

*En route to Khorasan following an  
earthquake. Persia, 1969.  
Photo (and dedication) Hilmar Pabel.*

# THE WHITE GIANT



*words Andrew Curry*  
*photographs Timm Kölln*

**I**n the winter, the German town of Görlitz is blanketed in snow, the granite flagstone sidewalks downtown icy and slick. The historic town is tucked away in the southeastern corner of Germany, where the Polish, German and Czech borders come together. The Neisse River runs through the city centre, and a footbridge is all that separates Germany from Poland. The city was torn in two by the Second World War.

Photographer Timm Kölln and I met in Görlitz in mid-December, chasing a winding set of coincidences that ran across 40 years, from Toledo to this border town deep in the East. The key, oddly, was Spanish cycling legend Federico Bahamontes, a man with seemingly no connection to this snowy, sleepy central European spot.

The story began like so: Timm photographed the “Eagle of Toledo” for *Rouleur* in 2007. His portraits made their way via a mutual friend to a retired German journalist named Randolph Braumann. Once a fixture in Hamburg’s bars and editorial boardrooms, Braumann now lives in sleepy Görlitz.

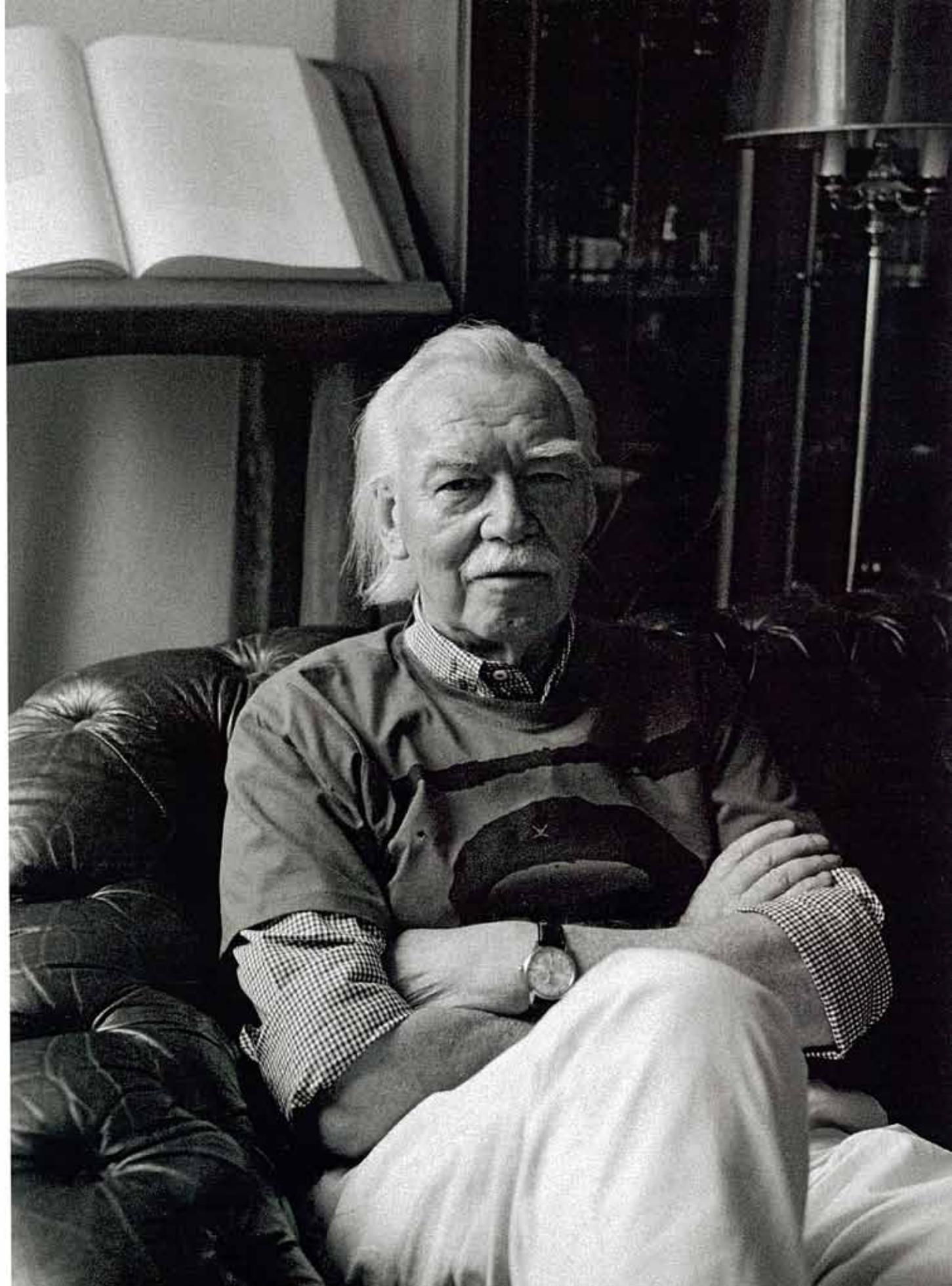
One afternoon in 2011, Timm got an e-mail from Braumann. “It was a great pleasure to see my old friend Federico again. What a great portrait, what a magnificent head!” the missive read. “We’ve gotten old together. When I reported on him, we were both in our mid-to-late 20s. Tomorrow the Vuelta stage ends in Toledo. I’m sure he’ll be on stage for the podium ceremonies. Thanks for the great memories!”

