

Nadine Olonetzky

Where Does the Light Go When the Day is Over?

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Only once did her father tell her what had happened to him and his family during the Shoah. It was on a park bench in Zurich's botanical gardens.

Taking this conversation as her starting point, Nadine Olonetzky weaves the story of her family, which originally hailed from Odessa, through the war years and her father's long struggle for restitution into the present. In haunting, intimate prose shot through with laconic humour, she writes about how what had happened – and what she knew and didn't know about it – have affected her life, and asks the questions she was never able to ask her father.

This book probes the shadows of his persecution. It is a story of flight, pain, anger and madness, but it is also filled with love and a will to live, the importance of art, the magic of pictures, the soothing energy of a garden – and the limits of a reckoning with the past.

Nadine Olonetzky is an author, editor and publisher. She writes for a variety of publishing houses and publications on photography, art and cultural history, is the author of non-fiction and fiction books, for which she has received many awards. In 2020, she found out that the Jewish part of her family struggled for decades with the Federal Republic of Germany for compensation.



Sample Translation: Simon Pare

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Extract from Part I – Scattered to the Four Winds

Snow

When did I first hear that my grandfather Moritz had *lost his life*?

My father had prepared a notebook with blank pages. On the day I was born he began to write. *It is quite cold*, he wrote. *A chill wind is blowing. Fresh snow fell on Saturday, and today, Sunday, the sun is shining. Individual snowy stars fall from the sky, sparkling brightly in the sunlight and dancing down to earth. The roofs are all full of snow, the sky is blue, and in the distance the mountains stand out clear and pure. It really is the perfect weather for someone to come into the world.*

The book was nicely bound, like the photo albums he had already started compiling. When I was finally born and lying there, all bloody, with lots of black hair on my head, he photographed me. And he began to keep a diary – about me, for me. *Until you can continue writing it yourself.*

Like snow, I too am made of water. And minerals and billions of bacteria and molecules. I am not a short-lived crystal that melts as soon as the weather gets warmer, but a teeming, compact-looking cloud. A cloud that walks around in the street or waits for the bus. Who showers and dresses up and goes out, or lies around on the sofa in a tracksuit. Who derives happiness from working and walking in the woods or in a strange city. Who loved her cat to the end and has missed her greatly ever since. Who is sometimes ill, almost falls apart and then recovers her strength. Who stirs pots with big spoons, enjoys big dinner parties and is happy to have friends

around her. Who knows that the world can be a place of extreme darkness and fear.

It is winter again and the garden is under snow. More and more often, there is no snow, or if snowflakes do fall from the sky, they dissolve when they touch the wet street. It is too warm and not just at Christmas, when warm southerly winds are typical. I can observe the effect of this increasing warmth in my garden too. In summer the knotweed leaves turn brown earlier than they should, and towards evening the ground is cracked, even when I've watered it early that morning.

There used to be more snow. I can see that in the photo albums.

The first albums my father made were small comb-bound books, 10 cm square. He developed his black-and-white photos himself and carefully arranged them into a sequence by inserting pieces of black, white or coloured glossy paper or transparency film. The bindings are coloured plastic, though it is brittle and a little faded now.

My mother is the main character, of course. Friends feature too, but I have no idea who they are because there are no captions to identify anyone or anything. My father also took photos of his siblings – my aunt Paula and my uncle Efrem – both of whom beam out of the pictures.

As I leaf through the album, the transparent film colours the next picture. A port seen through green, my mother in a hat through blue or a still life of pebbles through orange. He often included menus, city maps and wine labels he has cut into squares, and he typed a holiday journal on the pieces of coloured paper, only a few sentences each time.

How passionately he recorded the early days with my mother, their outings and travels together! What a keen sense he had of himself as a graphic designer, carefully and lovingly implementing his ideas of layout and illustration. On faded red paper he wrote: *The first of April 1952! Big*

snowflakes. A firework, everything is spinning, and we are drowning in a sea of happiness!

Then, on blue: *Our first mystery tour . . . You had no idea where we were heading. I just hoped we were heading for happiness. And we were!* He had seen my mother dancing at the Artists' Masked Ball in Zurich but wasn't brave enough to speak to her. He apparently thought to himself: *That's my wife dancing over there. They both told me that. He was beside himself when they got together in 1952. Or perhaps fully himself, a man reborn.*

I can't really tell how she felt. She never told me. In the first photos she is so young and soft, open. Overwhelmed, maybe? Both fascinated and uncertain at the same time – wary? The two of them are radiant in all the pictures. They married in April 1954.

One year later he wrote on orange: *One year married!!!! It wasn't always easy with me. Forgive me all my mistakes because I love you more than anything. Many, many thanks for your love and loyalty. We have to celebrate. And a year later on mustard yellow: Spain 1956! After a tough, busy summer we finally go on holiday. It is already snowing in the mountains, cold and wet. But we head south. We are happy and very gla.* The last letter of the word 'glad' has been cut off.

In the photo he chose for the album, my mother is wearing a strapless swimming costume, he is in a white shirt and a pair of suit trousers. The picture is taken with a self-timer, and they are having a picnic on a blanket somewhere in the countryside. On the next page they are lying on the beach, reading books. They have sunhats and sunglasses on. Then they are walking around a town – it isn't clear where – and through transparent orange film, a port with fishing boats appears, with large sacks being loaded onto a ship.

Those were our best holidays so far, he typed on beige paper, cut it to the right size and inserted it. *We return to Switzerland happy, relaxed and*

brown. It is snowing already in Geneva. It's bitterly cold and we have to heat the car, but none of this bothers us.

