

# **Palm Oil**

A Case for Elliott Kern

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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 an-

gular 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 pro-

duction, 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 seg-

ments of the population. Then I wrote the report in English and presented it to various people, including my mother. Being from Minnesota, she understands Midwestern voters. I also emailed it to some contacts from my time in Washington. That yielded some more valuable information."

"The conclusion made sense to me. Despite all the polls, the election outcome is open. And if Trump wins, it won't be because most voters like him, but because they don't like the left-liberal Democrats. And as to you, it's clear that if you get tired of being an agent, you can move to the analysis department. They'll take you straightaway. I wouldn't like it, though."

"Neither would I. Maybe in a few years."

"All right. That still leaves us time to investigate the extractor thing."

## 2 – Tuesday, October 27, 2020

Kern arrived back in Aarau toward evening. Regardless of the pandemic, the train station and its surroundings were as busy as ever. As he marched to his mother's villa, he left the bustle behind. The house was dark, his mother was not yet home. Since she had announced in the morning that she would bring dinner, he went to his office and sat down at the PC, which had a secure connection to the computers of the intelligence service. When he opened the machine, there was a ringtone: the dossier sent by Tamara had arrived. Kern opened it. He skimmed over the part that Stierli had already explained to him and turned his attention to Tanner's description.

There was a photograph of the man. He was short and skinny, clean-shaven, his graying hair cut short, dressed in an ill-fitting suit. He even wore a wide tie, the kind that had long since gone out of style. Kern thought, a moralist. He noticed Tanner's facial expression. This struck him as rebellious. He had encountered such types already several times. They provoked customs or police officers with a deliberately insubordinate expression and their body language. As a result, they were checked more closely, possibly harassed a bit, which of course angered them, so that the situation

escalated. Afterwards, they felt unjustly treated, about which they triumphed.

The dossier mentioned Tanner's dismissal, but did not elaborate. There was a reference that the files were archived at the ADC.

Tanner lived in a new estate north of the Lenzburg train station. His office with the name 'Swiss-World-Connect' had the same address. According to the dossier, it was a one-man business. Kern would visit the location soon and try to get into conversation with Tanner using a pretext he still had to think up. He was interested in his way of working and his possible contacts.

After that, he informed himself about palm oil. He switched to his private laptop, as he avoided surfing the Internet on the secured computer. Who actually said that Comprag's extractors were not needed in Indonesia for palm oil production as stated? If that was a major industry, Kern could imagine that a hundred extractors was realistic.

Kern surfed the Internet and found that at least the large-scale production of palm oil was controversial. He came across an organization in Basel called 'Action Against Palm Oil' – AAP for short – which was militant. Their goal was to get the major distributors to agree to give up the oil, which was widely used in Switzerland. If they did not succeed, they threatened political pressure. He found various newspaper articles that dealt with the subject. And then he actually came across a letter to the editor in one of the papers that made him won-

der. The author was in favor of the construction of large palm oil plantations in Indonesia! The aim was to promote the economic development of the country. This would mean considerable investment in factories and infrastructure. The positive consequences were jobs for the population and taxes for the country. The development would have a negative impact on the environment. There was, admittedly, a conflict of goals. But it was not right to put the brakes on the economic development of poor countries from the perspective of saturated Europeans. The letter was signed by J.-P. Tanner, Lenzburg.

At first glance, therefore, it looked as if Tanner wanted to handle the purchase of the machines as it corresponded to the export application. On the other hand, it was possible that he had written the letter to the editor in order to camouflage his intentions.

Kern leaned back and clasped his hands behind his head. Then a grin developed inside him, and then his whole face grinned. The letter to the editor was worth its weight in gold. It gave him the excuse to get into a conversation with Tanner. He would contact Tanner as a journalist and claim that he wanted to write an article on Indonesian palm oil and offer it to the customer magazine of a supermarket chain.

He smirked as he remembered how this cover had come about.

During an assignment in Lisbon – the same one

in which he had worked with Günter Klink of the German Federal Intelligence Service – there had been a lot of waiting time. Kern had used this time to write a report on the Alfama district of Lisbon for his mother, which he enriched with photos. Kern was actually forbidden to share his assignment locations with anyone outside the service. Nevertheless, he used to inform his mother about it. Marcia was his emergency address. Stierli knew about this violation of regulations. However, he knew Kern's mother, since he had frequented the Kern home as a high school student, and trusted her.

The mission in Lisbon had yielded only meager results. Kern's report was a one page affair. "As a consolation take this," he had said, handing Stierli his coverage. Stierli had received the report curiously, adjusted himself comfortably in his armchair and leafed through the article. Then he had laughed out loud.

"What's so funny about that?" Kern had asked in wonder.

Stierli had slapped the sheets on the table. "There's nothing funny about the text. But it makes a first-class cover for you."

With the help of a colleague from the tennis club, Stierli had been able to place the article in the high-circulation customer magazine of a large supermarket chain. To cement his reputation, Kern had written two more reports for this magazine, one on Washington, the other on Dublin. Both

were well received. Since then, Kern had been considered a travel reporter. He had obtained a press card and was able to pass himself off as a freelance journalist.

