

Sample Translation (Pages 5 - 39)

Tito's Glasses. The Story of my Demanding Family by Adriana Altaras

novel

Translated by Mike Mitchell

Adriana Altaras: Titos Brille

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In order to protect certain people, some names and places have been changed, some actions, events and situations modified.

prologue

Mostly I'm carefree. It's better like that. I cycle past the Tiergarten whistling a serenade to Berlin: some days it really looks good.

The bookshops are crammed full of Jewish-German books. Historians argue, opponents and advocates of every theory have had their lengthy say. Evening classes and memorials see to the rest. I don't need to do anything. Time will heal the wounds that are left.

But then, on this sunny day, I make a mistake, I go to an exhibition in the Gropius Building, and there's a photo on the wall. It shows a woman in a faded shirt. Her head can't be seen but on her breast I see the tattoo: Camp whore No. 712834.

I feel dizzy. It's muggy in the room and dark. I wait on the steps outside until I feel better, and I know full well that no time will ever, ever, ever heal the wounds. My aunt's right: the past is now.

I get back on my bike and pedal off.

I'm 1 meter 57 tall. Actually, I'm only 1.55 but at the registration office I said 1.57. I get a tremendous kick from having cheated the German state out of two centimeters.

So I'm not particularly tall, but I've got lovely, powerful calves because I land on my heels when I'm walking, like my mother used to. And cycling does its bit.

I like talking, like listening. It works out nicely.

I live in Berlin, in the west, in Schöneberg where nothing ever happens.

I was living in Zossenerstrasse, no. 61, in Kreuzberg when, after the Wall came down, the market hall was sold out of milk by 12 a. m. I was taking my huge dog (since died) for a walk in the Tiergarten Park when the Congress Hall, as it then was, what Berlin wits called the 'Pregnant Oyster', collapsed and was subsequently renamed 'House of World Cultures'. I went to the Max Reinhardt School of Acting, which was renamed the 'University of the Arts'. I took acting there. I ended up with letters after my name: '*Dipl.-Schau.*'. I could be called a 'qualified actress' but what would be the point of that?

I used to drink coffee in the *Schwarzes Café* or the *Terzo Mondo*, go drinking in the *Zwiebelfisch* or dancing through the night in the *Dschungel*. All that is part of a West that has long since disappeared. In fact the West, especially this West Berlin, vanished more quickly than the whole of the late lamented GDR. Almost overnight. It just left a few details behind.

Yes, I've been here all that time.

All I missed was John F. Kennedy and the Second World War.

I'm Jewish. Born 1960. There you are, now it's out.

I was born in Tito's Yugoslavia. I can remember it very well, it must have been the heyday of his rule, for large, imposing portraits of him were all over the place. Including our kindergarten. In colour even. Before breakfast we children greeted him with: '*Dobar dan, Druže Tito*' ('Good morning, Comrade Tito'). He never replied, we thought him impolite.

When I was three I was invited to a casting session. They were going to make a film of the life of Nikoletina Bursač, a heroic partisan from a story by Branko Ćopić. The casting ended in a duel between a little blonde and me for the role of Erna. In the last days of the war the hero, Nikoletina, finds a little Jewish girl in a village that's been burnt down. The girl comes to trust him and tells him the story of the persecution and murder of her family by the Croatian fascists, the Ustaša. I was determined play the Jewish girl. I had resolved to win and to become an actress later on. I managed to do both.

The shooting wasn't particularly spectacular, I wore thick woolen socks that were scratchy, had to drink horrible-tasting goat's milk and cry at certain points.

I had to cry when Nikoletina found me in a mountain village where the Ustaša had killed all the Jews, only they didn't find me, little Erna.

The Ustaša, I was told during the shooting, were Croatian nationalists led by Ante Pavelić, who, following the example of the SS, carried out the race laws with extreme brutality. They would have remained a radical minority if they hadn't been put in charge of the country by Hitler and Mussolini. Their aim was to complete the final solution before the Nazis, if possible. The Ustaša militia, they said, had killed Serbs, Roma, Jews and partisans. I could hardly understand any of this, but one thing was clear: at this point I had to weep buckets, no question.

So I made my first film in June 1964, in the mountains of Dalmatia. My mother, an ardent Communist, was thrilled by the content and form of the film. The premiere took place on Tito's birthday, in the summer of the next year, at which point I was already in the process of becoming a refugee and couldn't attend it.

At the age of 44 I became an orphan. That's not particularly early in life and I haven't felt specially different since then. I'd probably never call myself that if the office that dealt with inheritances hadn't addressed me as such. I inherited a few thousand euros, which I immediately used to settle my previous year's debt with the tax office, plus a 26-year-old Mercedes, an apartment that hadn't been cleared out for forty years and on-going restitution proceedings against the Croatian government.

Above all, I moved into the front row. There was no one left for me to hide behind. My parents had simply died. All sorts of things came to light: secrets, neuroses, rubbish.

I'm not a particularly good cyclist, above all not when I'm talking to myself.

I hate secrets. I think secrets are the absolute end. I detest them. Profoundly. And family secrets come right at the top of my list of unbearable secrets. I sensed that even as a child. Hardly anything is more persistent than a family secret. Every family has the same number of stories as secrets. You have to listen to the stories all the time so that the secrets can remain in the dark.

For example the story of Tito's glasses: Croatia during the war, 1944, Tito's glasses are broken. The partisans, led by Comrade Tito, have entrenched themselves in Croatia's rugged mountains, not leaving themselves open to attack. The Ustaša can't get to grips with them. A tricky situation. My father repairs Tito's glasses. The partisans win the battle. My father is declared a hero and remains so.

I get off my bike, sit down at the bar of my favorite café and just continue talking out loud. They know me there.

