

Translation of the article in "Stern", 9th of September 1982

Being Idiot, before being official

Freedom still exists. You only have to pay the price. Heinz Braun, literally cycling every day between Munich and "Starnberger See", hesitated almost 10 years to pay this price. After 3 decades working at the German Federal Post Office the postman Heinz Braun, married and father of a 14-years old son, resolved upon saying goodbye to his job and fulfilled his childhood dream becoming an artist.

The 44-years old looks in the mirror and sight his, after had been boozing all night, confounded face. He can't handle schnapps. He loves schnapps. He drank a lot schnapps the other night. A wet towel wrapped around his head he walks into the living room to seat himself on the yellow sofa. The sleeping cat ducked elegant and totally unperturbed laid down again. Heinz Braun just stares on the opposing wall. He punches his arm in the air ant tries to mussitate something. He falls asleep. I'm sitting in one of the armchairs and declared that day as lost. Due to too much alcohol my body and circular flow are shaking, but I can't sleep. Actually I have to blame the Russian from the adjoining municipality Germering: Wladimir Woinowitsch, author of "The memorable adventures of soldier Iwan Tschonkin", being expatriated based on his books and his connection to dissidents of the Kremlin. He is living in Bavaria almost 2 years. Braun didn't know him. Thats remarkable because he knows everyone and he wanted to get to know him. We both underestimated the russian hospitality.

Anyway, the table was quickly set by his wife. Heinz explained Wladimir his paintings and Wladimir explained him his books. The one was nodding, when the other one stopped talking. I was surprised how well they get along. After a while Herbert Achternbusch, a poet from Buchendorf, joined our little group. He is the one with the following quotation : " You have no chance, but take it." and this book title: " It is easy to touch the ground while walking". It was pretty hard for me to bring Heinz Braun home. I tried to get him into a cab over and over, but four times in a row Heinz persisted on turning and driving back to Wladimir. At one point he just got out of the cab and disappeared loudly scolding about me and all and sundry in the night. This actually could have been a scene from an Achternbusch movie.

When you have seen Achternbusch's movies, for example "The Andechs feeling", "The Atlantic swimmer", "The Beerfight", "The young monk", "The Comache" or "Goodbye Bavaria" you definitively remember the imposing physique of Heinz Braun. He played a variety of characters, he mimed a school inspector, an abbot, a police man, a cardinal, a journalist and a chief physician. Braun was a passionate actor. But when you asked him about his films, he began to niggle: " I'n not just the fellow of Herbert Achternbusch. I'm Heinz." Without compromise Herbert Achternbusch went his own way and is now a well-known writer and director. But what is Heinz doing in the meantime?

Not far from Germering there is a pub, called "Schusterhäusl" by the locals. Behind the pub is a barn. You have to climb a ladder to get to the attic. Braun choose the attic to be his private room. Some call it studio. It is humble. Only the table is set generously – with 24 bottles of beer, but the majority of them is empty. In harsh and cold winter you can't survive in this attic. It is like heating outside.

On cold days Heinz returns to Germering, in his little 3-room-flat. A petit-bourgeois surrounding behind concrete. Over the years he felt trapped there, because he underestimated the power of his misery. After a 2 hour nap Heinz woke up, slipped into his shoes, not without telling the story behind his crippled toes – as a postman in the years after war he worked in shoes, which were to small for him, but nowadays those to small shoes are the reason he is in early retirement and receives 1000 Deutschmark per month - and said to me: "Let's go." Heinz looks over to the cupboard in the living room, filled with glasses, collection cups, muffineers and a picture of his wife. " Look that's Elisabeth." - his wife since 1967 - " We never used those glasses and cups. It's horrible.". In his flat, Heinz feels caught and it's a unbearable situation for him, especially when he

is sober.

