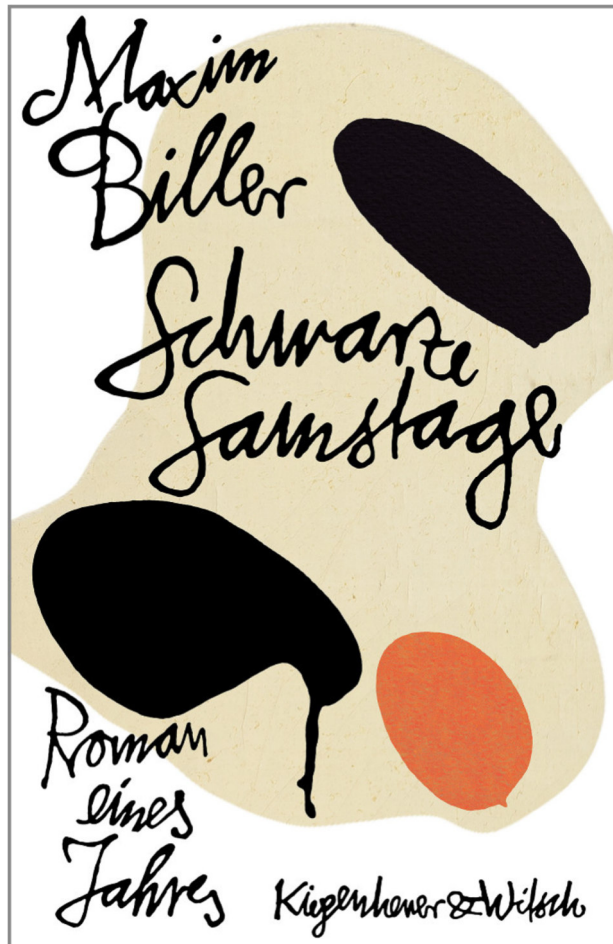


# BLACK SATURDAYS

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Sample translation by Simon Pare



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To someone like me who doesn't believe in God, it is surprising what unexpected ideas he sometimes has. The ovens of Majdanek. Nagasaki. Napoleon freezing in Russia.

And how else am I to understand the unimaginable events that took place a few months ago – maybe even a few years ago – in southern Israel on a late-summer's day? Is it really possible that humans alone conceived and carried out a bloodbath of such biblical force in Kfar Aza, Nahal Oz and Ofakim, places whose names are redolent of the Torah, a massacre that has thrown the whole world, Jews and non-Jews, into an enduring psychological and intellectual rage?

What an amazing, brilliant plot twist in the allegedly Almighty's universal narrative! 500 years from now, I'm sure, people will still recount how on this day in the month of Tishrei 5784, a frenzied, lawless mob of men in camouflage gear, old and young, weak and strong, tried to eliminate the entire Israeli people and with them all the Jews, and had to make do, for starters, with 1,200 mutilated, burnt and violated corpses.

But what did God – a gift to the world from the Jews – want to tell them through this bloodbath? Had he once again allied with their enemies to teach them a lesson for their chronic insubordination and their sins? Had I myself done something wrong or not understood or who knows what, and my punishment was to be a bout of diasporic depression, triggered by the massacre?

That day – for non-Jews it was 7 October 2023 – I had woken up far too late in Berlin. It was already bright outside, an unremarkable nine or ten degrees, but the sky looked like a Caspar David Friedrich painting with all the tree and hills wiped away with turpentine. Someone next door was strumming Billie Holiday's *Strange Fruit* on the guitar. While I was doing

my exercises out on the balcony, I saw the Arkonaplatz Nazi walk past below with his large, red, shaggy sheepdog. It was a sweet dog with funny pointy ears and the proud gait of an English butler. The Nazi was huge, even fatter than before, and he was wearing a parka that was much too small for him with the words 'Proud German' on the back. I'd been hoping for ages that he would die or at least move away.

After my morning gymnastics I went into the bathroom and turned on the radio, much too loud as usual so I could hear it under the shower. On the nine o'clock news they said that more missiles than usual were being launched in Israel along the border with Gaza, and a few other strange things were happening too. So after my shower I changed stations – I didn't want to hear about war just then. I read the previous day's paper over breakfast. I sat down to work, leaving my phone on flight mode in the kitchen, but then I jumped back up to fetch it and turned it on. Later on, I kept glancing at the display as I was writing. I was worried about the column I'd been working on for two days, imagining I'd have to chuck it away and start all over again, but then I came up with a conclusion that incorporated the ongoing massacre. I didn't want to admit to myself that I wasn't feeling so great, but I also felt defiant. I told anyone who rang me up during those few hours that they shouldn't get themselves and me so worked up because the golden age of the Jews was over. *Finita la commedia*.

Two hours later, I ordered a double espresso the moment I entered Café Elliott on Fehrbelliner Strasse, where I have a coffee practically every lunchtime while leafing through the papers and chatting to people I'd never invite to my home. The barman – a young Syrian with dyed blond hair who studied at the University of the Arts, had lived in Germany since 2015, spoke perfect German and knew me and every other customer here – said without looking at me, 'Go somewhere else. You're in the wrong place here.' I forced him to serve me my espresso anyway.

Shortly after my sister, my parents and I moved into a large, dark, old flat in Hamburg in 1972 – right in the centre of the city, in the former Jewish neighbourhood between Rothenbaumchaussee and Grindelberg – we made friends with our neighbours. He was a sad, skinny lawyer with a very loud laugh. She was a melancholic housewife with a pearl necklace and large-size striped shirts. There was also the woman's dead father, whose portrait hung in the hallway. I have no recollection of his face, but I do remember his Wehrmacht uniform, the large, scary officer's cap and the medals. We knew that he had departed this world on 8 May 1945 of all days, blown to pieces in his Horch cabriolet by an American shell, because his daughter wouldn't stop telling us. Each time I thought, what a stroke of luck he was dealt with on the very last day of the war. I was 15 then and I still feel the same way now.