It turns out Braumann rode in Bahamontes’ team car over the dusty roads of 1960s France while covering the Tour for his German newspaper. But he wasn’t just another past-his-prime sports reporter reminiscing about the good old days. Now 78, Braumann went from reporting on the Tour as a young man to a decade as one of Germany’s most daring war correspondents, narrowly escaping death in combat zones the world over.

Timm, whose cycling photography is the mainstay of his portfolio, was intrigued by the idea of a sports reporter who reinvented himself. And I, a writer on many subjects, just edging into the world of cycling journalism, was too.

We wanted to hear more about the view from the press seats in the days of Anquetil, Altig, Bahamontes and Simpson, of course. But there were other questions on my mind. How does a sports reporter for one of Europe’s biggest tabloids transform himself into a conflict junkie? And was there a common thread that ran through Braumann’s decades of work, something that tied post-race conversations with Bahamontes and Tom Simpson to face-to-face interviews with Muammar Gaddafi and Idi Amin?

We climbed the stairs to the second floor of a beautifully restored pre-war building not far from Görlitz’s train station and rang the doorbell. Braumann’s wife greeted us and ushered us into the living room, where Braumann was standing with the help of two crutches. He had recently undergone surgery for the first part of a double hip replacement, and moved gingerly to sit. On the wall above his bed was a photo of a much younger man, wearing aviator shades and a shirt open at the neck in the middle of a third-world market. “I like to have something to remind myself of the days when I could stand all by myself,” Braumann joked.



As we started talking, I felt like the odd one out – I’ve never been to the Tour as a journalist, and together Timm and Braumann have more than a decade of experience under their belts, albeit 40 years apart. In the late 1950s, Braumann left his hometown paper for a scrappy upstart tabloid, then called *10 Pfennig Bild* – 10 Cent Picture.

Founded in the wreckage of post-war Hamburg, *Bild* was modelled on British scandal sheets like *The Sun* and *The Daily Mirror*. Today, *Bild* is the largest-circulation newspaper in Germany, read by nearly four million Germans. “They called me because they were building a sports department,” Braumann says. “They had a bad reputation, but they made me such an offer.” Doubling the salary he had been making at a local daily in the Ruhr area, Braumann was put on the weird sports beat – rowing, canoeing, cycling.

*Bild* first sent Braumann to the Tour not because he knew something about bikes but because he spoke French better than the other guys on the sports desk. In Paris before the start, Braumann happened to meet a man whose restaurant on the Rue Montmartre was a shrine to Bahamontes,

the “Eagle of Toledo”. As a sponsor, the *restaurateur* had the right to drive his car in the race caravan; Braumann rode in the back. “I rode in that car for years. Every night, I ended up in Bahamontes’ hotel, with his whole troop,” says Braumann.

Braumann’s job was simple. The races were in France and Belgium, but there were few German riders. “At the time, the trend in Germany was creating heroes,” he says. “The idea was to get readers interested and invested in the personalities, and the sports.”

There was one problem. At the time, cycling was a mystery to most German fans. “No one had heard of these races – Milan-Sanremo, Paris-Roubaix. No one knew anything about cycling,” Braumann says. The Tour de France was covered in short text briefs, typically nothing more than the day’s results.

The sports department’s sole Francophone was determined to change the situation. *Bild*’s editors knew that engaged readers bought more papers, and races like the Tour were perfect opportunities to chronicle – or create – weeks of drama and rivalry, sometimes out of thin air. “The coverage had always been sort of

boring, just recounting the action, often without even mentioning riders’ names,” Braumann recalls. “We wanted to put personalities and the highlights up front.”

For the young Braumann, covering the Tour was everything journalism was supposed to be. Each morning he got in the car with his Parisian restaurant owner “chauffeur”; every evening they sat down to dinner in a different part of France, tucking into the local specialities on the paper’s generous expense account.

The Tour at the time wasn’t the media and promotional circus of today. “There were 20 international journalists, at most,” Braumann recalls. The race caravan was as good as unregulated, with team cars dodging in and out of the peloton. One foggy descent of the Col du Tourmalet reduced traffic to a crawl, terrified riders screaming their warnings as slow-moving vehicles loomed out of the mist ahead.

Journalists typically arrived at the finish ten minutes before the riders, dashing to the line to interview the winners or to set up appointments at team hotels for later that evening. *Bild*’s deadline in those days was 4pm, so Braumann’s stories were often called into the office a day

**“We wanted to put personalities and the highlights up front”**



late, increasing the urge to add colour and drama to his dispatches despite tight space constraints. In the days before fax and e-mail, reporters had to dictate their stories to stenographers in the office. Phone lines were a precious commodity that the travelling press fought over.

Braumann slides a folder full of clippings across the table that he has saved for decades. I read them carefully, working through the German to get a feel for the tone and style. One piece, written from the 1962 Tour, captures the post-race

scene at a German sprinter's hotel in a few spare, telegraphic sentences:

**Dinner in Montpellier's Hotel Metropol. As a *hors d'oeuvre*, Rudi Altig is introduced to a mediocre 'Miss Paris'. He shoots me a look. 'I've had it up to here with these birds who apply the green jersey to me every day. Strange Misses they have here. But I guess it's part of the business'.**

