



**Michael Krüger**

**What Happened in the Two Weeks**

**After Returning from Paris**

A Story

(Original German title: Was in den zwei Wochen  
nach der Rückkehr aus Paris geschah. Eine Erzählung)

219 pages, Clothbound

Publication date: 07 March 2022

© Suhrkamp Verlag Berlin 2022

Sample translation by Karen Leeder

pp. 7 — 19

## 1

The departure was delayed as usual. Anyone who was stupid or even simply inept enough to want to fly from Paris to Munich on a Friday evening in May had to be prepared to waste precious time. Why precious? What was two hours in the final reckoning? As I stood on the jolting, swaying traveller allowing myself to be transported to the departure hall, I made a quick mental calculation of the time in my life I had spent waiting at airports and came up with around four months. Four months in a non-place that you generally go to so as to be able to leave as fast as possible and in a halfway healthy condition. Four months: I found that acceptable for more than fifty years of flying. Just the last section of walkway through the windowless limbo, then I could rest from the exertions of arrival. Since I am one of those who prefer to observe rather than talk, I like to travel and fly alone so I can watch others talk. And Friday evenings, especially, were ideal for this kind of human observation. My cousin's secretary had driven me to the airport, having barely left my side during the days before. His name was Raul, and he was Cuban, but he had nothing to do with Fidel's brother, as my cousin had suggested. He had written a doctoral thesis on Amédée Ozenfant and the birth of a new spirit and was now allegedly working on a large monograph on the Cuban Chinese painter Wifredo Lam, the first of its kind, claimed my cousin. She had bought some of Lam's drawings from Raul, which he had allegedly received as a present from an uncle, to whom they in turn,

it was said, been gifted in the seventies by the cultural attaché of the Cuban Embassy in Paris, the writer Alejo Carpentier. Gifted? Yes, gifted. I didn't like Raul. He spoke as if he were a great connoisseur of the entire history of art, knew everything and everyone, dished out marks that even I as a layman would not have dared do, and became – which was what upset me most – loved by everyone like a black lap dog. He talked too much. But I kept my views on the brilliant young man to myself, because any hint of suspicion, no matter how justified, was declared to be more or less open racism by my cousin. When I once dared to ask whether the Lam drawings, hanging on her walls, and indeed on the walls of many diplomatic residences in Paris, were really by Lam, I was accused of banality with such fierce contempt that from then on I silently followed the adulation of Lam's biographers, even when more and more drawings appeared on the market, and with them the certainty that in some back room there sat a lonely copyist, producing the drawings on old paper to order. You can see in the dark that these are real Lams! it was always said. But what does a real Lam look like? The man was half-Chinese and half-Congolese; he believed in Orishas but also claimed to be a good Catholic. And his drawings looked as if they had begun in the Catholic faith and ended in syncretism. Neither fish nor fowl. When I once asked Raul whether I might read his doctoral thesis on Ozenfant, my request was rejected out of hand, because he had not yet "defended" it, whatever that might mean. So, with a certain degree of resentment, I set to reading Ozenfant himself, to wit his crazed account of the 20th century, which was full of bizarre notions. A strange hodgepodge of weird ideas, in which images of naked natives were repeatedly introduced without any kind of commentary, as if to prove something. But what? When I asked Raul about it, he referred me to the last image in Ozenfant's *Life and Design*, which showed a cigar saleswoman in Cuba, supposedly Raul's great aunt. Voilà, he said, as if that was the last word on the matter. Even in the car on the way to the airport, he had again been raving about Wifredo Lam, about his studios in Havana, Paris, Milan, New York and Martinique, all of which he had visited and "reconstructed", whatever that meant; about his extraordinary finds at the homes of friends and relatives of Lam; and, since I was German, I was to ask in a gallery in Hanover whether there was still an exchange of letters with Lam on the occasion of his exhibition in the Kestner Society, which I would doubtless have seen. Frankly, the name Wifredo Lam had been completely unknown to me before the encounter with Raul, and my aversion to Raul had now reached such a pitch that I had decided inwardly to dislike all those painters – indeed all artists – that had caught his eye, even if it caused me to sink deeper and deeper in my cousin's estimation. Ozenfant writes somewhere that there are thirty thousand painters in Paris alone. That really is excessive. If you reckon a thousand artists for every genius, that comes out as