Our first-floor flats were only a few metres apart. The woman would often leave their door open when she came over to ours around eight in the evening with her own bottle of red wine. She would sit down on the sofa, drink, barely say anything and watch television with us. My parents were mad about detective series. At the time they were still showing *Kommissar*, starring Erik Ode, in black and white. The policeman was as severe and guilt-ridden as I expected an ex-Gestapo officer to be in a detective series that could have been screened in Germany after the Nazis came to power. His manner of speaking and thinking appealed to my factually minded father.

Our neighbour never wanted to hear about our past. She never asked about Prague or Moscow or Baku. She wasn't interested in why we travelled to Israel so often. She drank her wine in silence, devoured my

mother's borscht in the kitchen after every episode and wouldn't touch the tea that we drank at ten in the evening, like all Russians, accompanied by biscuits and spoonfuls of jam. It would be eleven or twelve by the time she left, taking her empty wine bottle with her.

One time we visited the husband's old mother on Lüneburg Heath. I remember a large manor house – it was late and its large, ghostly silhouette stood out against the bright night sky. There was game for dinner. I'd never had any before. The meat was tough, the venison, or whatever I was eating, resisting every bite I took, and I felt like a cannibal. When I said this out loud – I was already 16 or 17 – everyone laughed, with the sole exception of our neighbour's weather-beaten, peroxide-blond mother whose features remained serious as she hissed, 'Stupid little scoundrel!' Knowing how the friendship with our neighbours ended, it now sounds as if what she meant was: 'You damn Jewish scoundrel!'

Three or four years later, my sister and her husband came to visit from Israel where she was then living. In an old green-tinged colour photo I still have from that time, the two of them look like a seventies-version of Bonnie and Clyde, she with her mane of black hair and my mother's beautiful features, he in a Che Guevara beret and leather gloves, smoking a cigar. My sister was studying linguistics in Ramat Aviv and wanted to become a writer. My brother-in-law – for a while, Israel's youngest philosophy professor – was a left-wing religious Jew from Canada who taught me everything I know about the good and enlightened nature of the Jewish written and oral tradition.

One evening he, my sister and I were sitting in our neighbours' flat with the lawyer husband because there was yet another party going on in our flat and it was too loud and packed for us there. He served us some wine, but we hardly drank any because none of us was interested in alcohol. He didn't really have enough either to get drunk and was trying throughout to

explain to my brother-in-law why American jury trials were pure Hollywood, entirely for show. He turned to me and my sister mid-sentence and said, 'I like your father, kids, I really do. What a charming conman he is! What a sly and greedy Jew!' We never talked to our neighbours again.

It isn't news that the Jews irritated the other people around them, almost from the beginning, with their persistent, almost pathologically peaceful existence, but both the educated and the uneducated among us need frequent reminders of this fact.

It started with the nameless Egyptian pharaoh's failed hate campaign against them. A few hundred years later, just after the first temple in Jerusalem had been reduced to a heap of smouldering ruins, tens of thousands of the inhabitants of Judaea were dragged off to Babylon as slaves, and it wasn't much fun for those who remained behind either. And so the diaspora business began, and although many Jews soon gave up on being Jewish so far from home, most were crazy enough to observe the same prayers and religious rules as their similarly obstinate ancestors, even if they frequently paid for it with blazing homes or their lives.

One example: the Jews of Alexandria, who were as modern, clever and inventive as New York Jews today and passionate about their city, their streets and the Greek language. Yet they nevertheless preferred to forgo their full civic rights, as they were called at the time, because they would have had to renunciate their strange, invisible god and dance half naked around statues of idols. Even after the first pogrom in history – centuries before Christ and Mohammed – when Jewish blood flowed like water through the streets of Alexandria, they still wanted to stay. The Jews in Judaea, on the other hand, were soon so sick of their perverse Seleucid occupiers and their polytheistic terror that they drove them out, led by a few yokels from Modi'in and their militia. Rarely were the Jews as bellicose and obstinate as they were under the Maccabees.

If this were an encyclopaedia entry, it would continue in telegrammatic style thus: Rome conquers Judaea, tries love first, then hate, and, after a Jewish rebellion, burns the second temple to the ground. Not for the last time, Jews are banned from setting foot in the streets of Jerusalem on pain of execution, and sold abroad as slaves. Those not enslaved are sometimes left alive, but things take a turn for the worse for Jews in the diaspora when Rome come out in favour of Jesus, the bleeding religious reformer. Simply by being who they are, they are arch-enemies of Christianity, damned because they didn't acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah as well as ordering his murder. They aren't allowed to serve in the army or work at the imperial court, nor are they allowed to take part in government. The funniest ban, to my mind, is on Jews being able to disinherit Jews who have converted to Christianity – a particularly sophisticated form of Aryanization.

And yet still the Jews remain true to themselves. They continue to kiss the rolls of the Torah as children kiss their mothers and fathers; they pray, observe the Halakha, learn to read and write. They refuse to capitulate when Muslim armies sweep through the known world, including Jerusalem, and offer them the choice of remaining Jewish dogs or becoming Muslims. Again they are slaughtered, again they are degraded to 'protected persons' or *dhimmi*, allowed to go about their normal lives only if they pay sadistically high taxes.

The fact that so many Jews in Torquemada's Spain become fake Christians but continue to observe the old laws in secret for generations demonstrates their peculiar, God-given obstinacy. It is particularly inexplicable and odd, especially to goyim, that they remained Jews even after the Holocaust, for which they have forgiven humankind and their own God. Just as their peacefulness and apparent defencelessness during that time of great murdering and dying has been completely unjustifiably

interpreted and condemned – even by many Jews – as cowardice and accepting their own sacrifice. It was something different. It was a message to all the barbarians of the world of every epoch that their habit of plundering and murdering their way through life is wrong and has little future. Six million on the cross, and no one notices.

