Sample translation pp. 5-31

Where We Are At Home
by Maxim Leo

Memoir

Translated by Shaun Whiteside

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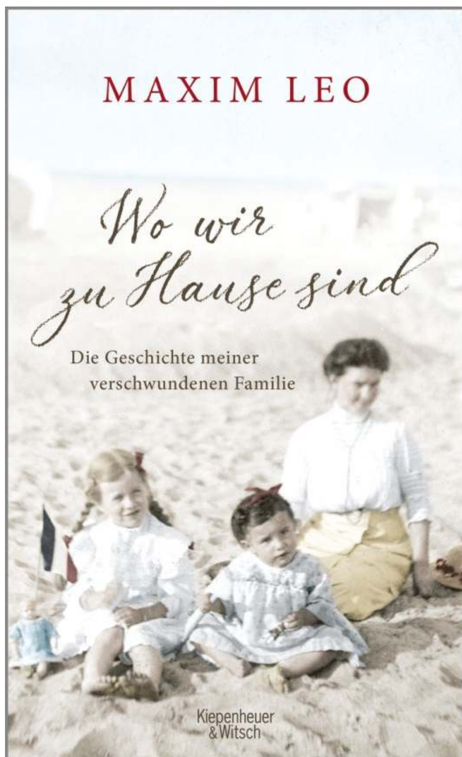

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The party

One warm September day my brother got married in a stately home in Brandenburg. The whole family was invited, including the ones from Israel, England, France and Austria. Eventually the stately home was full of Leos. And in the evening, when the dancing began in the garden, when the cousins, the uncles and aunts whirled around to the sounds of a Russian guitar band, I thought how lovely it would be if there were always so many of us.

The fact is, that we're quite a small family here in Berlin. Apart from that, we like to argue, and bear grudges, which is why we seldom come together all in one place. For me, family is four people sitting around a table. The many other Leos were always far away, scattered around the whole world. Sometimes they came to visit us, but they never stayed long enough to be real relatives.

As a child I envied people with big families, everything seemed to me to be so warm and natural as a nest from which you can't fall out. My own family, on the other hand, struck me as fragile.

My mother sometimes told me about the others, Nina and Hanan in Israel, Ilse, Heinz and Susi in Vienna, André in London, Hilde in Chicago. I asked why they all lived so far away. My mother said that our whole family had once lived in Berlin, but then the Nazis had come and driven out everyone who was Jewish or Communist. I'd heard about Communism, after all, we lived in the GDR. But what were Jews?

My mother explained, and it sounded complicated. She said that Judaism was a religion, and while our family hadn't been religious, we had been persecuted anyway. I learned that her father had had to leave Berlin as well, that he went to school in France and fought for the Résistance against the Nazis when he was sixteen. Your grandfather came back to Berlin after the war to build up socialism. The others remained in the countries to which they had fled. That's why today we're the only ones who live here, my mother said. I remember being cross with my grandfather at the time. I mean, why did he of all people have to build up socialism? I could have lived in London, Vienna or Paris – instead of Berlin-Lichtenberg.

Although at the same time I thought it was quite cool to have so many relatives in so many countries, you could impress other people with that. Our family, driven around the world, gave us a certain worldly quality. I remember the visits from Ilse, who had the same gentle eyes as my grandfather, spoke a sleepy Viennese dialect and brought me marzipan 'Mozart-balls', which I rate highly even today. André from London traditionally brought a

family pack of After Eight and several tins of Twining's Earl Grey tea. He wore stained, crumpled trousers, had more hair in his ears than on his head and told Jewish jokes, usually choking with laughter on the punchline.

Once André also brought his mother Hilde, who was said in the family to be a millionaire. It was a few days before Christmas when Hilde came to visit us, and I was very excited because I'd never seen a millionaire before. Of course I was also opening for a Christmas present. Hilde wore a threadbare coat with the left pocket torn off, and a big woollen cap that was far too big for her. I was surprised, because the millionaires that I knew from the television looked different. Hilde hurried towards my brother and me, eyes gleaming. 'I've brought you a present,' she exclaimed. Then Hilde took an orange out of her handbag, hand it to us with solemn gravity, and with a stern admonition to share it fairly.

