

Sample Translation (Pages 7 - 34)

Doitscha
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prologue

Well, they weren't there all the time, but they never really went away, either. They weren't partying non-stop, or sitting beside me at the breakfast table or cuddling up with me under the duvet. But they'd be joining in, as they always did – my dybbuks. I'm talking about the souls of the dead who won't leave the living in peace and particularly like to come and bother them at night. What's even more interesting, though, is that now they've got company – from the living. To be precise, the souls of the living who won't leave me in peace and come and bother me not just at night but all the time.

A right old cacophony: everyone joining in. The dead and the living. Real and in my head. On big and little decisions, buying this or that dress, choosing friends, deciding when and where to go on holiday, developing original neuroses. They say there are people who are allowed to make decisions all by themselves. Incredible!

I wonder how other people even manage to park without these umpteen personal assistants.

The relationship is not, I admit, an entirely voluntary one. I've grown accustomed to them, but I imagine life would also be very nice without them.

'You have to put yourself in the shoes of the people you encounter in your life, understand their feelings, their way of thinking,' Dr. Luise suggests calmly. 'Even if it doesn't come easily to you, try it, at least.'

Put yourself in these shoes and those shoes. Then you'll understand. It was like that all the way through drama school. 'Put yourself in Lady Macbeth's shoes! Come on, Adriana, how about you? Try it, at least. The ceiling's descending, the floor's a bog, the glowing walls are closing in, it's pitch dark and you've got blood on your hands. And? How does it feel?'

How does it feel? Like shit, that's how it feels. I should have given up acting back then! (That's also an interesting topic, but not one that belongs here.)

'One day you'll understand your dilemma and be able to change it,' says Dr. Luise. What a nerve! Anyone who's ever had to deal with this very particular German-Jewish dilemma will know that empathising with other people, putting yourself in their shoes, doesn't get you anywhere at all. Wanna bet?

doitsha

adriana

My son David calls his German father 'doitsha'.

'Hey, doitsha! Take a chill pill, doitsha! Relax, you doitsha,' and other variations on the theme. The reasons differ. Bad mood or good mood, the result is always the same: 'Hey, doitsha, what's your problem?'

I know, it's not only grammatically questionable, it's also completely out of order.

The whole thing usually happens at suppertime, around eight o'clock, which is when the bomb starts ticking in most families. After a working day of whatever kind you then have to prepare a healthy dinner, listen to Latin vocab, somehow make showering an appealing prospect for your little son. Georg, who as a Westphalian is generally the embodiment of noble stoicism, thumps on the table, splashing the delicious sauce onto my new blouse, and bellows. He demands respect and a different linguistic register. Screaming follows on both sides; I lose my appetite. Sammy, David's younger brother, retreats to his room. David puts on headphones, picks up the paper, switches to obstinate.

'It's healthier to eat at midday, anyway, rather than stuffing yourself in the evening,' I sigh.

This, comments Georg, is certainly true, but it's completely off-topic. He comes from a family of teachers, fourth generation: that's not something you shake off easily. But he's right. Being a 'doitsha' isn't easy at the best of times. Being a 'doitsha' in a Jewish enclave is doubly hard, because the 'doitsha' is worth less there. Sure, that sounds absurd, is absurd, and of course no one would ever say it that plainly – but it is how it is.

Well-meaning people might suggest at this point that the relationship between Jews and Germans must have changed for the positive by now. We're coming up to the seventieth anniversary of the end of the war, almost all the survivors are dead; there's been a new beginning. Yeah, yeah, yeah. In the Bundestag, sure, but here at home the war's showing no sign of ending, and here at home, that's the reality.

Because Georg quite rightly suspects that, deep down, this is what I think, I am punished by being given the task of making clear to our son that he too is at least fifty per cent German. That's just basic genetics.

Because, on the other hand, I know that David doesn't really want to hear this right now – he'd like to be Israeli, or at any rate one hundred per cent Jewish – the next day we go for sushi. If an unpleasant task cannot be avoided, let's at least have refined surroundings.

I take a broad approach, respect and gratitude, refer to the Old Testament, the fourth commandment, 'Honour thy father and mother'. David not only dismisses this with a bored

wave, he even grins. He doesn't fall into the biblical trap and lashes out instead with the 'German virtues' of which, in his opinion, his father has too many.

'He's too serious, too uptight, he makes ridiculous rules, he doesn't talk enough, he's a terrible loser...'

'Are you talking about yourself?'

'Where on earth did you find this person?' he asks me, without batting an eye.

'David, watch it, you're going way too far. Yesterday...'

'Yesterday he wouldn't accept that Lyndon B. Johnson was president of the United States before Nixon! I hate him.'

