

Sample Translation (pp. 9–18, 24–27, 30–45)

The Jewish Prompter

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[pp. 9–18]

I slept badly. It was hot and stuffy in spite of my keeping the window open all night. During the evening I'd put together comfort of sorts with music, candles and my murmured mantra of 'only six weeks, only six weeks 'til you're allowed home' while gazing at the view of the vehicle repair place and Aldi car park.

I love my work. Started out as an actress, got to be a theatre producer, then came opera. My father said, 'Good hookers always end up the *madam*.' An unusual sense of humour. These days the equality officer would have him for breakfast.

I love staging opera. Nothing is finer than music. And opera, the most magnificent element of theatre, is in a class of its own. But having to drop anchor in a middling German city on a Sunday evening is a real test. Emptiness. Waste land. The centre is post-war Germany in miniature. A few vagrants like me wander from the station to the pedestrian zone. If you're in luck, the Chinese is open and you can drown your misery in sweet and sour.

I fail to understand why theatre bosses can't grasp the following. If guest producers were offered decent accommodation, they would be more contented and would perform better, every production would meet with critical acclaim, audiences would spread the word, every show would sell out, box office takings would go up, even the most philistine of bean-counters would be converted and the much-debated theatre crisis resolved once and for all. Instead they offer the most miserable accommodation possible. After all, they say, you'll be out most of the time. At the theatre.

My Buddha sits next to my toothbrush. He'll make sure there's no time for self-pity. Theatre work is forty per cent talent, the rest is self-discipline, self-assertion, self-motivation – the three big 'Ss', you might say.

This time my commission is '*The Abduction from the Seraglio*'. Everyone I've told smiles ecstatically. Darling! Mozart! Darling! The *Seraglio*! The most beautiful piece in the world! Well, it's my first Mozart and all ecstasy has escaped me so far.

The plot goes something like this. We're mid-16th century. A Spanish woman named Konstanze is kidnapped by pirates together with her English lady's maid, Blondchen, and Blondchen's sweetheart, Pedrillo, another servant, and so separated from her fiancé, a nobleman named Belmonte, then sold at the slave market. Fortunately she is bought by Bassa Selim, another nobleman, Spanish and Christian by birth, now a Muslim, and he adds her to his harem in the *Seraglio*. Now that's what I'd call a global line-up.

They are guarded by the untrustworthy Osmin, one of Bassa Selim's servants. Osmin falls for Blondchen, Bassa Selim for Konstanze. As if there were no other women in this harem.

In the end Belmonte, through a letter from his servant, Pedrillo, finds out where the captives are being held and literally sails in, utterly determined to set them free.

Ten o'clock, concept rehearsal, Rehearsal Room A, three floors underground. 27 degrees outside, 18 in the cellar, the air-conditioning won't play ball. I present my vision. Seventy pairs of eyes are on me: singers, male and female, script editors, assistant producers, costumes, lighting, stage technicians, props, the prompter, and dressers. Hope there's no yoghurt round my mouth.

They're a weary-looking bunch, slumped in their chairs, sketches of individual characters pinned skew-whiff around the walls behind. I talk about my life. Not a flicker of a smile, no reaction, no sign of life from the chorus. I see it as a real achievement to go for so long without breathing.

I have learnt never to let this unsettle me, to breathe and smile for all of them, at the same time asking myself why I'm still doing it.

At least the soloists in the front row are nodding.

There's usually a tall blonde, the soprano, a fiery brunette, the mezzo, the Korean lady will be playing a man, the little Korean chap will be the tenor, the gentle giant is the bass, and the only flirt will be the baritone.

In 'The Abduction from the *Seraglio*' there's no cross-dressing, no mezzo and no baritone, either, but they're all nodding sagely. It's only in the next few days that I'll find out whether anyone remotely followed my opening discourse.

Thank God I'm not entirely alone in this alien place. The set designer and the wardrobe mistress are the two members of staff I'm permitted to select and bring with me. That's why Nora and Elio are here. We're thick as thieves, destined for hell or creative industry heaven. Over years working together in different opera houses, we've seen one another drunk, tear-stained, you name it, usually all in pyjamas.

