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On the Trail of the Kidnappers

Ulrich Renz



BO & FRIENDS

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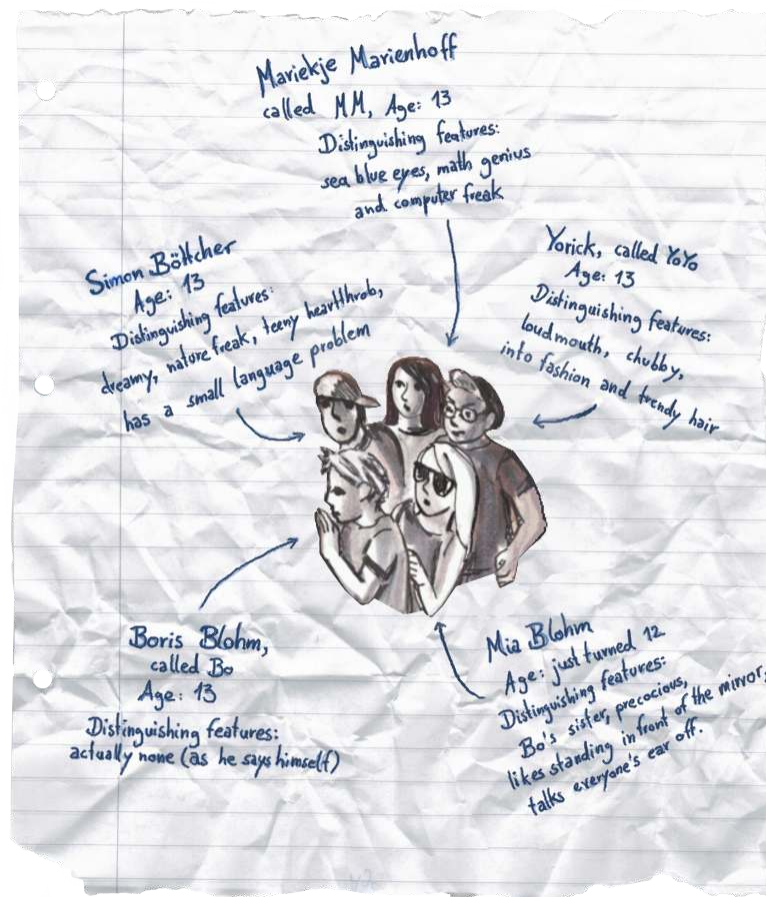
Ulrich Renz

On the Trail of the Kidnappers

Translation from German by Samuel Cotten

Wanted Posters

Bo & Friends



- *Name:* Boris Blohm, called **Bo**
- *Age:* 13
- *Distinguishing features:* actually none (as he says himself).

- *Name:* **Simon** Böttcher
- *Alter:* 13
- *Distinguishing features:* dreamy, nature freak, teeny heartthrob, has a small language problem.

- *Name:* Mariekje Marienhoff, called **MM**
- *Age:* 13
- *Distinguishing features:* sea blue eyes, math genius and computer freak.

- *Name:* Yorick, called **YoYo**
- *Age:* 13
- *Distinguishing features:* loudmouth, chubby, into fashion and trendy hair.

- *Name:* **Mia** Blohm
- *Age:* just turned 12
- *Distinguishing features:* Bo's sister, precocious, likes standing in front of the mirror, talks everyone's ear off.

Author



- *Name:* Ulrich Renz, called **U**
- *Alter:* middle aged
- *Distinguishing features:* loves Spaetzle (a sort of Southern German noodles), likes making music, used to be a doctor, now writes books for children and grown-ups. More at www.bo-and-friends.com.

Translator



- *Name:* Samuel Cotten, called **Sam**
- *Age:* quite a bit younger than the author
- *Distinguishing features:* grew up in California, currently doing his master's thesis in Medical Neuroscience at the Humboldt University in Berlin, also an avid home-beer brewing enthusiast.

CHAPTER ONE

Disappeared Without a Trace

If he isn't back by 8:00 pm, we'll call the police," said Mrs. Morahwe-Krieger, her voice just a whisper. Her usually lively face was expressionless. Her black glasses sat askew on her nose, and the blonde highlights in her hair were completely messed up. Her eyes wandered restlessly from one table to the other, where the children were sitting silently in front of their cleaned out plates. It had probably never been as quiet in the dining room of a youth hostel as it was at that moment in Wulfshausen castle. Even the minis, the third-graders in the adjoining room behind the half-open sliding door, didn't make a sound. Normally, their squeaking was hardly bearable. Now the only sound was the ticking of the clock above the counter in front of the kitchen.