Instead of writing everything down, which would have taken hours or even days, he took photographs. Drawing was my mother's domain. She had attended metal classes at Zurich art college – that was what the course to become a goldsmith was called at the time. I see her sitting at a forging bench in a white work coat in a photograph from that period. She is filing away at a tiny object. Was it one of her beautiful enamel works? She liked drawing more, though, because it required less patience. Her textile designs and illustrations soon brought her success.

The technical nature and tempo of photography suited him better. He pressed the shutter release and the scene was recorded. The rock-hard stone face and the delicate shadow my mother cast on the rock for a second on a hot summer's day: these two different things were transformed into shapes – patches of black and varieties of grey – that remain. Photography connects and conserves everything in a flash. It creates something that remains.

In one of the next pictures my mother is standing in front of a distorting mirror. Her face is thin and long, her eyes are ovals with an elongated, dark core. I turn over. The pages stick together – it has been so long since anyone looked at this album – and separate with a tearing noise.

This time she is very wide. She is standing there on short, chubby legs and everything she's wearing – the white gloves, the sailor's sweater with a bateau neckline, the little watch on her wrist – is distorted horizontally. Her smile is also very wide. I turn the page again. Now she is walking towards me across a square. How young she is! Radiant, with a wonderful softness around her lips, which are always smiling. She has dark hair and a moist glimmer in her eye. In the background the Eiffel Tower rises out of the city smog.

Why did she fall in love with my father? Was it his charm and his chutzpah that attracted her? He must have made her laugh. Was it the

foreignness he exuded? The darkness inside him? So, was it what he had been through? She was engaged when she met him, but the other man didn't stand a chance.

This album shows her and my father visiting Paris in the sunshine with wet cobbles. Paris with new cars, glinting cocktail glasses on round outdoor café tables, and sparkling chandeliers in the Galeries Lafayette. Paris with decorative street lamps in the night. Paris without ruins or bullet holes. She has adopted the Audrey Hepburn look: the hairstyle, the trousers, the smile. Everything is shiny and glittery. And he photographs her. He appears only in the self-timer shots, wearing a suit and tie again, and beaming.

They owned a car, a white Simca Vedette, and drove to Milan, Modena, Piacenza and other places. The countryside reflected in its glossy bodywork. To Genoa and Portofino. The chrome window frames had an urbane shine to them. They drove to the seaside and to the mountains. Very often to the mountains. On yellow he wrote: *This time we went to Arosa, but we had no luck. Two weeks of blizzards. Only a few days of sun. A catch-up at Easter, again to Zuoz, but this time at the Hotel Concordia. Food great, just a pity that nearly all the snow was gone, although otherwise we had a fun time.*

Again and again, they are on their way home. In one picture my mother, wearing a thin, white rollneck, is leaning against the Simca's radiator grille during a stop; they are driving *home to Zurich via Genoa.*

On the way, he writes for the album on orange paper, our petrol ran out and the Gotthard pass was in deep snow. We were looking forward to our lovely home and our life together. We were both very excited about how we would shape our life. We arrived home, tired but happy, with 5 francs in our pockets. We were so glad to hear Swiss German again.

And then he wrote on blue: *Trips to Stuttgart, Hohenzollern, Black Forest, Titisee. I show you the buildings of the city where I was born and grew up! How foreign everything seems to me here. The people, the buildings, the language.*

What on earth was he showing her in Stuttgart? Not a single one of the buildings he had once frequented was left. Now they strolled along new streets, saw new buildings and sat in new cafés. Did he constantly compare what he saw with what he remembered? What emotions did they arouse in him? *I'm happy*, he wrote later, *to be back in Zurich*.

(...)

A park bench

Huge snowflakes are now falling slowly and at airy intervals from the sky – *the size of handkerchiefs*, my mother liked to say when snow fell like this. They are heavy with water. They melt instantly on the soil in the garden in front of the house and on the dark-grey street while the blackbirds sing as if it were spring.

It was spring when my grandfather Moritz had to board a train. *Treblinka*, my father said. *Treblinka? We don't know exactly*. He had decided that I was old enough now. I was fifteen. He ordered me – there's no other word for it – to come to the botanical gardens in Zurich. He fixed a time and a place, and I had to be punctual and there, on a park bench, he began to talk. At long last. He told me. All at once. After years of silence, he spoke. He spoke as if it had all happened yesterday. He spoke in the present tense. A present tense that I cannot lay claim to as I write this story.

He told me in short sentences. They came crashing down on me like lumps of rock. Crashing onto and into me. He buried me until I had disappeared under a pile of words, sentences, pictures and rocks, a heap of pain. There were so many words, sentences, pictures and rocks and they came in such quick succession that I didn't know what to do other than sit

there quietly. The idea that I might ask questions came to me only later, but by then it was too late.

On that park bench in the botanical gardens I heard for the first time that my grandfather Moritz had *lost his life*. Why didn't my father say that my grandfather Moritz had been *murdered*?

He told me many things, and many things he didn't. What did he tell me? Do I remember correctly? Were the things he didn't say simply not important or had he forgotten them? Or were the things he didn't tell me actually the most important of all? I felt pinned to that bench, and as the words, sentences, pictures and rocks came crashing down on me, my eyes kept darting to the plants; it was late summer. Echinacea, reed grass, sedum.

I now know that my grandfather didn't go to Treblinka that spring. He went to Izbica, 300 kilometres away. It's in the documents. Izbica – Ischbitze in Yiddish – southeast of Lublin, a 'transit ghetto' and 'KL' is what it said in the documents. A concentration camp in the occupied Polish territories in the 'General Government'. Izbica was the antechamber of the extermination camps.

