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# Power **G**rid

A Case for Elliott Kern



During the corona crisis, a dispatcher of the Swiss Power Grid Company is murdered in Aarau. Did the perpetrator have personal reasons, or did someone intend sabotage? A large-scale failure of electric power-supply in addition to the pandemic would be particularly dangerous for the whole country. This risk requires the Federal Intelligence Service to participate in the investigation.

The corona restrictions of the Swiss government make the investigation more difficult than usual. But in an unexpected way, they also help to solve the crime within a short time.

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## **1 - Tuesday March 31, 2020**

At half past seven, Kern's cell phone rang on the shelf behind his bed. It wakened him abruptly. Because the call could only be business-related, he took it immediately.

"Is the Aarau office operational yet?" his boss wanted to know.

Kern tried not to let it show that he still was in bed. "We're ready twenty-four-seven," he said.

"Listen, a man has been murdered," Stierli said. "The Aargau Cantonal Police notified us. A dispatcher of the Power Grid Company in Aarau. Could be our business."

"When did the murder take place?"

"Yesterday morning."

"And they've already alerted us?"

"The Aargau Cantonal Police is pretty much on the ball. So get your ass over there. The officer in charge is waiting for you. His name is Rauch."

Without waiting for an answer, Stierli hung up.

Kern paused to clear his mind before getting up. His room was flooded with morning light, the day had started sunny. He entered the bathroom and took a shower. Getting dressed, he decided on a light blue shirt, gray slacks, a dark blue blazer, and a beige tie. The proper attire for police work, he thought. He eyed himself in the mirror and saw a lean man in his forties with straight brown hair, angular features and brown eyes. Pretty inconspicuous, no special features whatsoever, and that's an advantage in my profession, he told himself.

In the kitchen, he brewed himself a Nespresso coffee. He saw that his mother had already had breakfast. Apparently she had left for work early. The two-car garage was open, and her Jag was gone. Kern got into his old Renault Captur

and drove off, down to the Telli district, to the police headquarters. He noticed that there was hardly any traffic on the streets. This was one of the few pleasant circumstances accompanying the corona crisis, he thought.

He checked in at the reception desk, and shortly thereafter a burly man in his fifties appeared. He wore a well-fitting suit. Good clothes look respectable, Kern thought, as the man squeezed through one of the two turnstiles in the entrance hall. The Cantonal Police had probably issued dress codes for their executives. It had been no different at the Bureau. His own suits were all from his FBI days, made by a Chinese tailor in Arlington. They still fit perfectly, because he kept in shape.

It looked as if the police officer was about to walk up to him and offer his hand, but then he suddenly stopped two meters away. He eyed Kern coolly and finally waved at him.

Kern waved back and said, "Kern from the Federal Intelligence Service. I was called in by my boss. He mentioned it's about murder. I haven't heard anything on the news yet."

"Lieutenant Rauch," the policeman said. "I'm in charge of the investigation. Your boss has announced you. And we will inform the press about the murder tonight. Because of the corona crisis, we're understaffed, so things are a little slower than usual. Come with me."

He went to the counter and picked up a visitor's badge, which he gave to Kern. "This will get you through the turnstile."

Behind the barrier, Rauch marched quickly to the stairs next to the elevator shaft. "Riding the elevator two at a time is no longer allowed," he said, and stormed up the stairs. Kern followed at a suitable distance. Rauch led him into a corner office with modern furniture and a view over the tall trees of the Telli district. Doesn't look much like an office, Kern thought. The lieutenant sat down behind his desk and

directed Kern to the chair opposite. Okay, thought Kern, that way we sit two meters apart as required.

"No sunglasses?" asked Rauch. "And no resemblance to 007 at all? Not a typical intelligence man in my view." At that, he grinned. His face was lined with deep furrows and had a healthy tan. He regenerates in a solarium, Kern thought. Rauch had a noticeably large mouth, and when he spoke or smiled, his whole face joined in. Kern wondered what other expressions the officer had in store. Surely he could put on a poker face if necessary. Or unsettle suspects with a stern look.

"Average, even boring, appearance is the best cover," Kern replied, grinning back. He recalled that the FBI had had a few crime prevention films made. And they had picked him out as an average person. However, the videos had been converted into animated films, like those shown on airplanes, and so he had no longer been recognizable as a real figure.

He liked this ritual of meeting cop to cop and asked, "What did you call us in for?"

"A man named Gerhard Schlittler was murdered yesterday. He was a dispatcher at the Power Grid Company here in Aarau. You know, they operate the major Swiss grid which is connected to Europe. According to your office's list, that's a strategically important organisation. It could well be that someone is targeting the country's power supply. And that's why, in accordance with the instructions of the federal government, we have notified you."

Kern nodded. High on the Federal Council's list of nationwide risks were a prolonged, widespread power outage and a pandemic. "We already have the pandemic," he said. "All that's missing is the power supply failure."

"Exactly."

"What can you tell me about the murder?"

