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Palm Oil

A Case for Elliott Kern



A businessman from Lenzburg requests an export license for machines to Indonesia. According to his declaration, they are intended for palm oil production. However, they could also be used for uranium enrichment. Elliott Kern of the Federal Intelligence Service is assigned to examine the possible nuclear proliferation. In the process, he gets involved in a murder investigation by the Aargau Cantonal Police.

The investigation takes place while the second Corona wave has reached Switzerland. At the same time, the controversy about the corporate responsibility initiative in Switzerland and the presidential election in the USA provide for hot discussions. Elliott Kern was formerly with the FBI. He lives with his mother in Aarau and admires the philosopher Michel de Montaigne.

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Contents

1. Tuesday, October 27, 2020
2. Tuesday, October 27, 2020
3. Wednesday, October 28, 2020
4. Thursday, October 29, 2020
5. Friday, October 30, 2020
6. Saturday, October 31, 2020
7. Sunday, November 1, 2020
8. Monday, November 2, 2020
9. Tuesday, November 3, 2020
10. Wednesday, November 4, 2020
11. Thursday, November 5, 2020
12. Friday, November 6, 2020

1 - Tuesday, October 27, 2020

Kern was on the train from Aarau to Bern. Colonel Stierli had summoned him to the federal city. Whereby 'summoned' only corresponded to Stierli's use of a commanding tone. In reality, Stierli had invited him to dinner at a fine Bernese restaurant. "We're celebrating your success in solving the power grid case," he had explained. And he'll probably give me a new assignment, Kern thought.

He looked out the window. He loved traveling by train and had missed it in the United States. Although trains also ran between the major centers there, his work as a case analyst for the FBI had never given him any reason to use the train. Now he enjoyed the ride. The woods were changing to autumnal colors, and nature was returning to rest. The day was cool and foggy gray - Kern felt comfortable in this atmosphere. His mother had advised him to go by car because of the ongoing Corona crisis - the second wave had just reached Switzerland. He had refused. Now he wore a protective mask, as did all passengers.

The coach was sparsely occupied. Wherever possible, the companies had relegated their staff to the home office. Kern was familiar with this way of working. Although the Federal Intelligence Service resided mainly in Bern, for reasons that were not entirely clear, Stierli preferred Kern to be based in Aarau. Stierli called it the 'Aarau office'. Here Kern lived and worked in the villa of his mother, Marcia Tyler Kern, who had taken over her late husband's law practice in Aarau.

The air was cooler in Bern than in Aarau. As soon as he got off the train, Kern took off his mask, as did all passengers. That was still permitted now, but Kern expected the Federal Government to tighten the mask requirement

soon. The number of infections was rising alarmingly, even more so in Switzerland than in the surrounding countries. Goodbye to the image of the model state, thought Kern.

He turned toward the old town and marched across Waisenhausplatz and Kornhausplatz to the restaurant in Brunngasse that Stierli had chosen. The usually sober colonel had been enthusiastic. "A French restaurant, you'll be thrilled." Let's see, thought Kern.

The streets were not very busy, but Kern, who was rarely in the federal city, could not decide whether this was due to the Corona crisis or to the late hour of the morning. Outside the restaurant, Kern put his mask on again. When he entered the restaurant, it reminded him of upscale establishments in Washington: the same elegance and tranquility, and the same classic decor for restaurants in this category.

He took off his coat. Next to the coat rack hung a large mirror. In it Kern saw a lean man in his forties with straight brown hair, brown eyes and angular facial features, partially covered by the mask. He wore a dark blue blazer with gray pants and a light blue shirt.

Stierli was already waiting for him. He stood up. Kern thought he was an impressive figure. Tall, somewhat beefy, in a well-fitting suit. Clear, open face under a gray crew cut. The colonel gave him a brief welcoming smile and said, "Hi, Elliott. Have a seat." Kern removed his mask and said, "Thank you for the invitation, Felix. And in a restaurant like this to boot. Are you sure you're not overdrawing your hospitality budget?"

"Of course I'm sure. Otherwise Tamara wouldn't have allowed it."

Tamara was Stierli's assistant.

"Why didn't you take her along?"

"Tztz," said Stierli, "that would be going too far."

A distinguished-looking waiter appeared and handed them both a menu. The man wore a cloth mask, black with

colorful stars on it. Kern asked him if it was a bother to wear the mask all day.

"Yes. It's unpleasant. The guests don't understand me well. And I get a rash on my nose. But since I've tied it behind my neck, at least my ears don't hurt anymore."

Stierli said, "Bring us a glass of Aligoté for starters." And to Kern, "Is that all right with you?"

"Sure. I don't know the wine, but I know I can count on you."

"A special white grape from Burgundy."

Stierli had chosen oenology as his hobby. Even when he was roaming the pubs of the old town with Kern and other classmates from the Old Cantonal School in Aarau, he always drank wine while the others got drunk on beer.

Kern studied the menu with growing pleasure. "You seem to be a regular," he remarked.

"Well, regular, not exactly. Only if I want it to be festive."

"And how did you discover the restaurant?"

"A colleague from the Federal Criminal Police recommended it to me, saying that whenever he successfully closed a case, they celebrated here. I made a mental note of that."

Kern chose a grilled marrow bone for an appetizer and calf's head with vinaigrette for the main course, while Stierli opted for a lamb's lettuce and goujoned deer liver.

"And the wine?" asked the waiter.

"Will a Fixin do?" asked Stierli.

Kern nodded.

Stierli ordered a bottle. Then he asked, "How was your vacation?"

"Grandiose."

"Tell."