For Moritz too, Izbica seems to have been planned as a stop on the way to his final destination. But Izbica might have been the end of the line for Moritz. *We don't know.*

I recently received a photo of him. My cousin in Tel Aviv snapped it with her phone and sent it to me; she kept the original. In the picture Moritz is just stepping through a doorway. His eyes are in shadow behind his glasses. He is holding a piece of paper in both hands; it might be a receipt or a page from an order book. Dressed in a dark business suit with a white shirt and a tie, he is just taking a step out into the bare courtyard between city buildings, where a ladder is leaning against the façade behind him.

Who took the photo? Why? Was this Moritz's workplace, the 'Tobacco Cutters, Gartenstrasse 17 (ground floor)' in Stuttgart, as it is referred to in

the address book? For which goods did he issue a receipt or take an order? And why did someone take this snap of him at work? I don't know. I know hardly anything. This man is supposedly my grandfather, but how foreign he is to me. And yet how close. He looks sombre, stern, serious, unfriendly even. A strict man. Was he an ice-cold businessman – a *koifman*?

Your grandfather was in the tobacco trade, my father told me, and I have read the same thing in the documents. Moritz was a tobacco cutter, cigarette manufacturer, tobacconist and then principal agent for tobacco products.

He and Malka had not decided to cross over to America like so many other East European Jews, nor to emigrate to Palestine in support of the Zionist ideal. They wanted to go to Western Europe. One of my father's cousins, Abraham Olonetzky, born in Odessa in 1871, was already living in Stuttgart at the time. People have always emigrated to places where they had friends or relatives.

But where were the women? The wives, mothers, sisters and cousins? I read nothing about them.

'Moritz had been a Russian citizen at first and later he was stateless,' I find written in the documents. 'We received this information from the aforementioned's brother, Mr Max Olonetzky, who lives at Hermann-Pleuerstrasse 26 in Stuttgart. Signed by proxy, Warscher.' Moritz had a brother? Max? Max and Moritz in Stuttgart? 'Yes I must wince for pain, pain, pain, when I gaze ahead again.'

No one had ever said anything about my grandfather having a brother. And I cannot find anything about him anywhere. Only later would I discover that this Max wasn't his brother – no, the statement in the document is wrong. Max was the son of Moritz's cousin Abraham.

Did the Jewish religious community often make such mistakes and misunderstandings? Were they utterly unavoidable, because all the survivors were looking for the missing in the chaos after the Holocaust? Why did no one correct it?

In December 1938 *Flammenzeichen* magazine ran an advert. I find it in a book about Stuttgart during the Nazi regime. The headline is 'Checkmate the Jews'. A series of portrait photos with names are arranged in a chessboard pattern. Faces on the black squares, names on the whites. On black, Max's face; on white, his name and address. Above it is written 'The so-called highbred, supposedly harmless Hebrews' and 'Here again are some pictures of well-known Stuttgart Jews.' Max, the textile merchant, the trader. Max in the stocks. But Max survived the Holocaust. Initially, he was protected by his marriage to Emilie, a Christian: his grandson tells me this. Then, when Max did receive a Gestapo order to register for 'work detail' shortly before the end of the war, he and Emilie went underground. Someone hid them too. Max made it through the 'Checkmate the Jews' and after the war he worked for as a sales agent for various companies. The documents include only the claims he submitted for compensation for gold, silver and jewellery, for, like everyone else, he had been obliged to take items to the city pawn office. That's what it says. In 1950 he was awarded 3,000 DM for 'loss of economic advancement' –in words, three thousand deutschmarks – as the trial ended with a settlement.

Were the survivors ever asked how they managed to survive? Who asked them the questions? Who listened to them? And who believed them? Could what they were saying really be true? For anyone not forced to sit tight in hiding, anyone not sent to a concentration camp, it was, as my father said, *unimaginable*. Maybe they were keeping something secret? Or had they simply had enough chutzpah, enough luck and charm to brazen it out? And where did they get the resilience and the unconditional willpower to survive? At Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center, I listen to a man saying that he is ashamed that he survived; he says this on a monitor in the exhibition. He speaks like my father. In simple, short sentences. He recounts how he only survived because the bullet hit a man in front of him.

So, how had Max managed to stay alive when Moritz was murdered?

Among the documents I find only at the very end of my research a letter to my father dated 25 February 1946. 'Today we received a list of the Jewish religious community in Stuttgart,' it reads. 'On this list we find the name Olonetzky, Max, born 11 February 1897, now of Deckerstrasse 105, Cannstadt. If he is a relative of yours, we would be glad to redirect post to Herr Olonetzky in Germany.'

This was Cousin Max, as my father called him. All of a sudden, those long-forgotten words stirred inside me. They came to the surface like air bubbles rising from murky, watery depths. Two air bubbles only, nothing but words because I have no memory of Max. In a photo from the fifties, he and Emilie are standing next to my mother; again, the scene is a little blurred and caught in bland shades of grey. Apart from my mother's dress. It is a snow-white wrap dress with a pleated skirt; this glowing white envelops her wasp waist. She is made of light in this picture, and beside her Cousin Max is a heavy figure in grey. My father had always called him Chubby Max, it suddenly occurs to me. Three more words or air bubbles. They both had to go into hiding, they both survived, and then my father laughed at him. Max died in the early eighties, but no one told me.