Elio comes from Bordeaux, sensitive, a highly gifted designer, very much in demand. Nora is Russian, really clever, also exceptionally talented, and more like the daughter of a Tsar. The wardrobe department groans audibly beneath her demanding standards.

After my introductory talk, it's over to Elio and Nora. They explain why we envision the stage and costumes this way, not that way. But we want to look good, say the soloists, and please could the stage revolve nice and slowly. We nod. Of course, of course...

During the break I remain stoically in the rehearsal room, although I'd have willingly traded my German passport for an espresso, and I chat with the ladies and gentlemen of the chorus. My memory is a hopeless as far as names go, but I always make a point of following the best tip my friend Uwe ever gave me. Learning the names of the chorus before any others is the mark of a successful opera producer.

And so I ask Vessela and Borjana, Wilislawa, Nasko, Vesko and Juij, what they think of Mozart and where they're from. In this opera house they're mostly from Moldavia, Macedonia or Albania, countries which had no autonomy until recently and answered to the name of 'The Balkans'. So if they don't understand my German, I launch determinedly into Serbo-Croat. Serbo-Croat has as little to do with Rumanian, so Moldavian, as with German, but I want to show them that I'm from 'elsewhere', too, and that Tito was godfather to us all. Maybe that's why Dubrovka, Almerija, Nlnoslava, Jossip, Ivica and Pjotr go on standing so politely in front of me. I can play the Eastern bloc card.

By the end of the break I know exactly who comes from where, who pickles sausage at home and who distils Slivovitz in their cellar. 'In the last opera house I worked at, the chorus came mostly from

Ukraine,' I observed, 'while here it's largely Bulgaria, has one of you brought the rest of the village along, too?' My joke went down reasonably well, so now I can turn my attention to the Koreans.

Every opera house has its group of Koreans. I'll never know how these people, all socialised on the other side of the earth, can understand my humour. I crack a joke, their faces remain expressionless. And yet later, at rehearsals, they play to maximum comic effect every punchline that I've explained. Korea – land of comedians in disguise!

The break is almost over when a woman comes up to me. 'I'm the prompter,' she mumbles. 'I'm Susanne.' I ask myself how someone with almost incomprehensible diction can possibly be a prompter.

She must be around sixty – her blonde curls are going grey here and there. She's very well-groomed, a few freckles prettily adorn her pale skin, she gives me a searching look with her grey eyes and I find myself thinking she must once have been a beauty, now too thin, in my view. She senses my musings, so I quickly say something. 'Good to meet you, Susanne.' 'Good to meet you, too,' she replies. She gives a winning smile only then to purse her lips and grasp my hand with astonishing strength. 'I ought to be getting on now.' 'Of course,' she whispers but doesn't let go. 'The chorus is back any moment, and I'd love to do a scene now that we're all here and can get to know one another a bit straight away.' 'Good idea,' she says but still has hold of my hand and gives me a rather mournful look. 'My hand, Susanne, my hand, I need to...' 'Sorry, so sorry,' she murmurs, flushes and lets it go at last.

'Amazing, isn't it, the kind of people who take refuge in theatre work,' whispers Nora. I stretch to flex my back, then, smiling, get back to the rehearsal.

In the meantime the chorus have dispersed across the rehearsal space and hunkered down comfortably on the floor. I ask them all to stand, something they do very grudgingly, but this is all about demonstrating my authority otherwise I can write off the next few weeks.

They've all sung *Carmen*, *A Masked Ball* and *The Barber* at least four times, to say nothing of *Seraglio*. They've known the repertoire and subject matter far longer than I have and want to test me out. It's a baptism of fire of sorts, sometimes more like running the gauntlet. No kid gloves with these people. I've got to find a way of talking them round, using either the quality of my ideas or my personality.

My friend Uwe says you can only truly engage seven people at any one time. So I wonder what happens here with the remaining thirty-three. Are they nattering to their neighbours, fiddling with their phones, sleeping instead of singing?