Yesterday we were still on our starters when the conversation turned to the US and its health reform, of which we approved, of course, so inevitably David had to pour scorn on it. 'You're a neoliberal petit bourgeois,' I declared, took my main course into the living room and carried on eating on the sofa, where Sammy had already had the good sense to retreat. David, who will basically get worked up about any political discussion, continued unabated with his abuse of his father, who was bravely and stubbornly holding his ground at the table, calling him an ideologically stupefied hippie because he mentions the name 'Marx' from time to time. With the US presidential chronology the argument then escalated to such a degree that Sammy and I had to turn up the volume on the TV to maximum. Johnson or not Johnson, that was the question. At some point both of them left the room screaming: shortly afterwards Shostakovich came thundering from one room, Absolute Beginner from the other.

'I thought the man's name was Obama,' said Sammy. We stared at each other, baffled. We probably aren't americanophile enough.

David studies the sushi menu in detail. Not so much for content as for price. I'll bet my Hanukkah menorah he'll just choose the most expensive thing on it. With the justification that he despises the self-denying modesty of his German father...

'Kennedy, Johnson, then Nixon.'

'Good to know,' I say. 'Bound to come in handy one day.'

'A schmuck,' says David.

'You two are not unlike,' I reply, as calmly as I can.

'No! Me and the pedantic doitscha who always has to be right? No way!'

'Where do you think you get your stubborn intelligence from?' My voice takes on an unpleasantly shrill undertone. 'And your inflated aspirations are inherited straight from your father, as well. Look at me: I'm modest and happy, even though all I know about Clinton is his sexual preferences and all I know about Bush junior is his consumption of alcohol, in whatever historical order... Do you think you insisting on knowing best makes the world any better?'

I've talked myself into a rage, there's no stopping me now. A Japanese girl who looks like she's just dropped out of a manga comic politely takes our order. I order number 12 for thirteen euros, a sushi mix with the persuasive name 'Hiroshima'. David thinks and thinks, manga girl waits, I wait, and then he makes his decision. 'Pearl Harbour Deluxe.' Price: thirty-five euros. A bargain, as miso soup and a jasmine tea are included.

No, I don't want to be stingy, but does it always have to be the most expensive item? Is luxury a flavour enhancer?

'Why have you still not understood that people – no, that *I* have to earn this money first? That means getting up in the morning...'

'Anyone who is on the street before nine o'clock is a nobody and will never amount to anything. Baron de Rothschild,' counters David with an arrogant smile.

'You are a very long way from being Mr Rothschild, my friend!' I mutter, tight-lipped, as the first of David's three hundred sushis are served. 'When you have to order a taxi in Italian, English or Hebrew you chicken out because you can't do it perfectly; you'd rather walk. You're not being asked to recite Dante, Rabbi Löw or Shakespeare, all you have to do is order a taxi! Any Jew can do that in nine languages. Ask the Dreyfuss family! Not without an accent, maybe, but the eternal Jew can always find his way to the station. If you can't flee in several languages, you're not a Jew. You're so German it squeaks! You'd probably have been first at Stalingrad, militant as you are...'

I didn't mean to say that, certainly not that loud. Probably not all that beneficial from a pedagogical point of view; certainly inept. Seriously, though: David needs to practise a lot harder if he wants to be a grade A Jew.

He stares at me, an inside-out sushi roll halfway between mouth and throat. The guests at the nearby tables are being very discreet. Miss Manga is smiling, bemused. Pause. Silence. Then I continue, more carefully and rather more quietly:

'Any halfway normal boy is going to clash with his father. Everyone knows that. So far, so good. The conflict doesn't always take a discreet or classy form. Doesn't have to. Quite often it can even be pretty violent – look at Oedipus. That's not new, either. The '68 generation tormented their Nazi fathers; Gottfried Wagner had to work his way back to his composer grandfather and murder him, literarily at least; all new immigrants were ashamed of their 'primitive' parents with their bad manners and even worse German, and stars are brutally dethroned by their star children revealing all kinds of embarrassing details. The former chancellor's mediocre son never got so high in the bestseller lists as he did with the reckoning with his terrible father...'

'You're not seriously comparing me to Kohl junior now?' stutters David, aghast, at least for a moment. The soya bottle is teetering alarmingly close to the edge of the table. Maternally attentive, I push it back into the middle, which infuriates David.

'I'm not five any more! The last three broken soya bottles were on you, Mum!' he snarls, affronted.

For a few minutes we devote ourselves exclusively to the food. I have the impression the other tables are deliberately staying silent so as not to miss any of our argument.