I thought about all that when I saw my family dancing in the stately home in Brandenburg. Many years have passed, Ilse and Hilde have been dead for a long time, like my grandfather and the socialism he helped to build up. Today I myself can travel around the world and visit my family, but the closer I get to my people far away, the more I miss them here, at home. I feel like the child of a divorce, who always hopes that everybody might come together again one day.

Incidentally, I wasn't the only who was immersed in thoughts of yearning on the evening of that wedding. André's son Andrew, who is a little bit younger than me, said at one point: 'Why did we actually have to leave? We could all have been Berliners.' Suddenly I understood that I wasn't the only one who missed family. Indeed, that it might even be harder for the others because they live so far away from this city from which they were once expelled. My cousin Ammon, a cardiologist and former fighter pilot from Israel, said that evening that he had been surprised when he first came to Berlin a few years ago – and immediately felt at home. My cousin Uri, a child psychologist from Jerusalem, exactly the same age as me, said he had always envied the Berlin Leos. 'Why were you allowed to stay at home? Why do we have to live in this crazy country where war never stops?'

On that warm September evening it became clear to me how deeply the others longed for their lost home. How much they need the closeness and the sense of belonging, the extent to which they were in search of memories. I understood why it is that our relatives from Israel come more and more often to Berlin. Why they are so proud of their German passports, which they recently had issued in the embassy in Tel Aviv a few years ago. I understood why my uncle André had, last year, led his London family to a damp basement on General Pape Strasse in Berlin, where his father was arrested and tortured in March 1933. Why my cousin

Aron decided to come from Haifa to Berlin last winter with his fiancée, to study and finally even to get married.

The story of my family seems to be like a pendulum slowly swinging back.

But each generation seems to have its own speed. In parts of the Israeli family my cousin's marriage in Berlin was met with horror. 'Just a good thing that Hanan and Nina didn't have to witness it,' they said. Hanan and Nina fled in 1936 on a ship from Amsterdam to Palestine. They were the founders of the Israeli branch of the family, which is huge by now. When Hanan and Nina were still living in Berlin, their names were Hans and Irmgard. Their parents had chosen those names to sound German, that was the most important thing. Irmgard was a beautiful, funny woman, who liked dressing up as a witch in photographs. She studied law at Friedrich Wilhelm University, where she met Hans in her first year. In October 1933 they both had to leave the university – their German names had been no use to them.

Nina's elder sister Hilde was an actress, she worked with Max Reinhardt at the Deutsches Theater, before losing her voice in June 1929 and meeting her future husband, the neurologist Fritz Fränkel, who not only cured her but married her a short time later. Fränkel, one of the founders of the KPD (the German Communist Party) was arrested on 21 March 1933 by the SA and released two days later on condition that he left Germany straight away. On 25 March the couple went to Bahnhof Zoo with their two-year-old son André and boarded the Express 10 train to Bern. It was the start of a long flight that would take Hilde half-way across Europe.

Ilse, my grandfather's eldest sister, played the piano, loved painting and was determined to study psychology. In March 1933 she left grammar school, after her father had been arrested by the SA and taken to Oranienburg concentration camp. When her father was released again, the family fled to Paris. *What a lovely childhood we had, and then all of a sudden it was all over and we had to grow up very quickly*, Ilse wrote later in her diary.

Ilse was 15 when she had to leave Germany. Irmgard was 22 and Hilde 26. They were torn from their life, and had to set off into the unknown. I wanted to know how the three women had lived in Berlin, what they dreamed about, how they fled. What were their new lives like? What did they tell their children about the past? And why all of a sudden are their grandchildren coming back to Berlin?