This is why I ask them all to join in with improvisation straight away. And the subject? Dismissal. I say the director plans to dismiss a few of them, that uncertainty and disquiet break out, and that I'd like to see this on the stage.

'It doesn't work like that for the chorus, they're protected against unlawful dismissal,' the head of the chorus explains to me earnestly and in some alarm. I say yes, I know that, we would just be 'pretending' and give a strained smile. In *Seraglio* they'll be on stage, sadly, such a short time, I tell them, that it matters to me all the more that each individual gives a perfect appearance on both occasions. So Bassa Selim doesn't really want to dismiss anyone but to cut a few heads off here and there instead. Now you need to make sure the next man gets it and not you...music, please!

They've got it and, suddenly, it's all happening on the stage. Sasko has Vesko by the throat, Ninoslawa is reading Borjana's palm, and the two Kims have got their phones out to call NSA. I'm thrilled. They don't look perfect in the way the younger ones do: all much the same, slim, attractive and a bit frivolous. No, these are the big guys at work, expression, character. Too short, too tall, nearly all of them too fat, but bursting with imagination. Every single member of the chorus has a unique background, a special personality or simply a screw loose. The chorus is a bunch of individuals forced to sing together, chained together, maybe all their lives, I'm thinking. That's why they're so demanding, and yet so amusing and charming.

Susanne, the prompter, passes me a note. 'Not now!' I hiss, but she insists. I read it, swiftly and unwillingly. The message, written on a page torn from an exercise book says, in all seriousness: 'I've seen you on TV. You're great.'

'Thanks.' Distracted, I nod in acknowledgement. If the six weeks carry on like this, I'll need therapy. Meanwhile the chorus have made themselves comfortable again. If you don't watch them like a hawk and keep feeding them with new tasks, they all go into sleep mode. 'We'll repeat that in full, please,' I say quickly. Apathetically, they repeat, moan about the set, the steps are too high, the costumes scratch, somehow they've run out of energy. Nora flares her nostrils, Elio shakes his head, I smile engagingly. 'Thank you so much, gentlemen and ladies of the chorus, for putting so much into that, it was great. The set's working with and through you magnificently and the costumes are very becoming! You may now go but soloists, please stay a little longer.'

Suddenly, there's movement in the crowd, everyone's on their feet and hurrying off as if additionally engaged in the import export business. I've packed up fifteen minutes early, quite deliberately, this is how to win friends, the chorus are blissful, forty people shake me by the hand.

After any chorus rehearsal I always feel like I've been run over by a tractor, one of those huge red ones from a Soviet cooperative. My ears are ringing for hours. I turn slowly to face the soloists. They look relieved, at last the place is empty and quiet.

And into this quiet comes that voice again. 'I simply must speak to you.' Susanne has got to her feet, she's spindly, her pale skin is criss-crossed with thread veins that seem to pulse as you look at them.

Everyone's staring at her, the tenor giggles, Susanne repeats her request with closed eyes. I'm going to have to get another prompter, and fast, this much is certain, but now, dammit, all I want to do is bring this rehearsal to a close.

When in doubt, breathe. That was the golden rule at drama school. Breathe. So I breathe in and out and hum the opening melody of Blondchen's aria: 'With tenderness and pretty words'.

The soloists applaud. I'm back in control.

'Now we'll look again at the individual characters and what drives them. Who wants what and why? Then we'll finish, is that alright? And, my dear Susanne, you and I can have coffee together tomorrow afternoon, after the rehearsal.' This should buy me peace for the rest of the day.

*

When I arrive at the café, Susanne's already got herself fixed up with one of the little tables in the window and is waving joyfully in my direction. She doesn't look like a woman in need.

With some reluctance I take a seat, my prompter already has a glass of prosecco and a croissant in front of her, untouched. Without further ado she launches into a list of all the films she's seen me in, then the talk shows and finishes with the radio broadcasts. *Waterloo*, I think to myself, *my own private Waterloo*.

Every now and again she gets muddled but never long enough for me to get a word in, although I try two or three times, all in vain. Susanne has now got onto all the press cuttings she's gathered, national and with images, no less. Then she suggests we address one another with the friendly form of 'you'.

