

Dušan Šarotar

*Star Chart*

An excerpt from the novel

He headed to Zagreb unannounced, on a business trip. Usually he announced his longer journeys a week ahead of time, so we could prepare for them in peace and quiet at home. Roža would take over running the store, especially the retail part of it. While Franc was away, we did not dispatch ironware and building material by rail. Before he left, I tried to take care of the necessities in the house, and we especially worked the earth together, and I asked for some outside help so that we wouldn't lag behind.

The night before he'd leave, I would step up on the footstool and pull down the appropriate suitcase from on top of the cupboard, the smaller canvas one if he planned to stay away from home for just a few nights, or the bigger, leather one that was suitable for longer trips; only rarely did he use the big, heavy wooden suitcase, which was kept under the bed. I remember getting it ready for him only a few times. That suitcase was American-made, of sturdy wood, with metal corners, the outside was covered in leather and canvas, the inside a fine pattern in dark red fabric. He'd bought it from some emigrant with whom he had returned from America and who had sold it immediately on arriving at the station in Murska Sobota, needing money to buy himself a ticket for the remainder of his voyage. He ate a meal in the restaurant, and afterward he still a little left over. He probably had no desire of ever crossing the Atlantic again. The suitcase looked brand new, since it had only ever been on one ship. I don't know where Franc met this stranger, there were plenty of them before the war. They returned from the Promised Land, for the most part broken, sickly and disappointed, and hardly any had managed to bring back a few dollars so they could pay for a crooked roof to cover their heads; they took up trades, working as blacksmiths, fellers of trees, doing saw-work, or butchering or sewing, jobs they'd learned to do in America, and the first thing some of them did was to order a new stone cross from the stonemason for their deceased relatives, and for themselves as well, on the better, brighter part of the cemetery, on the river bank, under the linden tree or by the chapel. What really remained for them, as the only thing of value and the only reminder, were usually big suitcases pasted with the advertisements and labels of the shipping companies that they'd travelled with. For a long time they saved and stowed away linen, sheets and the fashionable, wide-lapelled double breasted suits, that had returned with them, and we too stuffed clean items into that massive suitcase. Every time Roža crouched under the bed and lugged the suitcase by its smooth wooden handle out over the shiny floor and into the light to fill it with freshly washed undergarments, a white tablecloth for Sunday lunch, or take her silk blouse out of it, no doubt remembering their wedding in Murska Sobota, since Franc had bought the blouse not long after that, maybe it will be good for a honeymoon trip, he said, we'll go when you've picked the right route. Roža sighed and just remarked, kneeling before the open suitcase, how heavy it was, maybe she regretted never having travelled anywhere with her husband. It's true they had to put off the first journey because she was pregnant, and later they'd put it off for various other reasons, mostly due to Roža, I think. Well, the first time I packed the suitcase was when Franc went on a long trip somewhere to Germany. At that time I examined it thoroughly, since it truly was beautiful and special, and you couldn't see anything like it at our little station in Šalovci, perhaps only in a catalogue

from a boutique in Murska Sobota that I'd never been to. And then perhaps I packed it again when he travelled by boat over some sea, let me think, said Žalna.

The last time Roža was obliged to pack their American suitcase completely on her own was when she and the child were taken away forever.

He chose the leather one, so I knew immediately that he would be away for more than just a few days. I wiped it down and aired it and I folded the shirts and the underwear that he took from home and laid them on the bed. He prepared his luggage before he went to sleep, but sometimes he also prepared it just before departing, always looking through his business books right up to the last minute, writing down all the things Roža and I had to either do or only keep a vigilant eye on. He wrote letters and short messages, which Roža carried the next day to the post office and sent off registered, or ordered a telegram. He'd send his business card to the people he planned on meeting, tradesmen, bank, tax office or customs office clerks, asking for an appointment or kindly announcing that they might expect him to call at some point in the future. He'd write the date in tiny and beautifully legible handwriting on the back of his card, wishing all the best to the esteemed addressee and his respected family, concluding with kind regards as well as the place and signature. He wrote with different instruments, using a plain pencil for reminders on small pieces of paper that lay all over the place, in drawers, on the window sill, under the kitchen table, on the veranda, in the store, where the wind blew them to the train station, and I also found them in the bedroom. He marked the goods with a carpenter's pencil, scribbling directly on the workbench, drawing and marking the timber, boards and beams he sent off by rail. For both private and business correspondence he exclusively used a fountain pen with a golden feather and black ink. He was saving his stationary and his smoking kit in the big lower drawer of the writing desk standing under the window in the hall. Before leaving the house for work, errands or travel, he'd put on his jacket and fill the pockets, pencils going into the upper outside pocket, his pipe, tobacco and cigarettes into the left pocket, while a smaller note book with orders, names and the duties for the day went into the right one. He stuffed his big black wallet where he always kept a few smaller bank notes and change into the back right pocket of his trousers, so he'd always have it within reach.