I have travelled in the tracks of these three women from Berlin, I have looked in attics, basements and archives for letters, documents and photographs, I have interviewed their families. The longer I spend with Ilse, Irmgard and Hilde, the more I regret not having taken an interest in their stories before. When they were still alive, there were so many other things

closer and more important to me. I met them, but I didn't really know them. How I would love to meet them all today, and ask them the questions I now have.

On the other hand the story is far from over, because we are still here, her children, grandchildren and great grandchildren, who are starting something new. This family, which often looked to me like a historical waxworks cabinet, is awakening to new life. My daughters have founded a WhatsApp group with their cousins. They say the same clothes are in demand in Israel and here. A few weeks ago my cousin Charlotte from London rented a flat around the corner from us. She came to Berlin to learn German. Since Brexit it's a good idea to have a second home town, she says. And how does she feel in Berlin? Charlotte thinks for a minute and says with a smile: 'Basically we haven't been away for that long.'

IRMGARD

The first meeting between Irmgard and Hans is related by the family in Israel like something from the lives of the saints. At large family gatherings it is even performed like a nativity play. Everyone in the family knows by heart the dialogue that is supposed to have played out between the two law students early in May 1931, at the start of the summer term, in the foyer of the Friedrich Wilhelm University on Unter den Linden. Irmgard had just matriculated and was looking for a meeting of the socialist student body. In the foyer she met Hans, who not only showed her the way to the place where the meeting was being held, but walked her there, before inviting her for a cup of coffee, after which things took their inevitable course.

Irmgard was 19, she had thick black hair, dreamy brown eyes and a mouth that was, quite rightly, praised in the family as sensual. There is a photograph taken a few months after their first meeting, which shows the loving young couple on a hiking tour in Brandenburg. Irmgard is wearing a light-coloured summer dress with a white lace collar. She looks strong, strapping and full of energy. Walking beside her is Hans, a thin, fragile-looking boy in knickerbocker trousers. According to legend it was Irmgard who eventually drew Hans to her sensual lips, because he himself was too shy. The Israeli nativity play always ends: ‘And so they met and loved one another and founded our big, beautiful family…’

My cousin Aron has known this story since he could think. This fable from far-away Berlin is the foundation myth with which it all began. One day in the spring of 2017 he himself is standing for the first time in the massive foyer of the university. He studies the columns and panels clad with brown marble, the grand staircase that twists up to the balustrades. Aron says he imagined the university differently, lighter, airier, brighter.

Aron has lived in Berlin for over a year, he is 22, and preparing for the German university entrance exam. Then he wants to study veterinary medicine, and it could be that he will soon return to the very same university that his grandparents had to leave 80 years ago. Is he a historical revenant? Aron smiles bashfully, he says he can barely remember his grandparents, who died when he was still very young. Their story seems to him like a dark, sealed box that lies somewhere where no one must find it. Sometimes that box was opened very slightly, and then an apprehensive shudder ran through the family. Aron says he never liked that feeling. That slight feeling of insecurity, those gloomy shadows, that barely perceptible sadness in his mother’s eyes. It was something unspoken, threatening, that he quickly wanted to forget.

‘I didn’t come to Berlin to open this box,’ he says with a vehemence that seems to surprise even him. He was actually concerned with much more practical matters, he says. He tells me how hard it is to get a place studying veterinary medicine in Israel. He talks about his German passport, which is opening doors for him here. He says how wonderful it is to get a bit of rest from Israel, to immerse himself in the lightness of Berlin. ‘I don’t feel like a German here, but I don’t feel like a foreigner either. I can just be myself.’

We walk along the edge of the foyer, where the black board of student organisations and political groups used to hang. This must be where Irmgard and Hans met. According to the family story, Hans took Irmgard along on a demonstration immediately after their first date. At that time Hans was already a committed socialist, Irmgard wasn’t particularly interested in politics, but she was interested in Hans and listened rapt when he talked about capitalism and the exploitation of the working class.