Ten minutes to eight.

The history teacher walked slowly back to the teachers' table. The clacking of her boots echoed through the high

hall like hammer blows. She sat down on her seat next to Zilinski, who was slumped in his chair, staring into space. He was still wearing the tracksuit and sneakers from the afternoon. The characteristic crease in his cheek was now a deep furrow. The trainee from the 7a ¹ ran her fingers absently through her curly red mane, which had earned her the nickname “Red Zora.” Delius had his elbows on his knees and hung his head so that only his shiny, bald dome with the ring of hair around it was visible. He, too, was far away in his thoughts.

Outside the windows it was approaching dusk. Bo imagined Tobi out there somewhere, wandering through the forest. What would he do if he were Tobi and had lost the way? He would walk in one direction, always in a straight line, until eventually finding a road where he would be able to stop a car. But where was the next road? Were there any roads at all in this forest, except the one they had arrived on by bus? Maybe Tobi had found shelter for the night, in some cabin, or in one of the old mine shafts in the area? Bo shuddered involuntarily. A night alone in the woods ...

From the teachers’ table came the muffled sound of a throat clearing. Zilinski straightened himself to catch a glimpse of the clock behind him. Eight minutes to eight.

The “forest run” had been his idea. “Kiddos, ol’ Zilinski has come up with something quite special for you,” he had announced in his thundering voice after breakfast. “Today, you are free to really live it up and go for a run through the forest. Follow your noses into the wilderness ...” As always, he was grinning so broadly that his whole face seemed to consist only of teeth. He had once been something like a champion in cross country running, and even now at fifty-odd years old he ran his six miles through the city park every day before school, always together with his mixed breed poodle, Chico.

“One who runs, thinks better. One who runs a lot, will become a genius sooner or later. So kiddos, the start is on the lawn in front of the castle garden and then off it goes through the woods, up the hill to the lookout point above, twenty minutes up, ten back – if you take it slow. At the top is a bag of candy, everyone takes one out, but don’t eat it straight away! The candy is proof that you really were up there. The first five that come back down with their candy are off kitchen duty.” He rubbed his hands and looked around expectantly with his Zilinski-grin. Proper jubilation did not arise, but, of course, no one objected. It was clear, anyway, that Zilinski would not let up. He did that kind of cross-country run on every school trip. Only Blondi had to

let the world know that it would be *impossible* for her to run through the *muck* with her new Subishi sneakers. Zilinski once again had the opportunity to make his favorite point: "Life is not a pony farm." He was grinning like a Cheshire cat.

On the road outside, a car could be heard. For a moment it seemed to Bo as if it were slowing down at the junction to the castle. Was it possibly bringing Tobi back? But soon the engine noise was lost in the distance.

Of all people, little Tobi. If only it had been Dimitri, who, at six feet tall and with a bodybuilder's physique, would've slashed his way through somehow. Or Lasse; Bo wouldn't have begrudged him a night outdoors. It would have done quite well for his big mouth. But Tobi, the only one of the boys in school who could still fit through the window to the boiler room when the ping-pong ball was lost during lunch break. Everything about him was tender, and if he'd let his blonde locks grow a little longer, you might have taken him for a girl. Everyone in class liked him, even though he sometimes lived in his own world a bit and you could never be quite sure if he really meant something seriously, or if he was just playing the clown.

His stormy passion for Tatyana had especially been the source of much merriment and teasing, yet he endured it

with a knowing smile. Bo, however, was sure that there was more to it than theater. In class, his seat was right behind Tobi's, and quite a few times he'd noticed that Tobi had his eyes glued to Tatyana. Of all the girls, Tatyana. She was two heads taller than him, looked like a walking sex bomb, and was into the cool skater boys from the ninth grade. The only thing that they had somewhat reasonably in common was their hair color. A few weeks ago, Tobi had shown up wearing a T-Shirt with a small heart and "Tatyana" printed in the center. But apparently Tatyana had made it clear that she didn't return his love, because the next day Tobi's T-Shirt read, "Tatyana, I can wait."

Bo looked at the clock on the wall. Five minutes to eight. The room was quiet as a mouse. Only behind him, at the Russians' room's table, was there some whispering.