I'd love to say to her, 'My dear, you're too kind, now let's go to the rehearsal.' At the neighbouring table voices had been lowered and, as so often seems to happen, I feel everyone's listening, it's embarrassing and I long for the café floor to open and swallow me up. Susanne's voice is strangely singsong. How old could she be? Definitely over sixty, even if she comes across as quite youthful. Why hasn't she retired? Does she need to boost her pension? What did she originally train for? Had she been a dancer? She's expensively dressed. Maybe she has inherited wealth but gets bored at home. Is she a prompter for the love of it? Can you choose the 'prompting' course at art school? Only one entry requirement: Ability to whisper.

It's gone quiet. Did I speak my thoughts out loud? Susanne has stopped talking and is looking at me long and hard. I give an awkward little cough and ask for the bill. She stares at her croissant and bursts into tears.

Oh, not that too. Over-familiarity plus hysterics, and all before breakfast.

What are the symptoms for borderline personality disorder again? This woman needs a therapist, a good one and for a good long time, I know what I'm talking about here.

Instead I offer her a handkerchief. But she declines, wants to tell me about something, won't waste time on wiping her eyes and nose. So she just sniffs all the snot upwards. I find that disgusting. Why I don't stand up right now and leave, I really don't know. I've only been in this city twenty-four hours and already I'm in a situation I'd never have foreseen. What is it with me? What do I give off that makes people treat me so unthinkingly? I've got a whole Mozart stretching ahead of me, and it would be inadvisable to lose my nerve in the first few days.

I sneak a look at my watch. The rehearsal's starting. Perhaps that's not as existential as the stories played out by life itself, but it's my job and it feeds me and my entire family.

'I know you're Jewish.' Aha, that's the way the wind blows. A pro-Semite. Maybe her father or grandfather was a Nazi and all she wants now from me is absolution. If there's one reason to migrate out of Germany, then it's this one. Everyone I ever meet wants to tell me how their relatives were harmless Nazis and that I should please forgive them without further ado.

'Stop, dear Susanne, stop!' I say firmly but courteously. It's lovely that she is confiding in me, I go on, but I'm not a therapist, even if opera house work sometimes drifts in that direction. I tell her I can't help with her burdensome past and her problematic family. If she's got dyed-in-the-wool

Nazis as parents or grandparents, then that's very unpleasant but that's how it is. She can't do anything about it herself, she's, you know, just born into it and she shouldn't take it so hard. I talk about how she's not the first, there've been really capable doctors who have found out that a grandfather had organised camp transportation or been a high-up in the SS. That's tough to acknowledge but completely normal in German post-war life, you have to, and can, get over it...

I speak fast because I don't want to be interrupted. 'I know it isn't easy for the children and grandchildren of Nazis to accept their family histories. I think it's marvellous that you're trying to do that and seeking out kindred spirits, people with the same fate, you're in better hands there than with me!'

It doesn't occur to me to use the more friendly form of address. Just because I come across as so personal, direct and open in my books, everybody thinks it's okay to be as personal, direct and open with the real me.

Susanne's eyes remain lowered and she weeps again. How on earth can I get out of here with minimal fuss?

'I need your help.' Speaking to me as a friend, she looks straight at me for the first time. Her eyes are more green and a bit watery, but still beautiful. She has high cheekbones, Slav heritage, perhaps.

She carries on looking and remains silent, and I suddenly sense that I've been on the wrong track. Susanne is Jewish. How couldn't I have seen that right away?

I take a cautious breath. 'Susanne? Susanne what?'

'Chaimberg,' she says. 'Actually, it's Sissele, it's only here in Germany that I turned into Susanne, in Canada I was pleased to be Sissele, you'll know what that means, won't you? Sissele, like sweetie.' She'd slipped into Yiddish and then I realised where the singsong voice came from. For a moment nothing's left of the pushy prompter. She comes across as a young girl who's forgotten to grow old. Freckles, thin legs, her mane of curls must have been white-blonde after summer vacations, as a young girl she must have been a beauty. Beads of sweat have gathered on her upper lip and she's looking at me as carefully as I'm looking at her. Then she stands up, hurriedly puts her arms around me and stammers, 'I don't want to make any further demands on you. I can see you have no room for me.' Before I can reply, she darts away and out of the café.