For almost 3,000 years, Jerusalem, with its shattered walls and the small, rocky piece of land surrounding it, has remained the metaphysical centre of the Jews, and this has always been highly sensitive politically. If you're a hopeless atheist like me, then you're free to find this laughable, but I don't laugh about Mecca, Lhasa and Varanasi.

What does the *Tosefta*, a rabbinic compendium from the first century of the first millennium, have to say about this?

A person should live in Palestine, even in a town in which the majority are gentiles, and not abroad, even in a town in which all are Jewish. This teaches that dwelling in the land of Israel is weighed against all the other commandments of the *Torah* and that he who is buried in Palestine, it is as if he were buried under the altar of the Temple.

Where does such stubbornness come from? Why do most Jews cling to their Jewishness the way only dumped lovers cling to their exes? And who can blame them for needing to return, sooner or later, to Palestine, to Judaea, to Canaan, as Joshua did 2,500 years earlier in his wooden chariot, and founding their own state there by force?

When my uncle Witja and my father, neither of whom had yet turned 30, were under surveillance in 1950s Prague by the StB, the Czech intelligence services, it was often because as Jews they were Zionists, and vice versa. Whenever they said something about Israel to a friend who was working for the StB, their words would end up in the intelligence service files that are now in a drawer in my study. Unfortunately, however, an iconic seventies photo of the two of them on the coast at Haifa or Akko is missing. It is at my sister's in London, and she would rather jump in the Thames than give it to me. Most of our family photographs have ended up in her hands – she needs them to think and sleep and dream.

Witja and my father were wearing little white hats that shone in the sunlight in that picture, I think, and they had girlishly happy smiles on their forceful, virile faces. It was 1971, only a year after we had fled Czechoslovakia and before we moved to the Grindel area of Hamburg. The four of us were living on 900 deutschmarks per month at the time. An odour of rotten apples and dead mice emanated from the cellar of our damp semi-detached house in leafy Wandsbek, and there were no presents on my birthday, nothing but a few pairs of ugly turquoise-coloured trousers that I deliberately ripped playing football. But that didn't prevent my father from spending two months' rent on a flight to Israel.

Two years later, my mother, my father and I travelled there together. That trip must have been much more expensive. Almost immediately after arriving we took a second flight on a small Arkia plane from Tel Aviv to Eilat, where I was lucky enough to stay in a luxury hotel for the first time in my life. I had a room to myself and imagined what it would be like to be alone with a girl in that kind of room. From there we flew to the world-

famous Saint Catherine's monastery. It was in the middle of the Sinai Peninsula, out in the desert, built on sand in the fifth or sixth century when Byzantium still held sway in these parts. It had subsequently survived the rules of Saladin, the Ottomans and the British, and had belonged to Israel since the Six-Day War. There were monks with long beards there, very dark, cool rooms full of Christian symbols and ritual objects, but I found it all boring and mysteriously uninteresting. Finally, we flew to Jerusalem, and it was only on the bus from the airport into the city that I noticed a girl with dark hair and converging eyebrows in our travel group who spoke English with her parents and shot me the occasional furtive glance. In the Jewish part of Jerusalem's old town, we met an old friend of my parents from Russia. He had sidelocks and was wearing a short black coat. He told me I had a pale Jewish diaspora face.

It was early January, the sun was white and cold, and we looked out over the grey, yellow-sandy slopes of the Mount of Olives.

It was a couple of weeks after the 7th of October when a very nice, always incredibly tactful journalist rang me up and asked whether I would like to write about it for his newspaper.

'Why call me of all people?' I said.

'Because you—' He stopped short.

'Exactly,' I said.

'I understand,' he said.

'No, you don't.'

'Yes I do!'

'You can't even finish the sentence you meant to say.'

'I'll have another think about it,' he said.

'OK.'

'Can I ring you back?'

'No, I'd rather you didn't,' I said, and only then did I realise that he had fallen into shocked silence after every one of my sentences, a little German private cowering before his strict Jewish captain.

When we spoke over the phone again a few days later, he said that his editorial team had had an extremely good idea. It was said that more and more Jews wanted to leave Germany since the 7th of October, and they'd like to write about these people.

'I have no plans to travel,' I said.

'We didn't mean it like that. I wanted—'

Another of those pauses.

'That's a very bad idea,' I said.

'Why?' he said, and I could hear how sad he was because he and his colleagues had meant well.

'Don't write about Jews who want out of here. It sounds as if you were happy that they'll all be gone soon. Write instead about whether you yourself sometimes also have a grudge against Jews,' I said in irritation.

I've had many more conversations like that one, mainly with journalists. One of the recurring questions was: what is it like to no longer feel safe in your own country? Is this a repeat of 1933? Would 1,500 words be long enough for an article on the subject? A publisher asked me if I could pen a quick foreword for a book of essays by a long-dead but highly topical German Jewish intellectual.

'Sure,' I replied, 'but you need to drop Ernst Jünger from your catalogue first. Along with that historian who's always wearing one of those dubious Fred Perry polo shirts in his author pic and writes books with titles like *Flood and Soil* or *Talking to the Right*.'

It is not only Jews who can be peculiar – tenacious, well read and mostly so placid it hurts – but many non-Jews too. In their case, however, the moral pendulum often veers in the wrong direction and gets stuck for a few centuries, and with it civilisation, humanism and progress.