Bo's gaze shifted to his friends by his side: MM's face was in her hands, and had completely disappeared behind her shiny, black hair. Simon stared somewhere on the floor, as if something devastatingly important were taking place there. From time to time he shook the blond mane from his face with a small head movement. YoYo had one leg over the other and was leaning back. He probably wanted to appear casual, but Bo could tell from his eyes that Tobi's

disappearance affected him just as deeply as everyone else. Bo still hadn't gotten entirely used to YoYo's tie, not to mention the tight side part on his sharp new hairstyle. He had turned up looking like this for the first time after Easter break: white shirt, fine cloth trousers, and a black tie. To top it off, he also wore a dark blue jacket with a golden crest on it. Together with his wise guy glasses, he looked like a model boy for a British boarding school. Only his obesity didn't fit into the picture so well.

The others in class considered his style to be the latest version of the Mod movement, but anyone acquainted with YoYo knew that he would never copy any style that already existed. He took his motto - "To be always one step ahead of the trend" - quite seriously.

Once again, YoYo made a state secret out of the way he had come by his new style. He had at least dropped a few hints to Bo, which suggested, once again, that it had something to do with a movie. Over Easter break, YoYo had visited his father in Hamburg for the very first time since he had moved out many years ago. They saw a movie together, the exact name of which Bo couldn't remember; but the story took place in a fine British all-boys boarding school where a few students formed a secret association, met in a forbidden cave at night, and recited self-written

poems to one another. At the end, the poet's club was busted and everything ended badly – Bo couldn't remember much else about the plot.

This much, in any case, was clear: The film had worked. In a big way.

YoYo was intent on at once establishing such a club himself, “where you can meet somewhere at night and recite homemade poetry.”

“Poetry” was his new favorite word. When Bo asked him if he'd written a poem himself yet, YoYo shook his head. He wasn't “inwardly ready” yet; first off he needed to “discover the poet within himself.” He'd packed a whole suitcase full of poetry books for the class trip. No one knew how he had gotten ahold of them. Of course, he'd also brought his favorite book, half of which he already knew by heart: “Hymns to the Night,” by a poet named Novalis. YoYo had very cryptically let Bo take a look inside, but Bo didn't get past the first five lines. It felt like the text was written in some foreign language unfamiliar to him. “Poetry isn't about understanding,” YoYo lectured him, “it's about feeling. And that's what you have to soak up. You just have to open yourself to it.”

He'd obviously already opened himself a lot to his poetic feeling. He'd already acquired a rich treasure trove of

verses, which he would deploy on both suitable and unsuitable occasions. "Wind is coming. We must try to live," he had said today at the start of the forest run, as Zilinski gave them their final instructions. He covered how important it was to run at a steady pace and never – "Understood, kiddos? NEVER!" – stand still. He was looking straight at YoYo, who had never managed to complete a run without a solid break.

At the tables, a whispering and murmuring had begun. Everyone looked at the clock. One minute to eight. Mrs. Morahwe-Krieger stood up, as if in slow motion. Very gently, as if she wanted to kill a little time, she walked toward the door. She stopped there and looked once more back to the clock. Very softly the hand made a click.

"I'll call the police now."

CHAPTER TWO

“I hereby declare ...”

A child can't just disappear like that, MM thought again and again.

Bo, who was sitting beside her on the lower bunk bed, was obviously thinking the same thing. “He can't just be gone, though ...” he murmured softly. He had his arms wrapped tightly around his legs, his tousle-haired head placed on his knees.

From the others there was no sound to be heard. Simon, on the bunk above them, swung his leg back and forth on the edge of the bed. YoYo lay stretched out on the lower bunk opposite them – the one that actually belonged to Abel. The latter was still on his digestive walk, which he always took after meals.

MM noticed the sauce stain on YoYo's white shirt next to his tie. She wondered briefly if she should point it out, but there were really more important things now than a stain on a shirt.

“The case is crystal clear,” YoYo started, and placed Abel’s frog pillow under his neck. He had put his superstar YoYo face on, as he always did when he wanted to show his genius to the audience.

“Aha, crystal clear,” Bo immediately responded. Lately, he’d let himself get easily provoked by YoYo’s swagger. “Tobi suddenly disappears from the face of earth, and no one sees or hears anything ... I actually don’t know what could be crystal clear about that.”

“Don’t you know that Tobi’s father owns that lawn mower company in the Rosenbaum district?” YoYo continued, undeterred. “It figures they’re loaded, you all know the villa they live in.” He took off his glasses, as he always did when something particularly important was to come. “Tobi has been kidnapped. The ransom note will be here no later than tomorrow morning, you’ll see.” He adjusted Abel’s frog around his neck and was pleased with himself.