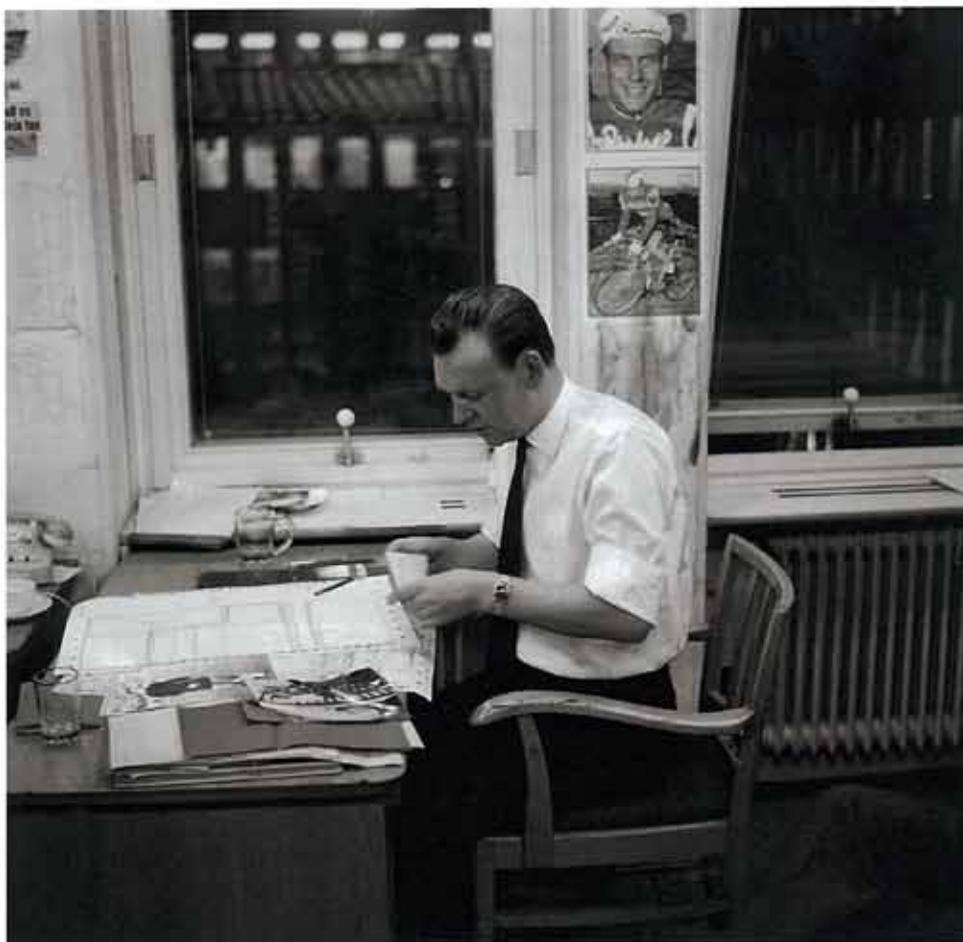
The yellowed, fragile clips tug me back to another era of journalism, an era when

writers and riders were on the same team. It's a total departure from the adversarial feel I get sitting down with sources today, visibly freer of the careful scrutiny of press liaisons and brand managers.

Take this staccato dinner-table exchange, not long after Altig's "mediocre Miss Paris" exits stage left:

"How do you see the last week playing out? 2800 metres of climbing?" Braumann asks the German sprinter. "I've got a plan. A fantastic plan.

BLD editorial office,  
Hamburg, 1963.  
Photo Otto Metelmann.



Come a little closer – but you’re not allowed to tell anyone...”

It’ll be hard for me, but nothing will be revealed. In a few days, we can talk about it. The plan isn’t safe. But if everything falls into place, we’ll be bringing a jersey from this Tour de France home to Germany. If not the yellow, then at least the green for the rider with the most points. P.S. – Rudi Altig’s plan has a lot to do with riders Vannitsen, Baldini and Graczyk. (Friday: The answer to the riddle.)

In other words, stay tuned, dear reader, for the next instalment, available tomorrow at a newsstand near you. Notice the use of the first person, singular *and* plural – it’s not Altig’s jersey, it’s *ours*, brought home to Germany. Cheering the home team was part of creating heroes, of course, but Braumann wasn’t interested exclusively in Germans. Tom Simpson, Rik van Looy, Jacques Anquetil (“Biggest Star since Coppi!” the headline of Braumann’s profile screams); anyone who might inject personality into coverage of the race.

“It was a consensus, it was planned. We were making a newspaper in a new style,” Braumann says. “We were looking for people we could keep going back to, people the public could engage with.”

It’s a reminder of the vital role journalists played in creating the sport’s mythos, building legends out of a contest to see who could ride a bike the fastest and farthest. “They Aren’t Thinking of Money: The beautiful and redemptive end of the Tour de France”, reads one headline from the end of the 1962 Tour.

**“For fans on the side of the road the racers are dirt-spattered, colourfully-clothed devils, flying by in a blur. The only impression is of faces clenched in warped grimaces”**



What is money, next to the feeling of winning? Against the feeling of being loved? You can't put a price on the adoration of the 35,000 people in the Parc des Princes Stadium, just as you can't put a price on the wagging of a dog's tail.

Braumann goes on to recreate the moment when the stadium loudspeakers called Tom Simpson's name:

He got on his bike, to take his lap of honour. He was smiling. And then the 35,000 began to call his name. First in small groups, then with greater force.

And Tom began to feel, that under these loud shouts could be heard softer, more honest tones of the heart. They amazed him. Him, Tom Simpson from England.

Suddenly he wasn't smiling any longer. His head sank, and tears rolled down his long, pointed nose.

German readers unfamiliar with cycling had to be educated, astounded, awed. A "Special Report" from Paris, July 7, 1963 casts the spotlight on the fearsome, "neck-breaking" descents of the Tour, something TV coverage today still struggles to convey.