The wallet opened like an accordion, and as he opened and closed it in the light its precious treasures shone in his eyes. In stitched compartments, big ones, small ones, visible and hidden ones, he would always meticulously collect and eagerly save the precious and less valuable memories, messy and buried among the creased papers he always carried with him, since he was never one to throw anything out. He filled the compartments with tiny traces of life, accumulated old receipts, forgotten names and addresses, newspaper cuttings, advertisements, business cards, shopping lists, useless bank notes and foreign coins, train and tram tickets, instruction manuals, telegrams, his son's drawings, dried flowers and little stones he picked up along the way. The wallet was old and battered, the leather growing softer and thinner, smooth, its colour fading around the edges, the seams were coming apart, yet he did not want to separate himself from it. Several times he tried to sew it with strong thread and stitch up the inside compartments that were falling apart because he kept, collected and saved too many things.

At times, usually before a longer trip, he would remove the tablecloth from the kitchen table and gently arrange the contents of his wallet on the table. We would all be amazed at how much, how many things, he extracted from it, as though his wallet was a magician's hat. Evgen was excited, Roža would quietly roll her eyes in secret, I didn't meddle, in the end, I took the dregs off the table. I would crumple up and throw into the wood stove whatever he finally decided to get rid of, still in doubt and with a trembling hand. He'd wipe the empty wallet, blow dust and the remains of dry tobacco out of it, since in his little compartment he also saved a pinch of tobacco or half a cigarette for an emergency, and then he would meticulously fold and arrange the tiny scraps back into it. Into the middle compartment he pressed identity documents, business cards from customers, suppliers, commercial and saving banks. Again and again he showed his family the little coloured business cards from the hotels he'd slept in, telling them about rooms above busy and loud streets, in which he had trouble falling asleep, about guesthouses by lakes and rivers, where he ate tasty fish, about dingy and small rooms at the train stations where he had to take refuge when travelling and making multiple connections. Often, due to a delay or breakdown on the train he had a special reservation for, he'd arrive at the station too late and have to wait for the next train going in his direction, which meant that he had to wait until the early morning or even the afternoon of the next day. He described his journeys with particular vividness, I remember that Roža and I were overtaken by fear, by horror, when he described the unpleasantness and perils of the road, as if trying to warn us of pickpockets, homeless people, beggars, stowaways as well as of seemingly cultured and tidy ladies and gentlemen, whose speech and comportment, when you glimpsed them at the station, in the waiting room, in a compartment or the restaurant car, gave the impression of trustworthiness, but who in the next moment, when you were forced against your will to share a bench with them during the ride, or even a tight sleeping cabin, revealed their true treacherous character. Roža was bewildered and appalled by these grim tales, at the same time something bloomed inside of her, she was feverish but unusually cheerful and excited, her eyes beaming, as if completely immersed in the story. I know, Žalna said, Franc was surely exaggerating in describing his adventures. He embellished his tales so they were just what Roža and Evgen wanted to hear, he spoke in line with what it was they wanted to see. Often I sensed, when later reflecting in the dark on what he said, that he was always trying to hide something. He wanted to protect his wife and child from all that was ordinary, monotonous and boring, wanted to save them from the feeling of loneliness, pain, of being lost, and mainly from the incomprehensible sadness that was his only faithful companion on his journeys. In his son's presence he always slightly exaggerated, wrapped the truth in beautiful words, beautified the atmosphere. His journeys were lit by the sun, he sat by the window watching the rain quietly and slowly falling on a foreign landscape. There was opening up, rising, and sinking into darkness, snow whitened the lit streets and squares, people were friendly, he spoke to them in many different languages, sometimes he called on the phone from the road. After a few days we were secretly awaiting his unannounced call, yet we did not talk about it, not wanting to unsettle one another. Roža was always fearful of bad news, at night she wandered ghostlike around the house, in deep darkness she was looking towards the station as though waiting for a special and unannounced train from far away, Father might come back earlier this time, she