'Great,' says Frank, the waiter in Café Savigny, giving me a friendly smile, 'and?'

'My father's dead and somehow it's all wrong.'

'Aha,' says Frank.

'Yes,' I say, 'at that time Marshal Tito didn't wear glasses at all.'

'Oh, dear,' says Frank. He's understood.

'But my father is and remains a hero.'

'Of course he does,' Frank reassures me.

'Thanks,' I stammer. Frank has to put up with all sorts of things, he's a nice guy.

Don't get sentimental, just get back on your bike and keep on riding.

My poor bike and I struggle along the Strasse des 17. Juni. Everything's blurred. The tears are running down my cheeks. Back home I look in a sorer state than my bike. But that doesn't matter. In Schöneberg everyone looks more worn-out than in fresh-as-a-daisy Prenzlauer Berg.

There's a letter in my mailbox, an official letter with lots of stamps. They just trying to impress you, I tell myself, and have a quick look at what it says: 'Regarding your claim for restitution, we would ask you to submit to us the death certificates of all concerned. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Zagreb, Croatia.'

They must be joking! They're responsible for at least half of my dead relations themselves, so they ought to have the death certificates in their own archives. And it was never that easy to get decent death certificates from Auschwitz.

I feel the fury rising up inside me: just another way of deferring a claim, playing for time, waiting until those concerned are not concerned anymore but dead, till I'm dead and buried myself. But I'm certainly not going to do them the favor of dying just to suit them.

I start up my computer, they're going to get a real stinker of a letter.

Whenever I'm trying to concentrate, one of my sons comes along. I have two. The older one says: 'Just feel, these football boots, real leather, no comparison, eh?' And I say, 'No, no comparison.' Delighted, he explains the offside trap to me. Immediately I lose the thread, my eye wanders and falls on his younger brother who's picking his nose as if he were searching for gold. What's the point, I switch my computer off.

my father, the hero

Adriana! Adria, my daughter, your name should be the same as that of our sea! Our beautiful sea! We sang! We laughed! Split! That was a pearl of the Adriatic. The Dalmatians? Like the Italians! Loud and high-spirited and above all not anti-Semitic. They helped us to emigrate, they hid us, and we went to the mountains together. As fighters! Just imagine, the first Jewish bookshop in the country was in Split: the Mopurgo Family... Look, almost everyone survived. Almost all the Jews of Split. Until the Germans arrived, but that's another story...

I wake up at half past one in the morning. It's 7 December, the night after St. Nicholas' Day. Yes, we celebrate St. Nicholas' Day. Jews make the most of all festivals. Not all Jews and not all festivals, but the principle's there. The children have stuffed all the candy from the boots they left out for St. Nicholas in their mouths and gone to sleep with tummy ache.

Is the window open? It's so stuffy! Sami has an appointment with the orthodontics specialist tomorrow, if we forget that we'll have to wait until he's getting his third set of teeth. Why have I woken up anyway? What's going on? Something's happening just now... There's always something happening somewhere...

When you're young you're too stupid to be afraid. I was a doctor. But as a Jew I wasn't allowed to continue working in the hospital. With the partisans I could, of course. Doctors, even inexperienced ones like me, had plenty to do right away. How many teeth must I have taken out with a lever! I was brave and stupid.

Just imagine, in June 1943 I set off and went to the concentration camp on the island of Rab! I knew a bit about the camp, your mother had written telling me who was there, what they lacked, how they all were doing. So I wrote out a document authorizing me to check hygiene in the camp. Crazy! I went in and even came out again! I had letters with me and money and little things for all the poor internees that they'd ordered from me through your mother. At the gate I told the officer on duty I was a kind of Jewish envoy and the Italian occupation authorities had given me permission to visit the camp. Somehow he was impressed and let me in without any further questions! But what is even more astonishing is that he let me out again. Since I was a Jew he could surely have kept me there? Was he stupid or simply credulous? Perhaps he was just a fascist, not an anti-Semite? I don't know. And I didn't ask him. In and then out again. Unbelievable! Look, these photos of the camp are ones I took. Hid them in my shoe. Hardly was I out than I started running, hero that I was! Ran for

my life. In a little guest house by the harbor I let the blinds down and waited for the next ship to Split. Crazy! Really stupid. And still so young.

And I repaired Tito's glasses! Marshal Tito's glasses! But that's not all. I fought, I slept out in the woods like a bear and I saved 40 Jewish children and took them to Nonantola...

My father was a hero, I've known that ever since I've been aware.

Nonantola is a small town in northern Italy, not far from Modena. In April 1943 forty Jewish children arrive there from Croatia. They got a ship as far as Ravenna, so the story goes, and then cautiously crossed the plain of the River Po to Nonantola on foot. It's hot, there are hardly any trees in that area, just rice plantations. But those are dried out, it hasn't rained for weeks. The children are housed in the Villa Emma in Nonantola. It used to belong to an Italian-Jewish industrialist, until he had to flee the country. So it's empty. The children look apprehensive, but they all have Italian passports. My father, the hero, has seen to that.

The carabinieri's sitting in his office in Split. He's reading the Corriere della Sera when I come in. I hum and haw. He grins. I want to get forty stamps for forty Jewish children who have to be taken to safety. Not possible, the carabinieri says. But Dalmatia's an Italian-occupied zone, I say. That makes us all Italians, doesn't it? Una faccia, una razza! And as a mark of respect I give him a bottle of Sioffientini di Milano brilliantine. The carabinieri laughs, 'Birbante,' — you rascal — he says and stamps a lasciapassare for forty persons. 'If you get caught, you can't remember who stamped the passports for you,' he shouts after me as I leave. At the harbor in Split the parents are crying when they bring their children to the ship. But they know it's their last chance. Fellow passengers: Italians fascists, German soldiers. We sing. The children and I sing like a youth group going on a holiday trip. We keep on singing. As if everything were normal. 'Ciri biri bella mare moja.' A Croatian folksong about our beautiful sea. We sang during the whole journey. We sang ourselves way above suspicion!