It's the gruesome logic of sport: everything gets better all the time. When one of the super climbers (earlier it might have been Coppi, Bartali or Robic alone) has 20 equally strong companions chasing him (today Puschel can stay within sight of Bahamontes) the decision gets made on different territory. On the descent.

Rik van Looy: "I wore out the soles of three pairs of shoes trying to brake."

Hans Junkermann: "I pulled the levers back as far as they would go. But I was still moving 70 kilometres an hour."

Raymond Poulidor: "In the last few turns I put my right leg on the front wheel trying to slow down a bit."

Jacques Anquetil: "I saw Poulidor in front of me in the turn, his bike looking like a V. His front wheel was at a right angle to his rear wheel."

On the descent of the Portillon, Poulidor risked life and limb to claw back exactly ten seconds from Anquetil. On the 25-kilometre descent of the Col d'Aspet, Puschel and Junkermann on his wheel, rode like madmen and regained four minutes.

One sees things at the Tour, things that no TV cameraman can capture – because he would be flung from the motorcycle while trying to film. This life-threatening fight for just a few seconds is harder for bystanders to see than the classic, 'heroic' uphill battles. Here no car or motorcycle can follow. For fans on the side of the road the racers are dirt-spattered, colourfully-clothed devils, flying by in a blur. The only impression is of faces clenched in warped grimaces.

"You're not allowed to crash," says Dieter Puschel. "When one crashes just once, it's all over. One can only risk it, when one doesn't know how it can end."

And sometimes, the hunt for drama goes a little too far: "The Shorts of Mr. Junkermann" blames the German star's shorts for a poor time-trial performance, with an entire paragraph devoted to their personality. "Herr Junkermann's shorts have the chance to go down in sporting history," Braumann wrote. "It will perhaps be their fault if their owner has lost his chance to win the Tour." Or perhaps not...

Braumann carried the love of telling personal stories that captured a larger truth with him when he left sports reporting behind at the age of 30: "I didn't want to be some grandpa at 60, still interviewing 18-year-old swimmers. Eventually he landed at the German weekly *Stern* that played second, cheekier fiddle to the staid *Der Spiegel*.

At *Stern*, Braumann's command of French took him quickly from sports reporting to covering foreign news. At the time, the world's war zones were mostly Francophone. As the stunned quiet of Europe's post-war years gave way to independence movements and political struggles across the globe, Braumann was perfectly placed to cover conflicts all across Asia and Africa. The budding war correspondent cut his teeth in Vietnam, in the early days of the USA's involvement. At a time when West German politicians were studiously deferential to their allies in Washington, his was some of the first openly critical coverage of America's policies in Southeast Asia.

Between 1965 and '75, Braumann covered crises on three continents. In August 1968, just a few years after watching Bahamontes climb the Alps, Braumann was in Port Harcourt, Nigeria, on the frontline of the doomed Biafran war of independence. He was there to interview 28-year-old warlord Benjamin Adekunle, nicknamed the "Bloodhound of Africa". The scene he set in his story for *Stern* was surreal:

Whisky and beer were abundant. Uniformed go-go girls DJ'ed. Adekunle danced and petted his mascot, a small mountain goat named 'Ojukwu'.

This time, there was none of the camaraderie Braumann had enjoyed with his interviewees at the Tour.

Braumann: What is happening to the European Humanitarian Assistance programmes authorised through your government?

Adekunle: In the section of the front that I rule – and that is the whole south front from Lagos to the border of Cameroon – I do not want to see the Red Cross, Caritas Aid, World Church delegation, the Pope, missionaries, or UN delegations.

Braumann: Does that mean that the many thousands of tonnes of food

*Interview with the president of Congo, Mobutu Sese Seko, during the civil war in Congo, 1967. Photo Thomas Höpker.*



that are stored in Lagos will never get to the refugee camps in your section of the country?

Adekunle: You are a sharp one, my friend. That's exactly what I am saying.

A million civilians died, mostly of starvation, before Biafra was re-absorbed into Nigeria in 1970.