One day the cherry tree in the neighbour's garden will flower again. Its blossoms will be as fresh as they are every spring. They open and shine. And when the tree is in full blossom, the individual petals will swirl through the air like snow. Occasionally it snows flakes and leaves at the same time. White showers rain down.

(...)

Carrots

Every family has stories that are told and others that are not.

My other grandfather, Ernst, and my grandmother, Thérèse, lay beneath a large, moss-covered gravestone with ivy and a tidily raked gravel path in front of it. We visited the grave from time to time, and on the way to the gravestone the gravel crunched under our feet. What about Moritz and Malka? Where were they? I wondered silently. Why didn't we pay them visits too? Malka lay under a mossy gravestone too, but we only went to Stuttgart two or three times. We knew that my father had grown up there. It wasn't clear, though, why we went to Stuttgart so infrequently. We went to the synagogue and afterwards we ate *gefilte fish*; I couldn't stand the smell of the mouldy, steaming carp. We didn't go to the cemetery. Much later, I saw that Moritz had had an inscription engraved on the stone:

Malka Olonetzky. Here rests my loyal and unforgettable wife.

Underneath, someone had added the line: *Moritz Olonetzky, 1881, lost his life 1942.*

Was this second line the reason we never went to the cemetery?

Where we lived there were no other survivors, not even many people with a foreign-sounding name. The village was full of people who greeted you cheerfully. *Grüezi mitenand!* everyone said as they opened the bakery door – *Hello!* The cowbell made a high-pitched clank. The baker's wife stood majestically behind the counter; it smelled of sugar, vanilla and flour. Her loaves of bread were laid out on a shelf on the wall, and below them were *Gipfeli* and *Weggli* – croissants and buns. Inside the glass display case, at my eye level, there were piles of cinnamon rolls and black-and-white pastries, and in autumn vermicelli tarts stood ready on shining, silvery trays. I always particularly loved the *Schoggi-S*, a piped S-shaped chocolate cookie.

Not far from our house there was another shop that sold vegetables and flowers. It was only a short walk down the hill and between a couple of old

houses. If I ran, I could get there in thirty seconds. Inside the front door, two steps led down into the dimly lit, cool shop.

The fat vegetable woman always wore a green apron, always had bright-red cheeks and was always busy. She washed vegetables and cut flowers, she composed bouquets and tidied the baskets of potatoes, cabbages and leeks. The aroma of the vegetables mingled with the fragrance that rose from the buckets of water containing ranunculus, peonies or asters, depending on the season. It smelled cool and a little rotten. When the vegetable woman had to bend down, she had trouble breathing. *Wotsch no äs Rüebli?* she would ask me – Would you like a carrot? – and if I was lucky, she would hand me one of those small, sweet summer carrots.

I wasn't allowed just to go to the greengrocer's and beg the woman for a carrot, though. Who knew what might happen on the way there! All parents were protective of their children, of course. They told us about strange men who appeared out of the blue and offered you sweets. My father said *Never leave the house without saying goodbye! You never know if I'll still be here and alive when you get back. And we wouldn't even have said goodbye.*

(...)

Piano

Spring came. As it always does. Time does not simply stop because it notices that something is going awry, shouldn't happen, must be prevented. It just keeps going. And so on 24 April 1942 SA men once again watched people packing their belongings in many flats. They had received a sheet of instructions on how to proceed with deportations. This time they knew that there were no freight cars available, so 'additional equipment, mattresses, work and cooking utensils, etc. are to be omitted'. As if anyone had taken them along on the first deportation convoys!

Then the apartments were sealed, I read in the procedure. Although my grandfather's place then couldn't actually have been called an apartment.

What might Moritz have still owned that he could or might have wanted to take along? There was no room for middle-class luxuries in the 'Jew house' in Hospitalstrasse, right next to the synagogue. Did he tie up a bundle or pack a suitcase? What clothes did he take with him? Did they fill a rucksack? And did he stuff a book in too? Then he went up the Killesberg hill.

Why do so many Jews play the violin or the clarinet? my uncle Efrem asks me later. *Because you can't flee with a piano.* He creased up with laughter and had tears in the corners of his eyes. Did Moritz set out with a violin on 24 April? Did he play the clarinet? Not as far as I know. In his last flat of his own, the one in the Gartenstrasse, there was indeed a piano – I find it in the documents. But he had left that behind long ago.

What would he have called what he did when he left the third apartment he hadn't chosen to live in? 'Abandonment of household effects', as the documents refer to it? Not in his wildest imaginings could my grandfather have suspected that one day, after the end of the Nazi dictatorship, some legal specialist sitting in some office somewhere would choose these words to describe what had been *taken* from him, stolen from him. Or

might he have a feeling that he had 'abandoned' something – the piano, perhaps?

If anything, he must have 'abandoned' his son, my father. Or the other way around. My father was forced to 'abandon' him.

So what was really going through his head as he climbed the Killesberg? Was he scared to death? Was his heart racing? Was he calm, composed, resigned to his fate? Did he perhaps even feel something like relief, as if he were setting off? Not for a Sunday outing to the 'Country Inn'; no, not that, but perhaps into a slightly better life?

The Killesberg was no longer just a park but a giant vegetable field too. There was a chicken farm and rabbits were bred there, and still every spring a party was thrown to mark the beginning of the park season. And in summer there were operettas such as *Turmoil in Heaven* and *The Fairytale Ghost on the Killesberg*. For some, the Killesberg was still an 'oasis of peace'.

Once he reached the 'Country Inn' at the top, the chosen site for the assembly camp, my grandfather's wait began. The summer season had not yet begun, and so Moritz waited, I imagine, like everyone else until his turn came for 'organisational and bureaucratic matters'. Until all his remaining money was confiscated, apart from the 55 reichsmarks he needed for his 'emigration'.