My father, the little man, is only a bit older than the children, he's twenty. On the farewell photo they all look similar, dark and serious, with big black eyes.

My father says goodbye to the children. See you next year in Jerusalem!

He has to go on to the Vatican on a secret mission. There a priest stamps an 'I' for 'Italian' in the Jews' passports once a month. This 'I' counts as a *lasciapassare*. A loophole. Since Croatia is under Italian occupation, the Jews are, strictly speaking, Italians. This 'I' saves countless members of the Jewish community who, for whatsoever reason, haven't fled.

The little group stay in Nonantola for two years. When, in September 1943, the Germans are approaching, the local inhabitants take the children in and hide them. Perhaps because they used to have a Jewish mayor and Samuel Friedmann was always such a friendly guy? After the war, and after an adventurous escape via Switzerland, the children arrive safe and sound in Haifa.

Do you know what's a pity, Adriana? I have never been able to thank the carabinieri, since I didn't know his name. And he saved forty children...

My father, the hero. I just hope that story's true. At last I fall asleep.

A few minutes later, as it seems to me, Georg, my husband, wakes me. 'Your father's dead.' Dead? But isn't he in Nonantola? And the carabinieri?

I'm prepared for it and yet I'm in shock, breathless. That's probably quite normal.

I'm glad he's told me and I didn't have to answer the telephone myself.

In the middle of the night I get in the car and drive to Giessen. It's a strange drive, a journey to see a dead man, my dead father. I'm unnaturally alert, chat to him. And somehow he answers. That's a comfort.

Do you know the partisans' joke about the bear?

A man has a bear on a lead. '30 dinars for the bear,' he shouts in the marketplace, '30 dinars!'

'Great,' says a passer-by. 'But what for? What can the bear do? Can it dance?'

'No.'

'Aha. Can it stand on one leg?'

'No.'

'What can it do?'

'Nothing — but it was in the woods.'

A year ago my father asked if he could have a talk with me. I drove to Giessen to see him, solemnly, as if we were the Buddenbrooks family.

'I have something to tell you.' He was pale, he'd learnt recently that he had cancer of the pancreas. The pancreas, of all things, was his specialism, he'd diagnosed the disease himself. I was sitting in his consulting room in the university hospital, leafing through a medical journal.

'Why so formal? Out with it.'

He was sitting at his desk, smiling, then sprayed himself with his favorite fragrance. We remained silent, which was rare. Then he started a conversation in which he told me not the slightest thing of

significance, no heroic deeds, nothing. As if I ought to be able to smell it, guess it through the cloud of *Azzaro*. Later on he played the same game, or something like it, several times.

He'd keep phoning me, chatting away, telling me jokes I already knew; eventually he'd ask me to come and see him again, the next weekend if at all possible. Only once did he say what he really had in mind, told me his time was up and that 83 was a fine age, wasn't it? He explained his hemogram to me in technical terms, his prospects. After all, cancer of the pancreas was his true specialism.

When he'd been hospitalized for the umpteenth time, I sat at his bedside and he told me a few jokes from his extensive repertoire:

After a free weekend, a surgeon comes back to the clinic and washes his hands, ready to operate.

'How's the kidney patient we operated on Thursday doing, sister?'

'Dead, I'm afraid, Professor.'

'Really? Well I never! And Friday morning's blocked intestine?'

'He died, doctor.'

'Aha... Right then, the lady with the cardiac catheter?'

'Deceased. She died too.'

'Right then. Help me on with my coat please, sister.'

'You mean you're going to continue to operate, Professor?'

'But of course sister, I'm not afraid of death.'

I liked laughing at that joke, although a bit hesitantly this time.

He would comfort me before he dozed off: "It is a well-known fact, Adriana, that there are two alternatives: you either die young or grow old.'

When he woke again, he asked me to proof-read the text of a lecture he was going to give, in the Faculty of Theology: 'Dying and death, a Jewish perspective':

In the Jewish tradition the dead are treated with great care. Even before the moment of death one has to have prepared oneself to face it with understanding and composure.

As in other old religions, it is considered a sin to leave a Jew unburied; cremation is not practiced. A dying man is looked upon as living until his very last breath. It is a sacred duty to stay beside him so that he is not alone at the moment of death. Weeping and lamenting is forbidden, so that the dying man will not suffer.

The mirrors in the house are covered, pictures on the wall turned round.

A dead man is buried in his kitel, the shirt he wore for his wedding, for Seder and at Yom Kippur. Self-mutilation as a sign of mourning is forbidden. Ashes on one's head, tearing one's clothes and fasting is appropriate.

The Sh'ma Yisrael is sung or read out; at the burial the El mole rachamim.

The mourners have the following duties: for seven days they sit shive.

They do not sit on chairs, but on stools or on the floor.

They do not put on shoes made of leather.

They do not greet people.

They do not work.

They do not read the Torah.

Sexual intercourse is forbidden, for 30 days.

They do not cut their hair or shave.

They do not bathe.

They do not do the washing.

They do not attend public entertainments, for twelve months.

‘How do you come to know all this?’ I asked him. ‘Have you taken out a subscription to the five books of Moses? You’re not particularly religious, nor, apart from specialist medical literature, have I ever seen you reading a book.’

‘Jews never do that and they still know everything’ was his modest answer.