Hans was the son of a Charlottenburg notary, he had no more to do with the working class than Irmgard, whose mother came from an affluent Danzig business family. Whereas Irmgard had encountered poverty as a child, when her mother’s entire fortune disappeared within months in the big inflation of 1919. Her father died in the First World War on the Russian front, so the family had to live on her small widow’s pension and charity from relatives. Irmgard grew up in Protestant girls’ boarding schools, she darned her own clothes and only had one pair of shoes for the whole year. But that didn’t matter, she told Hans, because in the end the only things that counted were education and determination. And in a few years’ time, when she was a qualified lawyer, she would earn good money, and her children would never have to darn their own clothes.

‘Or you could marry a lawyer and let him earn the money,’ Hans said with a smile. Irmgard gave him a furious look and said she didn’t want to be dependent on a man. Luckily at that moment Hans deftly changed the subject, because otherwise they would probably have had an argument on their first date. At the same time, Irmgard wasn’t concerned about matters of principle where gender relations were concerned; instead she had quite a pragmatic view: she had seen how helpless her mother was when her father fell at the front, and wondered why a woman couldn’t fend for herself. ‘If you’re looking for a princess to admire you, then I’m the wrong person,’ she said to Hans. And he was speechless and overwhelmed by this energetic, beautiful woman, who seemed to know exactly what she wanted.

Later they joined the demonstration marching towards the university. Most of the demonstrators were students, carrying red flags and singing revolutionary workers’ songs. On Universitätsstrasse they encountered a horde from the National Socialist Students’ League.

Admittedly the Nazi students were fewer in number, but they attacked them with belts, clubs and wooden sticks. Hans took Irmgard's hand and dragged her from the crowd. He ran with her into a doorway, and from there into a courtyard. They hid behind the rubbish bins and crouched there, breathing heavily. Eventually Irmgard started giggling, and asked Hans whether his dates with girls always ended up like that. Hans laughed too.

Hans would later say that he knew at that moment that she was the woman of his life. On the other hand it would take Irmgard a long time to decide on him. She later told her daughters she would have had no difficulty living alone if she hadn't found the right man. The family describe Irmgard as a warm, generous but also very wilful woman. She didn't do anything just because other people did it, she listened to her heart and trusted her instincts. And they told her that she had to stand on her own two feet before committing to anyone.

She was also stubborn, she clung to ideas and principles that were important to her. One of those principles was plainly to doubt everything. When Hans declared his love to her a few weeks later, she gave him a challenging look and said: 'Prove it.' Poor Hans was so rattled that he asked for advice from a friend, a fellow-student in the law faculty who knew Irmgard a little. The friend said he was sure it wouldn't be easy to live with a woman like that, but on the other hand Hans would never get bored.

The summer that Irmgard and Hans spent hiking together in Brandenburg must have been an important time for both of them. They trudged across woods and fields, sleeping in barns or in makeshift hideaways, drinking the warm milk that the farmer brought them in the morning. Irmgard told Hans stories about two girls who ran away from a boarding school, robbed banks and established a big band of robbers with other girls. Hans asked where she got that incredible story from. 'I just made it up,' she said with a laugh, and then looked at him with concern as if he was a pitiful boy who obviously had problems understanding the simplest things.

She was cheeky and quick and probably also incredibly hard work, but the more she challenged Hans, the more often she badgered him, the more attracted to her he felt. Eventually they talked about the political situation and the rise of the Nazis, and Hans said he came from a Jewish family. Irmgard asked him to explain Judaism to her in detail, asking a lot of questions which suggested that she was hearing about all of this for the first time. Was she unaware that she herself came from a Jewish family?