Then he went back to waiting. Did he queue up for soup? Glancing uncertainly around him, with his hat on his head? Did he chat to the woman in front of him in the queue as she too waited for something warm to eat? Maybe he even got carried away and cracked a joke and this surprised him as much as anyone else? What did he think might happen next? No one was under any illusions now, but what did they imagine? *It was all unimaginable, inconceivable*, my father told me as we sat on that park bench in the botanical gardens.

Maybe Moritz was silently hoping for something better? Could things get any worse than they were right now?

Like everyone else, he had to acknowledge retrospectively the confiscation of his household effects and his fortune as well as paying 1.15 reichsmarks to the bailiff, who had come purely for this reason to the Killesberg: '0.90 reichsmarks for the notification; 0.20 RM for the bailiff's travel expenses to Killesberg assembly camp; 0.05 RM for the official form'. What did he feel as he signed?

The 'relocation to the East' was the beginning of the 'final solution of the Jewish question'. In January, in a stately villa on the shores of the Wannsee, as, I imagine, canapés were passed around on silver platters and they took warming sips of cognac, all that remained for the SS to discuss was how to 'handle' it. There were, it was pointed out for the last time, 'about eleven million Jews to consider'. A letter from the Stuttgart state police headquarters dated 25 March 1942 read: 'The recent relocation of Jews from particular areas to the East marks the beginning of the final solution of the Jewish question in the heartlands of the Reich, the Ostmark and the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. As part of this relocation, a second transport of Jews from Württemberg and Hohenzollern will soon leave Stuttgart for the East.'

Did Moritz spend the night at the 'Country Inn' sitting on his suitcase, bundle or rucksack? Did those waiting offer one another mutual support? I imagine that no one slept a wink. Many were weeping, some were screaming – so I read. Jewish doctors and nurses walked back and forth among the people, helping here, offering a word of comfort there, seeing the fear and the tears, recognising those who planned to commit suicide. A few of them had nervous breakdowns, I read later; there was so much to do.

My father didn't tell me anything about the catastrophic conditions on the Killesberg as we sat on the park bench. Didn't he know about them? Was he sparing me?

He must have known that his father was deported from there.

The Killesberg is now a recreational area again. Somewhere people go for evening walks or on a Sunday excursion. There is a new park with neatly cut lawns and sunken, winding paths, tidy, a few trees and some new housing too. There's no masking the sense of unnaturalness. A memorial stone and an unobtrusive panel give information about what happened here. There is a commemorative monument now too. It is a giant iron ring that has been sunk into the ground and looks like a single railway track; it is easy to overlook. Children race past on their bikes. A girl does cartwheels on the grass, a whole series of them. Time and again her shoes are briefly in mid-air and her hair flies over her head. She whoops for joy.

The place where my grandfather waited and endured what had to be endured has become a harmless retreat, an open space with a viewing platform and the pavilion of the 'Country Inn' which is now called the High Café, a nice place. The hangars are gone. The chirruping of birds is in the air, and a distant plane. And there is a shortcut across the grass, a wound in the green scraped bare by many shoes and bike tyres.

The air is cool again. It rained in the night, the sky is still overcast, and the air smells fresh but no longer of snow. Even this early in the morning, a blackbird perches on the gable of the neighbouring house and sings. It is calling with all its might; from the depths of its throat and rounded chest the notes stream across the junction. So small and so loud!

The flowering cherry has long since lost its blossom. The petals rained down white on the flowerbed and on the walls around the garden. Now they are brown and barely visible. But the knotweed and the asters have larger leaves now. And the long allium stalks have shot up in several places; the flowers are still pregnant balls. Soon they will burst open, releasing their umbels of purple stars into the light.

(...)

Ash

Since when have humans produced things not just for their usefulness but for the sheer joy of it? Or to show off with them? To build a protective wall around themselves to hide behind? Or, more positively, to feel good? The growing mountain of objects around us! Some things are there when we come into the world, and we leave many behind when we die.

The ring my great-grandfather Jean, the goldsmith, made for my great-grandmother Judith – such an enterprising woman – and into which he inserted a tiny diamond for the birth of every new child, fitted my grandmother Thérèse as well. It fitted my mother afterwards and now it is on my own finger without ever having to be reduced or enlarged. Most things do not outlive us, though. They stay with us for a while only. I buy them, use them, love them. I use them until they are used up and disintegrate, perhaps until they are accidentally broken and can no longer be mended. Or I lose them, waste them or give them away, even though they would still be fine and usable. I take them to the *Brockenhaus*, as we Swiss call a charity shop, a thrift store, a *schmattesladen*. They become one cast-off among many.

Objects are signs. They tell me where I come from, who I am and who I might like to become. They also tell other people who see my things and can interpret them. '4 September 1958. It can therefore be assumed that his household effects, to the extent that they were still intact at the time of his deportation, were seized for the benefit of the German Reich.' Those from whom everything has been taken lose a language. That didn't matter to Moritz and my aunt Anna at the end of the fifties; they were both dead. It did matter, though, to my aunt Paula, my uncles Efrem and Avram, and my father. And to those of us who came later.

Where did all those things from my grandfather's household end up? Who bought them at a knockdown price when Moritz had to get rid of them?

Who confiscated them when he had virtually nothing left and had to set off up the Killesberg for 'relocation to the East'?

