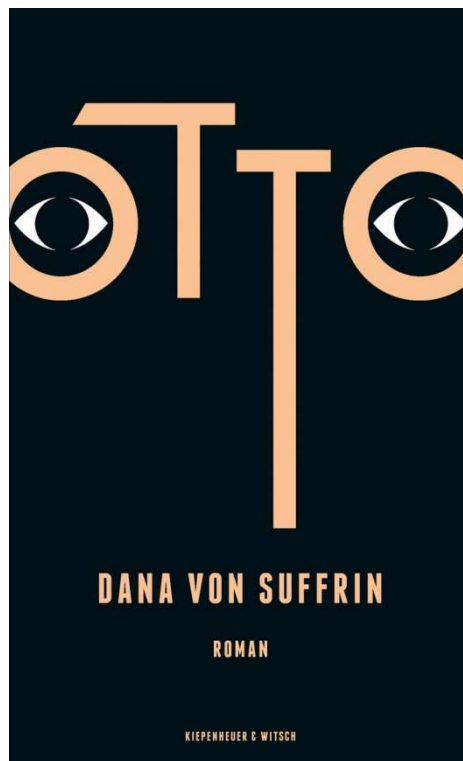


OTTO

by Dana von Suffrin

Sample Translation by Jen Calleja (www.jencalleja.com)



Literary Fiction

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Iris Brandt (ibrandt@kiwi-verlag.de)

Aleksandra Erakovic (aerakovic@kiwi-verlag.de)

1.

The Eurasian Steppe in Spring

My second husband was called Tann, and he came from a region called Gäuboden, and I heard it, while we were chatting in the corridor at the hospital for the first time, as *Goyboden* – goy soil – and I said, great, you come from the fruitful earth that brings forth one goy after the other, and I come from Otto.

I can still remember precisely the way Tann looked at me. He looked straight into my eyes, and while I pondered what colour eyes he had, green or blue?, he suddenly looked away again, perhaps at my nose or at the hospital bed covered in clear plastic wrap. He brushed back his hair, his hand remained planted on the back of his head, and he looked like someone who, after a long period of forced reflection, was coming close to finding a solution to a problem, and I knew that he had understood this strange sentence.

Every Saturday, Tann visited a small old lady who lay like a pupated honey bee in a shabby, four-person room awaiting her last metamorphosis, and I visited Otto, whose eyes were mostly closed and whose face had taken on a stern expression in his vegetative state, as if he were angry with the dear Lord (or us daughters: has anyone ever seen such a thing? Cruel daughters!). Every now and then we would step out of the rooms, bump into each other in the middle of the corridor that separated the legally insured patients from the private ones like my father, and then Tann and I would drink two or three cups of coffee in the cafeteria without really waking up. But Tann was agitated even without coffee; I noticed in the weeks that followed, in fact, that he was alternately indignant and

melancholic and often both at the same time, especially when I told him about my family.

Soon after we had got to know each other among the nurses' rooms and the goods lift, Tann started visiting me at home, and we went to one of the dreary, dark cafés nearby, or walked along the River Isar for a while, and when we came back to my flat, we sat on the bed and waited to see which one of us the cat would sit on first. Tann said his favourite sound was the *wrrrau* the cat made in the exact moment its paws hit the floor. The first few times Tann had sneezed and his eyes turned red and became even smaller after he had stroked it, but first his body got used to the cat and then he became very fond of it, and after a couple of weeks he asked me for a key to my flat so he could feed the cat when I wasn't at home. Your fridge is even emptier than your father's eyes, Timna, he soon complained. It just won't do, you have to eat something when you get back from the hospital. On my return the following evening, I found butter and vegetables inside it.

*

Maybe Tann was better off in some ways than Babi and me because his father was already dead. Our father was still alive. Some considered it a miracle that Otto was still with us, or however you want to call it. Every now and then he withdrew a little from his living state, then he would remember what kept him among the living: he would once more sneak up on life, and he would sneak up on me; the water would essentially drain from his lungs, he suddenly began swallowing and breathing for himself, it was like in those TV documentaries about the Eurasian Steppe: the long winter ends, the snow that had been lying numb and dampening over the Manchuria and the Puszta melts away, and in time lapse a young sapling bursts through the earth, it resolves to bud, an orchestra plays Vivaldi, and the bud opens and is so very glossy and magnificent, and all the while one is made to think

how wonderful life is and how powerful nature is, and other foolish phrases that the British voiceover whispers to you off camera; completely giddy from the action.

The difference was: my father blossomed so often that the doctors shook their heads and looked like withered sunflowers in the early autumn breeze, and said, oh boy, your dad's a tough cookie, isn't he?