So I carry on. We don't want to disappoint anyone, after all – old theatre tradition. 'When my parents came to Berlin to see me in the premiere of a play, whatever the time of year they always wore heavy coats lined with fur. Berlin is in the east, just before Vladivostok, so it's cold, they thought. The arms were lined, too, so their arms stood out; they looked like penguins on the wrong continent. They never took off the fur hats, not even in the overheated theatre. I could be acting in whatever and wherever I liked: two fur hats would be reliably seated in the front row, audience and performers staring only at them, my penguin parents, as if they were part of the production. They didn't find themselves embarrassing. Afterwards they'd invite the whole ensemble out for dinner. Yes, the Russian fur hats stayed on their heads then too. Even if they were enthusiastic, if they praised me, if they asked good questions, if everyone thought they were modern and cool, I still didn't want to be me, not there, not at that moment.'

'Just because something's lame doesn't make it a comparison,' sighs David. 'This is really not about the cuddly penguin tribe, it's about...'

The people at the next table are holding their breath. Can't one negotiate anything privately in Berlin any more?

'David, your father is German. I'm a Jew. According to old Moses – I don't need to tell you this – the two of you, you and your brother, are of course Jews. But according to modern genetics you're fifty per cent German, fifty per cent Jew, whether you like it or not. And however hard you fight it, that isn't going to change. It's a very particular mixture on, shall we say, a 'special base'. Perhaps it would have been easier if I'd married an Indian. But then you wouldn't exist... Your father wasn't on the eastern front and he wasn't in the Hitler Youth. He's not even from Münster, just a little village nearby, and his murderous tendencies are limited to killing mosquitoes!' I talk and talk for dear life. Then I remember a play by Boris Vian in which there's a part called 'Schmürz'. A creature, half-human, half-bundle, completely bandaged, who stands in a corner and is occasionally hit in passing by all the members of the family. Quite casually. This is described cheerfully, as far as possible; Schmürz gets what's coming to it without effort or tragedy – does it suffer, doesn't it? – It doesn't say anything, just goes on standing in the corner. I can't remember how the play ends. Does Schmürz die? I've always liked this play and yes, it reminds me of our Schmürz at home, our 'doitsha'.

I've now managed to talk myself into knots. I stutter to a halt. 'No way out' blinks above the exit. The customers are disappointed and ask for the bill. I'll count myself lucky if they

don't make me pay it. David, on the other hand, has recovered and is casually following the news on Spiegel Online on his iPad. He's been listening to what I've been saying with half an ear at best. He'll leave his thirty-five euro sushi meal half-eaten.

In the evening I fall asleep watching *Tatort*. Neither *Tatort* nor I are what we once were. I drag myself off to bed without waiting to find out who the murderer is.

I am woken by loud noise, crashing; the light goes on.

Father and son are wrestling. They fall on my bed, roll off it, continue fighting on the floor. Both are mad with rage, David scarlet, his father white as a sheet. I draw my feet and legs out of the fray. They take it in turns to dash out onto the balcony and roar something like 'I'm the strongest', then carry on uninhibitedly. In certain circumstances it could almost be funny. Of course it's not okay when a father and son come to blows. But this isn't a proper punch-up, more a trial of strength between youth and age, not without danger, hugely archaic. David in boxer shorts, naked from the waist up, his father now also minus shirt as his son has ripped it off his back.

David yells, 'I'm going! You'll never see me here again!' His father roars, 'We'll see about that!'

I'm just thinking about how I can intervene without getting injured when the doorbell rings. The neighbour opposite has informed the police; there are two men in full battle dress coming up the stairs. Battle dress? What were they expecting? A May Day demonstration in a Berlin apartment? David tries to run past them. 'Hey, kid, where you off to in that get-up? Better watch out, could easily give the wrong impression here in Schöneberg.' They bring him back. They themselves are so beefy they can only fit through the door sideways. I throw a pullover over my negligée. This isn't funny; there's probably a police van waiting downstairs with more law enforcers in full riot gear.

'What a good thing the tabloids aren't interested in me,' I coo apologetically to the two policemen, who are putting away their truncheons in slow motion.

Then the two of them give my men a talking to. I keep out of it: this is all about testosterone, like watching Saturday sport on TV.

I cautiously open the door to Sammy's room. He's sleeping as blissfully as a baby.

'I know it's really beyond the pale to have the police called to the house for domestic violence. But what can I do?' I ask the policeman innocently.

The Turkish-German officer explains to me in detail that they could, in fact should, press charges, but they won't; it's quite clear what's going on here. The boy's so strong and so insecure he doesn't know where to put himself, and neither does the father. And things are never that easy in a 'mixed' household, that's normal, where did we get the nice furniture?