Strange, I thought, he’s giving me very clear instructions for afterwards. So that I do everything right or so that I’m not alone in the situation, don’t feel so lonely?

When he was getting even worse, he asked me to come and see him again, in meaningful tones. I was to visit him in the hospital without my mother. It was late afternoon, dark already. I leant on his bed, he came close to my ear, as if he were going to whisper. Only again he said nothing. Nothing at all. I was a bit confused and he fell asleep. When I left two hours later, I still hadn’t learnt anything new but was harboring the suspicion that this hero grown old, this patriarch, would take his secrets to the grave with him.

The next day I was sitting by his bedside again, playing Neapolitan music to him on a tiny tape recorder. Even while I was wondering whether delirious people can hear music, he opened his eyes wide, said, ‘*Sento tutto*,’ (I can hear everything) and told me to get into my car, it was time. I gave a helpless, stupid laugh. ‘*Non far la stupida*’ (Don’t behave so stupidly) were his last words to me.

Göttingen, Kassel, Marburg, the journey goes on and on, even though I’m driving ‘his Mercedes’,

which he had entrusted to me during my last visit. When I finally reach the hospital, they've already taken him away. My father died in the place where he worked for years, Giessen University Hospital.

He started there as an intern when he came to Germany, stayed on for 30 years and made it to senior physician of the whole hospital. Basically it's only logical he should die there. What he left behind is a plastic bag with a few things. It's in the corridor outside the room. It's Thursday morning, 11 o'clock.

I phone my mother. She spent the whole night with him until he died. She speaks like a robot, mechanically, remote-controlled. She's not going to be a great help.

I go over the possibilities: Jews have a duty to bury the dead within 24 hours, but with the beginning of the sabbath that is forbidden for Jews. On Sunday not allowed for Christians. Monday, he could be buried on Monday.

My sister — she's only my half sister, the daughter from my father's first marriage — has come from Zagreb. She had hoped to see him while he was still alive. Now he's dead and we have to wait. Wait together for four long days.

My half sister's called Rosa and is even smaller than I am. She makes up for it by being fairly plump. Fatness shows weakness of character, my father always used to say. His relationship with her wasn't particularly good, and such devastating pronouncements did nothing to improve the situation. It was said my father only married his first wife under pressure from the Communist Party. At least he made her pregnant. Instead of hating the Party, that had forced him into the marriage, he distanced himself more and more from his wife and their child. Years later, when I asked him if that didn't show a kind of weakness of character too, he dismissed my question with: 'You know nothing about Communism, Adriana.' The older my sister grew, the more complicated his relationship to her and his relationship to the Party became. After all, my half sister was a child of the Party as well.

His first wife died after 14 years of marriage, I was born in the same year, the child of a new wife, my mother. He spent the nights in his late wife's home, with my half sister, the days with us. He was crazy about his 'new' daughter, me, who lived with my mother at the other end of Zagreb. I'm sure my sister didn't enjoy his commuting between families. She'd probably quite happily have smothered me with my fleecy blanket.

With the death of my father we are now faced with a new test of our relationship.

My sister sits down on the carpet in the middle of his consulting room. Basically she only gets up four days later.

His consulting room is on the third floor of the University Hospital, in the Radiology Department. I always used to like going to see my father there. I'd lounge on the leather sofa of the three-piece suite, try out four-color pens from the various pharmaceutical companies, gawp at the radiological photos of the colon. I was always given an espresso, just like the cleaner or the dean. My father was famous for his espresso. A magnificent Italian espresso machine was the centerpiece of the bookshelf. There was nothing he was as proud of — except perhaps his car. For a long time he'd got by with Renaults and Peugeots, but as soon as he officially became a naturalized German he treated himself to a big Mercedes: that made it clear to everyone that once more he'd arrived in a society. When he drove round Giessen, he kept his hat on, otherwise he might not be seen, he was so small. When I passed my school-leaving exam I was given a key to the car, it was the highest praise I could get — I too had arrived in German society, with the German *Abitur* and a German car. That very same evening I stowed in the passenger door. A mere trifle for my father, given our unstoppable rise in German society.

I could, of course, take my time clearing the room, there's no pressure from the hospital to get it done. I could stare into space, cry or even talk about my father with my sister in my Microcroatian. Or even about the two of us and our complicated relationship. But taking my time, perhaps even doing nothing, is not one of my strong points.

Instead, I pack box after box while my sister sits on the floor, smokes and accepts a coffee on the hour, every hour. I'm working like a Trojan, she's immersed in a 1000-page reference book by my father: *Atlas of Diseases of the Bowels: Colonic and anal regions*. At one point she shows me useful photographs on the double-contrast method. On one you can see how to insert a gastrointestinal probe without perforating the colon. Overwhelmed by these medical details, I sit down beside her and drink an espresso with her. In a kitschy gold frame among all the medical tomes we find a large photograph — my father's family: in the middle our grandfather Leon, a notorious card player, beside him his wife Regina, who somehow managed to see that the family scraped by, surrounded by their six sons. They're all dark-haired, lean and pale, a typical Sephardic family. Bottom left is the youngest of the six: Jakob, our father. Split, Dalmatia, 1922.

Our father's brothers were called Buki, Mento, Albert, Miko and Silvio. Of course, Mento wasn't really called Mento, but Menachem, Buki was called Israel and Miko Chaim. But what would that have sounded like in the streets in Split? When they went out, they were Mento, Buki and Miko.