I witnessed every single cycle of decay and resurgence. Our father is like Jesus Christ, Father, but continuously, we told the hospital's Catholic pastor, who spoke to us after he had watched us disappear three times into the small room where we disinfected our hands and put on those crackling green gowns before entering the intensive care unit. He laughed and asked whether we were twins, at which point Babi shouted: I'm much taller, but short on brains!, and then the priest got a bit serious and said that humour was a good way of coping with events, and that he wished us all the best (events, the priest had said; my grave illness!, cried out my father; I thought: does our story end here? I thought about the thick volumes on Otto's book shelves that were all called something like *the lost world* or *lost culture*, and the many things that Otto would never be able to tell me.)

During one of my daily afternoon visits, after he had been in a coma for two weeks, Otto woke up and looked at me with his big brown eyes, which looked a little like a sign of an overactive thyroid, and smiled. I was his favourite daughter, he insulted me only rarely, while he constantly addressed my sister only as *arsehole*. Timna, how is your new life, he suddenly asked me, and I laughed and said, Otto, which new life is that? Everything is just like it always is. You should lie not to your father!, Otto replied, and he laughed too. What I had said hadn't been a lie, seeing as my life really was for the most part the same, only the part with Tann was new.

*

After Tann's acquaintance had died, he was reluctant to set foot in the hospital. Whether he would come with me to see Otto or not depended on what condition my father was in; but whether he would visit him if he was well or unwell he wouldn't say, and he only came without any form of protest if Otto was in a coma and the only thing that could be heard was the respirator, which sounded like an entire meditation retreat in a sport's hall. When Otto was conscious, Tann excused himself. Timna, he would then say, I can't deal with all this hospital crap, not today, don't be mad with me. When Otto was irate because someone had left him in a wheelchair in the corridor, it was also not the right time for Tann. And even when Otto said from the telephone earpiece with a honeyed voice that he was looking forward to seeing us and a banknote or two might jump out of his wallet, as he used to say, Tann made an apprehensive face and moved his index finger from left to right. I nodded knowingly. I understood Tann well.

When Tann did come along and Otto was in a good state, I would buy two pieces of cake on the way, one with fruit and one with chocolate; not only because both Tann and Otto loved sweet things, but also because I liked the way they would first cut both pieces into equal-sized halves and would swap and after a couple of bites they would deliberate who should have which piece. They would then discuss who was light a few grams and ought therefore to take the chocolate piece. Most of the time they would agree that my father should get the chocolate cake, and he would then complain about the decision after a few bites, so that Tann and him would feed each other cake, subsequently scratching away at the paper plates until they were white. We share everything, like in *communism*, my father said in English, but in *communism* there was no cake for Jews.

Tann spent most of the time during our visits sitting on the window sill leafing through the sports section of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* that someone brought my father every day even though he never read it, and attempted to ignore Otto's psychotic monologues.

Tann could not understand why we were constantly going to Otto, why we washed and disinfected his hospital laundry, why we immediately jumped up and went to him as soon as he sent an emergency text message. He would say, Timna, people get old but you and Babi are both young, it's fine to go to the hospital once a fortnight, he has hundreds of consultants and twenty nurses. I would say, Tann, it's different with you Christians, everybody knows that (actually, my father had said that to me, specifically that Christians didn't know what a real family was, and that they would sell their grandmothers for a couple of slices of sausage, or even worse: stick them in a care home). I would say: in our family you take care of each other, you have to worry, you have to get anxious if you don't hear from one another a whole day, you have to always expect the worst. And just as I was trying to explain this to him, my mobile phone went off, and of course it was Otto [...] I took Otto's call, and Tann did what he always did when he was annoyed with me: he rolled his eyes all the way up and looked just like a Caravaggio, and then, as if that wasn't dramatic enough, he hit himself on the forehead with the palm of his left hand.

*

Otto begged me to come to the hospital immediately because he was feeling lonely, we were all he had after all, and what he had, he had to have immediately. I said, Otto, please, I have a life too, I was just with you, it's barely been an hour since I said goodbye, but he only said, Timna, and his voice was very weak, and I knew that he was crying, and I didn't know whether he really was that sad (seeing as the men of his generation were actually incapable of crying), or whether he just wanted to manipulate me, but that didn't really matter, at any rate I kissed Tann on his cheek, he shouted You silly cow! after me, and I hurried to the tram and rode it to the hospital. And when I got there, Otto sat up a little and said very loudly: Can

you believe this brat is doctor of philosophy, my child is doctor! And the nurses, who were busy hooking up plastic tubes or flicking infusion bottles, turned around and smiled: that's very nice, they said.

2.

The Deborah Number

or

How much is a long-distance call from Haifa to Munich?

Babi and I visited Ward 14b where our father lay every day for months on end, both together and separately, and the better Otto got, the worse his mood became. Sometimes, when he was able to, he even complained: I don't like it! Four weeks you both were not here! And if we consequently exclaimed half amused, half annoyed: But we've been coming every day! My father would reply: I would come twice a day! We are a family, what kind of daughters are you! We would look at each other, and then we would look at him, and then we nodded solemnly, he had, after all, just sprung back from the brink of death.