“The most likely scenario is still that he got lost,” MM said. “As Mehmet said, he has a totally bad sense of direction.”

“Yes, I think so, too,” Simon joined in from above. “Tobi has for sure only gotten loosed ...”

“Lost, you mean,” MM and Bo said almost simultaneously. Simon had now been back from America for

many months, but every now and then his famous Yankee-mistakes would still slip out.

“Well,” YoYo grumbled, “once up the hill and down again, how can someone get lost there?”

“After all, Silly and Betti got lost, too,” Bo returned.

“Yeah, that’s what they claimed afterward,” YoYo said. “They were probably just smoking somewhere in the bushes.”

“Or they were hoping that Zilinski would send Simon to look for them ... Betti at least.” Bo couldn’t resist.

As a punishment, Simon hurled his pillow at Bo’s face.

Poor Simon. They wouldn’t stop teasing him about Betti since that stupid “Revoke-the-Smoke” workshop for which Mo-Kri had dragged the whole class into the health department. They’d formed a circle of chairs and everyone had to tell Betti one reason why she should quit smoking. Simon, who was sitting next to Betti, was the last one to speak. Unfortunately for him, everything had already been said. Again and again he shook the blond mane from his face and finally disgorged: “I would be very sad if you died.” Betti looked at him as if he were the Savior in person and burst into burning tears. “No one has ever said that to me,” she sobbed, “*no one* in my *whole* life!” And suddenly Simon had a howling Betti in his arms, and she never

wanted to let go of him. Ever since, his friends teased him over that incidence. Of course, everyone knew that Simon wasn't into Betti, and that Betti only hung out with Silly and her crew of goth-types, anyway.

MM was just barely able to get out of the line of fire before a sneaker flew down from above – immediately followed by Simon's fists, which Bo tried to parry off with his feet. Someone who didn't know them might have thought it to be a serious fight. "Okay, I surrender!" Bo snorted. "I revoke my statement formally and officially!"

In the meantime, YoYo had popped open his favorite book of poetry. When Simon and Bo had calmed down, he said dreamily: "Why search every low and high, when good things couldn't be closer by."

To that he added a reverently muttered "Goethe." Of course, no one knew what he wanted to say with Goethe's words. But after a minute's silence he condescended to make a statement: "I just mean: Sure he may have gotten lost – as a professional you can't exclude any possibility. But I would rate it as highly unlikely."

"Maybe he had an accident?" The question came from Simon. "And now he lies somewhere with a broke leg –"

"A *broken* leg," MM murmured automatically. "But then we'd have heard him scream, right?"

“Maybe he was unconscious?” Bo said.

“We have searched every square inch of that mountain twice,” MM said. The search operation was still vivid in her memory. Zilinski had made all the students line up in the parking lot in the forest, ten yards apart from one another. Like this they’d then combed through the woods, step by step – like in the movies, when the police are looking for a corpse. They trudged through the forest like that until supper, as far as beyond Sheep’s Hill and back again. Mrs. Billerbeck, with her squeaking minis, was also part of the search. They were supposed to cover the “western flank”, as Zilinski put it, but the kids didn’t want anything to do with a forest where someone could vanish just like that. They crowded together like chicks around their big duck mom who then waddled home with them.

“Do you think there might have been some trouble in Tobi’s room?” Bo asked.

“Mo-Kri already asked Mehmet and Julian the same question – they haven’t got a clue,” YoYo said.

“And Tatyana?” Bo asked. “Maybe she noticed something?”

“She was completely ticked off a little while ago at dinner, because first Mo-Kri and then the Red Zora came into her room to ask her exactly that. – ‘What am I

supposed to have to do with this? Is it my fault that the little one has a crush on me? I'm not a kindergarten teacher, am I?' "

"And homesickness?" The thought just crossed MM's mind.

"But where in the world would he have taken off to? By the way, Tobi has never, ever been homesick."

There was a long silence while everyone was busy with their own thoughts.

"And the guys from the quarry, these Sinte or Roma or whatever they're called?" Simon asked.

"What do you mean by that?" was MM's first reaction. "Do you really think they *kidnapped* Tobi? They just want to be left in peace."