The family was poor. Somehow or other the six brothers coped; at times they lay in wait for their father and — if he'd been successful — took his winnings off him for their mother. Later on, the two eldest opened their own businesses. Mento's shop sold cheap, rubbishy goods, everything from erasers to bedlinen and tableware; Buki had a secondhand store. Business wasn't bad and that meant

that the two eldest could support the younger ones financially. Albert, no 3, became a rabbi, to the glory of God and the honor of the family. Miko, no. 4, became an engineer, a ship's engineer. Nos. 5 and 6, Silvio and Jakob, our father, were allowed to go to university and became doctors. It was probably like that, more or less, in many Sephardic families. You can certainly read about it in Elias Canetti's books.

After the war was over the brothers came back together again. They had not lost as many relatives as Ashkenazi families, who felt they were German and had trusted them blindly and fled much too late, or not at all. The Sephardic Jews had been more cautious, they had had the sense not to trust the Germans and had got out in time.

Our grandfather, Leon, had been taken when he was in the middle of a game of cards, deported and murdered. He had sat at the card table so long, he'd forgotten to flee. All the others, however, had very quickly cleared out as soon as the Italians saved their skins by going over to the Allies and handed the whole of Croatia over to the Germans. Our father and his brother Silvio stayed with the partisans. From what my father used to say, Silvio was the most handsome and gifted of the six brothers. He died during skirmishes in the last days of the war. The official version was that the Germans shot him. Grandmother Regina and the other brothers had managed to escape to southern Italy, which had already been liberated.

Back in Split after the war, the brothers had to use their initiative. The two eldest reopened their shops. Mento made his into a kind of cut-price store, 'two for the price of one', something new for Split. Basically he invented the discount store.

For his second-hand store Buki thought up the following slogan: 'Before you throw it away, bring it to Buki's!' His store was incredibly popular. Before anyone in Split put anything in the trash can — zinc, lead, copper — they offered it to him. And came back to look for spare parts, which in Split were only to be found in his store. Miko, who had been through just about everything on the Allied warships, had had enough of an unsettled existence. He had been to Cyprus, where the Jews were not allowed to go on land, and in Haifa, where they were turned away by the English. He decided to go to Eretz Israel, settle down there and sell juice on the Wailing Wall, to Jews, Christians and other tourists. Albert, the rabbi, had got as far as New York, where he founded a synagogue for the Croatian community and lived there with his wife and children as if he were still in Split.

It always sounded like a report from paradise when my father talked about Split. Split, over and over again, the narrow alleyways of the medieval town built on the ruins of Diocletian's Roman temple. They were street kids, on the beach, in the synagogue. They got their education from the town grade school, the weather, the promenade, the rabbi. They played football in the street. They bathed on the shallow beach of Bačvice, the public bathing place. Non-Jews, Jews, Muslims, all

together. Trying to keep a little ball in the air longest is 'Picigin', it's still played in the shallow water, for hours on end, during Croatia's long summers. 'Picigin' is a word of Italian origin, in fact everyone spoke Italian, without thinking about it, as a matter of course.

'I was born Jakov Altaras, son of Leon Altaras and his wife Regina, on 12 October 1918 in Split (Yugoslavia). I passed my school-leaving examination in 1936 and entered the medical faculty of Zagreb University in the same year. On 5 April I managed to escape from Split, one day before it was occupied by the Germans. That was cutting it fine. Since Split had been under Italian occupation, I had the opportunity of continuing my studies at Italian universities. At the same time I joined Tito's partisan army. My studies became more and more irregular but I did manage to graduate from Bari University in 1944.' Thus my father wrote in his curriculum vitae.

With the partisans he finds the mountains a problem, he's from the coast and he misses the sea. But he's tough, it was the years of track-and-field training with Makkabi Split that saved him, he used to joke, otherwise he'd never have survived the miles and miles of foot marches. He carries Russian guns and sings Russian songs about freedom. For two years he leads his brigade, the *prva dalmatinska Brigada*, in the mountains, amid snow and rocks, until the Italians withdraw and the partisans can make the island of Vis Tito's headquarters and people with experience of the sea are transferred there. He waves the flag in Vis, ready to fight against fascism and give his life for Tito. A dainty but extremely attractive soldier.

All this can be seen on the photos, which by now are spread out on the floor in front of us. Our father on his first means of transport, a donkey. Later in a jeep with a red star on his cap and a machine gun over his shoulder. He's often shown me these pictures and attached little stories to them. I can't say which ones are invented, which are cock-and-bull stories and which are true. *Se non è vero, è ben trovato* — even if it isn't true, it's still a good story.

He was a happy, energetic guy you couldn't keep down, his own impresario. He was entirely unaffected by the kind of melancholy my mother never quite managed to throw off after the war. Perhaps because he was never in a concentration camp, because he was spared that kind of humiliation, because as a partisan he was always on the side of the fighters and, ultimately, of the victors.

After the war someone told my father the truth about the death of his brother Silvio. He hadn't been murdered by the Germans or the Ustaša but by someone from his own side, that is by the partisans, because of internal disagreements, shortly before the end of the war. It was hushed up, of course. At the end of the 1950s the solidarity among the partisans began to crumble, the split between Tito and Stalin became noticeable, the Party functionaries became nervous. My father

followed the matter up. He made an official complaint, with the result that the Communist Party now turned on him. The former partisans did not like being accused of such a murder. My father, who by this time was a Party celebrity, was subjected to a show trial. He was accused of actions hostile to the state and to Socialism, among other things the possession of private x-ray equipment. There was no written evidence, but he was threatened with imprisonment, withdrawal of his work permit. They wanted to get rid of him and his complaint. A few informers were found who were happy to testify against him. He left the country posthaste out of fear of imprisonment. He was bitterly disappointed. He never learnt whether the harrowing trial he had to undergo was directed at him as a troublemaking partisan or as a Jew. The result was that they were rid of him. His beloved Party had betrayed him twice over, first of all by murdering his brother, then by blackening his reputation.