thirty, and that is more than enough to define an entire epoch. There is no image that could define an epoch. Maybe a child's drawing. But I kept my mouth shut. Wifredo could go jump in a lake, I thought to myself, and had to laugh out loud at this image. Anyone who can afford to fly to Munich at the weekend is usually not one of those who only eat bread and water, unless for dietary reasons. In truth, many of the people who had stepped out of the taxis in front of the terminal had looked as if they had perhaps done without their customary lavish meals for several days, crème fraîche with their apple tart and sugar in their coffee. Hollow-eyed and with sunken faces, they dragged their suitcases behind them, with the cabin luggage and clothes bags perched on top. They pulled these as if they represented a wretched fate that a strange force had imposed on them. Unfortunate, joyless creatures; and with some pleasure I could imagine what unfortunate, joyless creatures would be waiting beyond the barrier in Milan, Copenhagen, or Munich to embrace these wealthy wrecks. They looked like slaves, slaves in chains who had been allowed, just for that one evening, to file past the glittering stalls, where everything was on display, all their heart could desire: shoes, suits, chocolates, perfumes and, above all, those new-fangled watches with their inner workings on show that inexorably indicated how time was passing and what hour had tolled. But they were not allowed to buy anything. Some of these wretched creatures went so far as to have one of the chronometers from the locked cabinets shown to them and fastened on their wrists, only to give them back after long deliberations and with a bitter smile. Others stopped at one of the perfume stalls and had themselves sprayed head to foot for free with the latest creation symbolizing youth and creativity only to then continue on their way, grey and uninspired, but swathed in a cloud of fragrance, to the pullover-paradise. They looked miserable, as if they had trodden a long path, beset by privations, as if they had crossed a desert only to end up in a city destroyed by enemy fire. And presumably they thought much the same about me: another poor devil with an empty face, who wants nothing more from the future, who has no more words to keep stupor at arm's length. But who keeps on slogging away to collect a few more pieces of gold for the inheritance... Who persists in his misfortune... After only five minutes, I had forgotten what happy people look like.

I could be glad simply to have survived the swaying passage on the moving walkways safely. I had got caught up in a group of Africans dressed in their white robes that looked like they had just been pulled off the clothesline. They stood in front of me and behind me, discussing a problem so loudly in their national language and with such extravagant gestures that I had to assume I was witnessing a discussion about the advantages and disadvantages of a coup d'état.