How polite and competent these Berlin policemen are. Why haven't they been round on some previous occasion? The Polish-German policeman is chatting with David and his father in the living room. 'He's the psychologist, I'm the intellectual,' his colleague explains. Any minute now I'll start cooking pasta if things keep on being so nice and cosy.

Yes, it's not easy, says Emre – we're on first-name terms now – in a German-Jewish household you've got the collision of two very different worlds. That's a real challenge for children and adults alike. He knows all about the 'mixed thing': his mother's Turkish, his father's from Steglitz. He comes across my book on the bookshelf. Flattered, I give it to him; it's the first time I've done a signing in my nightdress.

For years we've been grappling with teachers and psychologists and two Berlin cops come round in the middle of the night and sum up the whole thing in three simple sentences.

They notify the squad car, the crisis has been de-escalated, the law enforcers take their leave, wish us goodnight. There are such nice boys working for the police!

I shall call the incumbent mayor to personally thank him for these angels in uniform.

Father and son are planning a three-day conclave. They want to have it all out.

Next morning Emre thanks me effusively for the book. I am irritated to discover that he has my e-mail address: where from? 'Are the police allowed to do that?' I write, unsuspecting. 'The police are allowed to do that and a lot more besides,' he replies. I feel agreeably surveilled. What else does he know and see...?

Sammy is annoyed that he slept through the turmoil in the night. To make up for it we'll go and play mini-golf, have a slap-up meal at McDonald's and go shopping on the Schlossstrasse. Maybe I'll bump into Emre in Steglitz. I can always dial 110 if need be.

the partisan

david

Paradise: bed, boxer shorts, music. No doubt – standard!

‘Put on some clothes, take off your headphones, can you put your gadgets down for just one second, what’s it look like in here? Hello! I’m talking to you!’

I honestly don’t know what the parents are always wanting from me. Seriously, guys, chill!

My mother’s standing in the door. I’m lying on the bed, mobile in hand, computer on lap. She nudges me, I move over. I’m a giant compared to her. I pass her the headphones; awesome lyrics. Cool song. No complaining. Safe.

She asks what it’s called, I say, ‘*Not Alone*’ and ‘Absolute Beginner – never mind, you won’t understand’, then she’s gone again. What was that all about? She’s sure to have wanted to talk about yesterday; she always wants to talk.

Is it midday now? Or evening already? Whatever. Enough sun. Turn gingerly on my side, keep dozing.

Seriously, though, the old man’s got a screw loose!

Me yesterday: extremely relaxed.

Him: stands in the doorway like some 1950s drill instructor.

Me: twice as calm, Sannyasin mode.

Him: ‘Hang up the washing, make yourself useful for once, we’re not your servants, do you have any idea how late it is?’

Me: ‘I guess it’s probably quite late, because the last train had gone...’

I hang up the washing; need music for that, quite loud, of course, else the bass sounds like shit.

Him: ‘That music is ghastly, and what the hell do you look like?’

‘One of the ten beers was bad,’ I grin. My father so doesn’t grin. He goes kind of red. I know what that means; we’re both the angry type. So he yanks at my shirt, which rips – man! I yank at his shirt, buttons fly, headlock – what, you think I’m still a kid? He yells, ‘I’m stronger!’ I yell, ‘Not any more’, and so on.

I run into my mother’s room, turn on the light, he pushes me from behind – coward! I stumble onto the bed, we fight.

Mother’s shocked, I’m yelling, neighbours on the balconies, fight continues. The old man really is strong. Not stronger, but not half bad. It’s kind of fun. At some point I go out, try to

leave, two cops come up the steps, push me in front of them, one of them the spit of Sil from *The Sopranos*. My all-time favourite series, and this time I'm in it. Awesome!

'Slow down, kid, no hurry, where d'you think you're going in boxers and no trousers? You'll have company there before you know it, dressed like that round here! C'mon, come and sit down nice and quiet, and then you and me'll have a little chat, Dad as well, while my colleague looks after your mum, okay?!

I explain to them absolutely clearly that my father is a tyrant. And that I can do what I want when I want.

'Kid, you're out of your league. You're trying to be a chav but you're obviously better than that. Be happy! What's with all the posturing? You two boys go and get some sleep now – no, no buts, not from Dad either, testosterone or no, and tomorrow you'll talk it over sensibly, and that's all for tonight. Shift's over, okay? I wanna go home as well.'

The old man really did go to bed, and now I'm supposed to go with him to talk it over on the way to Regensburg where he's doing the music for some shitty theatre. Talk it over. What a joke!

My mother carries on sitting there, and then she makes espresso. Sign of disaster; that's always when she makes espresso. White as a sheet. Doesn't do her any good, staying up all night. Can't do anything about it, really not, I'm shattered as well.

'Why?' she wants to know. 'What for?'