often whispered to me, Žalna said, and the child was curious and then annoying as he too missed Father. The child constantly remembered him, repeated his stories and was very worried about whether he would be able to do everything he promised father when they took their farewell, draw a train, read a book, practise his handwriting, learn some proverbs, revise German and Hungarian grammar, practise the violin, feed the rabbits and fall asleep in the evening. I tried to occupy him so as not to speak confusingly all the time and to calm him down for a moment, to distract him with little chores, sorting beans, cracking walnuts, cleaning the pigeon house, feeding chickens, reading aloud to me from a Slovene youth magazine. With his mother he sang, practised the violin and listened to the radio, but in reality we were all waiting for the call from Danica.

In the afternoon, when we closed the store Evgen, and Roža would stay home, since they never left the courtyard if it was not necessary. Sometimes Evgen would play with Helena in front of the post office.

The first place Franc sought out in any foreign place, or so we at home imagined, was the post office, and especially Roža and I said this in the presence of the child, in order to more readily refresh the memory of his beloved father, who had to make a real effort to call home from another town, or so we told Evgen, even as we were inventing the story at the same time. We'd say that father announced to the official clerk a trunk call for the Šalovci post office, the operator would switch the line and waited for the clerk in our post office to respond and to accept the call.

The large telephone hangs from the wall by the wooden counter, with its heavy black receiver, bells and the round rotary dial with numbers from 0 to 9, a clock hanging above it, opposite the entrance, in the middle of the freshly painted white wall hangs a picture in a black frame, a portrait of young King Peter II. It's quiet in the office, there's a scent of moisture and lime, the afternoon sun beats against the grey façade, the beaming light penetrates into the room through the high window, the air is thick, the humidity pressing, the double entry doors are wide open, but the atmosphere is restful, nothing moves, neither inside nor out. Around two in the afternoon, as the telephonist and manager of the Šalovci post office, Danica Singer, immediately and dutifully notes in her book of calls received, the phone rings shrilly again, the third time today, and its tiny little hammer with a spring constantly tolls the two zinc-covered bells. The day is unusually heavy and hot, even though it's barely June, thinks Danica, that's why my head hurts. She can feel her tiny fingers swelling as she grasps a fountain pen, slowly scraping it against the paper, writing addresses and counting parcels, accepting packages and arranging documents, counting and recounting money and carrying letters and small envelopes to the train station, giving the big canvas bag to the station manager, who safely locks it up in his office. Later the mail is taken by the first train to Murska Sobota, and there at the station the courier retrieves the items and takes them to the main post office, where they are sorted and dispatched, so the packages and letters travel quickly and safely, especially the international and above all the overseas post, mostly to and from France and America. The post comes from everywhere and travels everywhere our people, primarily emigrants and seasonal workers, live. Much official post comes from Maribor, also from Zagreb, but mostly from Belgrade, where all decisions about politics, taxes, and recruiting are made.

Danica Singer is energetic and nimble on the job, and she has been sitting here since the office's grand opening in 1934, an event that was immortalized by the local photographer Schönauer. It was just a few days before the New Year, when she was just getting used to this important and demanding job, and she accepted a few official telephone calls from Murska Sobota, felicitations on the opening of the office and the first telephone congratulations in her life, for the new year of 1935, which is of course something she'll never forget. She has saved the photograph and the official greeting card in an envelope in a drawer under the counter.