They could be sure that no one understood them. Amidst the excited chatter, the man standing behind me smashed his briefcase against my hips repeatedly and painfully, and since the arguments of his colleague in front of me obviously displeased him, he suddenly shoved me to one side, even though we were only a few meters away from the life-saving platform and rushed past me, his face distorted with anger, which caused the six or seven other members of his tour group to push right up beside me, as if they did not want to miss a single word of the quarrel. It was probably about the vision of a new world order. Some of the men had gone without socks, their feet were stuck embroidered sandals, others wore Central European footwear that was head and shoulders better quality than mine. What I wore had been called loafers in my youth. Somehow, I never grew out of my loafers. In any case, you can't make a state with these shoes, I thought to myself, nor overthrow one. Even the Africans would not be able to reinvent the state, because whenever something has become a state, the cause is lost. What cause? That of a just state. How alone you feel when you don't understand anything. No, of course I wasn't afraid on the walkway, why would I be? But I felt my heart start beating faster. You were never completely sure who you were; but in a society of strangers, every fixed outline went out of the window. You can see that you don't belong. They saw I didn't belong. If you were to have taken a picture of me crushed between the Africans in their white robes, you might have a snapped photo of the year. They were probably friendly art historians from the Côte d'Ivoire or Nigeria, roaming through Europe examining and collecting the artifacts that had been stolen from their people during the colonial times. They probably wouldn't even recognize themselves, I thought, as I had never been able to recognize myself when I walked through our museums. That is meant to be our grandparents, I hear them shout in their air-conditioned cultural centres, that's impossible! *The Savage Hits Back*, this book title suddenly flashed in my brain, where it had slumbered undisturbed for forty years, I even saw the cover before me, on which the small wooden figure of a fat Queen Victoria was depicted. The Germans had repressed their colonial sins well. Aside from a few Hereros, I had often heard tell, we had no blacks on our colonial conscience. It was impossible to establish exactly how many believed it. The incidents of erasure were not recorded accurately by any means. In any case, throughout my life, our "African adventure" had never been mentioned in a conversation about national crimes. In France or Belgium, on the other hand, it was immediately discussed. Even in Holland, Suriname was omnipresent. Had Helmut Kohl ever been in Africa? The Africans were able to come to him and get their development aid, but he, the black giant, had never been seen in the Congo or Uganda. Our sin was fascism, we had quite enough to be getting on with, that would be enough for several more generations. But a few years before we had suddenly become

colonials, which is why all the labels in the ethnological museums had to be adjusted. How quickly it had all happened. In my youth, the memory machine took decades before it could “run like clockwork”; now it happened in the twinkling of an eye. Probably Raul had a hand in all this too. Arriving at the top, in front of the terminal, on solid ground once more, the discussants again formed a harmonious group, engaged in looking for their departure gate, there was no quarrel to speak of. In their white robes and colourful caps, they looked infinitely more noble and elegant than the Central Europeans scurrying around them in their ridiculous suits, coats folded over their arm, and I too suddenly felt strange and superfluous, at least my still halfway good mood threatened to turn. I was glad when an Orthodox Jew with a huge briefcase walked in front of me, on the way to my gate: now nothing could happen. The dark suit and waistcoat suited him; his hat was inoffensive too. The last time I had sported a hat, my colleagues had almost laughed themselves stupid. Maybe he will be sitting next to me on the plane, I thought, then we can talk about the arrival of the Messiah, who despite having missed several appointments, to be sure, could be expected soon. Riding on a donkey. Barely had I sat down on one of the repellent plastic chairs that had seen better days and stretched out my legs, than I noticed an older man who, with bags on his right arm and a trolley suitcase in his left, had obviously lost his bearings. He took three steps, paused, went back again, scrabbled the ticket out of his coat pocket, held it in front of his obviously short-sighted eyes and put it back again. My eyes were drawn to him because he was the only one who didn’t look like the others. Not a tourist, not a business traveller, not a politician or civil servant. And certainly not the Messiah. Although – no one knew what he looked like. He probably looked like me and you. Maybe it was Death? That Death would look different from all the pictures of him I had ever seen, was clear to me. But if it was Death, what did he have in his suitcase? And why is Death carrying old plastic bags? Death needs nothing but a clear head and good eyes so he doesn’t stumble. Hopefully he will keep his distance, I thought to myself, such figures are easier to bear at a distance, and I looked ostentatiously in the other direction to escape his eyes that were searching for a victim. In vain. I sensed that he had caught the scent, and apparently he wasn’t interested in one of the ladies traveling alone, all of whom looked like they earned their living in the employ of fashion journals; women with strangely eccentric glasses and chunky shoes, their skin caked with make-up, lips puffed up and painted red and already smudged, with bags in shapes and colors that you would not give away even in a dream, and hairstyles that were inclined to discourage closer contact with their wearers. Why didn’t anyone stand up and shout? Why did they endure this expensive ugliness? The biological platitude that everyone is somehow different and wants to show it surely only applied to naked people if it was true at