And I start howling like a Cocker spaniel. Shit.

'Why do we keep having this drama? How do you see this carrying on? One hand on your balls, the other on the computer? Position warfare with your father in the interim?'

When I hear the word war I stop howling; I've had a totally awesome idea.

'I'm going to be a partisan! Then you can do what you want. I'm not going to play nigger for the old man any more. I'm going to fight for things that are worth fighting for!' I hear myself saying – no idea why.

'Partisan?' echoes my mother, bewildered. 'Have you taken something? At this hour? Without trousers? And what on earth is that supposed to mean: fight for things that are worth fighting for? Those are just empty phrases; when you go out, could you take the rubbish...' Big mistake. She should have just waited until my emotional whirlwind blew itself out, but now...

'Mum! Stop! Enough! What's that supposed to mean? Yeah, yeah, yeah! I'm young, but I know shit. I've seen and done it all here in Berlin already. No, you don't want to know! The clubs. The parties. The people. The whole thing. Turks against Russians and them against Arabs. Me and my mates in the middle. And then all the hipsters that have taken over round here. Can't breathe anywhere, everywhere's full. No one's interested in the challenges an

ordinary boy from the professional classes has to face! Leave me alone! I'm going to be a partisan and that's the end of it.'

The espresso's bubbling, it's been ready for ages. Coffee: her miracle cure, like other people have Nivea or Dettol.

'Lavazza machines are simply the best. We can agree on that, at least: no designer nonsense, just espresso. Lowest common denominator. Two sugars, for a change?'

When she talks to me like this I sometimes ask myself whether she's all there.

'Or three sugars today?' she continues cheerfully. Pretty poor.

'One sugar more or less really won't make any difference the day your son goes off to join the brigades. Professional class? Is there such a thing? I only know working-, middle- and upper-class.'

My eyes get pretty narrow, you might even say slitty.

'It'd make more sense to finish this tomorrow after school; I'm so tired,' I say, trying to back down.

'Partisan, uh huh,' she continues, undeterred: she's determined not to understand me! 'In what mountains, though? Is the Märkische Heide suitable partisan terrain? Ripped jeans, tight boxer shorts and split Chucks are no outfit for a hero. And what causes are you fighting for? Cheeseburgers for all, clubs to open as soon as school's out, abolish the school leaving certificate, down with fathers...?'

Does she ever listen to me properly? How about a silence seminar, a Trappist monastery in Provence, or trekking with Bedouins in the Sahara?

'Very droll, Mum! Take a shower with Mr Funny today, did we? *Your* causes are so old-school. Welfare state. Communal living. Clean and tidy. Structure. Totally dated. Yeah, now you're surprised. Sure, you think I'm too young. Naïve. Maybe I am. But it's time for me to go. The old man can stand in the doorway just as long as he likes. You'll see.'

I get up and go out, slamming the front door behind me. The glass pane falls out of the frame for the third time. Plexiglass is so what we need in our house. But nobody listens to me.

My mother watches me go from the balcony. Gotta make a good impression. Belmondo or something. I run across the road. It's raining, real partisan weather.

Why doesn't she take me seriously? Why doesn't anyone take me seriously? Why all this irony all of the time? Where do you want to be a partisan? In Berlin? Mecklenburg Lake District, Spreewald? I run back; soaked to the skin I yell up at the balcony: 'I'm serious, Mum, and don't say it's the delayed after-effects, you can't blame everything on that! The war's over!'

mini-golfer

sammy

Seriously? The police were here? Last night? And I didn't hear anything. Shit. I was asleep. Were they in bullet-proof vests? Special forces? Did they shoot? So cool! And I was asleep! But my brother's always kicking up a fuss, you can't go setting the alarm every time, can you?

Mum says David and I look very alike and that's why she didn't have more kids because it'd just be more of the same. In the old photo albums I think we look the same, too, in woolly babygros and stuff. But everyone looks the same in those. All babies lying on their tummies look like babies lying on their tummies. Or baby seals. And in the circumcision photos it's the same mohel, my mother's face is just as puffy from crying, and in almost all the photos Dad seems to be digging around in flowerpots. He's explained to me that he was stashing the foreskin on the balcony. It's what you're supposed to do, he said. So that's all the same as well.

But we're not the same inside, my brother and me. Not at all.

David is mega-vain. Okay, he does look great, with a six-pack and everything. But I'm much nicer, everyone says so. At Hoffmann's off-licence, where I always measure myself against the doorframe, the lads say David's the pretty boy and I'm the nice guy.

David's skipped two years in school, I've only skipped one. Seriously, he always has to overdo it. But his intelligence is cold and I have much greater empathy: that's what my gran always says. He doesn't even know what spring smells like. Wanna bet?!