Irmgard had been baptised as a Protestant, but her family wasn't religious, and she herself probably didn't even see herself as a Jew. That, at least, is what we draw from a brief biography that she wrote years later in exile in France: *I wasn't brought up Jewish, either in*

belief or tradition. For a long time I had no idea what it meant to be a Jew. But time and again other people knew better. Whether it was at dances, where nobody asked me, even though I'm far from ugly. Or at birthday parties that I didn't get invited to. Later in Berlin there were those looks, there was that rejection, sometimes made quite clear and at other times barely perceptible.

How did other people recognise her? Was it her surname? Or her appearance? Her dark hair and eyes, the pale complexion of her skin? There is a photograph that shows her with her sister Hilde. Hilde has her blond hair in braids, Irmgard wears a black ribbon in her ebony hair. There is nothing to indicate that they are sisters. Was it easier for Hilde to remain unrecognised? And what about Hans? He didn't look particularly Jewish either, and lived outside religious traditions. Hans told his children many decades later that there were people in Berlin 'who smelled us.'

Perhaps it was to do with the mood that prevailed in Berlin at the time. The radicalisation of political forces, the mounting tension seeking to be discharged. The university must have been like an arena where these forces clashed unchecked. Because the fights between socialists and Nazis didn't only happen outside in the streets, they also laid into each other in the foyer of the university. The Reds stood on one side of the foyer, the Nazis on the other, and there were repeated scuffles and bloody brawls. On several occasions the police had to clear the university, which then remained closed for several days. Seen from this perspective, Irmgard and Hans's first meeting by the noticeboard of the socialist student body appears in a less romantic light. How much time did they have left for their love? How busy were they with everything that was going on around them?

Hans must have sensed the danger clearly and early. He later told his children about the book-burning on the Opernplatz in Berlin, about the flames that lit up the façade of the university on the night of 10 May 1933. He described the jeering crowd in the square, the students in their brown uniforms standing on trucks and throwing stacks of books from the unitersity library into the fire. Hans told them it rained heavily that night and the books refused to burn which was why the fire brigade had to help with petrol cans to destroy Marx and Heine and Kästner and all the others. Around the blaze stood professors in black gowns, watching with hot faces and gleaming eyes as the burning scraps of paper rose into the dark sky. 'I didn't understand it straight away, but I did feel that our time in Berlin was coming to an end,' Hans said. 'There was so much hatred there, so much rage, so much delight in destruction, it was bound to have consequences.'

Aron and I go to the square opposite the university, which is now called Bebelplatz. Aron looks through the glass plate set into the ground at the spot where the fire once burned. Beneath the glass plate there is a dark space with empty bookshelves. I think about the box that Aron spoke about. That box that he would ideally have liked to keep closed. Aron stands there in silence for a long time. I wonder whether it was a mistake to bring him here. Why am I confronting him with something that he doesn't want to see? Why am I dispelling that Berlin lightness that he was just enjoying? Aron seems to guess my thoughts. He said he recently spoke to his father on the telephone, and said a few phrases in German, which hadn't been easy for his father to bear. The language of the hated murderers out of the mouth of his beloved son. 'Then he said I should go on talking German to him, it was good therapy.'

When we leave Bebelplatz, Aron says he finds it easier here than he did in Israel to address the history of the family. In Israel he felt observed, judged, obligated. Back home history wasn't something that lay behind you, it had a moral, it assigned you tasks. 'We don't live there, we have a mission, do you see that?' He says the family was always concerned with making a valuable contribution to the country. Running away wasn't an option.

And then he did run away, straight to Berlin. To that city where he feels so inspired because the past weighed less heavily on him here than the future in Tel Aviv.

When Irmgard and Hans were thrown out of university, their life fell apart. They were 21 and suddenly they had no future ahead of them. For Irmgard in particular it must have been hard to abandon her dream of an independent life as a trained lawyer so quickly. They themselves never talked about how they came to be deregistered and excluded so soon, while other Jewish students were able to stay on for years at the law faculty of the Friedrich Wilhelm University. That's why, one windy autumn day, I drive to the archive of what is now the Humboldt University, an austere low-rise building in a no-man's-land of waste land and forgotten industrial buildings in Berlin-Adlershof. The archivist flicks through fat directories, disappears to the store-room for a long time, and finally lays two documents in front of me on the table. They are the registration cards filled in by Irmgard and Hans.