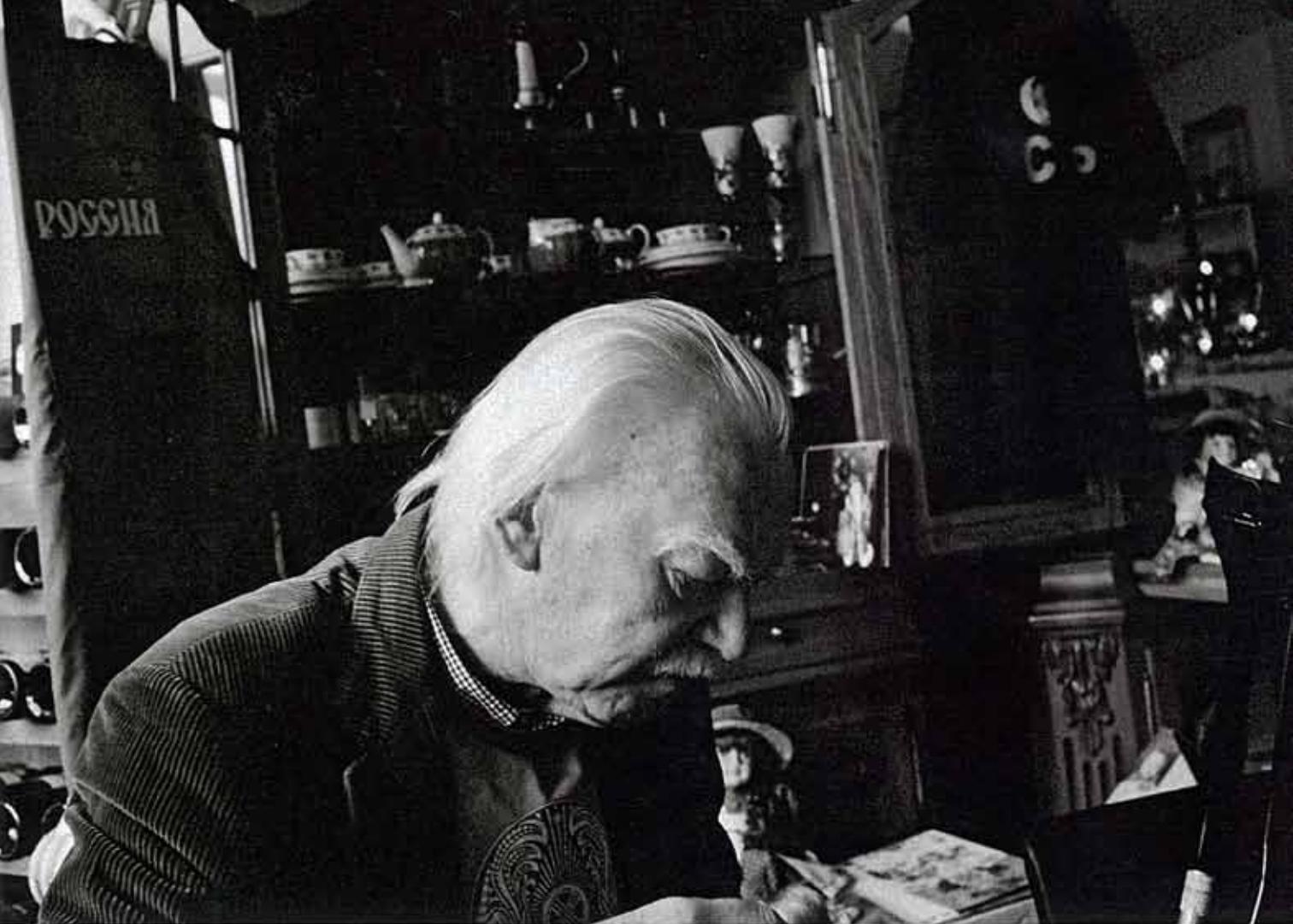
By then, Braumann had spent so much time in African war zones that he stopped paying into his retirement account,

convinced he'd never live to see 65. Sitting in his Görlitz living room, snow-white hair lit by the pale winter sun streaming in the window, it's clear he has no regrets. "It meant I had to keep working, I guess, which was maybe a blessing," he says.

I ask if Braumann's fascination with war and conflict owed something to being a child of WWII. His hometown, Bochum, was a key steel production centre; it was bombed 150 times during the war by the Allies. "We played soldiers, even though we were in the middle of a real war,"

he recalls. "The first thing we did after coming out of bomb shelters was run to find shrapnel fragments."

Braumann was ten when the war ended, from a family with no connections and little money. His father was a part-time football referee, the boy's sole connection to the world of pro sports prior to journalism. His family didn't have the wherewithal to send him to high school, leaving him with bleak prospects and a lack of expectations. At 15, he was pushed towards a career as a salesman.



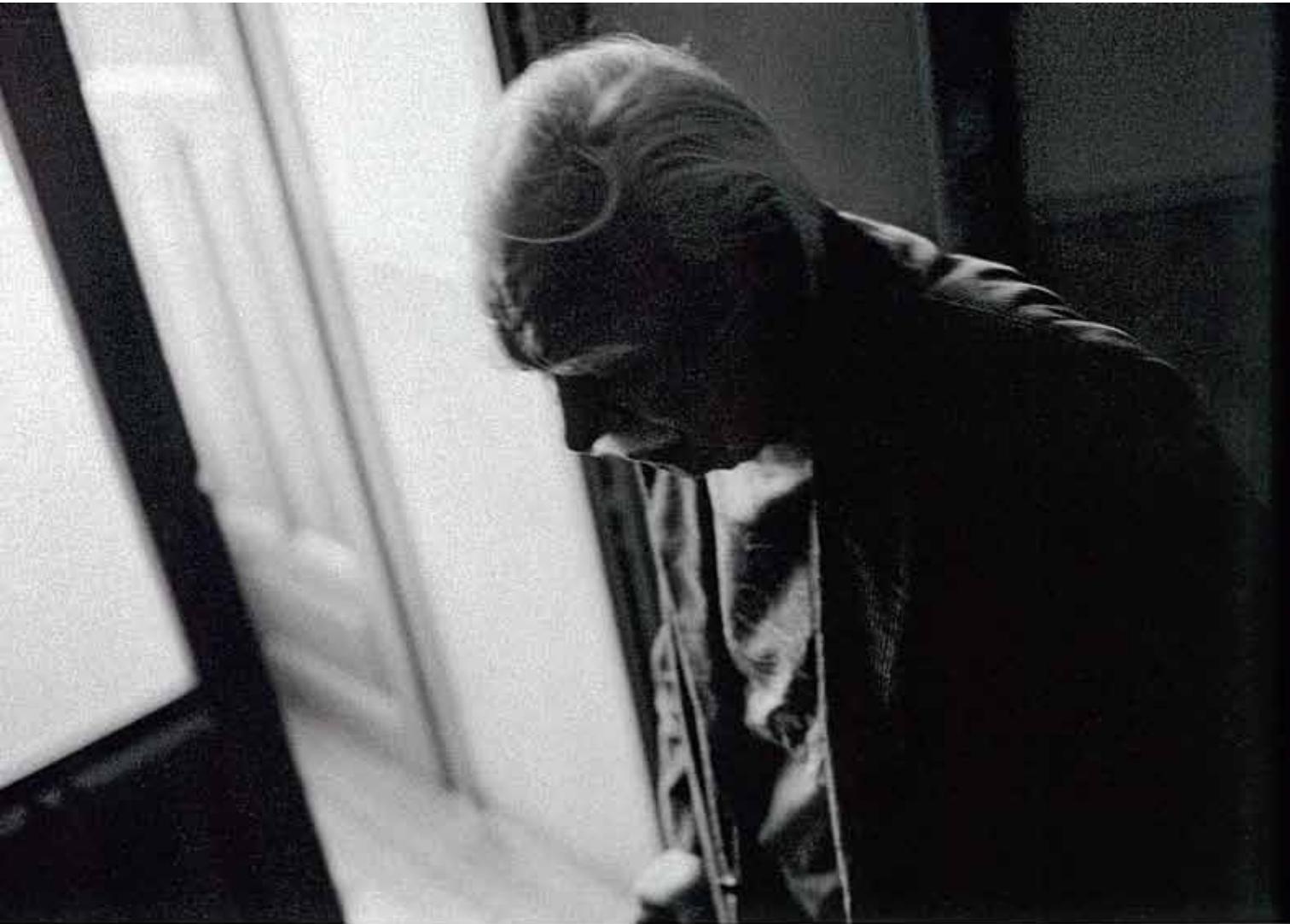
At 17, Braumann ran away to join the French Foreign Legion and was turned away; not long after he started working as an apprentice sports reporter for the *Bochumer Anzeiger*, his hometown paper. One of his editor's first acts was changing his byline, ditching Braumann's über-German first name, Friedhelm, in favour of the very un-German "Randolph". ("He was a big Churchill fan," Braumann says.)