[pp. 30–45]

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[...]

I hail everyone in the group, only Susanne refuses to look at me. We deal with the overture a couple of times, then turn to Belmonte's aria. The tenor, a young Liechtensteiner, struggles with the libretto, once more I look to Susanne, her seat's empty. The KBB, that's the Artistes' Management office, contacts me briefly to say the prompter's handed in a sick note and will be off the rest of the week.

I'm speechless. Just because at the café I didn't show an immediate interest in her life story doesn't mean she has to act so offended.

Nora thinks I shouldn't have a guilty conscience, I'm the boss, after all, and if I get any aggravation from any member of the crew, then that person has to go. Jewish or not. Elio looks up from his Apple Mac, mutters something about KGB methods and says, "Which prompter?"

KBB is headed up by a guy from Cologne, Rainer, blessed with Rhineland dialect and humour, and he grins at me when I appear at his office door.

"I'd only got to bloody fifty and here you are, roaring in!" Yes, he carries on, she's pretty special, that Susanne, you're not the first to complain, but what can we do?

"My dear Rainer," I reply, with none of my usual humour, "I want another prompter, and I want one now. Either you give her a break from me, or I have a break from her. I've never had any issues with my prompters before, but the chemistry just isn't working. She's exhausting when she's there, and exhausting when she isn't. Instead of being a support throughout the complexities of a rehearsal, she's actually a hindrance. She demands more of me than the *prima donna*." I'm deliberately coming over fierce and determined, demanding the attention of the director, too.

Going down the director route won't help, a smiling Rainer informs me, he was the one who took Susanne on in the first place. "May my protective hand shelter this poor creature," as he loves to say.

"Okay, okay," I mutter. "Poor creature. What does that make me?"

Rainer slides a chair beneath me, makes me an espresso and mutes the phone. For the next few minutes the schedule is suspended, rehearsal times, sick notes, travel plans, they'll all have to wait. Rainer's out of the blocks.

"My dear, you perhaps know that in Hitler's day our opera house was one of his favourites. A box was built especially for him, so that he could have an uninterrupted view of *The Merry Widow*. When Karl became director, he made it a priority to get rid of that box. The city fathers were put out but Karl, an old politico of '68, remained defiant. He said he was not like his father, that he had a sense of historic responsibility, and that was his creed. I don't exactly know what Karl's father did, but it was obviously not without significance. He held a chair in Anthropology from 1931 to 1945, was involved in drafting papers on the 'organisation of living space in the east', and after his exoneration by the allies was Dean of Faculty until 1960. Says it all, doesn't it?"

My head's spinning. What's a Nazi's professorship to do with recruiting a prompter?

“When Susanne applied for a job here, she could neither read music nor do anything opera-related, but her pathetic CV had a decisive impact on Karl. Honestly, she does have a good side, and because we know you’re Jewish, too, we thought the pair of you would probably get along alright.”

This took my breath away. “Why do I need enemies with friends like this?” That’s what my father would have said. He had a *bon mot* for every one of the life’s blows.

I’m straight from the KBB to the Director’s office. Karl’s got his feet on the directorial desk and gestures to me to follow suit. I politely decline.

Actually, I like Karl, he’s a really laid back type, even if he is rather too fond of power games, like nearly all opera directors. And if only he didn’t have this penchant for endlessly recounting Jewish jokes. I think he sees it as some way of coping with the past, or showing he not only understands Jewish humour but can put it into practice.

He pours two glasses of still water then looks at me with interest. Before I can launch into my complaint, he gets in first.