Heinz Braun was not just a postman. He takes a deeper look on his way, meeting people on the street, he realizes that the economic miracle in Germany wasn't able to eradicate the misery, the distress, the loathing and the bitterness of the years of famine during war, it only changed it. There was the beauty of a new beginning, but in the end there is always a ugly side too. After leaving the post, Braun had a nervous breakdown. He speaks sluggish, it's hard for him to finalize his sentences. We are sitting in pub near his studio. The landlord of the pub doesn't demand rent, but from time to time he wants a painting from Braun to decorate his pub. Today is health-day for Heinz. He rotational drinks a tea and a beer. Trying to finalize his sentences and put them in the right order, you get this fragmentary vita: He is the son a of a seamstress. His father was a soldier, a bouncer, a motorist, a overseer, painter and retiree. His memory starts at the point, where he lived with his mother. The parents were divorced. The father is 74 years old, his mother 67 years. The father draws pictures of King Louis, monks and hunters. Neither to his father nor to his mother heinz had a close relationship. "The divorce...." he says "is the point where it gets tragic for me...A mother should raise a child the right way, so that it never wants to leave the mother...A mother is the most important woman in a child's life."

The teachers at school told Heinz to become a painter. He became a postman. At the beginning he didn't feel constricted in his job : "There were the ruins in Munich, the devastation surrounded by new trees and flowers, there were the old people in their houses, the good smell and the fresh air." After work Heinz painted. He copied the Old Masters and taught himself the accuracy of drawing. Painting was a sort of therapy for him. When he was 10 years old he stuttered, 10 years later he stutters no more. "Sometimes the solecism returns", he tells me. He turns his aggressions always towards himself, destroys his paintings. "I have a great amount of strength, but I can't let it out. I could never harm a fly." His friends confirm that. Once, during lunchtime in the cafeteria of the post office, Heinz threw one serving after another out of the window, because it was uneatable. "Rice with nothing", he remembers "afterwards it got better". He got a disciplinary enquiry, one out of ten. He got transferred several times, "post-plague", he grunts.

He memorized 6000 town names. A necessity, because the postcodes weren't launched yet. He didn't want to become a bureaucrat. Rather they should think him an idiot. He told his superior about his crazy encounters. He told him about watching a typewriter crossing the street and got hit by a car. He told him about this obese women in a yellow trench coat waiting at the light not moving, although the light was green. It wasn't a women it was a call box.

"Now I have my peace." Braun, the early- retired man says. Yes true, but only when it comes to the post. The more he breaks with the bourgeois lifestyle, the more he is heading into a crisis with his wife. His wife took a job in department store. She thinks about getting divorced. His son played a huge prank so that the dominical mass couldn't take place. With a friend he put a water hose in the church and flood it. The result of this prank is a 10.000 Deutschmark bill. Even the Church is incapable of mercy, when it comes to God.

The people are sneering at Heinz Braun, when he takes his colourful hand painted bike, dressed in even more colourful sweaters. His wife no longer understands him. He isn't able to communicate his thoughts and problems in proper words, he only expresses his feelings through his paintings. His wife is no longer a fan of his paintings. According to her understanding the paintings are violating the common-sense of art by being no longer lifelike and not preserving the superficialities. Braun tries to escape the hopelessness, the uniformity, the old mishmash, the rigid rules of the naturalistic genre with his tromp d'oeil. For the people around him, he appears foolish.

His early artwork follows the New Objectivity, in his oil paintings he illustrates the clash between rural and urban life in a realistic way. But one day he realizes: "Painting exactly is boring. There is nothing going on." He broke away from oil and started using acrylic, pencil and coloured pencil. Spontaneously he created paintings with things that lay around, like lipstick or shoe polish. He

painted in the nature landscapes and worked with mud, oil and dirt. For example, about his painting of a canola field he said: "Yellow, radiant like headlights. How is it possible to draw it? With dirt, trash and paint. Then I bind it with Caparol."

The poet Herbert Achternbusch writes the following about the painter Heinz Braun: "A painter looks longer at a landscape, which pleases him, than at a person, which one a woman certainly likes, because she knows it's not for a long time, whereas the painter grows old with the landscape. He suffers with the landscape, he grows old with it, gets weaker with it. The painter is not keen on showing the wounds of the nature, or even the fools of nature. He looks at the land, because it's almost gone. There was hope in nature, and there was hope in Heinz. The longings are reaching out like branches of a tree. And the art catches them."