On the evening of 7 October, a friendly German woman who had been trying politely to invite me on to her books podcast for years, received jubilant messages from her politically interested friends on her phone. Most simply wrote 'Free Palestine', nothing more. She was weeping as she told me this. A few days later – half of the Israeli army wasn't yet on the borders of Gaza – a student at Cornell University near New York typed on his fraternity's electronic pinboard: 'If you see a Jewish "person" on campus, follow them home and slit their throat.' At the same time, a few thousand artists signed an appeal for Gaza in the international art magazine *Artforum*, without mentioning the pornographic Hamas bloodbath in Be'eri and Nahal Oz, to which the philosophers of the world sang the same weird song in their 'Philosophy for Palestine' declaration. And as the Israel clean-up operation at the scene of the crimes was only just beginning to search for and identify the charred bones and skulls of their people, the head of all Erdogan Muslims at home and abroad said in his Friday sermon that Israel had for a century been 'a rusty dagger stuck in the heart of Islamic geography'.

What else happened around the world in the days and weeks after the 7th of October? Hundreds of young men ran across the taxiway of the airport of Dagestan's capital, their faces twisted as in orgasm, searching desperately for Jews to kill in a kind of slapstick pogrom. German rappers told German children on TikTok that Israel was the Fourth Reich. An

Israeli pianist was suddenly banned from playing in Shanghai. Over one hundred states from around the world condemned the Israelis in yet another pro-Palestinian UN resolution.

Even in the city where I was leading my paradoxical diaspora life, a very strange and unnatural attitude was noticeable. The great massacre of the kibbutzim was celebrated with ululations and dessert in Neukölln. In Bernauer Strasse, the barren border between Mitte and the Muslim district of Wedding, someone felt a sudden urge to set a synagogue alight with Molotov cocktails. And over on the other side of the English Channel, in the capital of the United Kingdom, which chased all the Jews off the island back in the 13th century, hundreds of thousands poured out onto the streets after the Jewish 9/11, waving Palestinian flags and often a black Caliphate flag as well.

I found all of this very interesting, but naturally not without also being awfully horrified. What was all this nonsense? Why had the epic – no, biblical – bloodbath of Simchat Torah 5784 unleashed the greatest wave of antisemitism in history, more global and more merciless than the one in the 1930s? Why were Jewish houses around the world marked with blue stars of David and red Hamas triangles immediately afterwards and thereby symbolically targeted for their mortal enemies? Why did students in Yeezy sneakers and Fjällräven rucksacks in New York and Brussels tear down pictures of Israelis taken hostage in Gaza with silent anger, as if *they* were the criminals? Where was the world's universal sympathy that the patients in Gazan hospitals were to receive a few weeks later, the brief emotional pause of non-Jews who, in their frenzy, could barely conceal that they have never distinguished in fact between Jews and Israelis? Why couldn't the goyim control their dark feelings for at least a few weeks and months at yet another historic moment in the history and religious

tradition of the Jews? Why were people so strange, so inhumane, so barbaric? Were they antisemitic?

Question upon question that I no longer really needed to ask myself because I'd never had any illusions in this respect, nor was I paranoid. For antisemites were as much a fact of life as high Vodafone bills or the autumn flu – this I had learnt at home – and I was constantly surprised if I met a stranger who *didn't* regard the Jews as a denial of his own existence and an attack on his thousand insecurities. I had long wondered when the world would grow weary of its Holocaust trauma. Maybe this was the moment.

How clear do I need to be? Since I was a teenager, I had reckoned with the return of Bohdan Khmelnytsky's sadistic horsemen. I was ready for the political rise of a second Rudolf Hess, for new doctors' trials, for the Philistines' next assault on Shiloh and Beit She'an. And yet I didn't regard antisemitism as a force of nature; it wasn't a flood or a heatwave that came and went and came and went again. It was as much a part of the bodies of non-Jews as their tongues and eyes. It was pathological and universal and older even than the two non-Jewish world religions that wouldn't have existed without Judaism. And antisemitism had many tricks, detours and incarnations, all of them familiar to me.

If there were human life on Venus, I sometimes thought, there would surely be antisemites there too. Yes, I was completely certain of that because I knew, as I've already mentioned, that, for non-Jews, Jews were a kind of *ex negativo* proof of their own moral and religious self-image. But what I still didn't know after all these years was why this universal hatred of the Jews existed at all? For what reason had the non-existent God bestowed it on humankind? And hadn't the enemies of the Jews got on *his* nerves long ago, just as they got on mine?

I still know his name. Dr Renz. Short, square, male. And I still know that his name was spelt with a 'z' at the end, not a 'tz', which would have been too vulgar, not classy enough.

Our headmaster was a tall, dignified man with the brawny yet fine facial features of a bookworm, his stance always exaggeratedly upright as if he were wearing an orthopaedic prosthesis, or it were wearing him. I read later in a book about Hamburg's major and minor pedagogues and their Nazi pasts that Dr Renz had almost been killed twice in the war. So maybe the thing about the fixed dressing was true all along. I also learnt that he would ask new teachers the regiment in which they had served. He had joined the SA at 20, a few years later the Nazi Party had accepted him, then he became a lieutenant in the Wehrmacht. However, his PhD dissertation had nothing to do with the great new age, in which he had become a conscientious adult; it was about the Catholic Church and the 19th-century princes of Baden. And he was very concerned about troubled pupils who caused trouble, as I read in *Profiles of Perpetrators*, a three-volume reference work.

The first time I heard of Dr Renz, the headmaster of our school, was when the sixth-form girls sat down on the floor of the large entrance hall with its pelican fountain two weeks after the democratically elected president of Chile, Salvador Allende, had committed suicide, took out their guitars and sang peace songs in hard, German-accented Spanish. Dr Renz had a reputation for eating left-wingers and Red Army Faction sympathisers for breakfast, and the next morning he had the teachers vote on whether the schoolgirls with guitars in their laps and revolution in their hearts were acting within their democratic right to freedom of expression,

or whether their nonsense should be brought to an immediate end. Only a few of the teachers sided with the girls and Salvador Allende, one of the stars in the firmament of the Internationale at the time, alongside Che Guevara and Ho Chi Minh. When the dissidents had lowered their arms again after voting no, Dr Renz apparently commented, 'At least we now know how many communists we have on our staff.'