Only once, on a day where everything went wrong, a day when Tann had once more shouted That old swine! and rolled his eyes, a day when my boss (the Doctor of Philosophy was working as a badly paid maternity cover at a collaborative research centre for late scholastic mysticism) once more wagged his finger at me for slinking out of the office much too early, on a day when heaven and earth shook and I was quite tetchy, I retorted: Otto, how often did you visit Omama in Haifa when she broke her hip?

My father ignored my question because the answer was naturally: he visited Omama in Haifa a total of zero times when she broke her hip. For many, many years already, Omama had been lying under a stone slab, engraved on which were her name and the name of our Otata.

When I was still a child and my parents started divorce proceedings because of a Yorkshire terrier (more on that later) my father had cancelled the family holiday without further ado and took only me to Israel and to Omama's grave.

We had to search the cemetery for a little while, which really meant that my father searched because at this point I still couldn't differentiate the peculiar Hebrew letters: some of them looked like noses, others more like ears; most of them looked like some or other part of my father's body. We breathed in the unique mixture of sea and exhaust fumes. Omama's memorial slab was completely plain, there were simply two names on it: Chawa and Yitzhak. There were no blessing hands or palm leaves, firstly, because we didn't come from the priestly class, secondly, such engravings were also a matter of money. My father had a little book with him and he read out something in Hebrew. Then he said: Finished, Timna, let us go to the car. Poor Omama! Poor Otata!

We got into the small Honda that my father had rented at the airport. In the heat the plastic interior stank even more, and my father burned his palms on the steering wheel. Shit, he said, puckering his purple-coloured lips and blowing on the burned skin. Then he put on his sunglasses, no idea where he had got a pair of real Ray-Bans from, it wasn't like him to spend money, but they did suit the way he lay his arm around my headrest, put the car in reverse and bumped the Subaru parked behind us. Whoops!, he said. Then he asked me: have you already *chatted* with your mother? (He didn't ask, like he could have asked in Germany: are you strapped in, because in Israel you didn't have to wear a belt back then.) I said, yes, I have, everything's OK, and that had been sort of true. My older stepsister, who wasn't allowed to spend the summer holidays at her boarding school on Lake Constance (for which her father sent us a fat cheque once a year) where our parents had stuck her because she is a right little rascal (as my mother used to say), had picked up the phone. Reisele had passed the receiver straight on to my mother, the dog barking in the background, *Sheket* now, for Christ's sake!, my mother had shouted, but the dog carried on barking of course. Reisele won't say a word to us, shouted my mother, she spends all day writing these ridiculously long letters to the other youngsters from the boarding school.

I hadn't had a lot to tell my mother that day because while I was away with my father nothing ever happened. I was woken in the mornings by the carting Arabic fruit seller, who shouted avatiach, avatiach, and at night I was woken up multiple times by the alarms of the parked cars that shrieked and caused a racket, even though no one had ever owned a valuable car in the whole country. (My father would say: the Germans are stupid and buy expensive Nazi cars, the Jews are smart and buy Subaru and Mitsubishi and Toyota!). My mother held the receiver to her ear, even though she didn't speak to me at all, but told off the dogs instead, Billy, you blockhead, Joe, you are so bloody stupid, will you be quiet! until I finally shouted: Mama, stop it! Do you know how much it costs to phone you from here? I was lucky because my father had just popped out to the small shop under the flat to pick up some pitta bread and cottage cheese and little gherkins, and therefore couldn't monitor my telephone usage. My mother laughed and said, Timnale, is the old goat being thrifty again? Oh, that miser! And then she exclaimed: Dreadful! Sixteen degrees, what a crap summer! We all got completely soaked out on our walkies yesterday. Have you gone to the sea? The old man should drive you to the sea, you should get to know some other young people! Ach, this Haifa is nothing, if I'd have gone with you we'd now be in Tel Aviv at Eli's or Chanale's, you'd have liked that! I know Chanale from my first trip out there, my mother said, she had a roof terrace where there were piles of oranges, good Jaffa oranges, the absolute best oranges, I ate them by the ton; and Chana's door was always open, shame that she's dead now.... Mama, it's fine, I interrupted, we're going to the cemetery in a minute. To the cemetery!, cried out my mother. Can't the old man think of something nicer to do with a thirteen-year-old?

But I obviously didn't tell my father any of this, I just said: Yes, I gave her a quick call, and my father said: Good, you must, she is your mother.

*

I had to think of Haifa, Omama and her grave, and the telephone call with my mother when my father, twenty years later, fell silent in his hospital room. And he stayed that way: my father folded his arms and didn't say a thing. Perhaps he hadn't ignored my question, but had just not heard it, perhaps he hadn't understood it; since he had been in the hospital you could no longer imagine how brilliant he had once been teaching his students complex formulas that could explain just about everything between the sky and the earth in his crumpled jacket. My father had had a teacher in Israel who had invented the Deborah number and this Deborah number was something like the panta rhei of Jewish physicists. My father wanted to prove that everything melts away, perhaps not before our eyes, but before the eyes of God. The prophet Deborah writes – according to her song – that even the mountains melt away before God, and my father calculated complicated formulas for it, which he wrote on the board with chalk.