But today her eyes are misted, she is shivering, a cold sweat runs over her, and her grey dress with the large starched collar is sweat stained. She can hardly hold herself upright, it seems to her as if her weak body is laden down by an unknown weight, as if she were lying in a heavy winter coat in a narrow bathtub filled up to her neck with hot water. She was breathing in slow and shallow breaths, and although it suffocates her, she should have gotten up and taken a few deep breaths to fill her lungs, but she couldn't move. It seems to her that she could at least get to her feet, she wasn't entirely without strength, but she lacked the will, it vaporized, withered like a rose, even if the stem is hard and it also had a thorn, if somebody were to look at her or address her. It would be best just to close the office ahead of time, shut the windows and rest there in the dark and by herself, she could slip out the back door, sit on the grass in the shade, but her thoughts are running ever more slowly, she can't think clearly, she is stuck in her routine work, even though she is behind in her counting and letter stamping. She knows that she should soon stop working and clear her desk, but she still has a great pile of envelopes in front of her, untied packages, and especially she still has to close the cash register, which worries her most of all because she never likes to leave uncounted money in the till.

He put on a thin light suit, a short coat and a grey hat, everything he needed for business meetings, he carried a small leather suitcase, documents, catalogues, bank books and securities. Then Franc sat alone for a long time, off by himself under the old bushy plane trees. The light was soft, as if the city air, saturated with traffic and human hustle and bustle, was darkened by the grey-green shade that rose above the slowly flowing Sava and hovering over Zagreb. There was the quiet fading of an era, and he was suddenly struck by a thought, he didn't know whether he'd just read it somewhere, maybe heard it, or overheard a word that slipped out during a discreet conversation at a neighbouring table, he had the feeling that the sun was suddenly shining through the branches and warming him. He put down his coat, even though he often felt cold even on summer evenings when he and his wife would sit on the veranda or in the garden he'd have a woollen sweater on, and now that he had warmed up a bit and fortified himself with a healthy mug, he felt relaxed. The tension and haste, which he was of course used to, since it was always present in business, it only escalated with important and long-term decisions. He knew where the limit was, what was financially sustainable, most importantly, what sort of move was risky, and he was especially careful when dealing with securities, non-cash remittances and bills of exchange, though he could not completely avoid such things. When he needed money for an investment, for example, when purchasing a large quantity of construction material or hardware, he would have to pay for goods himself and store them, only later handing over the freight car or even more material to the final buyer, payment would then be delayed, and often he himself would play the role of intermediary for imports from nearby countries,

Czech lands, Hungary, Austria, or exporting goods, but in such instances it was best to insure the business. He never took too many risks or endangered his or the family's property. He always set something aside, made prudent deals and wisely invested in the land, in the forests he managed, and precious metals, for his gold reserve. He'd seen with his own eyes that the world was becoming increasingly uncertain, which was evident in the increasingly aggressive and uncompromising struggles in the market, people who had once been savvy traders and businessmen had turned savage, there was no value to anything anymore, the price was all that mattered. He encountered more and more such people, who would sell their very soul, if he was willing to offer them a gold coin for it.

Sell your soul, and you can never buy it back. It is completely exhausted, it sullies itself and is trodden down like last year's snow.

He thought, it's not like I'm in any hurry, he felt that he'd been successful. He was overwhelmed by a pleasant and unfamiliar feeling, as if he were merging with the pleasant atmosphere that pervaded the city park, and mostly it was as if he were an active part of something greater, even if only insignificant and fleeting, yet, he breathed in harmony with something great and lasting that infinitely transcended him. He felt the warm, pleasant June air, he perceived an at first inconspicuous harmony, which revealed itself to him in a sudden flash, as a release of tension in the electrified clouds, and he knew that there was only infinite blueness above him. Everything was budding, growing and changing, and he was partaking of this eternal incomprehensible, mysterious wave, and he felt, as he would later remember, that he was experiencing something beautiful, although it was not merely pleasing, since there was no comfort in this experience; on the contrary, it was close to the dizziness that characterizes any voyage or majestic view from a height. He observes and marvels at the big houses with their tall windows and beautiful, their ornate facades, semi-circular balconies with wrought iron railings, and their frescoes with angels and fauns, everywhere motifs of abundance and restrained pleasure, grapes, sunflowers, exotic fruit trees, lion heads, titanic bodies and female figures wrapped in veils, carved from white stone, but above all the murmur of deep wells and birds high in the air, with only ethereal air between them, a feeling of freedom, of complete freedom, and this fills him with hope that he has beautiful days ahead, that the journey will be pleasant, that he will be able to see some more sights, the synagogue and the zoo, that he will take the funicular and enjoy the view of the streets, the squares, the parks and the bell towers. He'll stroll through the town, no umbrella, and changing trains and waiting at stations will be more pleasant, he had been looking forward to sitting, aimlessly perambulating and wandering near train stations, reading newspapers, having lunch, treating himself to a mug of beer in the restaurant's garden. He was full of plans and ideas, but without concrete goals and intended effects, only ideas, nameless places and indefinite time, in which only memories are possible, images that assert themselves into consciousness, coming and going like birds or trains, or perhaps he dreamed, planned a great journey, only to put it off the next moment, change it, and forget it without regret. He no longer thought of the heavy luggage he had always travelled with, he was relieved of thoughts of fear of loss or theft, the arduous waiting and searching for connections to continue his travels, the dirt, the noise and the unkindness of remote inns and lodgings, the anxious wanderings through foreign cities, the search for post offices that had a telephone connection, scribbling and fabricating experiences in letters and sending deceptive accounts on pretty postcards, and most of all, constant worries and disappointments in doing business. Suddenly there were no more unpleasant meetings,