Irmgard's card is pink, Hans's is white. Irmgard has round, girlish handwriting, Hans writes expansively, with big flourishes. It's a strange feeling to have these cards in my hands, to run my fingers over the rough paper and imagine that their fingers slipped over this paper more than 80 years ago. Hans registered on 16 April 1930, his address at the time was 54 Innsbrucker Strasse in Berlin-Schöneberg. Under the heading of religion he drew a dash. His father's profession: lawyer and notary. Irmgard's card shows an address in Zehlendorf, 13 Johannesstrasse. I feel myself clearly grasping that they both lived in this city, that they were

Berliners like me. No idea why I need this proof, but probably it's sometimes just that two file cards are more persuasive than a story only ever heard from others.

Irmgard matriculated on 17 April 1931. I find her yellowed study book, in which the classes she took in the first semester are listed. Criminal law for beginners, Civil Code, civil law. Stuck to the bottom of the pages are the fee stickers stamped with the Prussian eagle. There is a note to the effect that Irmgard was exempt from the fees, which presumably has something to do with the fact that her father fell in East Prussia in the First World War. Until the summer semester of 1932 Irmgard regularly attended her classes, but by the start of the winter term the pages of the study book are blank. 'Suspended' is stamped on the first page. The next page, for summer term 1933, is empty and has a similar stamp. On the back there is a typewritten note: *holders are excluded from study at Berlin University from 16.6.1933 to 3.10.1933 by ministerial decree because of Marxist activity.*

That means that Irmgard wasn't deregistered because she was Jewish but because she was apparently seen as a Marxist. I later find the ministerial decree in the files of the legal faculty. Yellowish typewritten paper. The ministerial decree helped to put into effect the law against the overcrowding of German schools and universities. It sought to limit *the number of students of non-Aryan descent in every faculty to 5 percent. Supernumerary students of non-Aryan origin were to be immediately excluded from further study, as soon as their fees were no longer paid.* That was how German ministries were acting in the early summer of 1933, they were not afraid of discriminating against thousands of Jewish students, but the payment of fees remained highly significant.

The decree amounted to a ban on Jews, because there were hardly any faculties in which less than five percent of the students were of Jewish descent. All students and university teachers also had to fill in a form providing information about their descent. *False information will lead to immediate exclusion from university.* I go on flicking through the decree, it's lots of pages long, so I speed up a bit, dust whirls up from the file and itches my eyes. Then I find the clause that affects Irmgard, it's from 9 August 1933. The minister indicates that *all students at Prussian universities who have demonstrably been active in Marxist (communist or social democratic) or any other anti-national terms are to be excluded from higher education with immediate effect.* Irmgard must have been a member of the socialist student body, or else she wouldn't have been excluded so quickly.

In the papers of the university senate I find a blue dossier. On the cover it says in clean gothic script: 'List of students excluded because of anti-national tendencies. 1933.' The

dossier contains 124 names in alphabetical order. On page 11 I find the entry: Irmgard Leo, 29.8.11, Marx. Berlin.'

This single line turned Irmgard's life on its head, it turned the optimistic legal student into a pariah. Strangely, Hans doesn't appear on the list. On his matriculation card his departure date is given as 23 July 1933. Did he leave of his own free will? Did he follow the apprehension that crept over him at the book-burning in Opernplatz? In the minutes of the legal faculty meeting I find a report about the fact that the questionnaire about the racial descent of students was issued on 16 June 1933. Perhaps Hans took that as his signal to go.