Because Otto was silent and didn't make any signs of engaging with my Omama argument I went into the tearoom, made him a very weak, over-sweetened coffee in a feeding cup, gave it to him to drink, he brought forward his lips and stared at me with his huge black eyes, and I left the hospital so I could come back the next day.

I came to the hospital every day, from July to March, until my father was allowed home after a few months. During this time Otto constantly received new diagnoses, and all of them were somehow right, while all being simultaneously wrong. The only thing the doctors could agree on was what was on the upper right corner of his medical chart: Born on the 20.03.1938 in Kronstadt. Kronstadt, Russia?, the doctors asked. Kronstadt, Transylvania!, barked my father. And when he said that he seemed strong and proud, for a few seconds at least.

Otto, engineer, born in Rumania, Lord of a terraced house and two unhappy daughters, was already a nuisance before he had to go to the

hospital. When he was released, something happened that no one could have considered possible: he got so much worse.

[...]

4.

My father kisses the ground

Timna, screamed my father into the phone, finally the bastards let me out! Come and pick me up! Thanks! Ciao!

It was still dark, Otto had woken me up. I looked at the clock, it was seven, I put something on, knocked over the coat stand on my way out, swore and ran to the tram stop.

My father had been in the hospital for six months, and he had interrupted this stay for one day only. It was three months in, it was October, the first snow had already settled, the patients were finding their first chocolate Santa on their wheelie tables, and he had decided one morning that he had had enough. He detached the infusion drip with his dry hands, slipped into his woollen trousers and took the goods lift down. He took unsteady steps to the U-Bahn station to save paying for a taxi, but his trousers had become so big that he couldn't walk as he usually did with his hands behind his back, but rather with both hands holding up his trousers by the waistband instead. When he attempted to buy a ticket from the machine he failed because he had to keep holding up his trousers with one hand.

A woman was watching him and his large, sad eyes elicited her compassion. Otto didn't look like a homeless man, even though he had not been to the hairdressers for a long time, because the nurses carefully shaved their private patients, and even his shoes had been polished. Otto was a handsome man even in his old age; he hadn't been in such good shape since he left Rumania in 1962, especially after having only been given an astronaut's diet and unkosher jelly for three months in Geriatrics. The woman had hesitated for a moment, then she unfastened her belt, drew it through the loops of her jeans and gifted it to my father. She even helped him to thread the belt into his trousers, then she brought him down the

escalator, and my father finally reached Trudering with a rhinestone-studded blue belt in the loops of his trousers.

Otto loved to tell us this story: what a woman! What a mensch!, he would say, and he liked to emphasise the striking contrast between the belt-giving mensch-woman and his ungrateful, cruel daughters, like when he called me on the day he fled the hospital, for instance, and I had been stunned when I saw his home number on my display (I had speculated thieves, police or squatters). Otto, what are you doing at home, I asked, and my father had replied: Those arseholes can kiss my arse! I'm healthy again! A mensch-woman helped me! And then I had beseeched him to go back to the hospital, and I ended up calling the clinic and notifying the staff.

Only after the chief consultant telephoned him and urgently begged him to come back to the hospital to cure his unresolved infections and to treat his forgetfulness caused by countless anaesthetics, Otto understood that he had to go back to Ward 14b.

*

When I arrived at the ward on the day my father was released from hospital, I could already see him sitting on a folding chair in the corridor from a distance. He was wearing his dark blue quilted jacket from Lidl and his suede flat cap. When he recognised me, he waved and called: Timna, my daughter, finally you are there.

My father loved this jacket and would have never have got rid of it, even though there were places where whiteish stuffing was billowing out of it. Otto was the opposite of those people nostalgic for the old era of manufacturing, who constantly complain that everything used to be of a higher quality and exquisite and handcrafted; he considered it a great marker of progress and even a small miracle that everything now came from China and cost hardly anything. This jacket, he would always say with

pride, only twenty euros, and no one has touched it, only machines. So what if not look nice? It has kept me warm since five winters!

My father struggled to get to his feet, cursed that arsehole of a chief consultant one final time, and gave me a kiss on my forehead, one whose scent I found unpleasant. I picked up his rucksack, which he had kept on his lap the entire time, he protested, and I laughed and said, come on, so it's a bit easier, take your little bag. (My father always wore a small, leatherette handbag containing all his important documents. Inside you would find his ID card, his driver's license, duplicate copies of our ID cards, copies of birth certificates and his diplomas, all of which was naturally a precautionary measure in case we were deported. But he never admitted that Germany was secretly the land of murderers to him; because at the same time it was the country, as he used to say, where the Jews were unlikely to be murdered again that quickly. Once is enough, Timna!)