Shortly after the coup in Chile and the sing-in in Pelican Hall, the Yom Kippur War began. The days were grey, rainy and too cold even for October in Hamburg. No one at school mentioned that Israel might soon cease to exist, with a few million Jews either dead or on the run again. Barely any light filtered into our usually dark first-floor flat in Rothenbaum (a very memory-like memory). My father would sit in his study until 11 pm, typing away on his gigantic, grey IBM with its square head like something in a science-fiction film, but this time he didn't close the large double doors between the study and the living room, where my mother, my sister and I were watching television. When the news came on with reports from the two fronts, we shouted in Russian, 'Israel! Come in here!' He would leap up from his desk, rush into the living room and stand in front of the television. He often unbuttoned his trousers while working, so he would pull them up slowly and awkwardly and stuff his shirt back inside the waistband as Golda Meir gravely refused to rule out the end of Israel or Henry Kissinger got off a plane.

Whenever people – Russian, Czech and Polish emigres, German neighbours, former Hitler soldiers and harmless ex-Hitler Youth lads – were gathered in our kitchen or in our living room, my father's loud, shrill voice would drown out all others in discussions about the future of Israel. I noted one phrase he used, sometimes in Russian, sometimes in German: 'If the Israelis get it in the neck, comrades, we're next. Isn't that right?' Nods from the Germans, even though this 'we' didn't include them,

disagreement from some of the Jews – or maybe it was the other way around. When the tide surprisingly turned and the Israeli troops were marching on Cairo and Damascus, the German guests suddenly stayed away, and only now do I realise why. In exchange, more light immediately began to flood into our living room! And we were no longer on the phone so much with the Kaminskis, the Lederers and the Vishgoradovs in Tel Aviv, Ashdod and Haifa.

This was in autumn 1973. The following spring, I was supposed to give a presentation in a social studies class with Herr Wurm about the history of the Jews from the burning bush to the 'Zionist occupation of the Golan Heights in breach of international law', as he called it. He looked over at me from his desk, but he didn't look me in the eye.

'No,' I said, 'I'm not going to do that. No one else has to give a presentation, so why should I? And why about Israel and the Jews? Why not about Honolulu?'

Half the class laughed, but a few kids let out irritated groans, probably because I cracked too many jokes.

I looked out of the window over the school playing fields where I had once scored a penalty during an important game despite my weak right foot, and waited for a reaction from my superior opponent. I knew that Herr Wurm was left-wing, very left-wing. Communist Party of Germany / Marxist-Leninist or something. His hair was just long enough to qualify as not too short. He had a wild moustache, John Lennon glasses, and a nice smile. And because I loved giving people nicknames back then, during break I would hiss the nasty words 'bloodworm' behind his back. You don't get to choose your adversaries.

'I'll inform the headmaster after the lesson,' Herr Wurm said. He was worked up, his round teacherly face white and unsmiling. 'Dr Renz will deal with it. I know what you're up to, but I won't let you provoke me.'

*What I was up to? I thought. What I was planning? As a 14-year-old agent of world Jewry?*

I can only imagine the conversation with the former SA and Nazi Party member Dr Otto Renz to which my father was invited on my account a week later, because I wasn't there.

They were of course sitting in the headmaster's study up on the third floor, where it was fairly light even on the darkest of Hamburg days. From there the headmaster could observe the whole playground over to the main road, which kept all of us from playing music too loud, smoking joints and beating each other up during break.

My father – short, quick, energetic, not always as fearless towards his superiors as he was in our kitchen with guests or when he lashed out at me or my sister – sat there slightly uncomfortably on the chair Dr Renz had placed on the other side of his desk for visitors, delinquents and subordinates.

'So what has that damn boy come up with this time?' my father said loudly but with a touch of uncertainty.

'You know—' Dr Renz said.

'Herr Doktor Renz,' my father said even more loudly and scathingly, rolling the 'r' in 'Doktor' from here to Prague, Moscow and Kobelecka Poljana.

'You know,' the headmaster repeated, 'none of us had it easy. After the war, I mean. None of us.'

'Yes. Of course. Naturally,' my father replied. 'Naturally' sounded like 'natyurly' when he said it.

'But I still don't understand you.'

'I'm sorry?'

'Your family. How many people did you lose?'

'What?!'

'Why did you come here? I would have stayed clear in your position.'

This left my eloquent father speechless. 'You can say that again,' he mumbled half audibly.

'And your son,' Dr Renz said.

'What about him?'

'He can sense it all.'

'Yes, he senses everything, the little devil. He drives all of us mad all day long with his hundreds of ideas!'

Dr Renz cackled. Yes, he cackled. 'But he's having a hard time,' he said. 'Not that he's an easy character to deal with . . .'

'Where was it you served, Herr Dr Renz?'

'. . . and that puts him on edge the whole time.'

'Any war wounds?'

Dr Renz tugged on the fingers of his right hand. His knuckles cracked like distant gunshots. 'One forgets them,' he said. 'Shot through the chest once, I can tell you. And once I almost lost my whole left leg.'

'And where did that happen? I mean, where exactly?'

The headmaster of the Kaiser-Friedrich-Ufer high school in Elmsbüttel, still a human colossus despite his age, abruptly got to his feet. 'Tell your son,' he whispered conspiratorially. 'Tell your son that he should come to me immediately if the other kids attack him again. What is it you people say? Trust is good. Information is better.'

'Control,' my father cautiously corrected him.

'Right!'

'Eastern Front?'

'Your people in Israel are going through the same things right now,' Dr Renz said, twisting his bulldog face into an enigmatic smile. 'A risk of the trade!'

Now both men were laughing. My father jumped to his feet, and they shook hands amicably, the short Russian Jew from Nemchinovka near Moscow and one of Hitler's many industrious officers.