Later I find another file in the university archive, bound in black cardboard. This dossier is also carefully inscribed in ink: 'List of non-Aryans 1933.' On the first page there is a large red swastika. The list is not recorded as cleanly as the one for Marxist enemies of state. Here some names are crossed through, and others are completed by hand. There is a note to the effect that one copy of the list is going to the Ministry, another to the Reich Security Head Office on Prinz Albrecht Strasse. It only contains the names of students in the law faculty, and the list is a long one, hundreds of names. How many of these students were able to flee? How many were later killed because they appeared on the list?

Irmgard's name is on page 10, between someone called Karl-Heinz Leipziger and someone else called Fritz Levinsohn. If one wished to document how great the need of the Jewish educated elite was to forget its own roots and become as German as possible, one would only need to show this sad list, bound in black cardboard, in which almost all the students have typical German first names, while the surnames sound oh-so Jewish.

I leave the university archive and travel home through cold, dark Berlin, which seems even colder and darker to me this evening. It's hard to get rid of the pictures that have emerged from those dusty files. It's even harder to reconcile that past Berlin with the contemporary city.

A few weeks after I walked through the university with Aron, he gets married in Berlin. The wedding is held at Charlottenburg-Wilmersdorf register office, a white town house with ornate columns. Aron sits with Noam, his bride from Tel Aviv, in a room with bay windows and a big gleaming chandelier. The registrar says this is called the 'trust room' (Trauzimmer), because if you're going to get married you have to trust one another. Aron's German isn't good enough for this kind of word-play. Even apart from that he doesn't understand particularly much of what is said. At the important moments an interpreter translates. These have to do with the finer points of naming laws, the international validity of a German certificate of no impediment and the distinction between place of residence and

place of domicile. The atmosphere has more or less the solemnity of the notification of the change of address for a car registration plate. Aron and Noam don't seem bothered about this, they say 'Yes' at the right time, and give each other a fleeting kiss. Later I ask Aron whether he didn't find his marriage here too strange and alien. Aron replies that in Israel they would have had to go to a rabbi to get married. They would have had to learn prayers off by heart, even though they weren't believers. 'That would have been strange,' Aron says.

On the evening of the wedding there's a party in an Italian restaurant. Aron's mother delivers a speech, recalling her mother Irmgard, who was already called Nina when her children were born: 'A circle is closing this evening. And even if it's sad for me that my boy now lives so far away from us, I'm still glad that he chose Berlin, this city that has remained a home for all of us.' Aron's mother weeps, the family applauds, and all of a sudden even Aron looks gripped. He looks with big, questioning eyes into the faces of his rejoicing family. This may be the moment when he finally begins to grasp the significance that his return has for everyone else.

I try to imagine what it would have meant for Irmgard if she had been with us all in Berlin that evening. Whether melancholy or joy would have predominated. I assume she wouldn't have chosen the image of the closing circle, because it means that a story has reached its natural ending. For Irmgard that ending would presumably have been reached a long time before, when she found peace and contentment with her family in Israel. Only her children would be able to afford the luxury of nostalgia. And then it took another generation not even to become nostalgic, but just to want to study veterinary medicine in a country where there is no war.

But back to the time when Irmgard herself was younger than her grandson Aron is today. To a time when everything seemed suddenly over. What did Irmgard do after she had to leave university? How did she spend her days? What did she live on? Did she have any idea what was about to happen? Her children say she never wanted to talk about that time, she only ever said it had been difficult, she had wondered whether life still held anything for her. Irmgard was ambitious and determined, she always had a plan, she was full of energy and ideas. For that reason too this uncertain time was possibly the worst of all for her.

There are no traces of her for those weeks and months, no one from the family knows anything about that time. I only find a few answers when I go to Israel a month later. I visit Michal, Irmgard's youngest daughter. Michal lives in Hazor, a small town at the foot of the Golan Heights, not far from the kibbutz where Irmgard spent most of her life, surrounded by

dark mountain ranges, green avocado orchards and the reddish broken earth of the tilled fields.