We made our way through the hospital corridors, my father clasped his hands behind his back, and his little bag swung to and fro. I thought to myself: He is and always will be an engineer, he walks stooped a little forward, but his hands pull him back; he knows where his centre of gravity is. He had a couple of short rests on the way, then I called a taxi, and my father grumbled the whole journey that the degenerate dogs from the hospital had refused to pay for the taxi. According to his logic, *they* had been the ones who wanted him there, he would never have gone to the hospital voluntarily. Come on, I said, without the hospital you would have passed over the Jordan. And anyway, the transport to the hospital had been free, and Babi and I were even allowed to travel with him and flirt a bit with the paramedics after they had complained for ten minutes straight about Otto's shit terraced house and its narrow spiral staircase.

I kiss the ground!, my father exclaimed as the taxi stopped in front of his terraced house in Trudering. Then I told him that soon a nurse would be coming to live with him: Valli.

[...]

13

The Nice Request

Over the years, Otto found a new way of enforcing his will over us: the nice request.

The nice request was a kind of covert order and worked like this: First, Otto would ask, then he would ask again, and finally he would complain in a plaintive tone that he had asked us so nicely, and in spite of that we had simply ignored his nice request!

One thing that he nicely requested for a long time was for a book to be written about our family.

Previously, when my father had been a completely regular pensioner and we didn't yet have to worry about his life every single day, he had reminded us at most every couple of months how much of a pity it would be that soon no one would be able to remember our wonderful family history. My daughters, he would say very suddenly but very solemnly, for instance, while we were sitting in a Turkish snack bar trying to shove the pale diced pieces of tomato onto the fork with our fingers, my Otata was a man with an extremely long beard, who was always smoking, only not on the Shabbat! And then, when we didn't react, he would order himself another pitta bread, and when the waiter brought it over, he would shout at him, these children are a curse! They are not interested in nothing! Then he would angrily clear his plate and leave us in peace for a couple of months. Since his return to the terraced house he was convinced for some reason that his life story ought to be written down and, just like his books about the lost world, be put on his book shelves and the book shelves of all *the right people!*

And of course my father had made a plan to place this burden on us.

In order to double his chances, he decided to ask me and Babi at the same time, and so it came to be that we were asked nicely while we were lying on his uncomfortable grey couch watching the remake of *Family Fortunes*.

He slunk up on us in complete silence, as he always did, and surprised us with the request. It wasn't the contents of the request that shocked us (we were used to strange requests), but the way he asked. Otto had to have already been standing next to us for a little while and drawn in breath; his voice was unusually loud and deep. He had probably already formulated the request in his head as he only made one grammatical error. He might have even typed it into his Microsoft Word 1997, alternating index fingers hopping over the keyboard, and printed it out multiple times on the dot matrix printer (I found notes like these in his study all the time, Otto loved typing out and printing reminders and scattering them over the desk.)

He said: My children, I have so many wonderful memories in me, which I ask you to write down, please do not let fall our wonderful family history into oblivion! Who will ever remember my family, my countries and my adventures!

Babi deflected the request straightaway by laughing and said, Papa, that is a really stupid idea. She hadn't taken her eyes off the television and started listing what a hundred people might have answered when asked to name a place beginning with the letter C. Otto got a very angry look on his face, his eyebrows became a livid triangle, and he shouted, Timna, your sister is an idiot!, she watch this *rarbish* instead look after her family!, then he rested his hands on the edge of the sofa, raised one hand, pranced with bent knees raising the other hand, and plopped down beside me.

I said, Otto, what do you want? Otto lay his hands over mine and looked me in the face, as if he were searching for the hereditary traits that would make me a worthy chronicler of the family history. Obviously he found them because he said: Timna, the history of our family is so wonderful! Like Otata playing with little girl at the train station! And then he married little girl! And the shit communists wanted to break his back! Timna, do you understand, that is gone when you do not write it down! Timna, why you not write a novel about our family?

Otto, I said (in fact, first I asked Babi, will you turn the TV down), write your own novel, you're retired, and you have a Samsung Laptop and an old skull full of stories. You don't need me. My child, he said, I cannot write well, I have a technical head, I do not have patience for it, and I do not have also the time. (While he said this, he indicated his folders that were labelled URSULA, that was my mother, or ROBERT, that was my uncle, who my father had been arguing with about the inheritance from Omama's will for fifteen years; there was also a folder called RUMANIAN LAND. Since retiring, my father spent around a third of his time with tasks that had something or other to do with these folders.) He looked at me threateningly. Otherwise you will regret it, this look said, a phrase my father had liked to say to me when I was younger.

I obviously didn't have the slightest desire to write something, so I fought back and said: But didn't Raviv write something about our family already? Otto said: Timna, your cousin Raviv is an idiot like his father (he meant his brother Robert, see above). Raviv painted a tree of origin or whatever you call it, he said. And Raviv is in Israel, he do not understand such things, he do not even know what a cherry tree looks like!