You know, Adriana, it was the Jews who were the first to be sifted out of the Party — always with the same charges: Zionism or cosmopolitanism. God knows, I wasn't the only one. We'd been given the opportunity of joining the resistance in Tito's brigades and of course later on there were enough ambitious Jews in high office, above all Moshe Piade. But there was still anti-Semitism within the Party. Outwardly Tito remained the great victor who gathered all nationalities, races and religions together beneath his protecting hand. Under him we were left to live our lives more or less in peace. More or less.

Every time I tell that story, there are loud 'Ohs' and 'Ahs': 'I've never heard that before, tell us, are you sure?' The more intellectuals are gathered there, the louder the expressions of amazement. 'What's so strange about that?' I would say. 'There were anti-Semitic purges in every Communist state, only much earlier, and very violent, in Poland, later in Czechoslovakia but still effective. And in the Soviet Union Stalin had a particular penchant for show trials.'

In the summer of 1964 the show trial against my father is set up. So much is clear: this is the end of a Jewish doctor's career in Yugoslavia. My parents flee the country — or, rather, they try to. I remember us all sitting around nervously in our living room. I was little, but I can still very well remember the sense of panic. My father disappeared with a suitcase in which he was lugging mostly heavy shellac records: operas, Gigli, Caruso, Zenka Milanov. It was midsummer and very hot. He went to Zurich.

My mother didn't make it. The authorities had heard of my father's escape, took her passport away and kept her in Yugoslavia as a means of exerting pressure on my father. I was smuggled into Italy by my aunt, my mother's sister.

My mother stayed in Yugoslavia alone and had a whole year to come to terms with her disappointment with Communism. She had been an ardent Party member and now she was equally ardent in her hatred. One morning she took her red Party membership book and her red gloves and tossed both in disgust on the table of the local Party official. That is the short version of the legend. But I know that she found it very painful and took a long time to get over it.

In the meantime my father was trying to establish himself in Zurich, learning German, or what the citizens of Switzerland consider German. He repeated his doctor's oral — in Swiss German. They got him provisionally to swear an oath to the constitution, but he didn't become Swiss, his Swiss German was obviously not good enough.

As for me, 1964 was also an exciting year: my first film, my first exile. I was just four years old.

I stare at my sister. Not only does she drink one espresso after another, she chainsmokes. Socialism must be something very special after all, I think. She's calmly doing a 750-piece jigsaw puzzle of Lake Zurich she's found among my father's souvenirs. 'He brought that as a present for me,' I feel like saying jealously but manage to stop myself in time. But how can anyone do a jigsaw puzzle in such a situation? 'You're hyperactive. I'm mourning.' With these words she hands me my father's brief résumé and continues to busy herself with her jigsaw puzzle.

1966 repeated final examination, Zurich University Hospital

1967 inaugural lecture as senior physician in Giessen

1969 personal chair in Human Diagnostics

1970 permanent position

1970 German citizen

1973 full professor

1984 retirement

1985 Federal Cross of Merit

1998 Plaque of Honor of the Hesse State Medical Board

My father's achievements were remarkable. The little street kid from a poor background became a German professor with a permanent position. A man with a pension and a Mercedes. He developed a new method for the early diagnosis of intestinal cancer, the so-called double control method, addressed conferences all over the world. His scientific successes were particularly acclaimed in Italy. There were incredible dinners for which up to twenty young doctors would come from all regions of Italy to learn from him. He taught them and amused them with his specialist knowledge

and his jokes. Development courses for European doctors were held in Giessen. Soon the University could boast that it was a world leader in the early diagnosis of cancer. Numerous publications in various languages. He became an authority in his field, unmatched in his charm and sense of humor. A great character in a great epic against a background of tumultuous historical events. A kind of Dr. Zhivago, who's always been one of my heroes, as was Dr. Altaras, my father.

His empire was wide-ranging, from the technician, who got a capuccino from him at the crack of dawn, to the doctor on night duty who was invited in to his office for an espresso in the evening. He shared his little favors around and was generous with his praise. An uncle who was not sparing with his gifts. In return, his wish was their command, they helped him wherever they could. But there was one thing he didn't achieve: he never became chairman of the Central Committee of Jews in Germany. There was always someone he abhorred for political reasons who just beat him to it. It brought the partisan out in him again. He accused the Frankfurt State Association, and thus indirectly the Central Association of Jews in Germany which did nothing about it, of dirty tricks: the embezzlement of reparations funds. Correctly, as it later turned out. For years he pursued legal action against the Association. He was accused of running down his own people. It was a long time before a German lawyer could be found who had the courage to become involved in an internal Jewish affair. It was hopeless. My father lost. He withdrew, embittered.

He had to make do with Giessen, which wasn't exactly the hub of the universe. His great political ambitions were frustrated. To be precise, ever since 1964, when he'd had to leave the glorious army of Comrade Tito.

The next morning things go on just as before. I pack box after box. My sister's finished the jigsaw and now she's carefully looking through all sorts of papers. I notice that she's spending an unusually long time staring at a photo but just as I'm going to ask her about it, the telephone rings, and afterwards I forget about it. Actually I don't know her at all, my half-sister. She's 14 years older than me, when I was a baby she was in puberty. There was nothing in common between us. She stayed behind in Zagreb. Was left behind and got less than her fair share. My father sent Swiss francs to her from Zagreb. My sister spent her nice Swiss francs, which were intended to pay for her to come to the West, on a fridge and a Lada.

My father was the successful professor in the 'Golden West'. But he was also the father who had abandoned her. There were meetings in Trieste from time to time, presents exchanged, she was paid a monthly allowance in western currency, had an apartment bought for her, and that was it. Actually, I was always pleased to see her. We wanted to like each other. But then I could hardly understand the Croatian songs she sang to her guitar on the beach in the evening and she, for her part, would

look at me with large, uncomprehending eyes when I sang all ten verses of sad German folk songs to her.