Mum, who went to a Waldorf school, says the anthropologists claim we choose the family we want to be born into. I don't believe that. Sometimes I think I'd be a much better fit somewhere else. Maybe someone made a mistake with me?

Mum says she and Dad did a trial run with a dog. She says it was really easy teaching the dog to play dead. If bringing something up is that easy, they thought, we can have a daughter. The daughter was a son and he did everything except play dead. A couple of years on they'd forgotten about all the hard work, Mum says. She got pregnant again, David was usurped by me, and he still resents me for it today.

I know it sounds a bit weird, but I can't go anywhere without someone giving me something. Lollies, chocolate, free tickets, footballs. I smile, and the world falls at my feet. That's just how it is.

David observes this, he nicks my sweets, but he doesn't get it. What's the point of skipping two years if you don't understand simple things like that? How's it possible to be so smart and so stupid at the same time?

Yesterday, for example, war broke out again over dinner. Dad and David were bellowing at each other like animals about some president or other. Mum pushes the glasses into the middle of the table, we don't have many left... It's mashed potato, one of my favourite meals; I take the last schnitzel without anyone noticing, grin over at my mother; ever heard the term strategy? All David has to do is smile and nod and we'd be on dessert and could get straight back to the computer. Why can't he do it?

Dad says that when I was still small Mum used to tell everyone I was always so cheerful I must be retarded. And that then she'd add, extra loud, 'But you're not even allowed to think something like that in Germany, with that history it's clearly politically incoherent.'

I'm just contented, that's all. Is that so bad?

While we're on the subject: yes, I like churches, I like cathedrals even better, I like baking, and in school I elected to do Latin and Greek. French is completely out. Except in Africa, but I don't live there. My room's tidy, my T-shirts are folded. Embarrassing, says David. What's embarrassing about it? Why's it supposed to be cool if your room looks like of the messies' on TV? Before I go to sleep I put out my clothes for the next day. That's just organisation, David. It's quicker in the morning then, you jerk! I play hockey in Grunewald, violin in Wilmersdorf, I ask Mum how she's doing, and tell her I like her dress. Next week, though, I'm going to switch from violin to trumpet: big band instead of orchestra, sounds cooler, doesn't it?

Am I more German than David? More than fifty per cent, maybe? Switched at birth in the Martin Luther Hospital? Am I secretly descended from the von Weizsäckers? Those were the good Germans, even during the Nazi period – not entirely undisputed, though, we're just doing it in History.

I dunno, I just have it easier. Honestly. David says he had a bloody hard time as the first-born, he wasn't allowed his first stick of chewing gum until after he started school. Harsh! I had one when I was still being breastfed. Same with watching TV, Coke, doner kebabs. Mum's friends say just you wait, Sammy's still young, but when he hits fifteen... But whatever I end up like, I'll never end up like David, all right?!

What I really wanted to say, though, is: what I love best of all is minigolf!

I know the golf course opening times off by heart. Today it's Mum's turn, even if it's not her favourite sport. She comes back from her therapist exhausted; she says she pays ninety-five euros an hour and the therapist sits there the whole time and says nothing. She has a doctorate, though, and studied for years and years. Mum is either in therapy or in the theatre. In any case, she mumbles something now about 'not my day today'.

It never is with minigolf. I usually get a hole in one to three shots. Mum gets seven points right away in the first round, because if you don't manage it in six shots you're given the

highest penalty – seven points. She’s used to losing; it’s the same with Memory, table football and billiards.

I hate it when she tries to leave out a hole, like she’s doing again now. Dad says Mum is resistant to rules. ‘Mum! What’s the point of having rules if you don’t take them seriously?’

‘You’re more German than your father. Is that because of Wagner?’

‘Mum, not Wagner again!’

‘It’s not all Wagner’s fault, he’s not that important, but we could trace your Germanic vein back to him, you know, when you were born...’

Not this story again! Unbelievable. ‘I think I’ve told you before. When your brother was born I had to have an emergency operation for the first time. He was fourteen days overdue and too big to get through; in the end they dragged him out whether he wanted to come or not.’

It’s gross when Mum tells me stuff like this, and so loud they can hear it all the way to hole 15.

‘I’d always suspected the whole natural birth thing was a farce. They disapprove of caesarians in Germany, in certain circles, anyway. From a very young age German women are able to make jam, understand homeopathy and give birth naturally. I can’t do any of it.’

Argh! In a minute she’s going to start talking about my birth in every last detail in front of all the other minigolfers. Wanna bet? God, I hate this! ‘Mum! Your turn!’

‘Don’t take him out before the end of the month, my astrologist warned me. He’ll only be a happy person after twelve o’clock on the thirty-first.’

