

Chapter 11: My little hacks

Julmargo: The Truth of the Three

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I started searching for connections to Vienna. The nearest bus was leaving at 1:00 PM from the station on Sucha Street in Wrocław. However, I immediately realized that this bus hardly stops along the way, and the next stop was supposed to be in Olomouc in the Czech Republic. Fortunately, PolanBus—the carrier that operated this line—offered a paid stop on demand. Brilliant for towns like Kobierzyce and as if specifically for such an occasion. I connected through a Slovakian VPN server to the PolanBus website and paid for the additional stop—that way Eterna Corp wouldn't track us.

"Okay, we have transport—no transfers, about a 7-hour ride and we'll be there. We just need to walk to the stop on the main road, and we leave at about 1:25 PM," I told my siblings and Grandma.

"Children, will you manage without me from here? Since a driver is no longer needed, I'd like to go back to Widawa. You are so smart and on top of that, you have those... abilities," Tereska asked shyly.

For a moment, we looked at each other confused, until after a while, to my surprise, Ignacy spoke up.

"Sure, Grandma, you helped us a lot and there's no need for you to keep risking it. Go home, visit Krysia, and wait for us. Maybe our parents will come back and look for you," Gogo said in a firm voice and hugged Grandma.

Julia and I stood there speechless because it seemed that besides extraordinary strength, our youngest brother had also gained courage. Tereska looked at us, and we nodded certainly. When we were together, the three of us felt confident, and at least I didn't feel fear.

"Thank you for understanding. Please, here is some more cash, it will surely come in handy," Grandma handed Julia 600 PLN and 350 EUR. "I will have my phone with me all the time. If you have a way to call from time to time, let me know. I'll be worried about you, but I believe all the time that you must make this journey."

"And how will you get back to Widawa?" I asked.

"I'll wait until you leave, walk a bit away, and call Ryba. I have a subscription with them for moments when I can't look at my Tico anymore. Sometimes Grandma also needs to allow herself some luxury," she laughed modestly.

"Grandma, we love you, thank you for your help, and I promise I will find a safe way for us to contact you. Let's establish one

thing—if one day we call and you are being eavesdropped on, start with 'Teresa, listening'."

Grandma nodded and knew immediately what it was about—she always called herself "Tereska," the diminutive. This wouldn't surprise an eavesdropper, and we would know the line is not secure.

A moment later, we reached our stop and hugged Grandma tightly goodbye. In the distance, a bright red bus appeared, which, according to plan, began to slow down at our stop. We took one last look at Tereska, who waved to us briefly with emotion and walked away.

I got on first and paid for the three of us—cash payments were becoming less popular, but fortunately, at key moments they could still be used. Dad always said that cash payments nowadays are a bit of a gray area and a way to avoid taxes, but when you get a receipt, it's different. We got the tickets, the receipt, and at the same time, no one still had a chance to track us. I estimated that for at least three hours, the agents had no way to track us, and we quietly sat down in the free seats.

For the first five minutes, we rode looking out the windows—we knew this route well. Almost every year in winter, we would go this way with our parents to Szklarska Poręba. Dad always told us how

many times he and Grandpa Wiesio climbed Hala Szrenicka with heavy backpacks and skis. How many times a slightly stronger wind blew, the lifts stopped, and you had to walk several kilometers uphill on foot. The constant story was the one from 2006 when Grandpa's whole leg with the ski boot got stuck in deep snow. Dad had to dig a hole over a meter deep to pull him out. Of course, we knew this story in every single detail, but we always pretended it interested us very much and we didn't know how it ended. Apparently, it was important for Dad to tell us about those memories with Grandpa literally every year, and at most, we rolled our eyes that it was the same thing "agaaaaain" and laughed to ourselves.

"Marcel, we have to check what's next. Turn on Grandma's tablet and check the connections from Vienna to Trento," Julia commanded.

I quickly realized that getting to Vienna on one bus from Kobierzyce turned out to be a luxury. There was not a single direct connection to Trento from the capital of Austria. What's more, the fastest route I found on maps took over nine hours, and the nearest train after our arrival doesn't leave until 5:00 AM the next day.

"We'll be at the station in Vienna around 8:15 PM. Unfortunately, we'll have to sit in the waiting room for a bit," I told Julia.

"That's out of the question. It's dangerous—someone might take an interest in three children sitting against a wall for so many hours, and besides, we don't know this place and I wouldn't want to risk any unnecessary action. Please look for cheap accommodation nearby," our travel manager commented.

450 PLN, 560 PLN, 800 PLN... 244 PLN per night. Unfortunately, accommodations in this city were not cheap, but we had no choice; I chose the cheapest one. During the reservation, however, a completely different, bigger problem occurred. A question was asked about the date of birth of the person booking, and Julia's seventeen years were not enough. I changed her year of birth to 2007 in the form, and the reservation was successfully completed, but it was still only half the battle. Information appeared about the necessity of presenting an ID card upon check-in.

This created two more difficulties: Julia's ID showed 2009 as the year of birth, and besides, every upload of our data to a system with network access could be fodder for Eterna Corp agents.

My brain started working faster. I knew, however, that I had to stay calm and could only use my knowledge and experience. Those powers, still incomprehensible to me, had to wait. We couldn't let ourselves be tracked. Still using an encrypted connection, I downloaded the EuroID app from the store. For several years now, an international identification system has been available in the

European Union, something like our Polish mObywatel. Julia gave me her PESEL number, and we logged in. Then, in developer mode (the programmer mode), I started editing the application's local files. First, I changed my sister's birth year, and then, just in case, also the last name. To a German-sounding Szmit. I disconnected the internet, launched the app—it worked. December 11, 2007 (18 years old)—that's what the app showed now. The hotel pass was ready.

According to plan, we reached Vienna after 8:00 PM and went straight to the Plaza Inn where we were to spend the night.

"Good evening, how can I help you?" the receptionist asked in English, but with a German accent.

"Good evening, I have a reservation with you for tonight," Julia answered in fluent, even nonchalant English. She looked even older than her new 18 years and sounded as if picking up a reservation was something she had been doing for years. I thought to myself that watching cartoons and movies only in English had done its job! Julia was killing it!

"Of course, please, your ID," Julia showed the EuroID screen with her new birth date and invented name. After a moment, the receptionist thanked her.

Bingo, it passed, I thought.

"And now, the boys' IDs, please," the receptionist added normally.

Julia turned completely pale, her hands started to shake. She stood motionless for a while, until clearly nervous, she turned to me and asked in Polish: "Do... you... have... your... IDs?"

"Sure, here," I gave her our original Polish IDs, smiled broadly, and winked. I had everything under control.