Later, he adopted the *nom de plume* as his legal name. Perhaps inevitably, the

freewheeling war correspondent picked up a variety of nicknames in his time on the world's front lines. He's most fond of the *nom de guerre* "Congo Randy", less so of "Brandy Randy", a soubriquet bestowed by his war correspondent colleagues. Someone scrawled "*Der Weisse Riese*" – "The White Giant" – across a photo from his time in Africa. It was the nickname locals gave to the many mercenaries who plied their trade in those days as hired guns or arms smugglers. Braumann often found himself travelling with soldiers of fortune in conflict zones, relying on

men with shady motives and pasts for protection and camaraderie.

Braumann was on the Israeli front lines during the Yom Kippur War. He covered Angola's civil war, Bangladesh's war of independence and the Iran-Iraq war. He joined Cambodian troops on elephants not far from the Vietnamese border. On assignment in Bangladesh, he disguised himself as a Red Cross worker to document a civilian massacre; he later told another reporter it was the worst day of his life.



Over the years, Braumann interviewed a rogues' gallery of dictators and warlords: Saddam Hussein, Idi Amin, Mobutu Sese Seko, "Papa Doc" Duvalier, Robert Mugabe. Muammar Gaddafi gave him a gold Rolex Oyster. A few years later, moonlighting as an aid worker, he used the watch to bribe a customs official in Ethiopia into letting a planeload of relief supplies donated by *Stern* readers through the Addis Ababa airport unmolested.

"That was the golden age of print media. *Stern*, *Spiegel*, *Paris-Match*,

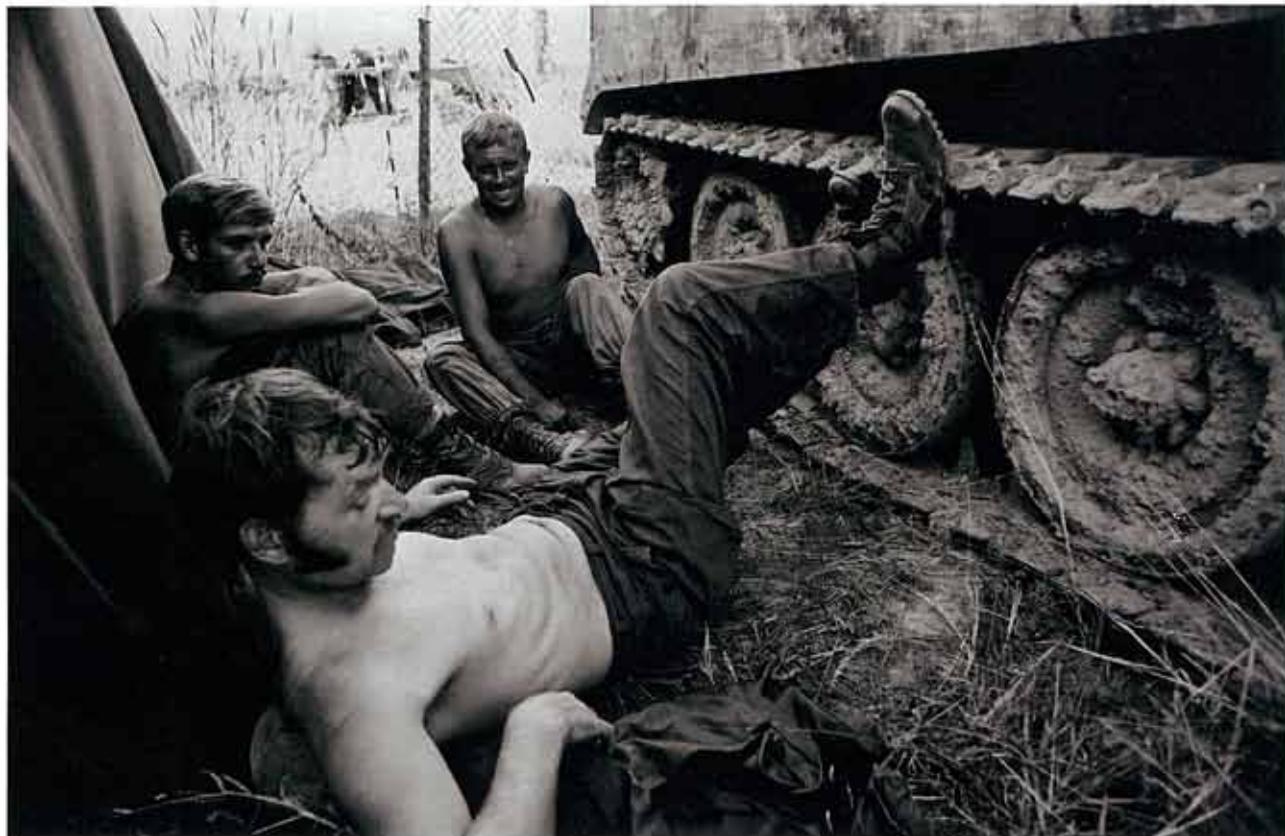
*The Sunday Times*, *The Sunday Telegraph*," Braumann says wistfully. "Money flowed in rivers." The lines between journalist and spy could be blurry; Braumann was debriefed regularly by the German intelligence service and says he met with MI6 agents from time to time to share what he learned in the field.

