

An aerial, top-down view of a large, diverse crowd of people walking on a dark, square-tiled floor. The people are scattered across the frame, some walking in groups, some alone, and some pushing strollers or carrying bags. The perspective is from directly above, creating a sense of a busy, public space. A large red rectangular area is positioned at the top center, containing the magazine's title. A vertical red bar runs along the right edge of the image, containing the issue information. At the bottom, the word 'PREJUDICE' is written in large, bold, red capital letters.

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**PREJUDICE**

FICTION

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TRANSLATED BY  
JULIA AND PETER SHERWOOD

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*Some things are clearly visible even if they take place in the middle of the night. The peak of the spire, topped with a rusty revolving rooster, affords a view of the square and the adjoining streets. The gently creaking rooster's field of vision takes in the whole of the tranquil and unexciting town of P., located somewhere beyond the range of interest of the news agencies, on the edge of the civilized world, although the locals pride themselves on being part of a civilized, law-abiding Europe—not the barbarian steppes.*

*It is evening, early October 1928: the town festival. As it spins around in the wind, the rooster on the spire sees men, dozens of them, storming out of the bar, carrying justice in their hands - hoes, sticks, metal hooks, knives, revolvers. They chase their victims around their own houses, down the streets and into the fields surrounding the town. They leave behind scalped heads coated with feathers from torn pillows, elaborately tortured remains, body parts, the corpse of a six-year-old girl shot before her mother's eyes. Through a gap between the boards of a summerhouse, lit up by the moon, a lifeless, single bulging eye stares up at the rooster.*

*The unprovoked brutal torture and killings have been unleashed on their neighbors by hitherto timid and irreproachable local clerks, teachers, merchants, the mayor, and members of the local council. After a few hours the frenzied operation comes to a halt, as if a curse had spent all its force. The air clears, the streets and fields fall silent. The tools are rinsed, the bodies dumped in some unknown place.*

*The locals have no explanation for what has happened. No one remembers the details. The only thing that's certain is the whole operation went smoothly, without a glitch or any attempt to put a stop to the frenzy.*

*Investigating officers fail to get to the bottom of the event, most likely because they have no intention of getting to the bottom of anything. But even if they approached their task conscientiously, a different outcome would be beyond their capabilities. No one heard anything, or saw any proof of the murders. The witnesses get tangled up in their testimony, only to deny everything again while each day - without pointing their finger at anyone in particular - they come up with some new implausible claim and spout blatant nonsense that won't stand up as evidence.*

*The clergy and the police side with the perpetrators, accusing the victims of trumped-up offences. In the end no one is charged with the murders: there are just three symbolic indictments for disorderly conduct, and the whole business is forgotten. Years later there is nothing that might commemorate the event. No symbolic crosses for the victims, not even a plaque somewhere out of sight or a single mention in the town chronicle.*

*Subsequent conversations with the reticent and reserved residents of the town lead to the conclusion that no one bears responsibility for these acts, and a few days later hardly anyone even believes that they actually took place. It couldn't have happened that way; it can't be true.*

Why? To be honest, I knew you must have come here for a reason. No one ever visits this place out of the blue. I'll serve you your beer, I'll even have a drink with you, if I may, but as for these events, the only one you can ask is the rooster, he's the only witness. And while we wait for him to sing, let me introduce you to our town of P. I've been running this local pub for a hundred years now and nothing has ever changed. The same people live here, and they all think the same way, even if they have turned in their graves several times, as I have done.

If you took a walk around the streets of our town and had the time to crisscross every single one of them, you'd probably reach the disappointing conclusion that P. is a pretty average and tedious place, hardly worth visiting. It has no historical monuments to speak of - unless you count the church and the multistory dump that passes for our town hall. Equally devoid of any interest are the regulation tenements, the murky little river V, the pond, and the marketplace downtown with nothing to offer that you wouldn't find anywhere else in the world. P. can't boast of its atmosphere either: the people in the streets are mostly taciturn and grouchy, and aside from a few cheap bars there is basically nowhere for a visitor to kill time. That's why every stranger is treated with suspicion. You say you have come as a tourist, but I can tell that you intend to pry, slander, dish the dirt, spread untruths, and speculate. Come on, what else could you possibly be interested in other than the wretched year of 1928?

Because nothing much has ever happened here in P., apart from that armed hounding of the Roma. What history has ever occurred here? What has history got to do with us? Other than the odd exhibition of folk embroidery, or the time we made it to the finals of the Village of the Year competition, but I guess that's not what you're interested in.

History is nothing but things you can't verify. Idle talk of those who hold a grudge. Let me give you my opinion of that event, because my opinion is my truth.