Who flogged or auctioned them off and earned as much as possible from the sale? Who turned the silver cutlery into pieces of silver by selling it? Who kept it for themselves? In whose sitting rooms did the sofa stand, the sideboard, the chaise longue, the smoking table? Who played the piano? Who drank coffee from those cups, who ate from those plates? Who slept in those sheets? Around whose neck did the gold chain with the medallion now nestle? Who plays chess now?

Maybe these things were soon nowhere to be found. Stuttgart and its surroundings were bombed; that had already begun in 1940 and it did not stop until the end of the war. Sooner or later the city centre had been reduced to rubble and ash, and even the park on the Killesberg was riddled with craters. *Everything was kaput. Ruins everywhere*, my father told me. All these things were probably nothing but ash, airborne dust, grey clouds swirling and drifting, visible only for an instant. Or melted, shattered, charred. And then just minerals, bacteria and molecules in German earth, bound to the soil in the finest of particles and buried.

The hills of rubble soon formed a landscape that conserved the smashed porcelain, the splintered furniture, the souvenirs, the shattered things and people for ever. It entombed all the lives that had been ripped to pieces as the buildings caved in. Enclosed all the burst thoughts and curtailed cries. It was silent and soft, but full to the brim.

A landscape of hawthorns in dips like the folds in the skin or armpits of a gigantic body. Knee-high bushes along its contours, delicate grass like fresh down. The paths leading around it are idyllic now. From the rises there are nice views, and there are firepits with ash and lumps of charcoal, strips of paper and small scraps of aluminium foil.

The wisteria is flowering on the pergola. From one side it climbs over the garage door; from the other hops, ivy and honeysuckle reach out to meet it. The hop plant grows so fast; it's a minor miracle every

year. While the wisteria becomes bare over the winter but keeps its shape and grows a good bit larger every year, the hop plant has to be pruned back to a hand's breadth above the ground. Then it sprouts mightily again in the spring.

The wisteria's abundant racemes are hanging down now, and the first petals are already falling from the bright-green foliage to the ground. In German it is known as 'blue rain', and that is an appropriate name: it really is raining blue.

How many blues are there? There's the blue of wisteria, of flax. The blue of the sea and the sky above it. The blue of the Blue Onion on Sunday porcelain. The blue of the indigo hour. The blue of my mother's sapphire. The blue of feeling blue. The blue of our planet, this great blue marble.

On 25 April 1958 Stuttgart's main financial office 'objected as a precaution' against the claim for restitution for 'loss of property':

'Experience has taught us,' the letter reads, 'that Jews were obliged not least due to limited living space to dispose of parts of their household effects gradually so that they often possessed only the most basic personal effects in later years.

'The question regarding household effects that were still in the deportee's possession at the time of his deportation depended, in the absence of corresponding evidence, on the additional question of whether and to which extent he had been subjected to changed living arrangements prior to his deportation.

'The testator had once resided at Gartenstrasse 17 and was later obliged to move to the building at Hospitalstrasse 34. The claimants' representatives should address this question.'

And anyway, who said Moritz was dead? The deportation list and the deportation certificate were not sufficient; there was no death certificate. Maybe Moritz would turn up again? 77 years old by now, but as alive and tough and stubborn as ever? Maybe all the beds and tables, the crockery

and the bedlinen had not been sold off or bombed out or vanished, but would reappear and would therefore not need to be reimbursed?

Who said that the applicants were even entitled to make a claim? Who said so? 'Has there been any communication since 8 May 1945?' No. 'The claimants must provide evidence.'

'Stuttgart district court, coroner's office, 23 July 1952

Dear Sirs, as the Stuttgart registry office is unable to supply an extract from the family register, with regard the aforementioned case you are requested to provide the claimant's birth certificate and the marriage certificate of the missing person, along with the names of the missing person's other children and their dates and places of birth. What was the missing person's profession?' Judicial officer

My father wrote to the district court: 'My father, Moritz Olonetzky, born 1 May 1881 in Odessa, resided permanently in Stuttgart from approximately 1906 onwards and was deported from here to a camp in or near Lublin in 1942.

'I never heard from my father again after his deportation. Neither I nor my living siblings know when our father died.

'I file a petition that the time of death of my father, Moritz Olonetzky, born 1 May 1881, should be established by a decision of the court, without a public appeal, as 31 December 1942.'

The authorities did not agree to this; there had to be a public appeal. 'As the son of the testator, Mr Emil Benjamin Olonetzky, born 7 April 1917, claims compensation due to the losses he has supposedly suffered on the grounds that his father was forced to wear the Jewish star from 19 September 1941 onwards, was deported from his last known address in Stuttgart to Izbica concentration camp on 26 April 1942, and has been missing ever since.

'No decision about the claim has yet been issued, but it must be assumed that the testator suffered damages due to his belonging to the

Jewish race and has therefore been persecuted in accordance with §1 of BEG [West German Federal Compensation Law].'

And so the following call was published in July 1952:

'Emile Benny Olonetzky, graphic designer in Zurich/Switzerland, Holbeinstrasse 22, represented by the lawyers Ostertag, Ulmer, Werner and Seyfarth, Stuttgart, Charlottenstrasse, has applied for a death certificate for his father, Moritz Olonetzky, born 1 May 1881 in Odessa, cigarette manufacturer, later principal agent, residing in Stuttgart, deported on 26 April 1942 to Izbica (Lublin district) and missing ever since.

'The missing person is requested to come forward by Tuesday 15.9.1953 at the latest to Stuttgart district court, Archivstrasse 15, ground floor, Room 180, failing which he may be declared dead. Anyone with any information regarding the missing person is requested to report it to the court before the aforementioned deadline. Stuttgart district court. Senior circuit judge, signed Stahl.