Money and well-placed friends were no protection from danger, and Braumann had his share of near misses. In 1970, he was trapped in an Amman hotel

for nine days during Jordan's "Black September" civil war. A fellow *Stern* reporter managed to negotiate a ceasefire that allowed them to escape.

While in Amman, Braumann interviewed Palestinian Liberation Organisation founder George Habash. The interview sat on his editor's desk for months – until Habash, then the head of a Marxist splinter group called the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, masterminded the hijackings of four passenger jets and the capture of more

*Ho Bo woods, Vietnam (US Army),  
September, 1971.*



than 300 hostages. Braumann's interview ran in the magazine under a made-up quote ("We want to start a Third World War"). The article so angered Habash that Braumann was sentenced to death in absentia.

Barely a year later, on a sweltering September night in 1971, he and a friend went dancing at the Tu-Do Club in Saigon. Moments after they sat down behind a pillar, the club exploded in a flash of light and a thunderous roar. "The whole place blew up," Braumann recalls.

"There were 36 dead, lots of wounded and one person unhurt – me."

For years afterwards, he crossed the street whenever he saw someone carrying a briefcase. Every parked car was a potential bomb. I ask what drove him to keep going back, war after war after war. "I just wanted to tell good stories," he says. "And I was fighting for a living. There were 200 people on the staff [at *Stern*], and we all knew you could come back once without a good story, but not twice."

Oddly, Braumann says he found that being a war correspondent mirrored life on the Tour. Not because of the "epic battles" and "bitter rivalries", most of which have more to do with the efforts of journalists than the realities of the peloton. Rather, Braumann felt like a part of a family. He likened three weeks following the Tour to the weeks he spent covering American troops in Vietnam, hunkering down each night with hundreds of GIs, facing the dark jungle from behind a network of trenches and foxholes.

“You’re in a closed society, a united group. Together versus the world. It’s the same at the Tour: 200 people, all together,” Braumann says. “If I had to say what ties cycling and war reporting together, I’d say that sense of solidarity you feel in a group of fellow combatants.”

That solidarity shaped the way Braumann covered cycling – and doping, which was as common in the peloton of Anquetil’s era as it was in Armstrong’s. Back then, only the dope itself was different: unholy mixtures of meth, coke and booze, topped off with chemicals more commonly used to kill rats. “They really pumped themselves full of strychnine, and then, bam! To the start line,” Braumann says. “They did it to dull the pain, to last longer, and have more energy.”

Doping was common knowledge among the small cadre of reporters following the Tour. “Journalists didn’t criticise it. We just figured it was part of the sport. It was just clear to me this was a sport where people were trying to reduce suffering,” Braumann says one well-known German sprinter was known inside the peloton as “the rolling pharmacy”.

There was little to be gained by airing

the close-knit community’s dirty laundry. But Braumann came close on occasion, coming up with ways to hint at what was going on behind the curtains. In 1962, German rider Hans Junkermann was in seventh place going into a mountain time-trial up the dreaded Superbagnères. The next day Junkermann was barely able to get on his bike, and collapsed and withdrew 50 kilometres into the stage – along with eleven other riders. They all claimed to have eaten bad fish the night before, even though none of the team hotels had fish on the menu.

Read Braumann’s report on the German hero’s precipitous fall four decades later and it is a study in the importance of context. To anyone initiated in the ways of the sport, the message was clear. Braumann wrote:

Dear [Hans] Junkermann, I must admit, that for a moment even I doubted that it was food poisoning that forced you to bow out of the Tour de France.

...

Naturally, it looks funny when on the morning after a major mountain time-trial top riders like Van Aerde,

Decabooter, Rimessi, De Mulder – and Junkermann – fall off their bikes chalk-white, sweat-soaked and with deep circles under their eyes.

For those readers not in the know, the next paragraph might sound like earnest concern, rather than thinly veiled sarcasm.