But what really took place between them after Herr Wurm had set the powerful headmaster on me and my father? All I know is that my father told me that evening that everything was fine. I was simply to cause less trouble in future, and if I had problems with the others, I should go straight to Dr Renz and he would help me. Of course I never did, but it was reassuring that I could have.

And what became of Benedikt Wurm, the 'bloodworm'? Two years later, he told the kids in a parallel class to ours to write an essay praising the Vietcong's military victories over the American machinery of murder. Two girls – yes, it's always the girls – snitched on him to Dr Renz at the last minute. Within a few days, the situation had descended into one of those typical seventies dramas of left against right, and it ended with a squad of Hamburg police taking control of the school and fighting their way through hundreds of pupils who had formed a protective ring around Herr Wurm. The atmosphere was every bit as frenzied, aggressive and pointless as when the police carry more white, Black or brown defenders of Hamas and every other oppressed people in this world off the campus of Columbia University in New York or Stanford by their hands and feet. History as an eternal series of repeats on television.

Herr Dr Renz died soon afterwards of a broken heart at the age of just 64. Were the communists or the Nazis to blame for his premature death?

One could – in one's quest for the truth and nothing but the truth – briefly look at the story from the other side and wonder if, maybe, the Palestinians were right quite simply, completely, about everything. Meaning, whether the Hundred Years War between Jews and Arabs might really need to be seen in an overarching historical context – context matters? – whose dimensions could not be clear to the parents of fallen Tzahal soldiers and mutilated Nova Festival girls.

But where would one start? With Chaim Weizmann, the first Israeli president whose actions as a diplomat contributed more to the foundation of the new state – and therefore to the sad fate of hundreds of thousands of Arabs – than those of the godfather of Zionism, Theodor Herzl? Perhaps. Weizmann's own Zionist convictions were so radical and driven by the anxieties of the ghetto that he rejected naming his cherished project 'Israel'; he would have much preferred 'Juda'. Why? Because Israel was the first of the two ancient Jewish empires to be extinguished, by the ultra-brutal Assyrians. On the other hand, Juda, the competing enterprise in the barren and sun-scorched south, existed for a good century longer at least, until 586 before Jesus when the somewhat more civilised Babylonians made short work of King Zedekia and his court. The fact that the Jews had not one but two kingdoms at the time has, incidentally, always sounded to me like a Jewish joke that hadn't yet been told. I found the prospect of a scheduled end to my own state less funny.

The other thing that had never been told was that the modern Israeli state – armed to the teeth with uzis and naive dreams of peace, unlike the apocalypse-tinged Arab-Persian-Palestinian Al-Aqsa Brigades – has never experienced a period of peace long enough for the country to acknowledge

and make amends for its own crimes when reconquering Israel after 2,000 years. That's right – after 2,000 years! Instead, with each new PLO attack, with every PFLP hijacking, with every suicide bomber on a bus during the chaotic times of the Second Intifada, the corrosive virus of fear and right-wing radicalism spread ever further and ever more poisonously among the cool *sabras* and the nervous new immigrants. See Meir Kahane. See Baruch Goldstein. See Itamar Ben-Gvir.

Did I really just say 'after 2,000 years'? It is completely fine to find this historical and – superficially – religious continuity ridiculous. However, the Jews never asked the Romans, following the example of the notorious perma-invaders from Mesopotamia, to drive them out of their country, out of their kingdom, and set fire to the rebuilt home of their invisible god. It has therefore always struck me as entirely legitimate that they in turn did not ask the next occupants of their old homeland – the children of Ishmael and the faithful companions of Mohammed – if they were allowed to come back or not. We live in biblical times, always.

So where is the best place to start if I wish to give the other side's perspective, which the other side sees as the only perspective? Maybe it's better to begin with the massacre of Deir Yassin, one of the greatest disasters in the history of Palestine, and of modern Israel too – a completely un-Jewish crime, if you asked a good rabbi. I shall start with the unforeseen, unforeseeable, sadistic slaughter of countless Arab children, mothers, pregnant women, the old and the crippled by an Irgun unit and a Lehi paramilitary force on 9 April 1948 – a Saturday, another Black Saturday – whose barbaric and heathen character I condemn as strongly as stern Moses did the frenzy of the Jews who began, in his absence, to couple in public and revert to worshipping the old Egyptian gods on the watch of his brother Aaron.

The Palestinian village of Deir Yassin had stayed out of the first Arab-Israeli War for months. It had a famous quarry and good aubergine salad, but unfortunately it was close to the road from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, which the well-equipped soldiers of Mufti Amin al-Huseini and many other Arab irregulars and volunteers blocked during the fighting with their old Ottoman muskets and sabres. The Jews of West Jerusalem should starve and die of thirst and disappear into the soil of their graves, which is why the Haganah kept trying to break through the blockade.

Was the peaceful village of Deir Yassin in the Jewish troops' way? No. But neither Ben Gurion nor David Schaltiel, the Haganah commanders in Jerusalem, would mind if it ceased to be an Arab village. Schaltiel eventually allowed the ultra-Zionist militias to take the village – why had he refused for so long to give the order? – and he even provided them with weapons. 'You're pigs!' Schaltiel's adjutant screamed at the Stern and Lehi terrorists a day later, after the Haganah had advanced into the destroyed village, bleeding from every stone and body, to stop and disarm the band of zealots, still euphoric from the killing.

Yet no one was arrested, as if the dead Arabs were of no significance. Instead Begin and Shamir's people were allowed to leave so that Jews wouldn't wind up firing on Jews. First, though, they had to remove the traces of their crime. Schaltiel's adjutant ordered them to move the corpses out of the village. They carried them to the famous quarry of Deir Yassin whose marble has paved the floors of thousands of houses from Akko to Damascus. They poured petrol on the corpses and set them alight.