Otto didn't let up, he didn't stop asking me nicely. Time was running from him, and no one knew how much more the dear Lord would give him, that it was a miracle and a phenomenon that he was still alive, still had all his marbles, but that he could, God forbid, get an Alzheimer, like his cousin Olga's husband who couldn't remember his own address in the space of two weeks.

When I still hadn't responded my father argued further, I would speak in such nice German, and I could type so quickly with five or six fingers, and above all I had just finished writing a book, for which I had received twelve hundred euros a month for three years; we needed to know the whole story, and to conclude, he was gravely ill. Then he said, my whole shelf is full of such books, I had to know how it worked, and then said, only the thought of his life story made life worth living. And finally I thought, the poor old man,

perhaps this is his last request, and if I didn't fulfil it, I would die of grief, and in order to buy myself some time, I said: I'll think about it, Otto, I'll let you know in the next few days. This was a big mistake.

That evening I wrote to Raviv via Whatsapp and asked him about the family tree, and Raviv wrote back straightaway that he had drawn a family tree in year six, but it only went as far as our grandparents, that was enough for a sixth year.

He was now thirty-eight.

I despaired.

I couldn't hand the job over to Raviv.

*

Hard to say what would have happened if the following Monday my professor hadn't let me know that my so-called working zeal had developed only extremely poorly up to this point, and he therefore advised me that it would be better to look for another position. I went home and didn't go back. A few weeks later the university sent me a termination agreement, which I signed apathetically and sent back without a stamp.

Now I had time.

For a couple of days, mainly while walking up and down the river, I contemplated whether I should be sad or pleased; on the Tuesday afternoon I showed the neighbour's daughter the rabbits in the pet shop, afterwards we bought cucumbers and chard at the market, and in the evening I prepared a sumptuous meal for Tann and actually received him wearing an apron when he came back from the library, then I served him on my coffee table, where it was difficult to eat salads and casseroles and Persian rice dishes.

I cleaned the fittings in my bathroom, I got a manicure, I learned how to differentiate between different kinds of cabbage. That's how I spent that

week. They were the first days in many years that I didn't have to think about how many angels would fit on a pinhead or something of the like. I only thought about things like: Is this aubergine fresh?

At the end of that week I came to the conclusion that I really didn't care that I'd been fired, and I bought a monthly pass for the bus that went to Otto's with my first unemployment allowance, so I could spend my days with him and write his life story and listen to what he had to tell me about our wonderful family.

*

I had my doubts that my father had done himself a favour with his last nice request. Let me make this clear: The history of our family was not an epic of searching, losing and finding each other again, with a rosy-cheeked family propping themselves up on their elbows on the kitchen table and gazing confidently into the future at the end of it. (I think that's how my father saw us.)

Our family was more a clump of stories. If one were to be less kind, one could have said: our family was a rat king of stories, a large number of mangy rodents, whose bald tails had become tangled together and were now inseparable from one another; rats who all wanted to go in different directions and ultimately couldn't budge from where they were, some had died in their effort to escape, others were still alive, resigned and stuck with their tails tied in that ball of yarn called family. All of the stories were connected, and Otto's life story was always so real to us, it was like we'd lived it. The stupid thing about the stories was that almost all of them ended badly. Sure, Otto got out by the skin of his teeth every time, but I wasn't always sure if that was a good or a bad thing. One thing was sure: no one could escape this family.

Of us sisters, I was the one most interested in Otto's stories. I often used to ask him about them and when I got older and stopped believing everything my father thought he knew, more and more often I would look up whether Otto's stories were really the past or only Otto's past. I compared what Otto said with what was in my books. Much of what he said was just wrong. Sometimes I had the impression that my father not only mixed up dates, but that his mind birthed crafty and stinking rich ancestors, he invented whole mountain ranges in the Carpathians. If I said, Otto, that can't be right, he said: But that is how it was! To him, everything that he said was right. But that is how it was, Timna!, he shouted. You can stand on your head and it is still how it was!

Perhaps the problem lay in this: Otto said he could, for example, only talk about Rumania in a 'romanced' way. He explained how all Transylvanians and all Transylvanian Jews always *romanced* everything. Like all Transylvanians, he couldn't simply put facts together and try to separate the important from the unimportant. It was the task of his listeners to bring order to his stories. My father said: I talk this way, I talk that way, that is what we do!

He lost track of the narrative while telling it, he started in the villa in Kronstadt and ended in a thousand little details that did not make a story, he suddenly spoke of infantrymen with seven twins and of women with grey gazes, he simply skipped decades and deconstructed every chronicle, and his beautiful eyes would become even darker as he told the story, and I said, tell me, tell me more, but, even though I was supposed to write his life story and that's why I was coming to Trudering, he suddenly didn't feel like it, or he became tired. Otto, tell me about the morello cherry trees in the garden when they bloom!, I exclaimed, and I thought about Proust and his stupid madeleines and wondered if I ought to have given Otto a linden flower tea instead of a magnesium effervescence tablet.