And now, forty years later, my sister is an out-and-out Croat who's been sitting on the carpet in his consulting room for two days collecting personal relics of my father's while I, with my broken ex-Yugoslavian, can't even explain his will to her. That's what my Europe's like.

Now and then, while I'm sorting through his papers, the door, which still has the sign: 'Senior Physician Radiology', opens and various women come in tentatively. They look at me then sit down hesitantly on the leather couch in the consulting-room suite. I lean on the desk, fold my arms, wait. The first one bursts out with it: she was my father's lover. Her make-up is smudged by tears, I give her a handkerchief. The second, long blond hair, is more or less the same age as me. She thinks she's the only one, raves about my father: 'A wonderful man.' By the time the third arrives, I've acquired a certain routine, give her a comforting nod and offer her an espresso. My sister smiles, a sly, knowing smile. I always suspected she understands a lot more German than she admits to. She calmly continues to smoke, sips her coffee. I once went to see her where she she worked in the pensions organization in Zagreb. She was sitting in a little, chaotic office among stacks of files arranged according to a system only she knew. She sat there smoking. She clearly doesn't care where in Europe she sits in an office, smoking...

With the first lover there's a joint account with American Express, with the second an apartment on the outskirts of Giessen. The third accompanied him on his lecture tours. I get a piece of paper and note down: 'Close account, cancel apartment lease, lecture tour. Don't forget!!'

I have to admit I'm not as detached from all this as it might appear. After each woman leaves the room, I need a few minutes to recover. I take deep breaths and let the idea get through to me: my father had lovers! Not one, but several! At the same time. His lovers were my age, one even considerably younger. It's disturbing, silently the image of my father inside me crumbles and new ones appear. For example his dentures grating when a young woman kisses him... I don't want to imagine it too clearly. I'm impressed how effortlessly my father must have managed to live several lives alongside each other.

The third one even brings some money back my father supposedly gave her for her daughter's education. — If that was what he wanted? I give it back to her. She gives it to me again and it goes back and forward like that for a while. Finally she leaves, tears in her eyes and carrying the envelope. I quickly add a note to my piece of paper: 'Careful when winding up the apartment. Mama mustn't know!'

During all this my mother's waiting at home. She's probably sitting at her desk, smoking, like a true Croatian. Perhaps she's even trying to work. That would be just like her. 'I need to finish my

book,' I can hear her mutter to herself, 'and now there's another distraction.' I call her and, indeed, she's sitting at her desk, but she's not well, she murmurs quietly, she's run out of ideas.

My father was her great love. She takes his death as a personal insult and generously allows me to deal with everything: arrange the funeral, clear out his consulting room, inform colleagues, friends and acquaintances. I get on the phone. One thing she impresses on me repeatedly: if the hospital should call, 'Yes to an autopsy, but not his head, his head must be left as it is, d'you hear? It's against Jewish law. Not his head!'

Thea Fuhrmann, my mother, was just thirteen when she first met my father. She and her sister, Jelka, had been allowed to spend a few days at the seaside, in Split. Rather liberal for those days. Inevitably the two girls met a group of Jewish boys on the promenade. Their leader, not the biggest but the most charming, was called Jakob.

Him and no one else, Thea decided, before she said goodbye. Two years later, 1938, at the big Purim ball of the Jewish community in Zagreb, to which young Jews from all over Yugoslavia went, she informed him of her plans for her future life. The way my father, nineteen at the time, looks on the photo I would immediately have fallen in love with him myself. My mother wasn't the only one, lots of girls were interested in him. But she was persistent. She put him away in her heart and kept him there until he died. Her love survived another marriage, a world war, various affairs and exile.

My sister comes to life. She's discovered my father's toothbrush. It's all by itself in the mug where he kept it. I would probably have thrown it away. In fact she keeps on picking things out of the rubbish I've already chucked out. I suppose these things must have some meaning for her they don't have for me. She's crying. Oh great, clearing out his room's probably going to take a couple of years.

The consulting room has cupboards going right up to the ceiling, full to the top. Lots of medical books, some written by my father. He doesn't seem to have thrown anything away for years: bars of soap, swimming caps, shoe cleaning materials from thousands of well-known hotels, sugar, matchboxes, postcards, souvenirs from all over the Mediterranean. Photocopies of articles about himself, about the family, about all sorts of conferences, newspaper articles about political events, all crammed into box-files. I'm working hard. I glance through letters, arranging them according to topic: profession, religion, politics, lovers, and keep the panic rising up in me under control. Death. He's dead. That's clearly something that can't be changed — not even by my father.

We two sisters, strangers to each other, spend four days close to our father and relatively close to each other, closer than we've ever been, surrounded by mountains of 'trash'. Trash really is a problem. I don't mean normal, urban, secular trash, but what we have to get on top of during those four days. However much I loved my father, I'm beginning to hate him just as much for the masses of trash he left me. At that point I have no idea that not long afterwards, with the death of my mother, a much greater pile of trash will be waiting for me. Of course it wasn't trash for my father. It was his lovers, his memories, his life.

My father seems to have felt a bit uneasy himself about this mountain of unfinished and discarded business. During the last years he kept asking me to come round and help him sort it out. But when I appeared in the doorway, all ready to get on with it, his determination melted away. He preferred to make me an espresso and talk about the war. There was always a war breaking out somewhere in the world that concerned him.

He died and left it to me to decide whether he'd had a great life.

the rabbi in the aldi bag

That burials often turn into absurd events is nothing new. The advice of my father and my religion are of only limited help in surviving the day.