The adjutant later described the scene thus:

It was a mild spring day. The almon trees were in blossom, the flowers resplendent, but the air was heavy with the smell of

blood and the terrible stench of the corpses burning in the quarry.

Deir Yassin was the Gaza of the fifties and sixties and seventies – a rallying cry, but also a lamentation of the Palestinian Arabs. Did the Irgun and Lehi massacre alone legitimate their version of history, the constant terrorist attacks that followed, their Muslim-based disgust for the Jews? Arab radio stations immediately reported what had happened in Deir Yassin. They exaggerated the number of dead. They invented atrocities. They dreamed up rapes and violations of pregnant women. They hoped that the armies of Jordan, Egypt and Syria and the lightly armed tank regiments of Iraq would rush to their aid. But their Arab brothers advanced on the Cathedral of the Rock and the Al-Aqsa Mosque as slowly as the dozy waiters of Jerusalem's American Colony respond to an order.

However, the Arabs of Palestine did get moving. The Jews had finally proved what bloodthirsty monsters they were, and only idiots would have no fear of them and their crimes! It was time to get away as fast as possible, temporarily leaving behind all the things that made up the complexity of a human life: walls, memories, fragrances, the old who were too tired to travel. The Nakba had begun – and it was often one great, idiotic misunderstanding. A false view of the real facts. The eternal victim's view of the supposedly eternal innocents, the tragedy within the tragedy.

And what about the Jews, the Israelis? How did they view the matter? 'The massacre of Deir Yassin was not only justified – without the 'victory' of Deir Yassin, there would have been no state of Israel,' the powerful head of the Likud Party and sensitive Machiavellian, Menachem Begin, coolly explained a few months later after *The New York Times* had published a letter signed by Hannah Arendt, Albert Einstein and many

other left-wing Jews, in which they called him and his people war criminals.

However, the Jewish terrorists were not feted for their Deir Yassin slaughter party by the Yishuv, the Jews of Palestine, either. The Jewish Agency distanced itself diplomatically yet angrily. Ben Gurion, who later ordered his troop to fire on the Irgun ship *Altalena* during a one-and-a-half-day civil war in the centre of Tel Aviv, and was able to disarm and defeat Begin's people, apologised tearfully to Jordan's King Abdullah, who later – for this is what kings do! – seized the majority of the Palestinian share of Palestine, as defined by the UN. The chief rabbi of Jerusalem cast all the Deir Yassin murderers out of the Jewish religious community.

That all sounds pretty good, I think. Apologise and you feel remorse. Excommunicate and you control. Even Menachem Begin eventually recognised that Deir Yassin should never have happened. Why else would he later – much later, in November 1977, when he was Israel's prime minister – invite the president of Egypt to the Israeli parliament to give a peace speech that Sadat had promised a few days earlier in Cairo? A year later, the two of them were awarded the Nobel Prize for a cold peace that holds to this day.

Crime acknowledged, atonement made? Almost. Because the Fatah Party of the eternal revolutionary – and alongside Yahya Sinwar, the greatest traitor to the Palestinian cause – Yasser Arafat was tormented by this new Israeli-Egyptian friendship. This wasn't the historical trajectory that Fatah wanted! In March 1978 Arafat's best men battled their way from Lebanon through to the coast road between Haifa and Tel Aviv – my favourite highway, so sunny and sandy and as old-fashioned as a road in Saint-Tropez in an old Bardot and Belmondo movie – and shot dozens of children and adults, hijacked two buses, set one on fire and shot more

people. It was as if someone had switched the rolls of film and inserted the old, smouldering film into the projector. Its title? *Blood Not Peace*.

To prevent anything similar from occurring on Israeli soil ever again, Begin, the recently repentant ex-terrorist with a Nobel Peace Prize to his name, immediately dispatched the Israeli army into Lebanon, but only 40 kilometres, which he hoped would be enough to keep the hostile terrorist mafia at bay. But still it went on – rockets, tunnels, the first suicide bombers. And so in 1982 – where was his Oslo certificate hanging then? – he ordered Tzahal to occupy the whole of Lebanon. This spelled the end of Arafat and his crew, who were able to slip away to Algiers, and anyone who wishes today's Hamas elite the same fate is being kind to them.

Yet it also spelled the end for Menachem Begin. When it became clear in the aftermath of the Lebanon war that the wave of bloodshed from the north would continue, this time as a frenzied Shi'ite jihad, Begin gave up his job as prime minister and regretted his show of remorse for the rest of his complicated failure of a life. After a decade of complete isolation, depression and virtual silence, his lips thinner now than in many thousands of newspaper photos, he died in Tel Aviv's famous Ichilov hospital. His beloved wife, Aliza, was long dead by then. She had clearly grown tired of listening to his continual self-doubt, and of looking back on their Israeli life, at the end of her days, in such a new and self-critical light as he did.

On the spot where Deir Yassin once stood, in the middle of Jerusalem's Givat Shaul neighbourhood, there is now a psychiatric clinic, some of which is accommodated in the houses of the murdered residents of the most famous, now non-existent Palestinian village. The mental institution specialises in the treatment of Jerusalem syndrome. This mental aberration generally affects Christians who have come to Jerusalem for the first time and suddenly think they're Jesus or St Paul. Jews can also contract it – they believe that they are Moses, Joshua or Judas Maccabeus. The illness often

goes unrecognised or undiagnosed among Jews. It does not affect the children of Ishmael.

I was sitting, as was almost always the case when I visited Israel, in my aunt Mira's kitchen in Givatayim, eating a sweet, watery goulash soup. After that came turkey schnitzel, more steamed than fried. Outside there was the clatter of a broken air conditioner, soon joined by a second, and we were talking about family, because we always talked about family.