“I always fast about now, it leaves me receptive and yet also slightly exposed. Rehearsals going well? I hear our prompter is giving you a few worries...our ‘Jewish prompter’ – great book title, don’t you think? D’you know this one? *Leah wakes her son, Jossi. Jossi, get up, it’s late, you must get to the synagogue. Jossi doesn’t want to go. Leah insists. Come on, hurry up now! Jossi says, I’ve got at least two reasons for not going. First, the people there don’t like me. Second, I don’t like them. Leah says, you’re going anyway. First, you’re fifty years old and, second, you’re the rabbi. Hey, not bad, eh?*”

“Karl, please!” I break in. “What are we doing about Susanne?”

“Nothing,” says Karl. “We put up with her. We owe that to the six million. Go and see her. Once you’ve heard her story, you’ll understand. Do you know the one about...?”

*

Susanne has wrapped herself in a blanket, the curtains are closed. I can't help but think of the final chapter of *Anna Karenina*, just before Anna rushes to the railway station. Nothing more could be done for her either.

"Where shall I begin?" she asks me. How should I know? I sneak a look at the time, rehearsal at six, she knows that as well as I do. But now she's a Jewish woman with a life story as long as your arm, I definitely won't be out of here before midnight. 'Abandon all hope...' says Dante in *The Divine Comedy*. Outside the sun is shining. You could just sit beneath the hole in the ozone layer and get a little dose of skin cancer. Instead we're stuck here in this airless room heading straight for a powerful dose of depression.

Oddly enough, I'm really curious, so ask her, "Susanne, what on earth's your problem?" This time I use the friendly form of 'you'. Susanne gives a satisfied smile, she's hooked me.

"I would like to find my family," she replies. "I've been searching for them for decades, and you can help me, I feel it."

Susanne seems to have far more ability in 'feeling' than in prompting.

"Surely The Red Cross is responsible for that sort of work, or the Central Jewish Council, or...?" I ask, a little sanctimoniously, deliberately evasive.

Susanne has now turned in the bed to face the wall, like a sulking child.

"Susanne, come on," I try again, "why on earth me?"

"I've read your book," she mumbles into the wall, almost unintelligibly, "the one where you write about your family. You went ahead so courageously, so ruthlessly, you asked the questions, you did the research, you travelled all over the place. That's what I want to do. But with you."

Susanne has half turned back to face me and I glimpse a furious determination that makes me shudder. I vow to stick with fiction from now on, or a little book about vegetarianism.

I clench my jaw in an attempt to delve deep for empathy and, sounding like an ingratiating wolf, ask where her family actually comes from.

"Siessese, you've got to call me Siessese!" I hear from under the blanket. "Not like the short 'i' in 'Cicely'. But long, like in 'sweet'."

"Alright, then, *Siessese*," I say in velvety tones, "I can only help if you give me a little information, could you possibly..."

She sits up in a flash, wipes her nose with the back of her hand and begins the story.

"I was just one when my parents brought me from Israel to Germany to a Displaced Persons camp. 1953. My mother, Malka, had an older sister there, Rachel."

Nothing to do with me is what I'd really like to say, but instead I ask, "From Israel to a DP camp? 1953? I thought only concentration camp survivors were taken to DP camps. Why should anyone who's managed to get to Israel go back to Germany? Of all places? Back to a camp?"

"But they were survivors, too. They'd made a detour to Israel. Somehow we were all survivors. Even we children, even though we'd only just been born."

"I see," I say, hesitantly. So we're all survivors. Right now I could do with a *grappa* at the very least. Or I could just lie down next to her and sink into the black hole of Holocaust stories. Sissele's ashen-faced, too. I can't understand why she's regaling both of us with a new variation of the same old story that brings nothing but anguish. It might please Karl, he wants to atone, but me? And yet I can feel myself being dragged down by the undertow that these horrific stories always envelope me in.

"My mother met my father, Fischel, in Israel. Her father, that's my grandfather, had a small farm, Fischel was the farm hand and helped with the harvest. He was a real charmer, saucy with it, and Mama told me how she fell in love with him at fifteen, her parents were utterly opposed to it."

Sissele giggled as if she were Malka and minded to lure our twenty year-old tenor to the registry office straight after rehearsal. All the while I'm sitting on the edge of the bed and feeling more than uncomfortable. But I can't leave.

