concerns the satisfaction of our personal needs and caring for our personal hygiene. Nothing is ours, everything is subject to our tribe's will to survive.