Mira's sister Erzsike had married Schulem, my grandfather's violent cheat of a brother, after the war in Prague. They went to America – to Queens – because Erzsike never again wanted to live in a small country that was constantly attacked and occupied by its large neighbours. Carpatho-Russia, Carpatho-Ukraine or Ruthenia: the name of their old homeland changed as frequently as its masters.

'That's what she says every time I berate her for being so far away,' Mira said in Czech with a laugh. She was standing at the sink with her back to me. Her back grew smaller and more crooked every year, but as always when I visited, she had been to the hairdresser's, and her black-dyed, bouffon hair was shining like an Egyptian queen's. She had never imagined, she had once said to me – just once – that she would grow so old, nearly 20 years older than Hitler.

'And why did you go to Palestine with Izi back then, instead of to America like them?' I said, as she teetered on her old tiptoes, reached into the cupboard and took out the apple cake she had probably bought several months earlier at Supersol.

'What?'

She wrestled briefly with the packaging, then I heard her tear the plastic wrapper off in one go. Her movements were quick and precise, even though her arms and fingers were already beginning to stiffen with age.

'I mean, why didn't you go to New York after the war like Erzsike and Schulem?'

No answer.

'Palestine,' I said. 'Why were you so sure?'

'Where else were we supposed to go as Jews?' She sat down with me. 'Nachon?'

'Yes, of course,' I said.

'We finally had to start looking out for one another,' she said quietly and her voice faded to very quiet while the corners of her wrinkly old mouth danced the czárdás with dried spit, which didn't disgust me in the slightest because I was still young. 'Jews looking out for Jews,' she added.

I said nothing. My parents sent me to Israel on my own that summer, but I still wasn't alone because I had to stay with Mira and her husband Izi, where I slept in the living room and generally felt bored. I would soon be travelling back to Hamburg, to Germany, and I was looking forward to it. Despite never feeling ashamed of anything, I now felt briefly ashamed of wanting to get away from Mira.

'Some more tea?' Mira said, propping herself up on the tabletop with one hand so she could get up faster if I needed something. She used her other hand to push the small plate with the pale supermarket cake on it amiably but firmly towards me.

I shook my head and went into the bathroom, whose two small skylights gave on to a loud street called Rechov Katznelson. I looked at myself in the mirror as I washed my hands. Although I had only just turned 16 and yet I already had a long black beard. My whiskers were as long and wild as on one of those crazy Hassidic Jews who tried to drape their tefillin around unbelievers like me at the Wailing Wall. I had argued with one the week before because he had claimed that goyim didn't have a *neshume*, a soul. *The way I look now*, I thought, *I would have ended up on a wooden cot in a*

*but with hundreds of other starving Jews back then too, but without my beard and with a shaved head.* I reckoned that I wouldn't have lasted four weeks in Auschwitz.

When I returned from the bathroom, Mira was still sitting at the kitchen table, eating my cake.

'So why did Erzsike go to America without you really?' I said. 'I mean, really.'

'I think she needed a little break from me after three years of war and concentration camp,' Mira said, and again she gave a sharp, loud laugh. '*Koncentrak*,' she said in Czech, before quietly correcting herself: 'No, it was because of Schulem. That bloody Schulem! He beat her. And when he was drunk, he sometimes even threw her out of bed like a piece of rubbish. And he had more whores than fingers on his two hands.'

Erzsike and Mira grew up in a village in the part of the Carpathians that belonged to Czechoslovakia before the war. The village was called Kobelecka Poljana – a name that I had heard my grandfather say since I was a boy. Then came the Hungarians, which was still bearable, but when the Germans realised they were going to lose the war, they occupied Hungary and began to deport all the Jews as rapidly as possible. Four hundred thousand of them. And that's how strong Erzsike and weak Mira ended up in Auschwitz, then Budapest and then Prague, where they bade each other goodbye for the rest of their extremely different married lives.

'Izi went there once. To Erzsike and Schulem's in Queens,' Mira said. 'For nine whole months.'

'Why?'

'The only work going in Israel at the time was hard, and he couldn't cope. Two of his toes had frozen off when he was a partisan in the High Tatra, and he had more attacks of rheumatism than other people have headaches, though of course he had those too. He was meant to look after

Schulem's houses in Harlem and he sent me money every month. 'Then a few times Schulem wanted Izi to drive him to one of his Black *shicksas* in the middle of the day and wait outside in the car for him. When Schulem said that two of his houses had been insured for long enough and a little fire had never done business any harm, Izi immediately came home and applied to drive buses for Egged.'

'I would like some cake now after all, Mira,' I said.

'We're doing all right here,' she said.

'No, we're not.'

'I didn't think so, my boy.'

Nearly 20 years later, in 1992, during the European football championships in Sweden, which Germany didn't win, I was in Kobelecka Poljana with Erzsike, her son Leo and my father. Up in the mountains I saw a long street with houses built of dark wood and old farming women sitting in front of them. I saw young men on horse-drawn carts, and there was one single rundown Soviet housing block in the middle of the landscape, where we were invited for a meal by people we didn't know. They were very nice, neither they nor anyone else in the place could remember our half-extermiated, displaced family.

I had a small blue Herlitz notepad with me in Kobelecka Poljana, and I filled it up over those five or six days. It too is in one of the Bisley drawers in my study.

Sometimes I take it out and flick through it or read a few lines.

On Saturday 19 June 1992 I wrote: *Erzsike wears a wig because her hair fell out 'there'. Nobody could help her, not even Dr Hof in Vienna who treated her with electric shocks. To her fingers and toes. But not a single hair she lost in Birkenau ever grew back. She waited three years in vain for compensation. – Yesterday evening, Germany 3 Holland 1.* And for 21 June there was only one sentence in the blue notepad, a question: *How long will the wall that Israel built for us stand?* I

couldn't remember if Erzsike had said that or my father or Erzsike's silent, lanky son, who was a dentist from Rochester, upstate New York.

[END OF SAMPLE]