P. has always been a calm, sleepy, and lethargic place. People here are like purring lions with their bellies stuffed and eyes half-open, wagging their tail or batting a fly away every now and then before padding off nonchalantly into the shade, one paw after another. The locals do stir, but their manner is so lethargic that if you observed them from the top of the church spire, you'd find it hard to tell whether you were looking at a photo or watching a film.

Back in the old days I would have sworn that this was the calmest place on earth. Nobody missed anything because they never thought about anything. However, that can't have been the case: the past was bound to conceal something, as it was a past that went back much further than my first days in this world, a past no one remembered, or wanted to remember, or had been prohibited from remembering. A very long time ago

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something must have happened here that silenced everyone, sapped their strength and energy, extinguished the spark in their eyes, and wiped clean their memories. An outside observer might have gained the impression that this is an idyllic and contented place, but in fact what they see is just ordinary apathy. The silence comes from locked tongues that are under the spell of deep and long-term shame and guilt, which, if allowed to bubble to the surface, would make it impossible to breathe.

Nothing disappears from this world just like that. The past will start to seep through, filling the air with tiny droplets of tension, energy will slowly emanate from the earth. Ghosts that had been unhappy and unreconciled for decades started to articulate threats that were increasingly easy to understand. Once again, ancient forces brought forth something stifling, something that enveloped us. We found it hard to breathe, our lips twitched nervously, our skin was itchy. And words followed suit. A valve had been released. The sky, the boundless, oppressive sky, pressed the people of P. to the ground like the lid on a pressure cooker.

Then October 2nd arrived, and all hell broke loose.

We are not a people of a violent disposition. I'm not sure whether I'm saying this in our defense or as an argument against us, but we have always known our place. Someone else has always had the upper hand, be it the Hungarians, Austrians, Czechs or Russians, and we have always toed the line, peering from behind drawn curtains to check what's happening out in the street and actually quite happy to be ruled by someone and not have to make our own decisions or settle our own accounts. It's hard to go on a killing spree when you're a prisoner.

The only ones we've had the guts to take on have been the Jews and the Roma, that's what our circumstances have allowed. We are a small people, surrounded on all sides by larger nations. Someone might use the term cowardice in this context, but self-interest would be more appropriate. We've had to pick someone safe to hate, comfortably, without risking retaliation.

We have always blamed our failures on someone else, ideally an outsider, someone different, not too numerous, those unable to defend themselves, without an army or influence at their disposal. Nowadays we've added homosexuals and immigrants to the list, but that's just verbal

warfare. The former are well hidden and you can never be quite sure about them, while the latter avoid our country like the plague. In a word, they are not available and, as a result, the options an angry mob has to choose from are rather limited.

It all began with half-hearted attempts on the part of a few Romantic free spirits, poets who pondered the question of how to put the Jews in their place. But before they knew it, the emperor rapped their knuckles for having confused, in their enthusiasm, revolutionary activities with the committing of crimes. So they channeled their curmudgeonly anti-Semitism into journalism and novels but, fortunately, our people were not accustomed to books. If a pogrom took place, it was just symbolic, all that we could do within our limits.

Even later, during the Second World War, when we ruled ourselves under Nazi supervision, no major waves of amateur popular killings occurred. The bloodlands were located northeast of us, that was where Stalin's and Hitler's armies roamed, civilians died in the millions, commandos cleansed the countryside of Jews, annihilated the Polish, Ukrainian, and Belorussian intelligentsia, and razed entire villages and cities to the ground. That's where true hell was to be found. That's where ordinary citizens joined in the cleansing, and hundreds, maybe even thousands, of pogroms took place: the victims were too numerous to be counted. Around here, though, things were different.

It was our president, a Catholic priest who arranged for the deportations of Jews to concentration camps, so clearly that was the merciful and proper option for our nation. It was God's will, and we paid the Germans for every person deported to ensure they took care of it for us. The Slovaks accepted this without a murmur, such were the times we lived in, and the Jews were obliged to leave. We were innocent, we had our excuse: it was the German Nazis who were to blame for the Holocaust, we didn't even know what was happening at the time, Hitler had deceived our powers-that-be, that was our immediate response. All we really wanted was peace and quiet so that we could grow, weed out anything that was unnecessary, and free ourselves from the thousand-year-old yoke. We are a peaceful, dovelike nation, we invented this name for ourselves and have been quite happy with it. You know - cooing doves, Picasso and all that, we're as gentle as little doves, the most we might do if we come across a rival is dance around them.

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Popular pogroms were quite rare in our part of the world both before and after the war; we prefer to believe that nothing worth mentioning has ever happened. Or if it did, it was only occasionally, exceptionally, and even those occasions were more symbolic hunts, without any corpses, just plain mass robberies and humiliations – a kind of sport, really.