Michal is a petite woman with a hoarse, warm voice. She talks, we drink tea with lemongrass that grows on her terrace. Then Michal leads me to an old wardrobe in which boxes, bags and tins are stacked on top of each other. ‘Nina’s things,’ she says. ‘Also those from a time when she was still called Irmgard…’

I carefully open the first box and see letters, documents, old newspapers and photographs. Irmgard seems to have taken just about everything with her in July 1936 when she boarded the ship in Trieste that would take her to Palestine. I find her reports from primary school, different-coloured vaccination certificates confirming that Irmgard Leo was immunised against smallpox and diphtheria. I find a fat book entitled *In the Rabbit Wonderland*, about the boys Hansel and Franzel who have adventures in a village in Bavaria. On the cover of the book it says in clumsy, childlike handwriting: Irmgard Leo, 1918.

In a yellow envelope is Irmgard’s baptism certificate, issued on 21 November 1911 in Muskau in Silesia, where her father Erich worked as a history teacher at the local grammar school. One Pastor Neitsch confirms the authenticity of the christening papers and refers to the “Mosaic background” of both parents, “who have found their way to God a long time ago”. Also in the envelope is the confirmation certificate, embellished with calligraphic writing and showing Jesus blessing a blonde maiden.

In a box I find some papers that tell the story of Irmgard’s life after she left university. For example it contains a certificate from the German bookselling School in Leipzig, and confirms that on 16 August 1933 Irmgard registered as a student there but already left the institution on September 30. *Irmgard Leo had to abandon her professional training as a bookseller following economic difficulties in order to start earning a living. Her behaviour was blameless,* it says in the certificate.

What took her from studying law to training as a bookseller? And why did she throw it all in after only six weeks? Perhaps her decision had something to do with Hans, who had left for Amsterdam a short time before. In one of the boxes in Hazor there is a letter in which Hans announced that he was leaving. On the reverse of the letter is Irmgard’s brief answer: ‘Why don’t you actually ask me if I want to come with you? What’s to keep me here? I can’t expect more help abroad than I can in Berlin either.’ That sounds sad and sober, but also as if Irmgard had made a twofold decision in her heart. For Hans. Against Berlin.

After her return from Leipzig she spent a few months doing odd jobs. She found a small advertisement in the newspaper, blind man from Berlin Schöneberg seeks someone to

guide him through the city occasionally. The man was old and smelled bad. When they were out and about, he linked arms with Irmgard and she had to whisper to him all the things she could see. The man was particularly interested in cars. When a car drove past them, she had to say what make it was, what colour, and whether it was decently washed. Irmgard wasn't particularly well informed where cars were concerned, and the man would shout at her that she was a silly fool and should use her eyes, that one would wonder why you had eyes in your head at all. After a few trips Irmgard had to give up. She thought it was really time to leave

Two days later Irmgard went to Anhalter Station and boarded a train for Cologne. From there she would travel on to her sister in Paris. She even kept the train ticket, a piece of pale green cardboard that allowed her a seat in second class. Irmgard carried with her a a letter that her mother had handed to her before she set off. It contained her favourite verses from the Bible, in gothic script on handmade paper. *These sayings were a great source of comfort and support to me at some difficult times,* her mother writes. *May God protect you, my beloved child, and may fate make good what I have done wrong without knowing it. That is my most ardent desire. A kiss from Mutti.*

Those were the last words of a mother who didn't know whether she would ever see her child again. What did she think she had done wrong? At any rate, from now on Irmgard's mother Katerina is alone. By now her daughters already live in Paris. Irmgard's brother Fritz, a family doctor, was arrested a few weeks before on grounds of doing underground work for the communists. That was why Katerina didn't want to leave Germany: she wanted to be nearby in case her son needed help. *The children can go wherever they wanted, the parents will stay where they are needed,* she wrote later to Irmgard, who was begging her to flee from Germany while it was still possible.

One of the Bible verses that Irmgard is given by her mother to take with her on her journey is:

God is Love. And he who remains in Love remains in God. And God in him.

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