"Schlittler was thirty-seven, married, two children. He lived in a single-family house in Auenstein, up on the hill,

with a magnificent view. Looking at the peaceful countryside helped me brace myself before ringing the doorbell to break the bad news. Well, yesterday he drove his car to work as usual, but never arrived. There followed the standard procedures, a call of the company at home, which alerted the wife, and at ten a call from the wife to the police. The responsible precinct in Aarau started a search along his route to work. Schlittler used to drive to Aarau over the Auenstein bridge and then through the forest of Rohr. And on one of the parking lots on the Rohr side of the bridge they found him. He was sitting in his car and was dead. By the way, strange that none of the people walking their dogs from there noticed and reported him. It must be because of the corona crisis. Everyone is only looking after themselves. When the police showed up, there was no one else in the parking lot, but there must have been dog walkers there. We will put out an appeal for witnesses. Schlittler had been killed by a shot into the head. The probable sequence of events is this. Schlittler drives into the parking lot. He has a date with someone, or someone he knows waves him out. This someone gets into the car, places himself in the passenger seat, possibly a conversation ensues. The murder is done with a small-caliber weapon, which means there's hardly any blood spatter in the car except on the driver's window."

"And you're already investigating who Schlittler associated with, whether he had debts, possibly an affair, and so on."

"Exactly. We talked to the family and immediate neighbors. He lead an ordinary life, spent most of his time with his family, socialized amicably with neighbors, and was a member of the local tennis club. Everybody liked him, he was unobtrusive. At first glance, neighbors and club members are trustworthy people, no exotics among them, if you know what I mean. It's all provisional, though. I've put two officers on it to get more information out of interviews."



"How do you organize that without violating the distancing rules?"

"Well, usually two officers conduct the interviews, one to ask the questions, the other to observe the interviewees. Now they go alone - except when backup is needed, but then they drive separately. In addition, they always ask the interviewees to follow them outside or at least into the stairwell to avoid closed rooms. It works, but it's all a bit complex."

Kern nodded. "And of course you immediately considered the wife as the perpetrator."

"Exactly. The statistics speak for themselves. Henriette Schlittler works mornings in the accounting department of a trust company. Because of the corona crisis, however, she stayed at home the whole morning, assisting her two children - they are nine and eleven - with their home schooling. And what further speaks against her perpetration: there is no gun registered in Schlittlers house. I think we can rule out the wife for now."

Kern was impressed. This officer worked thoroughly. He further noticed that Rauch simply referred to the children as such. They didn't have names yet. This showed that the police were focusing on the relevant issues. The children were given names only when they were to be questioned. And otherwise when the final report was written. Only then do we chase such details, he thought. They are necessary in case one of the persons reappears in a later case. Therefore, Stierli is completely right when he demands detailed reports from me.

"And what about the company where Schlittler worked?" he asked.

"I've scheduled a visit to the Power Grid Company for later in the morning. I thought you should come with me."

"I think I should. But why don't we do it by video conference?"

"I'm an old-fashioned cop. I want to feel the atmosphere of the place and the reactions of the interviewees."

Rauch reached for a thin dossier and slid it across the table to Kern. "Here's a copy of our findings so far. I've printed out everything my staff has fed into the system up to this morning. It's still meager, of course, but we're working on it. We strongly hope that we will succeed. We're hardly used to unsolved homicides here."

That was true, as Kern knew. The Aargau Cantonal Police had good reason to be proud of their high solve rate.

Rauch rose. "Come along."

Once in the parking garage, Rauch paused. "Because only one person is allowed per car, we are currently short of vehicles. I assume you drove here from Bern by car."

"I came indeed by car. It's over there in the visitors' parking lot. But I didn't come from Bern, I came straight from home. I live in Aarau, in the Zelgli district."

"Perfect."

When Rauch saw the Captur, he asked, "And where's the Aston Martin?"

"Only five pay grades above me."

Rauch grinned, said, "Exactly," and got in.

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Kern knew that the Power Grid Company had its headquarters in Aarau, but did not know the location. He followed Rauch up to the train station, then under the railroad line to the Gais traffic circle and from here to the neighborhood south of the station. They parked in front of an eye-catching building with "Power Grid Company" written on it.

Rauch had announced their visit. At the reception desk, a woman who Kern estimated to be forty - the same age as himself - picked them up. She, too, kept her distance. She was dressed smart casual, in black designer jeans tucked

into Texas boots and a light sweater flecked in greenish colors, over which hung a long necklace of dark blue, irregularly shaped stones. She wore her black, shoulder-length hair down. He liked her appearance at once.

"Astrid Mächler. I run the control center."

Rauch introduced Kern and himself, but did not mention that Kern was from the intelligence service. Well done, Kern thought.

At the reception desk, they were given access cards, with Rauch showing his credentials, while Kern showed his private ID. The man at the counter frowned, but apparently came to the conclusion that if Kern accompanied the policeman, the officer would take responsibility for him.

Ms. Mächler led them into a meeting room.

"Please take a seat. There and there, so we can keep our distance. May I order coffee for you? Or mineral water?"

No one wanted anything.

The room had been prepared for the visit. There was a brochure of the Power Grid Company by each of the two visitors' seats, as well as a business card from which Kern learned that Ms. Mächler had studied electrical engineering at the ETH. She sat down, brushed her hair out of her face and said, "It's terrible what happened. I can't understand it."

"Neither do we, not yet," Rauch said. "But I think we'll find out. But first we want to know what Schlittler's function was."

"As a dispatcher, he was responsible for grid stability. In layman's terms, this means that the electricity supply is adjusted to demand at all times. Thanks to the European interconnected grid, this is possible without any problems. If a giant like the Gösgen NPP fails, for example, a large number of power plants across Europe ramp up their production slightly, and the grid remains stable; consumers don't notice a thing."

Rauch cleared his throat. "It's not part of the case, but I find this explanation irritating. What does it look like in the