crafty traders, no more counting profits and loss prevention, for now he is alone with his thoughts, in the middle of a living world that can't possess him, now they can't take anything away from him, now he doesn't owe anyone anything anymore. He is surrounded only by his loved ones, he talks to friendly hoteliers, travels with polite companions, in short, business is done, he is looking forward to the journey home, and the time he has left is for the first time really his own.

He listens to the slow sliding of the tram, the driver has just rung the bell and the tram cars are about to rumble forth, the windows in the carriages are down, the children are in shorts, the ladies in lovely coats, the men with hats and bags, their large baskets and bags full of vegetables, they have come from Dolac Market, he thinks, on the other side a line of cars, black, grey, and snow-white, circling around the park, as if aimless.

Franc reads a newspaper, turns over the large leaves, stops for a moment to ponder a photograph, in the foreground is a bored man in a long leather coat, he notices large, black and cold eyes and a tiny moustache on a bony face, covered with a large officer's hat, gloves clenched between fists, and he immediately recognizes the elegant and mighty silhouette of the tower in the background, which marks the scene of a large and beautiful city. We must also travel to Paris, he thought, before again being disturbed by birdsong and the hustle and bustle of the road, and now no longer waiting on the bench in front of the padded door. The meeting in a spacious and bright office overlooking the city park is just another anxious memory. They sat him down at a long, polished table that reflected the heavy crystal chandelier in its gleaming surface, a mighty wall clock in the background with its endlessly tic-tocking gold pendulum. A bluish cloud floated slowly through the air, probably someone had just been here a little while ago, they were smoking during the meeting, the tobacco smells of ripe figs and old cognac, he thinks, I heard nothing; as I sat in front of the door, everything in the office and in the long and winding hallways, in fact everywhere, was immersed in a respectful, intense silence, rare and muffled words that escaped someone melted into the noise of a large fountain in the inner courtyard.

Everything was agreed upon and arranged at the specified time, just as he had imagined it. He was briefly left alone in the office to look around in peace and prepare for the conversation, and he walked over to the high window, the heavy burgundy curtains were drawn apart, the curtains, of a type he had only ever seen in the theatre, fell from the ceiling to the polished parquet, and there were light curtains of thick white weave fastened at the sides with a ribbon, and the light enveloped his face and shoulders. Clutching his hat in his hand, he left the bag of documents on the table. He leant forward slightly and touched the pane with his forehead. On the other side of the paved road in the shade of plane trees he sees white tables and chairs, a waiter in a black suit carries a silver tray, now, sitting at the table he has chosen, he gazes blissfully in the direction of the window, where he stood alone less than an hour ago. He seems to be standing there still, he just saw a table in the park across the street, now he knows as he remembers what will happen to the man, but the one standing upstairs in front of the window doesn't know it yet. The two men look exactly alike, the same, but one is real, the other is a memory. Did that clerk who entered the office through the smaller door on the other side, gave a kindly greeting, and placed a folder on the table with papers that just needed signing, know who was who? Did he ask

himself, even doubting which signatory was real and which was fictional, created from memory and imagination?