'Fee for publishing the call: DM 2.50.'

For the first time since I started reading these documents, I have to laugh. The missing person should present himself at Room 180, ground floor! It's like a song by the Swiss singer, Mani Matter: *Är isch vom Amt ufbotte gsy, am Fritig vor de Nüne / By Schtraf, im Unterlassigsfall, im Houptgebäud, Block zwo / Im Büro 146 persönlich go z'erschiine!* (The authorities asked him to go / in person before 9 o'clock on Friday / Punishment pending if he didn't show / at the main building, Block II, Office 146.)

Failing which! He did not come forward before the deadline!

But what else was the pen-pusher supposed to do? 'Letters of administration are obligatory.'

Was this appeal published in several newspapers? Was it pinned up in a display case next to the main entrance of the court building?

My father never told me what it was like to look for his father. Nor what it was like not to find him. Nor what it was like to wait and see if Moritz would

get in touch or perhaps show up out of the blue. Not as a *dybbuk*, but as a living, mortal man.

But Moritz stayed missing. Smoke, ash, airborne dust, a swirling grey cloud. Scattered to the four winds, drifting, visible only for an instant. Or mould, minerals, bacteria and molecules in Polish earth, bound to the soil in the finest of particles, buried, hidden, *we do not know*.

On 8 January 1954, the Stuttgart district court declared Moritz dead. 'The missing person did not come forward before the deadline. The time of death is established as 31 December 1945, 24:00. No court fees will be levied. This decision is legally binding,' it say in the proclamation dated 5 March 1954.

Now Moritz was officially dead. And yet the proceedings went on. As always.

My father, my aunt Paula, my uncles Efrem and Avram all had to lodge and pursue several simultaneous claims.

'Loss associated with bereavement (husband / children / parents / grandparents), here: father.'

'Loss of freedom'

'Loss of amenity, along with pain and suffering'

'Loss of property'

'Loss of education'

'Loss of professional advancement'

'Loss of pension'

'Loss of health insurance'

'Loss due to fines and special levies'

Loss after loss after loss while, at the same time, settling in a new country. Hearing a completely different language. Slowly learning this language. Finding work, buying beds, buying cutlery. Buying a sofa. Sitting on a chair in a flat again. Lying in bed and trying to sleep. Having nightmares, trying to

love again. Walking along new streets and going shopping. Cooking again, eating and telling jokes at mealtimes. Heard this one? *The devil goes into the Café Treblinka in Lublin and orders a Large Brown . . .* A large coffee. Laughing again, strolling along the beach, relaxing in the botanical gardens, finding friends. Finding happiness again.

And then to have to think back, wind back time, prove things like these? Looking ahead would be important now and actually easier. But someone who has claims has to prove those claims.

'The testator had to abandon these living arrangements during his deportation to Poland. There is therefore a claim for restitution according to §51 of BEG.' What did it cost Aunt Paula and my father to gather their thoughts and remember what happened ten years earlier or more so that they might answer according to the West German Federal Compensation Law. They tried to prove the existence of objects they could no longer recall with any certainty – or which they recalled with absolute certainty. Many people didn't want to do this and couldn't.

What did that mean, 'State Office for Restitution'? Who worked there? What evidence did they require? Nothing could simply go back to how it was before.

(...)

Hay

My father set out from Mulhouse, again and again. He pretended he was wounded, injured by bombing, as it said in Berndt Weber's papers, and indeed he was.

'Meanwhile, I went on many walks, scouting for an escape route. During these expeditions I usually spent the night in a haybarn on a farm.'

What did he mean by 'spent the night', I immediately wondered? Did the farmers let him sleep in their barns? Did they give him food or offer him a glass of milk in the morning? Or did he sneak into the hay at dusk or in the dark and hide? What about the farm dogs? Didn't they hear him or bark? And what other food did he have? He had almost wasted away by now.

'I wasn't registered with the police in Mulhouse or anywhere else by then, so I didn't receive any ration cards. My mother-in-law sent me food parcels and ration cards in Mulhouse,' he explained.

Bread? Tinned meat and beans? Were they still available? And the ration cards – would he really have dared to go into a shop with them?

He never said anything about them. He only told me about his hunger as we sat there on the park bench. He could never forget the hunger. He had put on record to the 'State Office for Restitution' that he had 'had far less to eat than other citizens'. As if he had been a citizen of that country.

I worked on and off. All kinds of jobs. Did he work for farmers in occupied Alsace? Did they hire him for haymaking? Picking pears and apples? It was late summer. Maybe they hired him to put up fences or dig ditches, after all he was experienced at those things. Why didn't I ask him more about it in the botanical gardens? He had held his tongue for so long and now he talked. I sat there speechless. I couldn't interrupt him. I said nothing.

I can vividly imagine him using his charm and his chutzpah to weasel information out of the farmers – or more likely the farmers' wives – about the situation in this pretty landscape along the border. The wives, children and old farmers were still working in the fields and the cowsheds despite the war and the many troops stationed on the border. Especially due to the war and the troops. Someone had to produce the milk, the hay for the cows, the wheat and the beans to fulfil the quotas set by the Nazis.

I moved towards the Swiss border without attracting attention, he told me. 'I gradually made contact with border posts and similar locations during my reconnaissance,' he told the 'State Office for Restitution'. He stayed alert the whole time. *I was in constant fear, day and night,* he told me.

What were 'similar locations'?