We would give the Jews a drubbing out of envy: they were not our own and they were to blame for our poverty, they kept themselves to themselves and never complained, so they obviously prospered at our expense. They had been exploiting us long before the war began, which was quite an achievement since, unlike us, they were limited to carrying on certain types of business. They went on exploiting us during the war, after being deprived of their basic liberties, and continued after the fighting ended, when the communists nationalized whatever remained. We knew full well who was to blame, the handful of poor bastards we had dispatched to the camps had just come back, and, skeletal as they were, they still managed to enslave us, exploit us, bleed us dry... But we didn't repay them for our poverty by dispatching them. People just wanted to take what was rightfully theirs.

We also hounded the Roma, not out of envy – only a fool would want to live the way they do – but they were handy, you would always find a few at the end of the village, ready to have their faces smashed in, or asking for a Molotov cocktail to be hurled through their window, for their wives to be stripped naked and slapped around, for the men to be whacked with a shovel on the noggin or across the back, to be taught a lesson. There were really no casualties, and even if there were, they were purely accidental, you could count them on the fingers of one hand. As I said earlier, we're as gentle as cooing doves.

Sometimes it was quite fun, innocent teasing, you see. One night the men in a nearby village wrapped themselves in white sheets to look like ghosts and scared the living daylights out of the Roma. They ran off, and by the time they came back in the morning, their houses had been dismantled. So they disappeared. Oh well, they're nomads, aren't they, so they might as well return to their nomadic way of life.

I see a shadow of suspicion crossing your face. You are wondering if I may have had anything to do with these unfortunate events, or have

some information, since I come across people of every kind, or whether I may even have been one of the folks implicated in those crimes. Yes, you do suspect me, my pub is at the center of events: it was from here that the armed men reportedly came running and it's almost impossible for me not to know something, out of the question that I wouldn't have picked up at least a tiny little clue from conversations: surely someone as smart as I would have put two and two together, eavesdropped on someone's whispered plans, admission of guilt, or threats. You're convinced that I know everything but that I'm keeping quiet to shield the culprits. Otherwise you wouldn't have asked: why.

When it comes to this matter, my conscience is clear. But even if it wasn't, I don't know any reason why I should open up to you, of all people. No need to apologize, I understand your curiosity, it's all right, we're having a nice chat, it's good to talk and clear the air. There's simply nothing to confess, because even after all these years we're not sure what really happened here in P. New theories keep cropping up, one day you hear one thing, the next something else; in one version of events this person had lost their life, in another it's someone else. By the way, where have they all gone? Have you seen their graves? Be my guest - go and bring me someone who has seen everything and who can corroborate the story. A lot of thought has been given to individuals and the mob, but no one ever discusses the motives. Let me tell you why - because there are no motives. And where there is no motive, there's no perpetrator.

I think that here in P. we're much more sensitive to words. Words are soothing, they squeeze out thoughts from your head and take their place, all you need do is repeat them a few times in the pub during a feast. You adopt them as your own views, and you'll fight to defend them. Furiously - until you draw blood, even though you're a gentle, kind man, one who is as meek as a lamb.

Just look at the silent shadows roaming the streets in the evenings, at these figures that would disappear without a trace if you threw a sheet of flimsy over them for a moment, dissolving into the pages, fading out of their own resumes that would shrink instantly to a couple of dates, and often not even that. Wretched, insignificant figures wandering about town, nursing their grievances and envy...

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Just imagine that one day, after many years of being held captive by boredom, lethargy and hopelessness, a voice suddenly speaks to them, maybe addressing them by their name, reminding them what they're called and encouraging them to take action at last, assuring them that everything is allowed, that this is their chance to demonstrate their strength and abilities, to offer the world proof of their existence. They respond immediately, and as far as they are concerned this is not revenge, just a confirmation that they are capable of leaving a legacy, of rising up in a blaze of pent-up energy. And once it's over, they revert to their previous state, before they managed to ask any questions, happy and anonymous again, grateful deep down that someone had reached out to them. It may have been the voice of a politician, or someone imitating a politician, or a person who had scores to settle with someone, and things slowly escalated into uncontrollable random attacks, maybe it's the drunken mayor who is to blame, a man like you and me, who just needed to let off steam.

Be that as it may, for these people the flame had gone out, and it no longer concerned them, they had their private lives after all and these things had nothing to do with them, they were just carrying out orders, how dare we disturb their peace without any evidence. Whoever they had been, there and then, bears no relation to the person that exists here and now. The situation and the context that had shaped their personalities in those difficult times were very different from the situation and context now.

Nowadays they no longer identify with the former image of themselves. If they bumped into themselves in the street, they wouldn't even say hello, they don't care about the person they had once been, who no longer exists. And in addition, they are religious: whatever it may mean to you, this term is important. Just look at their faces. Do you see pent-up anger? Do you detect any sense of guilt?