"They all gave her a good talking to," Sissele rattled on. "He's a good for nothing, he's sixteen years older than you, with a dubious past. Malka didn't want to know and in the end ran away from the farm and walked all the way to Jaffo to be with him."

She's robbing me of time with this blend of Holocaust and folklore. I'm glued to the spot, can't move from the bed and want to hear the rest.

"My grandfather forcibly brought her back, she sat chained inside the coach, so the story goes in the family, but too late, at sixteen she was already pregnant by a thirty year old man who'd survived Auschwitz. Special Command Unit, at that."

Special Command. I gulp. I'm no expert, but I know very few survived Special Command. I've read a bit about it and wished I hadn't.

Any member of the Special Command was branded for life, shunned like a leper, seen as the long arm of Death. A creature from the underworld. Does anyone who talks about this now, who listens, turn into one, too?

Sissele gives me a hard look. I want her to carry on, and I want her to say nothing more.

More than anything I'm not going to be baited and blackmailed, not by death that's for sure, and being a Jewish woman doesn't mean I have to be forced to carry the burden of every other Jewish woman in the world. So I tear myself away, stand up, walk firmly to the door. "How could your father possibly have survived the Special Command Unit?" I ask her, my fingers resting on the door handle. I know this is a mistake, but I really want to know.

Sissele gestures, inviting me to take a seat once more. She can feel how the bait has hooked me.

"You must remember he was a big man, handsome, hardly ever spoke, never laughed with me. We'd been in the DP camp for just two years when my mother died of an internal bleed caused, so people whispered, by my father, they said he was violent, especially at night. The whispers were so loud I could hear them. When I cried, they'd all fall silent."

There are no nice camp stories, I think to myself, pick up my handbag and get to my feet, but Sissele grabs my free hand as if life depends on it.

"Listen," she says, very quietly. "My father, Fischel, is one thing, but I'm going to tell you about me, about little Sissele, maybe then you'll help me?"

Sissele, Siessese, Sweetie. Helplessly I sit back down on the bed for the third time. Will I ever get up again?

“Malka, my mother, had me in Israel. She’d turned seventeen by then, had no contact with her family and lived in a tiny room in Jaffo with this man. Just as the family had predicted, it was a hard life.”

Sissele’s account had something monotonous about it, as if she’d told this story many times over.

“They decided to go to Germany to my mother’s sister, who was living there with her own husband. Even though their Israeli passports stated ‘This passport is not valid for Arab countries or Germany’. So they crossed Austria’s green border as illegals and got to Bad Reichenhall. My mother’s sister received us and took us to the DP camp.

My thoughts were racing. Jews as illegals in post-war Germany? I wished the words to this solemn opera had been written by Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy, both star librettists of Offenbach and Bizet. In *Carmen*, for example, everything’s spot on. The story is logical and transparent. They drafted and drafted to perfection. You can’t do that with life. You can’t re-draft your life.

A few years back I did a production of *Carmen*. I made the factory a women’s work camp with male overseers. Another example of where my imagination comes from...

“Right, so your mother’s there with you, a tiny child, and your father, in this DP camp, somewhere near your relatives?” I’d forgotten about Sissele in my *Carmen* musings. “You’re in the camp as illegals? That’s not going to be a secret for long, is it?”

Sissele explains. “In the DP camps there were plenty of stateless people, and we got this special status pretty quickly and lived as if there were no Germany round us. We celebrated Pessach and Sukkot, did circumcisions and weddings. We children played war games in Yiddish, can you imagine? Then my mother died. On 22 September 1955.”

Sissele speaks of herself as she might of an alien child she’d once known years before. She’s not crying, but she doesn’t deal with her runny nose. Anyway.

“The burial was at the Jewish cemetery in Munich. Father vanished same day. He left me with my Aunt Rachel, her husband, Itzig, and their sons, Aron and Riven. They were pleased to have a little sister. A little sister with blonde curls they could pull!”

Lovely, I think to myself. Yes, sad, too, of course, but how good to have family. Sissele, the little princess of the Displaced Persons Camp.