What did I tell you?!

‘The delivery room was all prepared, everyone there in lime-green scrubs, I already had the plastic cap on, when an emergency was brought in. Me and my big belly were pushed back into the corridor where I was supposed to wait, strapped to the gurney. And that’s when it happened. Your father couldn’t think of anything better to distract me than to enlighten me on the subject of Wagner. And I swear that’s influenced you more than every one of my Jewish genes!’

Mum doesn’t even notice that I’m already three holes ahead... She just keeps talking, probably to disguise the fact that she has yet to pot a single hole without a penalty. Any minute now she’ll try to cheat again. But I’m watching like a hawk.

‘Wagner was a strange guy. Probably a genius, but definitely a massive arsehole. An insecure man, despite his talent. He couldn’t stand competition. He wanted to be as successful as Meyerbeer, Mendelssohn... all Jews, unfortunately. While in exile he worked doggedly to create a community for himself. People were not only to hear his music and think it good, they were to believe in it. In return he, through his art, would lead his followers out of this base and vile life and redeem them to something more exalted. For Germans, with their great

yearning for faith and redemption, it was exactly what they wanted to hear. There are some truly magical moments in his music. The man composed like nobody else before him...'

Mum is now shouting across four holes so I can hear her properly. If there were a Guinness record for embarrassing mothers, mine would be number 1. Germany's Next Top Mummy.

'He could have written such beautiful ensembles! Instead, those endless solos over and over again. Manic. Monomaniac. Entry only for initiates. Not unlike Rudolf Steiner, comparable to Stefan George. Germans need disciples, every enigmatic word provides them with fresh nourishment: *fuehrers* with their eternal secret. Which is why it can't get too concrete. It's not important what you believe in, the belief itself is the content. Giving birth, incidentally, is also one of these dogmas...'

I've finished the course. Record score. I could just fill in the annual season ticket form right now, then we can come here as often as we like. With a bit of luck Mum'll just carry on talking and won't notice what she's signing.

'In our twelve-year history together up to that point I had never heard your father talk as much as he did then about Wagner.'

'Mum! Please, just finish playing.'

We're not in the delivery room here, we're on the minigolf course! So get on with it! I can probably count myself lucky that I'm not called Richard, Tristan or Siegfried. They're cool, my parents, but they're not exactly normal. Next time I come into the world I'd like it to be with my friend Paul's parents. They're with the audit office. They eat on time, drive a leasing car with air conditioning and don't talk constantly about art.

our man from the münsterland

georg

‘Why don’t you say anything? Don’t you want to say something too for once? Did you hear me? I asked you a question! Or do you need a libretto to answer?’

My wife is laying the table for our evening meal together, on the Day After. Another evening, another meal, a completely overrated ritual in my opinion. And then on top of everything this battery of trivial questions! What am I supposed to say? Talking is always possible, says Adriana. I don’t share this opinion. I watch as the fork is set beside my plate, and say nothing. I say nothing not out of passive resistance, as my family accuses me of doing; I like saying nothing. Saying nothing is nice.

Can’t any of them hear the cuckoo in the park? That they’re nesting in the centre of town now? Foxes, wild boar, why not cuckoos as well? It sings a fourth instead of a little third, as always in classical composition; is that a mutation we’re hearing? Has anyone noticed? Probably not. Philistines. How many living composers do you know? One, and he’s sitting here at the kitchen table and could do with some silence every now and then.

Whatever I try it’s useless: they’re chosen, I’m not. I’m the outsider in this *ménage à quatre*, and as such I have the right to an opinion but no right of veto. There is no democracy, not in the theatre and not in the family.

You could see what I’m doing here as German-Jewish rapprochement. Private reparation. It only works up to a point, though.

What an evening yesterday. What a night!

When you’ve been waiting all Sunday evening for your son, who since five o’clock has been saying he’ll be back soon then turns up drunk just before one with a stupid grin on his face, and when the day ends with a visitation from what feels like a hundred people, one cannot say that the weekend came to a peaceful conclusion.

Yes, from time to time I lose my temper. What are my alternatives? How else am I supposed to get anyone’s attention in this madhouse? ‘Domestic violence’, my God, what that sounds like. Am I supposed to feel ashamed? We were wrestling. Wrestling for dominance in a fourth-floor flat in an old apartment block in Berlin Schöneberg. And incidentally: I’m still the strongest.

Tonight we’re trying it with soup first.

‘Sammy, David! Dinner!’ I’m interested to see whether they pay as little attention to my wife’s summons as they do to mine.

Surprise: they deign to come.

And immediately there's non-stop talking around our table. I like soup, but isn't it enough to hear the quiet sound of the spoon on the plate? No, there has to be talking at all costs, and always everyone at once, never one after the other.