I've been telling you all this as an example, on the off chance that something has really happened in this town, or that something might have happened in some other town, today or in the past. Come on, now! If it was true what the papers said, one couldn't possibly go on living in P!

When you walk down the streets of P., you are enveloped by silence. You may call it a deadly silence, although others may find it peaceful and

others chilling. I believe that the silence of the locals is a sign of great wisdom. Silence – what a decisive, absolute stance!

I have realized how smart and sophisticated the people of P. are, how penetrating their silence is, what sharpness and precision it conceals. They keep quiet about the past and are not interested in the future. They stride in silence and without fear. And should anything evil happen nearby, or even in their own house, they would rather join in than let themselves be affected, let alone defeated, by it. Rather than waste their time daydreaming, they put on the national costume and break into a dance. Reflection is the very last thing you can expect of them.

An outsider might think that they are consumed by a sense of shame and embarrassment, as I was a few minutes ago when you asked the question: why. But their silence hides prescience and power. After all, the guardian angel is often silent, but that certainly doesn't mean that he's a fool. It is his way of telling me something, giving me a hint or a piece of advice.

Those who keep silent are demonstrating their wisdom. Just like you are. I admire your silence and I'm not going on about it in order to ingratiate myself with you, but out of respect for people who are wise. You are almost like a son to me, even though I've never had a son. You're someone I feel close to, the ideal interlocutor.

Let's have another. I see you don't mind paying for a round, which suggests that you're well off. It's great to meet someone who is successful and flush with money. You see, should you ever hit rock bottom, you can be sure that someone will remember you. I'm not saying that this person will actually offer a helping hand, but they will remember you and their conscience will haunt them; at night this person will have to justify himself to himself, blame himself, berate himself, lose respect for himself. And that knowledge will be heart-warming for poor old you, it will cheer you up. Because you will live in someone else's conscience, spreading your tentacles inside his world. What more can one hope for as the meaning of one's existence?

But back to the point. Here at the Old Lion, I look after people's wellbeing. Here, too, we are silent. Me, the landlords, my customers. We know there is nothing to talk about. We lack the capacity to revisit those events, we

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know in advance that we won't figure out anything earth-shattering - unless we plunge a dagger into our own heart.

Silence is the best answer. The scope for misunderstanding is so much less if instead of a human being I'm sitting here facing, say, a sparrow or a thrush. Being silent like an animal.

The void that I would like to understand and that looms above our days like the holy triangle in the local church -- this void can only be made eternal by silence.

Silence will be the most beautiful monument, the most fitting way to remember me, the Old Lion, and all of our town. It would be a great honor and a liberation for all of us. It would be the kind of eternity I would cherish.

But instead, people keep prying. They keep trying to drag skeletons out of the closet, to analyze, to look for reasons. But we who live here are not asking why. It has happened. Or has it? Are you really sure? What if it didn't happen that way, but the other way around? Or if it never happened at all? What then? These are the questions we ask. The questions that we need answers to. "Why" can only come right at the end, but we are convinced that we will never get that far anyway.

We are consciously and quite deliberately wrapping ourselves in alternative facts, getting tangled up in various possibilities, relishing the "yes but" and the "what if", yearning for a chaos in which the original question will be lost, as will the straightforward, the only possible, undeniable answer. Every digression is a clever maneuver to test our opponent's patience. These are the tactics we use to delay the verdict.

If you are familiar with soccer: we are like an amateur team that, by some fluke, find themselves on their village playground facing a regular

professional club against whom they don't stand a chance if they stick to fair play. So they choose the tactic of kicking the ball out of the field and as far away as possible, into the bushes, into tall nettles, to the far side of the embankment and into the stream, so that most of the game is taken up searching for the ball, to make time pass as quickly as possible, leaving their opponent as little chance as possible of scoring the necessary goals and penalties. Playing against us is agony because we are capable of expending all our energy on thwarting the game, on denying our involvement in history, and inventing very unlikely – indeed irrational – explanations of the past.

We don't stand a chance of winning this game, so full of shame and unhappiness, in which we disregard the laws and general rules. Our opponents are historical facts and we cannot succeed in justifying our actions by philosophical, logical, or moral means. That is why we choose the tactic of kicking the ball out of the field and of changing the subject, throwing our opponent off balance, cheating, denying, ignoring, making things up. And meanwhile our game is unwatchable. Our opponent is tough, we are bound to lose and admit our responsibility. But we stick to this desperate tactic and hope that our opponent, that is, the world around us, will tire of this farce, that it will stop paying attention to us, and finally leave us in peace.

If asked why, if we tried to get straight to the point without any digressions, we would make it too easy for our opponent to score one goal after another. If we answered this question, we would expose ourselves – to ourselves. We might understand our own image, and that is something our fear won't let us do. We wouldn't be able to look at ourselves. And that is also the answer to your question of why there is no mirror in our shithouse. •|