She thought back to the memorable "forest tour" with the old gentleman from the *Folklife Association* who had shown them the abandoned mines in the forest. Most of them were buried or had collapsed, but in some of the tunnels you could still walk a bit. Here and there stood rusted carts that were once pulled by donkeys and on which ore had been transported to Marienburg. The Folklife tour guide was sweet, but a bit overzealous. "Back in the day, the ore from Marienburg was famous throughout Europe, and its quarrying is a glorious tale of

heroism ..." was how he ranted. "Today, unfortunately, it has faded into obscurity, and with it, the fate of the glorious men and women who immortalized themselves by their hard work."

The path led them past an old quarry, in which – as their guide told them – the gravel for the Marienburg Railway had once been mined. That, too, was a "glorious tale of heroism" to him. In one corner of the quarry, a large camper van was parked. Nearby was an old tractor with a rusted trailer attached. There was garbage pretty much everywhere on the ground.

"A real problem," the old man sighed. "The family settled here a few years ago. They come from somewhere in the Balkans and hardly speak German. They hoof around here with their little circus and show tricks. The father plays the "Big Zampano" who breaks chains with his muscle power ... By now there are five children, the oldest is already of school age now and should technically attend elementary school in Marienburg – technically, but the family lives on their circus, and the children have to help out, as well. The boy does some animal acts with his pony." He sighed again. "A real problem ... The father himself has never gone to school and does not see why his son should either. Now and then the boy shows up at school for a few days, and then he

goes on tour again. The class teacher, Mrs. Brüser, says he's pretty bright and incredibly eager to learn. But most of the time he's just on the move. A couple of times the police have come for the boy to bring him to school, but that's not a good solution, either." Just at that moment a tanned boy with black hair and eyes just as black stormed out of the trailer. He might have been eight years old. When he saw the children, he stopped and looked at them with wide eyes. On his shoulder sat some sort of animal.

"A rat," the guide said. "He took it to school once, it escaped and jumped onto the teacher's desk. Mrs. Brüser is a very sensitive and elderly lady and fainted straightway ... A real problem ..." He couldn't stop sighing.

When they had moved on, the boy gazed after them for a long time. Somehow MM felt sorry for him. Growing up in the woods all alone without friends ...

"This rusty trailer," Simon said, swinging his leg, "it looked like a large cage ..."

"You mean you think they locked Tobi up in there?" MM said. "Have you lost your marbles?"

"Maybe they want to demand some rent."

"Ransom," she corrected him. "And how should they know that Tobi's father is rich, do you think they've got a

class list with details about the parents' financial situations?"

YoYo put an end to the discussion: "Principle number one for pros: You have to take all leads seriously. Let's take a closer look at the quarry tomorrow."

Maybe Tobi will already be back by then, MM thought. She looked instinctively to the window, almost expecting to see him out in the yard. But there was nothing but the pitch-black night. Suddenly she shivered.

Poor Tobi! What if YoYo was right, and he'd really fallen into the hands of criminals? Another thought crept into her mind: Technically, they were all subject to an investigation ban – a "strict investigation ban," as her mother had put it. "Hunting criminals is a task of the police! Do you follow me?" As a matter of fact, she wasn't entirely wrong. The thing with *Giant Blue* could have, by a hair, taken a bad end. It was only due to a tiny coincidence that Bo's little sister Mia had survived the night in that underground bunker ... Bo had once told MM that his parents, too, had demanded that they stop with their investigations. Bo's father had called him a "repeat offender" – the thing with *Giant Blue* having already been their second case. He probably meant it in jest, but Bo had to solemnly promise to

his mother that in the future he would keep his hands off any investigations.

As if he'd read her thoughts, Bo said: "My parents will kill me if they catch wind of it."

"Mine, too ... at least my mother," MM murmured.

"Mine, too ... both of them," came softly from above.

YoYo sat up abruptly and shook his head impatiently. "How are your parents going to find out about what's going on here?" He crossed his arms over his stomach. "So I'll just investigate on my own ... if you want to skip out on me ... and Tobi ... then go ahead!" He lay down again and demonstratively buried his nose in his book.

MM and Bo looked at each other helplessly.

"Besides, we are not investigating. We're just collecting some pieces of information ... What's forbidden about that?" came from behind YoYo's book.

MM looked again outside into the darkness. Actually, YoYo was right. They were sitting here in the warm, while Tobi was out there ...

"Of course we won't skip out on Tobi," she heard Bo whisper beside her.

"No way," Simon said quietly.

"If it's going to get dangerous, we can still stop," MM said.