"I drove by car to the Bordelais. On the way I stopped at a castle hotel near Meyrueis in Auvergne which I can highly recommend. It's a hiking area, and in the nearby valley of the Jonte there is a vulture station. I then drove on to

Bordeaux. Here I booked a wine course at the Maison du Vin. You know, in the morning they explain wine production, backed up with tastings, in the afternoon they take you on a tour to the St. Emilion region, where we visited two chateau estates. But that was just in passing. The destination of my trip was St. Michel de Montaigne."

"Why is that?"

"I admire the philosopher Michel de Montaigne. He lived in the 16th century and invented the form of the Essais. He was a skeptical philosopher who dealt in his texts with questions of everyday life, religion, history and human existence in general. The texts are based, on the one hand, on a thorough knowledge of the ancient authors and, on the other hand, on an unreserved introspection. They are written in an understandable language and their statements are still valid today. They have impressed me ever since I began to deal with them."

"And what's there to see at St. Michel de Montaigne?"

"The tower that belonged to the castle of Montaigne, in which he spent most of his time. On the three floors there are a private chapel, a living room with bedroom, and at the top a study with library. Burnt into the ceiling beams of the study there are quotes from ancient authors as well as from the Bible. Thirty Greek and thirty-six Latin aphorisms. Fascinating. He mentions the rooms again and again in his texts, and at last I was able to look at them."

"Good for you." Stierli paused and continued, "I have a new case for you."

"That's what I thought. Fire away."

Kern reached for his cell phone to take notes. Stierli said, "No need to do that. Tamara will send you the dossiers today with everything I'm about to tell you. But first, cheers." Meanwhile, the waiter had brought two glasses of white wine, and they toasted each other. Kern did not like the wine, it seemed inharmonious to him. Quite unlike the colonel, who tasted it and then clicked his tongue with

relish. Stierli continued, " Comrag is a machine factory in the Jura. You'll find details in the dossiers. They have applied to the Directorate of Foreign Trade for an export license for a hundred centrifugal extractors. What these machines can do, you will also find in the dossier. The destination country is Indonesia. They need the machines for the production of palm oil."

"Sounds plausible."

"Well. However, the extractors are on the so-called dual-use list, which concerns the proliferation of nuclear weapons. They are not only used in the food industry, but they can also be used for uranium enrichment. Apparently, there exists an enrichment process using ion exchange, whatever that means, and this requires centrifugal extractors. Because of this, and especially because of the large number of machines, alarm bells rang at the Directorate of Foreign Trade, and they asked us to look into the matter."

"To my knowledge, Indonesia does not have a program to develop nuclear weapons."

"True. But it's conceivable that the machines would be supplied by Indonesia to another country, for example to Iran."

Kern whistled through his teeth.

"But it's a mere suspicion?"

"Not quite. The deal was brokered by Jean-Paul Tanner. Born in 1967, Tanner lives in Lenzburg and brokers deals, mainly purchases by developing countries from Swiss companies. He is an engineer and has worked for the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation ADC in Africa. He appears to have successfully handled some water supply projects, but was eventually fired for involvement in a corruption case."

"Don't make it so exciting. What do you know about Tanner?"

"He is an idealist, at least he sees himself as one. He is opinionated and believed he was supporting the good side in the corruption case. Because he made no personal profit, he was not prosecuted further."

"Yeah, so?"

"Well, he is committed to the economic development of third world countries. There would be nothing wrong with that if he hadn't come out in favor of Iran's nuclear program in an internal ADC paper. He believes the Iranians when they say they want to produce their nuclear fuel only for civilian purposes."

Kern sat back and said, "All right. You guys put me on Tanner. You want me to find out if he's working on behalf of Iran and if that's where the machines are ultimately going to end up."

"Exactly. I think it's great that you're formulating my assignment to you right away yourself."

The waiter brought the first course and the wine. Stierli let Kern taste the Fixin. He was enraptured and considered cellaring a few bottles of this Burgundy. Then they turned their attention to the meal. Kern also thought the food was great.

"French cuisine at its best," Stierli remarked with satisfaction when his plate was empty.

"Your figure doesn't look like that of a foodie, though."

"I go jogging for an hour every morning."

"Well, you were always the jock in our class. And not stupid, either. A perfect basis for a career."

Stierli grinned. "Could be. But the decisive factor is the even temper I was born with. Without it, the politicians' attempts to influence me would get to me."

"Blunt question: is your career actually over? Are you bumping at the top?"

"I should hope so. The higher the rank, the more you become a politician. And that's not for me."

Kern drank from the wine and said, "My compliments to you. It was the same with Montaigne. He refused to pursue a career. The king had to force him to become mayor of Bordeaux. And when he was, he did nothing to become popular. Which turned out to be a mistake. It was precisely this that made him so popular that he had to run for a second term."

Stierli sighed. "Thanks. I'll keep that in mind."

He waved to the waiter and ordered coffee. Then he said, "Your analysis went down very well with our situation assessment freaks. By the way, how did you make it through quarantine?"

After his return from the Bordelais, Kern had dutifully gone into quarantine, as prescribed by the Federal Office of Public Health.

"Oh, fine. Fortunately, I live in a kind of granny apartment in the villa. My mother took care of me. She cooked and left my food on a tray outside the door of the study."

"No symptoms?"

"No. In France, after all, masks were already largely compulsory. And I was careful anyway."

"No claustrophobic moods?"

"No. From my study I can get directly to the terrace. I often sat there, smoked, and thought about your assignment."

Stierli had used Kern's quarantine to request an assessment from him on the American elections.

"So my assignment was welcome?"

"Absolutely. The task fascinated me. I completely forgot about being isolated. For days, I surfed the Internet. I analyzed statistics and the course of previous elections and read countless articles in the opinion press. I left out the social media. They are interesting if you want to take the pulse of society, but they only cover certain segments of the population. Then I wrote the report in English and presented it to various people, including my mother. Being from