Depending on how he was, I sat with him on his small, scuffed Ikea sofa or crossed legged on the side of the double bed, which was without a

waterproof mattress cover, stretched my back, lay my head to one side and blinked a few times.

Outside it was thundering, and my father said: Do you know what it is? I said: a storm. My father yawned and said: Of course it is a storm you fool. I ask where this storm come from! And I replied: the clouds rubbing up against each other? My father said: that is true, but not true. Then he told me of the speed of lightning and the speed of thunder. He used terms like: metres per second! And: kilometres per second! You cannot imagine it! You cannot imagine so much! My life, you also cannot imagine!

Tell me about your life, Otto, I said, and he did, and I recorded everything on my mobile phone. Otto started with the nanny (we were rich, Timna, we were capitalists!) and his clean, white hands; he told me how Omama had shown him how to rub around his fingertips a thousand times a day to get beautiful finger nails; tell me about it! I exclaimed, that's interesting, but my father didn't feel like sharing cosmetic tips from the 1920s with me, he wanted to start again somewhere else, he told me about the re-education centre very close to his parents' house. That is where the prostitutes learned to drive a tractor! He shouted: we drill a hole and watch how they become communists! And we watch them when they have shower too! And then they get on the Traktor Traktorowitsch and plough the corn fields! That is how it was, Timna, the communists were so stupid! And I cried out, enraptured, tell me, tell me, tell me more! Omama and Otata, he said, and he told me something quite different, namely that our grandfather had struck him in front of all of his friends when he was twenty-one, because even though he was twenty-one he was not allowed to wander around at night, he had to be home by eight so the Securitate didn't get him like how they had with our grandfather a couple of times, who would come back home afterwards so very quietly and completely purple from the bruises. Poor Otata!, he exclaimed.

And then I lost track completely and my father suddenly started talking about the hood of the Lada, which always used to jam, but what an engine,

Timna, what a machine! And just as I had wanted to ask whether it was a four-stroke engine, my father was already telling me that you could now buy Hanuta crispy wafers that were much better and cheaper than the real thing at Lidl. SONDEY Carré milk hazelnut. Timna, you want?

Otto told, I asked, I recorded, and then the story died or began up again where we had been long before. I tried to lure Otto back to a place that interested me, but after a short while I found myself hardly interested in anything, because all the good stories, the stories about love, sickness and death, were all familiar to me and had been for a long time already.

My thoughts broke free from the conversation and wandered around Otto's bedroom, they wondered the last time the bedsheets had been changed and whether there was still detergent for the curtains in the cellar; my thoughts skipped to how many times younger I was than Otto (2.666 times), they calculated how often Otto had been to the dentist in his lifetime. If I asked something while yawning, Otto either didn't understand my question or he shouted, Timna, you are not listening properly! Then I would smile and say, I am, I am Papa, and I resolved to listen to all the recordings and type them up the following day at the latest.

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When I wanted to start writing up our family history after the first meetings (at least twenty or thirty pages, with a gold embossed title and bound in a good plastic, not unlike the doctoral theses that my father used to have on his desk, would probably suffice), I quickly realised that I knew a lot about the ochre-coloured villas in Kronstadt and the fruit trees that circled them like petitioners, but had absolutely no idea how to make a beautifully coherent story out of it. I had to order the chaos, I had to arrange the events and put everything that had ever happened into an order.

There was no question that everything had been very sad and very simple in this lost world, that the world was black and white and the weather mostly bad (the sun never shone in the shtetl) and people kept to the walls to quickly, quickly make it to some family member or other who was on their deathbed on account of some kind of infectious illness. Like all religious Jews, my family members always walked as fast as they could, they didn't know a normal pace, they didn't know the meaning of strolling.

People back then had a lot to worry about, a lot of children (only two of them would make it past eight) and no Internet. They were god-fearing and never laughed; they found it highly amusing when someone slipped on a piece of slimy intestine in the street (there weren't bananas yet, and innards lay about everywhere), then they'd smirk good-naturedly. Did not one of them have anything to say to us? There weren't letters or diaries from past generations in our family, there were only a few business records and photos in which the women screw up their mouths a little bashfully like Lady Di and in which the men stand so stiffly it's as if a stick was running between their hat and their waistband and down the back of their grey jacket. And apart from these photos, there was what Otto remembered.

My grandfather had been an Eastern Jew, whose family, like hundreds of thousands of families after the outbreak of the First World War, fled pogroms from his shtetl on the outskirts of Galicia. My father's grandfather came from a town in which everyone apart from the fireman, the mayor and the policeman were Jews; this was the place my people fled from, and they wanted to make it to Vienna, a city that had become so popular at the turn of the century that a lot of people had to rent their beds to shift workers, sometimes even to two such 'bedders', each of whom were able to stay in bed for eight hours, so the straw mattresses and the blankets in the city never went cold.