all. The older man – who probably wasn't much older than me but looked like an older man – shuffled past the ladies done up to the nines and headed purposefully towards me, so I quickly dropped my battered travel bag on the seat to my left, and my coat on the free seat to my right to indicate unmistakably that he should continue on his way. All occupied, find another seat. How do you know instinctively who you don't want to sit next to? Older men, who look old but have maintained their vitality intact despite all the quirkiness, scare me, while I enjoy encountering old men who are truly old, with their whole lives behind them, but who live with irony and serenity, resigned and yet not acquiescent. In Germany, this type had become extinct a long time before, on account of the war. There were too few clear consciences, you could tell that simply by looking at them. Anyone who has something to hide and is forced to deal with questions of guilt has no room for irony and serenity. Such people had to pay too much attention to how they looked, and this had the effect of lending their faces this mask-like coldness, these dutiful expressions, and this stiff posturing. This false dignity, which was still respected in certain circles despite the abolition of the requirement to wear a tie, even if everyone saw through it. You only have to look at photographs of political events from the last century, to know who to beware of. You were not supposed to see what these men were thinking, but you saw everything at first glance, a second glance was not necessary. Or rarely. I had known faces like these for as long as I could remember, in my family, at work, especially at cultural events. They looked like lettuce leaves that had been in the fridge for too long. I see my uncles in front of me, my teachers, my work colleagues, their diligent willingness to consider all and every piece of crap, to evaluate it morally, to condemn the mistakes of others, but to gloss over their own. This lack of sincerity, greatness of spirit and generosity were immediately visible coming back home even home after just one weekend abroad. The resources of cheerful irony had become scarce, or completely exhausted. While I desperately did not want to think about the old man who, as I could see out of the corner of my eye, and despite his jerky perambulations was steadily approaching to my seat, I had to admit that in recent years I had met some people who did not fully conform to this pattern. They did not try and make people believe that it was altruism and solidarity that made them want to save the world, to show humanity a way out of misery, who did not constantly attempt to push through their own ridiculous beliefs with demagogic arrogance. But these were few and far between. And sadly, they were rare in my environs. In my youth, I had collected photographs of people who seemed exemplary to me. Picasso in a striped sweater, the old Matisse, Braque, Giacometti, of course, also Hermann Hesse, Franz Kafka, and Robert Walser. They hung on the wall in my room, and as I walked past them, I used to talk to them. If one proceeded from the fundamental incomprehensibility

of the world, from its inscrutableness even at the level of the smallest detail, then inevitably all those who at school and university were educated in the certainty of being able to draw at least a thread of truth from the tangle of probability – if they only they applied themselves and with a bit of luck and reason – would act as if it were possible at some point to decipher everything. So that their ignorance in all other things – except that thread – is not noticed, almost everyone pretends to have seen through it all, and speaks with an unapologetic matter-of-factness and without restraint about economy and culture, politics, and social issues. And about medicine. Since the world has turned into a hospital, everyone wants to be a doctor. In my family, there was a lot of talk about suffering and pain, but never about medicine. That's what doctors were there for, they knew what they were talking about, after all. But one could talk about pain and suffering in and of themselves until the cows came home. And recently, AI was on a roll, the great solution for the second half of the 21st century. Many are happy to think that we will soon be ruled by a robot that you must bathe in oil at night. But they know nothing. We know nothing. The more we learn, this is the beautiful and at the same time humiliating experience, the less we know. We don't even know why we know this, but we do know. That is why most of us – among the better circles who fly from Paris to Munich on Friday – have acquired this sheep face, this beautiful sheep mask, which is widespread throughout Europe. Very few indeed have kept their natural face. Strange what comes to mind when you're waiting for a plane. As soon as I'm home again, and on my own, I think of something else. If I think at all. Sometimes I think I've forgotten how to think. One is so busy remembering credit card, health insurance and pension numbers that one does not have time to think about epochal changes. You simply accept them like the weather. Perhaps the last question humanity will ask itself before its demise will be to wonder about tomorrow's weather.