For my father's burial around 500 people have gathered in the Jewish part of the Christian cemetery. It's cold. My plump, sad sister is wearing a little black hat with an equally little black veil, as if she'd come to the chapel directly out of a Goya drawing. My mother has a fixed expression which is amazingly similar to that of Comrade Tito.

I don't feel at all like crying which is possibly because all sorts of people touch me, shake my hand or even embrace me. I hate it when people wander round my aura uninvited.

The most cheerful person seems to be our cantor, a substitute rabbi, a poor scholar, certainly the most embarrassing rabbi in Europe. Although there's no league table for that. He comes running along, too late of course, has to stub out his cigarette quickly in the doorway, leans his plastic bag from the Aldi supermarket against the coffin and immediately disappears head first into it.

His caftan has shiny patches, there's a whole week's menu on it. I sense the horrified looks of those present, most of the Christians find their philosemitism put to a serious test.

In 1978, when I was in my final year at school, my father dug up a few Jews in Giessen. He established a Jewish Congregation and had himself elected chairman that same evening. He found rooms for it, a Thora roll, he was so enthusiastic there was no stopping him. The little congregation was soon 'flourishing', thanks to the wave of immigrants from Russia.

My father involved everyone and anyone in his project. He was superb at delegating and hardly anyone noticed how much work they put into it for him. The Dean of the Faculty of Medicine became not only a real friend but also an indispensable treasurer of the Jewish Congregation, and the patient secretary and the medical technician, who was in love with him, were equally willing to type complicated documents for the Congregation after hours for the little doctor in white. He urged them on, he had convinced them they were involved in great things. My mother, his colleagues at the university hospital, the Association for Christian/Jewish Collaboration, the Bürgermeister of the town. All were given tasks, Jews as well as non-Jews. The whole of Giessen a Jewish community. Finally Giessen got its synagogue again. With my mother in charge, the 19th-century, abandoned half-timbered synagogue of the little rural congregation of Wohra was transported to Giessen. Everyone contributed to the costs: the state, the city, societies and private individuals. And eventually this little jewel, with its mikveh, congregation house and students' hostel, was there in

the middle of Giessen. A minor miracle in which all had played their part: the government and the opposition, the Bürgermeister, the Dean, the technician and citizens.

Today they're all standing there, shivering, in the cemetery chapel, staring at the Jew who's disappeared inside his Aldi bag. Time passes. Eternity appears to be coming closer. Somehow the cantor manages to dig his prayer shawl out of the plastic bag.

It's cold, our feet are freezing, the speeches are OK. What does one really understand on a day like that?

And then this comic figure of a cantor starts to sing and it's as if our souls were flying up to heaven — my father's soul, mine, my sister's, that of my stoical mother, even those of some of the Christians. Open-mouthed, they're spellbound by the voice with an Aldi bag. It rises above religion, politics, above the snow, the new town and the hospital in Giessen.

'I'll tell you one thing,' my mother had threatened several times, 'I'm going to spare you and me the *shive* sitting. In the first place, I'm not a Polish Jew, we German Jews don't waste our time with such nonsense and, anyway, I'm not going to sit around in the apartment with some Russians or other, listening to their *eytses*. I've things to do.

For the funeral meal we go to the Italian restaurant right next to the University Hospital, for some inexplicable reason my father liked it. It's drafty, there's Italian kitsch hanging on the walls and Paolo Conte bellowing on tape. I hope the meal will be a nice surprise. To my astonishment, I'm hungry, I've not swallowed a morsel during the last few days. The Italian restaurant's empty and desolate, my father and his all-encompassing presence is missing.

On the way there an argument breaks out between me and my sister. She took it amiss that before the burial I didn't go to see my father in the morgue. I was going to defend myself, explain my reasons, but then I thought that I just didn't want to see him in the refrigerator, that I abhor frozen food, got irritated at that thought, so said nothing at all at first, then '*Koza!*' My father used to enjoy saying that to my mother: 'Goat!'

My cousin Ben has also come. My favorite cousin. I asked him to bring some soil from Split. It is written that the dead have to be given soil from their homeland in their grave. Our homeland is naturally Israel, but I think Split is much more my father's homeland, so everyone, Jews and non-Jews, were impressed by the handful of Israeli soil that fell on the coffin, while Ben and I kept our little secret.

Now he's trying to make things up between my sister and me. He orders piles of food. We eat greedily, but continue to maintain an obstinate silence. My mother's face starts to thaw. That rather

worries me: what will happen when feeling returns?

Finally evening comes, time to say goodbye to my sister. In less than fifteen minutes the blue bus will set off for Zagreb and I won't see her for the next few years. I'm not particularly sorry about that, but to my surprise I am overcome with something like melancholy. When she leaves she'll take a piece of home — whatever might be hidden in that magic word — with her.

I have to think of my friend Raffi, who claims his dilemma began when he lost his home, when his family had to leave Prague and go into exile in Germany. That, he said, was expulsion from Paradise. Zagreb — my paradise? I've already left so many paradises, with their colors and smells, behind me that even exile seems unreal.

At the bus station my sister is surrounded by some ten cardboard boxes. I forbid myself to feel ashamed and help to load them. Things are sticking out here and there: his old doctor's coat with *Klinikum* written on it, slippers from Abano Terme, a paper knife. Ten minutes to go. She rummages round in her tiny handbag and takes out a photo. 'Look,' she says, 'have a good look at that. I found it in Papa's room. Phone me soon, sis. All the best. *Zbogom.*'

I stare at the bus as it leaves, then at the photo in my hand. Dammit, the man smiling at me from the photo looks like my father, no, not quite, he looks like me. Funny.

- end of sample -