“I lived there a couple of months, we were all very happy together. Aunt Rachel was the image of my real mother. She made me Buchteln just like Mama used to, they were my favourite, sweet dumplings filled with blueberry jam, you never get the stains out.”

Yes, I knew all about Buchteln, we had them at Purim instead of hamentashen, absolutely delicious and I, too, remember working away in vain at the stains they left.

“Then one day my father came back and demanded that Aunt Rachel give me up. He took me with him, just like that, and told nobody where we were going.”

Sissele's reached the end of her story, for now, and it's not her that's weeping but me. A little girl loses her mother and is taken away into the unknown by her traumatised father.

There are certain parallels here with children from residential homes and foster families. How long were you....? How old were you....? What were your foster parents like, your carers? And you look hard at the person you're asking, and you know.

I, too, was once a girl that grew up separated from her parents. Became cautious, mistrustful. No grown-up ever seemed trustworthy enough to lean on.

I'm weeping for the little Sissele, for myself, and for all children thrown prematurely into the world's orbit. On the run, hiding away, neglected, hungry. Cared for by parents or other adults who were in no state to do much more than save themselves let alone anybody else.

Sissele has her work cut out in comforting me, although it should really have been the other way round. I can't compose myself at all, even though it's awful to go so hopelessly to pieces in front of my prompter. She makes me some green tea, puts on Leonard Cohen and falls silent. So I'm silent, too, blow my nose, slowly calm myself and wait. I feel that the drama has not yet reached its high point. At some point she picks up the narrative once more. Says her father had taken her with him but had given her away the same evening to a Catholic family in Bavaria.

What? Why? I'm beside myself. Why hadn't he left the child with his wife's family? At least for a couple of years? Why's he even out of the camp?

"I don't know," says Sissele. "I've got my suspicions. Maybe my father didn't want us to live among Jews. Maybe he simply wanted to protect me. Jewishness hasn't exactly brought any of us happiness of late."

We sit in silence, then Sissele says:

"Maybe he wanted to have revenge. On the family that hadn't wanted him in the Holy Land. On the father-in-law who hadn't wanted his daughter to be with him."

That'll be why he maltreated Malka, I think to myself, he'd taken his revenge on her, and she'd perished as a result of his beatings. Beatings presumably probably not as hard as those meted out in Auschwitz and the like. But in a place suspiciously like a camp: a place for DPs. Maybe he decided to take revenge on everyone for everything. On the history of the world because of the way things had gone, because of the course it had taken.

Sissele tries to read my thoughts, she even gives me a cautious smile. Perhaps she's gone through the same thought processes herself.

She must have spent many years of her life thinking about her father, she must have talked about her suspicions, as she might in a Holocaust seminar. Now here she is, sitting quietly, upright, waiting until I'm ready to hear more.

This woman has multiple lives I'm thinking, and they're all lined up, separated, divided, and she takes these surprising leaps from one to another.

"I didn't stay with the Catholic family for long either. My father turned up again unexpectedly and took me away again. The foster parents were devastated, asked him why, he gave no reasons and disappeared with me."

Why so suddenly? Had he found a job and a flat? Could he look after her now?

Sissele's carrying on with her story, very focused, very quietly.

"He collected me, thanked the foster parents and took me next morning to the nuns. To a convent near Munich."

I stare at Sissele, say nothing, with the best will in the world I can't think of anything consoling to say.

For a split second I find myself thinking how very young Sissele was then. Far too young to remember all these details. Who's told her all this? Has she invented it all to bring me closer to her? In the theatre we're pretty susceptible to weird life stories. A crazy libretto with weird family combinations is part and parcel of any Baroque opera. I'm getting caught up in her web of intrigue.

Which bits of her story are true? And which has she invented? If she thinks she can manipulate me with extravagant detail, she'll have precisely the opposite effect.

Feeling uneasy, I search out her gaze, I don't want to do her a disservice, but her story is too much.

What if she isn't even Jewish at all? Has she acquired this Jewish bio to make herself interesting? She wouldn't be the first, there are quite a few prominent examples...

As Sissele's sad eyes meet mine, I find myself gazing into an abyss and, for the time being, forbid myself any doubts.