But we know you’re not one to mess with poison. Never in your life have you given up in the middle of a race. Unexpectedly, that’s what you had to do the other day, with nothing more than a fifth place in a mountain time-trial to show for it. That must be tough.

...

There’s nothing better to be done than to forget about the fish from Luchon as quickly as possible.

The “Fish Dish From Luchon” article hit just the right note. Junkermann and a score of others, outraged at the mocking tone of other newspaper reports, called for a riders’ strike. Braumann’s piece gave him what today might be called plausible deniability. Yet those in the know were grateful to reporters for finally hinting

**“Adventure.  
It was always all  
about adventure”**

*Air raid close to Port Harcourt,  
Nigeria, 1968. Photo Gerd Heidemann.*









at the drug use behind the scenes – the riders’ excuses were giving their products a bad name. “The head of the German Fish Industry Association called to thank me for making it clear that fish wasn’t to blame for all these guys dropping out,” Braumann says.

There is no doubt journalists at the time saw doping as something of a joke. Junkermann’s blazing, drug-fuelled ride the day before was met with knowing winks among the press corps. “It was totally clear such exertions weren’t fuelled by bread and water alone,” Braumann says. “It wasn’t till Tom Simpson died in 1967 that people stopped laughing.”

Even today, Braumann’s puzzled by the moralistic tone the doping discussion has taken in his native country. “That a hero like Jan Ullrich not only falls, but gets stepped on later, only happens in Germany,” Braumann says. “Now all anyone wants to talk about here is doping. Nowhere else is there such theatre about this stuff.”

The more we talk, the more I realise Braumann may be one of the few pure reporters I’ve met. Most journalists will tell you they’re neutral observers, interested in both sides of an argument. The truth is, most aren’t. Whether it’s a war or a town council meeting, most go with the heroes and villains already cast, their stories half-written and judgments already made. We’re human – bias comes with the territory.

But Braumann’s just excited to be in the middle of things, wherever that is. Even approaching his eighth decade, Braumann still has a reporter’s compulsion to meet people and ask them questions. Görlitz may be small, out of the way and on the decline, but that hasn’t stopped Braumann from digging for stories. He writes guest columns for a local paper and keeps an active Twitter account.

Halfway through our interview, Braumann suggests we break for lunch. He’s got somewhere specific in mind.

After slowly hobbling down several flights of stairs and into Timm’s car, we head to a cramped storefront in the centre of town. A sign in the window reads “Russian Specialities”. Inside, a large, heavy wood table takes up most of the store. The walls are lined with Russian candy, canned goods and vodkas, a tiny treasure for East Germans who miss the old days.

The proprietor, a trim German man with a steel-grey buzz cut and a navy jumper, warms greasy meat pies the size of a fist in a microwave, bringing them out to us along with tea and jam. Braumann introduces us around the table. It’s clear he’s a bit of a local celebrity, and relishes the attention. The conversation bounces between the capabilities of the GDR’s air force and the doping options preferred by East Germany’s Olympic marksmen, both topics the shop owner seems intimately familiar with.

Finally, it’s time to go. I hold the door open for Braumann, who hobbles out into the cold to wait for Timm and the car. The shop door closes behind us with a soft tinkle from the bell above, leaving us alone on the sidewalk. Braumann steadies himself on his crutches and turns to me with a sly smile under his moustache. “Do you know who that was? That guy used to be the head of the Stasi in town,” he says. “In 1989, he stood on the steps of the secret police headquarters with his pistol, holding off pro-democracy activists trying to storm the building.”

Braumann couldn’t care less about the former Stasi chief’s politics, or his past. The guy’s got great stories. What more could a reporter ask for?

It’s been decades since Braumann set out to cover a war or a revolution. Even at his peak, chasing wars was a young man’s game: back problems made it tough for him to climb on Israeli tanks during the 1973 Yom Kippur War. In 1978, Braumann left *Stern* for less physically demanding positions editing

and writing for German travel and environmental magazines.

Today, Braumann remembers perfectly well encounters with mercenaries and soldiers in the jungles of Vietnam and the Congo, but the details of jobs he had in Hamburg are shoved further towards the back of his mental filing cabinet. After the sun sets, he takes us out to dinner at a hotel restaurant not far from the Neisse, greeting the waitresses by name. The wine and the stories flow.

We talk about the Tour, the struggling media industry, the nearby Polish-German border. I’m still not convinced that pressure and competition explain the risks he took as a younger man – there are easier places to find stories, after all. I ask again what it was that made war zones so irresistible, despite the physical and personal toll. “Adventure. It was always all about adventure,” Braumann muses. “I was always on the knife’s edge.”

Finally we call it a night. Snow is falling again, and on this night the icy sidewalks and stairs are adventure enough for a man with artificial hips and a pair of aluminium crutches.

A few weeks later, I forward Braumann a link to an article about British war photographer Don McCullin, who at 77 went to Syria with his cameras and flak jacket for one last taste of the dark thrill of conflict.

I got an e-mail back that night. McCullin, a year younger than Braumann, was an old acquaintance. “I get him,” Randy wrote to me. “A few days ago, when I saw German transports taking off for Mali on the evening news, I said to my wife, ‘I want to be on that plane’. Given my crippled state, a joke – but who knows what kind of nonsense I’d get into if I were still as fit as Don. *Vive la mort, vive la guerre, vive le sacré mercenaire...*”

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*Andrew Curry is a freelance journalist based in Berlin. [andrewcurry.com](http://andrewcurry.com)*