But above all, so thought my forbearers, there were a lot of Jews and many civilised Christians and no murdering Cossacks (bastard Cossacks! They went and killed the good Jews, just for fun!, cried out Otto). The Mayor of

Vienna at the time was a man with a magnificent moustache and an angry expression, who Hitler would later go on to call the most terrific German Mayor of all time, but my great-grandparents wouldn't have known that yet.

You had to change trains at Ciceu to get to Vienna. At this point, with Ciceu and the train station, is where Otto's all-time favourite story begins, a story he had told us time and time again since we were children: my little Eastern Jewish family missed the connection and stood helplessly on the platform, the great-grandparents, the children, always standing in order of size like organ pipes, four cardboard suitcases and sixteen bundles of essentials: bedclothes from the dowry, religious paraphernalia, jars of boiled turnips and clothing for Shabbat. My grandfather saw a little girl on the platform who moved a little too assuredly between the waiting travellers to belong to them. He moved away from his family, pulled up the already somewhat threadbare sleeves of his coat, snapped his fingers, hid behind one of the information boards, peeked out from behind the board and opened his eyes wide until the little girl laughed, then he beckoned her over and took her hands and spun her in a circle. The stationmaster came out of his little house, called his daughter, Tova, Tova, get away, leave the people alone, and the girl broke away from my grandfather and ran to her father. My grandfather asked the stationmaster whether another train would be going to Vienna today, that is, to the most magical of all cities, and he said no. My grandfather hung his shoulders and was about to go to his family to bring them the bad news when the little conductor looked at my grandfather and then he looked at my great-grandfather and saw his long beard and the exhausted, simple face of my great-grandmother and asked, are you Jews? And my grandfather said, very softly as he was used to doing, yes, we are Jews, and the man said, so my father told me, I'll make a place for you all to sleep. The man was called Havas, it was a Hungarian name he had adopted so that it wasn't obvious he was Jewish, my father said.

Otto owed his name to his father's patriotic sensibility. My grandfather, like most Jews, had worshipped the Habsburgs and their monarchy and

had endeavoured his whole life to live like a true Austrian: He fought like an Austrian, he spoke like an Austrian (with a Yiddish accent that everyone heard apart from him – the poor Otata spoke so beautifully!, exclaimed my father with gleaming eyes), he wanted to be as wealthy and prosperous and manly as the strong citizens of Cisleithania, he was an incorrigible assimilant. Otata, my father said, walked with a straight back and no longer stooped thanks to Vienna. Otata was a proud Austrian!

Shortly after my grandfather's family arrived in Vienna, the war followed: someone had the idea to stick my barely seventeen-year-old grandfather in the light blue uniform of the Austrian mountain troop, press a cape and breeches in his hands and to give him an edelweiss to tack to his collar, because that was the time when even 'Jewish rascals', as the mayor said, were sent to the front.

Otata spent four years during the First World War sitting on a mountain next to Nova Gorica, shooting into the air and waiting until the men in Italian uniforms on the neighbouring mountain peak also shot into the air, so went the ritual. My grandfather returned, as my father would several times later, physically unharmed from the war and began to build an existence, as they say. Even when my grandfather decided to leave Vienna and go to Transylvania, he remained an Austrian (he smoked such fine cigars!, my father said). He opened a sawmill and prospered with a bit of underhandedness; he bought the small villa and one of the first cars in Transylvania. Later my grandfather married, and it was only shortly before the wedding that it became apparent that the girl that my grandfather had chosen, the girl with the black curls and the black eyes who danced ballet and played Chopin and almost seemed like a true bourgeois daughter, was the little daughter of the stationmaster, and everyone was so delighted that there was an eight-page cover story about my grandparents in the local newspaper. (Such a beautiful story, such a perfect way to start a novel!, Otto said. It's kitschy and I can't read Hungarian, I said.)

Omama was nearly twenty at the time. She gave up the Hungarian name her father had once chosen, took my grandfather's and moved to the Transylvanian city he had chosen to live in and where my father would be born.

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That was it, the most beautiful, touching and instructive story my family had produced. At the same time, it was unfortunately one of the few stories with a beginning and a climax and an end, and probably the only one Otto was able to recite coherently.

I went to Otto's three, four or maybe five times to sit next to him, listen to him and press the record button on my phone. But the conversations remained hanging in the air somewhere between us like little flies in a spider's web. I wondered why Otto had wanted me to write down the stories when he could barely keep his eyes open while I tried to take notes. It seemed to take so much effort for him to bring out long forgotten happenings and other little trifles from his head, that he became older and even more tired while trying. I noticed that when I got ready to head home, Otto would walk me to the door less and less frequently, asked me less and less often to bring my forehead to his lips, for which I'd have to get down on my knees, so he could kiss me. His hair was very fine and white, and like most things about him, it had become translucent: hair, skin, memory.

[END OF SAMPLE]