Or said otherwise: "This landscape in Bavaria ruined me and I stay here until my revenge can be seen." It happens that locals saw Braun outside in the cold standing in the middle of a field and paint. Last winter he was sitting in the car, only wearing underwear and depicting his trembling reflection in the mirror. He named the painting "The trembling landscape". Braun always paints on site. He sketches the outlaws, who invite him to stay some nights, the weak ones, the hopeless ones and the stubborn ones. How their soul is trembling, the affected person finally realizes, when they get their portrait. Heinz loves the people with the ability to put up a fight, because they commensurate with him. But he also realizes, how they are only part of the common run of mankind, which drifts towards the cliff of being unsatisfied. How to get out is the question now.

Why hiding the real person, the real character in a costume accepted by the community? His bourgeois life broke down, it only was nothing but smoke and mirrors, and what is left over, is the reality, the only loved one: to be born again.

A shattered man, he even seems crazy to his women, considering his concussion she lost her nerves. But the anger he feels considering her concussion helps him to get up again. He is far away from a solid solution. His faith is to play a lone hand. The dissonant game between the person, how loves someone but at the same time observes this love between two persons. The emotion of the moment, the literally jumping in the moment, the joy of suffering and the death acceptance and on the other side the stubborn faith in his own strength.

In the pub Heinz doesn't talk much. When he does his interjections juts like a splinter in a orderly conversation. For example the injection, when they talked about their favourite food: "At school in the year 1945 I draw loafs on a paper, very naturalistic ones. I ate the paper."

Being famous in Bavaria doesn't mean your famous. There was the poetess Emerenz Maier, who moved to America not to die of starvation at home. The author of goliardic poetry Jakob Haringer, died in exile in Switzerland, because his poetry was blasphemy. Oscar Maria Graf, an author, died in exile in America, also Georg Schrimpf, a painter from Munich. All anarchists, all Bavarian. They remained true to themselves.

"Once I had a weird dream. I saw a ghost in front of me. I didn't recognize him, but I knew his paintings. After a while a actual living painter joined us and told me, that the dead painter doesn't profit from all those pictures. It would have been more reasonable to bury them with him. That idea killed me and on the other side I met other painters. Sitting around a table, I knew they were waiting for me...."

Heinz Braun has several exhibitions in Munich. But he hates openings. "It's just as if 5000 tennis balls came through the door at the same time." A gallery owner once said that there is a lack of socio-critical paintings in Brauns oeuvre. A visitor gave Braun an exhibition catalogue from Edward Hopper as an advice to paint like him. Another one gave him a catalogue from Otto Dix with the same advice. Paintings were only sold, when Braun was drunk. He granted allowance for friends of friends. "Dix is too mean and Hopper way to psychological."

Vlado Kristl, a jugoslav art lecturer in Hamburg, director, member of theatre and painter says about Braun: "Heinz walks like a very masculine fee, more like a hippo through a alien world."

Not far from the pub Vlado and Heinz prepared the scaffolds in the middle of a field. Then a farmer came along and stopped by Vlado and his scaffold. "What is that? It's hard to recognize." Vlado nodded and answered: "I paint like I want to paint. That's freedom." "Do you sell some of your paintings?" "A good artist is poor. So am I." The Farmer walked over to Heinz. Heinz brandished with his arms, his brush, his palette. He contemplated over his painting, walked away, came back and drew again. Heinz talked in a very haunting way to the farmer, who got really quiet and walked away shaking his head. Heinz rushed to Vlado, and told him: "I told him, that the people love my paintings and they're buying them even half-finished." "And what did the farmer say?" "He asked if I was rich. I answered that only millionaires are able to buy my paintings. I really ride roughshod over him. Always those idiots, with their opinion that painters are jerks."

After the freedom of Heinz Braun followed a catastrophic time. A few weeks ago he maned about sore throat. In a munich hospital he got the diagnosis of laryngeal cancer. Braun is now painting scenes straight out of limbo, thats how he calls the cancer treatment rooms at the hospital, because they are 2 levels under the ground. He had 30 radiotherapy treatments. Although the hell is walking through, he paints his mother, a sunflower, a duet of orange and lemon and his ascension to heaven. He lost his gustatory sense. He lost 80 pounds. But he fights, painting over painting he sets against the weakness. "I won't give up. There is no way that I loose my freedom."