Kern closed the laptop. Time for a drink before dinner. He went to the kitchen and peered into the refrigerator. There was an open bottle of Soave wine. He poured himself a glass and was about to go to his room when he heard the front door slam.

His mother was home. He went to meet her. She looked weary. "Are you all right?" he asked her.

"Actually, yes. I was able to reach a settlement between the owners of a property and their business tenants, but it was laborious. Both sides gave each other nothing, which is understandable. How about you?"

"I had an excellent meal with Stierli in a French restaurant in Bern's old town. It was accompanied by a Fixin which I think I should stock a few bottles of."

"Do that. Are you very hungry? I don't feel like cooking. How about a salad?"

"Agreed. Why don't you throw on some comfortable clothes and I'll prepare the salad?"

Fifteen minutes later, his mother came into the kitchen. She had showered and changed the suit she wore professionally to jeans and a sweater. She seemed much fresher now. He poured her a glass of Soave, and they sat down at the big kitchen table, where the salad plates were already waiting.

"My assessment of the American elections has

been well received. I owe that in no small part to your comments."

His mother took a sip of wine and said, "These elections are dividing the whole country, even families are affected. I already voted by mail and gave my vote to Biden, but my siblings will probably vote for Trump. With my sister's family, I can understand. They vote like most farmers in the corn belt. And my brother does what his wife says. She is, after all, the breadwinner of the family, and as a manager, she votes Republican, even though she doesn't like Trump. By the way, have you voted yet? Or are you going to?"

Kern had both Swiss and American citizenship. His mother had taken care of this right after his birth. This had enabled him to study in the U.S. without any problems and also to take up a position with the FBI.

"I haven't. I guess I'm not really politically engaged. It's probably my paternal heritage that makes me tend toward neutrality."

"Probably the reason why your situation assessment came out well. Without wishful thinking one way or the other."

"Don't you talk to your brother and sister about the elections?"

Marcia laughed out. "Certainly not. There's an unspoken understanding there. We don't want to jeopardize family peace."

"So what were my grandparents' political views?"

"My father belonged to the Republicans. That was at a time when they were a popular party and the Democrats were still on the right, especially in the Southern states. My mother stayed out of politics."

Kern recalled the two visits to his grandparents in Minneapolis. For grandfather Seth Tyler's seventy-fifth birthday, his parents had traveled from Switzerland. He was a student at the time, and they had first visited him at Yale University. He had given them a tour of the campus, and his mother, who had studied at Yale herself, had remembered some things wistfully. Afterwards, they had all flown to Minneapolis together.

Kern's grandparents had treated Kern and his father kindly but distantly. Marcia had explained to her husband and son that this had nothing to do with either of them or with their foreign origin. It was simply due to the nature of their parents.

Grandfather Seth Tyler had run a prestigious law firm in St. Paul, and Grandmother Lucy had bred dogs, specifically American Foxhounds. The wayward dogs had been a presence in the Tyler home and on the estate. Kern had tried to flirt with them, but they turned their backs on him. "Don't sweat it," his mother recommended. "The animals can be very arrogant."

The second time, Kern had traveled alone to visit his grandparents. He had already worked at the FBI. His parents had delegated him to celebrate Seth's eightieth birthday. Seth had been rickety by

then and died two years after that. The grandparents were quite proud of their FBI grandson and presented him accordingly to their circle of friends. Kern had also met Marcia's siblings again and visited them at their homes afterward. He had liked the countryside of the Corn Belt, where Aunt Amy farmed with her husband, as well as the town of Stillwater on the La Crosse River, where Uncle Jeff ran an antiquarian bookstore.

Kern said, "I remember my visits to the grandparents. Both times it was for one of your father's birthdays. Why weren't your mother's birthdays celebrated in a similar way?"

"She insisted on not making a fuss about her growth rings, as she called them. I think aging was getting to her."

Kern grinned. "Do I detect a resemblance between mother and daughter?"

"Well, I think men care much more about being celebrated."

"I don't. Obviously, I'm taking after you."

Kern usually forgot his birthday. But he never forgot his mother's. There was no celebration, but since he was back in Switzerland, he always ordered a huge bouquet of flowers for her birthday and took her out to dinner. It was more than a ritual. Kern was grateful to his mother. She had given his life essential impulses, but had always left him his freedom. He said, "You don't take after your mother in one respect. You've never indicated that you want to keep a dog."

"True. Cats are closer to me."

"Would you like a cat?"

"Actually, yes, but not urgently, not as long as I'm working professionally. If we decide we want one, let's get an animal out of a shelter."

She yawned. "I'm knackered today. By the way, did Felix give you a new assignment?"

"He did."

"Do you have to travel?"

"No. It looks like I'm going to be working in Aargau again."

"It's not bad at all, I think. Traveling around under Corona conditions is not exactly pleasant. By the way, stricter rules will apply again starting tomorrow."

"I saw it on Bluewin."

"Well, somewhere along the line the spook will hopefully be over."