When they get tired and leave short pauses between sentences, out of sheer exhaustion, I have a chance of getting in there. Then, when I'm finally able to place a sentence, I have the next problem: they don't listen.

Excellent minestrone. Well-seasoned. Delicious.

The children look like me. Especially David, but he doesn't like to hear that. Well, the truth can be harsh.

To be honest, I have yet really to encounter his much-praised superior intelligence. It's more like a medal that's been pinned on him: Intellectually Gifted. I scored 1.4 on my leaving certificate – does that count for nothing? But no one here talks about that.

Who's read their entire Jewish canon? Spinoza, Heine, Marx, Freud, Adorno? Not to mention the literature. Yes, people warned me, at home in my family, and elsewhere, too, made ambiguous comments: Do you know what you're doing? Are you sure? With this woman? This constant nerviness, this extrovert behaviour, it doesn't suit you, surely. Take Verena, on the other hand, she's nice, normal... No one ever said the word 'Jewish'.

When I met Adriana I was in the anti-nuclear movement, a kind of bourgeois anarchist, political cabaret department. I never threw stones, that was too concrete for me and would have lacked style. Other than that, any form of resistance was fine with me. Our basic law was: *Sic semper tyrannis!* There were plenty of father-substitutes for me to oppose. My son manages without substitutes, he's got me... Back then, for me, it was only logically consistent that I should bring a Jewish woman home for Sunday lunch with my Union of German Girls mother and my Wehrmacht father. Well, of course I didn't think of it quite like that. I was simply fascinated by this Jewish tornado. Really, this was not what I had imagined. Too loud, too fast, too much. They call it chutzpah, I call it bad manners. Now I'm being unfair... and the soup was good, and today they're kind of relaxed, in fact it's almost cosy around our table.

I come from a narrow background – or what do you call it when you served as an altar boy in Greven in the Münsterland? Adriana widened my horizons. There is a world beyond the Dortmund-Ems canal.

And this is what that world looks like. Every flight is rebooked at least once. Every decision is basically no decision but is always negotiable, because discussion is always possible. Talking gets everything moving: feigning mass through speed, the Jewish version of the theory of relativity. Apropos mass: the much-vaunted kosher food, above all the *scholet*, is the kind of stew we were eating in Westphalia two thousand years ago. Fat, beans, brown gravy, the week's leftovers – inedible.

They don't exist, the master race, the *übermensch* – but I don't see a chosen people here either. It may be that they're constantly in communication with God, but it wouldn't do them any harm to introduce a bit more fear into the relationship.

Now it's gone quiet all of a sudden. An opportunity – I could say something. What's happened? Aha, the main course, with salad.

'Jews are like everybody else, just more,' Adriana always says, and to this day I still haven't worked out whether it's meant as a joke.

Middle-class people usually team up like for like: doctors or Golf drivers. Famous studies have proven that the coexistence of people from different cultural backgrounds is exceedingly complicated, usually goes wrong, and if it succeeds it's only with tremendous expenditure of energy and the attrition of numerous personal resources. I can but confirm this. Nevertheless, that's what I chose, and now I'm stuck with it, and I don't even own a Golf.

Salad. The war starts with the salad. 'Please may I have some more salad too, or is it reserved for you alone?' I ask David, who behaves as if I'm disinheriting him.

'But of course, Poppa,' he answers complacently, after piling a mountain of salad onto his plate and leaving almost none in the bowl. Yes, I love salad, and he knows it. Is that morally reprehensible? 'Salad is my friend,' says the lead actress in the film *The Green Ray* by Eric Rohmer; a wonderful film, another thing no one here understands. Shortly afterwards my eldest casually rises from the table. 'Please, do get up, no, I'm not offended. I just haven't finished yet. I eat too slowly? Just because I don't gobble like a famished Palestinian in the Sahel? Incidentally, that white appliance over there is the dishwasher.' I'd like to shout: I'm not the victim here, you're making me a victim, if your mother had married Moses Mendelssohn we all would have been happier. Instead I say, 'And by the way, Truman does come after Roosevelt!'

And already I've got to David: he immediately returns to the table and, just to be on the safe side, asserts the opposite of everything I say. Sammy grins. He's so young and he's immediately seen through it. But the big one's red in the face and yelling that there's pretty much everything in Palestine, just not the Sahel. I'm a member of the educated classes whose knowledge is dangerously superficial. Well, at least I have some knowledge, even if it's superficial. How about you?

'Washington, then Adams,' insists David.

'Jefferson isn't counted as a president of the United States. Feel free to google to find out why,' I say. 'And yes, darling, I would like some dessert – anyone else?'