What did the hay in the barns smell like? Did it tickle? Was it warm with August heat, did it rustle with mice, did they dart across the wooden floor of the cowshed while he 'spent the night' or hid there? Did he have some bread from his most recent food parcel with him and a flask of tea? Did he steal from the farmers' fields? Or did he have a constant queasy feeling in his stomach because it was so long since he'd had any solid food? Did he sit in a haystack like Aaron in Isaac Bashevis Singer's story 'Zlateh the Goat'?

Aaron was supposed to take the goat to the butcher's, but then they got caught in a snowstorm and had to hide in the hay. The icy wind whistled and howled around the haystack, it was pitch black, and the snow kept on falling until it had covered everything. Aaron huddled in the warm hay with Zlateh though, where they were well protected. The walls and floor and ceiling of their hide-out were made of food for Zlateh, so the goat nibbled and bleated contentedly and Aaron could squirt her milk straight into his mouth. They kept warm and they chatted and so they survived the storm and returned happily home. No one ever again thought of taking Zlateh to the butcher's because luck and love had saved both their lives . . . I would always ask for 'Zlateh the Goat' to be read to me, and I always wanted a Zlateh of my own.

Were there any goats in the haybarns my father slept in? Did he hear their gentle bleating in the night? And if someone happened to pass or enter the cowshed where my father was hiding, did he hold his breath and did his heart leap into his throat? Did time stand still for a second or did it tick past in slow motion, as during an accident? And when everything fell silent, did his father pop into his mind? Did his sister Anna? Did he wonder what his siblings were doing in Palestine? If perhaps they were asleep in their new beds? Switzerland was visible in the distance, still out of reach.

This went on for ten weeks – two whole months and two weeks. How come no one became suspicious about this wandering Weber and tried to

find out more about what he was up to? *It is unimaginable*, my father had told me, meaning what had happened to his father, but I cannot imagine either, genuinely cannot imagine what my father went through, did and said. How he felt when everything went quiet and dark. Why on earth didn't I ask him . . .

Then, 'on 28 August 1943 I finally found the escape route near Leymen (Alsace) and Benken, directly on the Swiss border. I travelled to Mulhouse, told my wife, whose national insurance papers were also made out in the name of Weber, to come to Mulhouse, and on 1 September 1943 she and I fled together into Switzerland via the location I had scouted.'

Another of those terse descriptions, as if it had been a walk in the park, only this time there were two of them.

Now, what were those 'similar locations'? Did Leymen's last inhabitants help people escape? Four of them were sent to a concentration camp because they were brave enough to do so. The other villagers were already living in southwestern France because they had been evacuated beyond the Maginot Line in good time. Or was it simply the farmer's wife, the baker's wife or the old publican who were still there in the village and knew the area well? Did my father sweet-talk everyone and tell them a new cock-and-bull story every day? Why was his cover never blown?

He never told me.

(...)

Letters of administration

When did I first hear that my father had received compensation for the time of the Nazi regime? Never, not once. I read it in the documents.

Cover sheet always on top.

Olonetzky, Emil Benjamin, DOB 4.7.1917, Zurich, Am Wasser 80.

Settlement:

Loss of financial advancement: DM 1,000, paid 1954.

Loss of education: DM 4,000, paid 1957.

Loss of liberty: 20 months, DM 3,000, paid 1959.

Loss of professional advancement: DM 4,000, paid 1962.

Loss of education: DM 5,000, paid 1965.

And: 'The applicant relinquishes any further claims compensation for loss of professional advancement including pension claims.'

Why did my father receive compensation twice for his studies being impeded and for 'loss of professional or economic advancement'? Did the 'State Office for Restitution' regard these losses as being more significant than the time he had to spend in Schlosshof and the form only refers to as 'incarceration'? More significant than his forced labour in Stuttgart, that incredible 'loss of liberty'?

I can find no conclusive explanation for this.

All the proceedings dragged on. All of them. Have I already said that? Of course I have. The process was repeated. Over and over again. 'The claimant is unable to present any concrete proof for his claims.' How dry the language of these letters is. How industrious the many stamps, signatures and handwritten dates. As if the officials had important things to attest and say and convey. Also, marginalia, mostly illegible, and calculations in pencil.

This was also repeated for claim for damages for 'loss of liberty' for Moritz Olonetzky, my grandfather, probably murdered in Izbica or Bełżec in Poland, sometime in the summer of 1942. The missing man stayed missing; that much was clear. The dead man stayed missing; that too was clear.

The death certificate had been obtained; there were heirs – my father and his siblings.

But there were no letters of administration.

So the district notary wrote a letter to the 'State Office for Restitution': 'This is a request for the transfer of the compensation files ES/A 10861 held there and confirmation of the same for the purpose of issuing letters of administration. District notary Hipp, 25 February 1955.'

'Letters of administration' is underlined twice.

The 'State Office for Restitution' answered Herr Hipp promptly.

'To the district notary, section A – court of equity – FAO district notary Hipp, Stuttgart, Königsstrasse 191.

'As the son of the testator, Mr Emil Benjamin Olonetzky, born 7 April 1917, claims compensation for the damages he has allegedly suffered on the grounds that his father was forced to wear the Jewish star from 19 September 1941 onwards, was deported from his last known address in Stuttgart to Izbica concentration camp on 26 April 1942, and has been missing ever since.

'No decision about the claim has yet been issued, but it must be assumed that the testator suffered losses due to his belonging to the Jewish race and is therefore persecuted in accordance with §1 of BEG. According to a judgement of Stuttgart district court from 11-15 July 1958, the date of the deaths of Jews deported from Stuttgart to Izbica on 26 April 1942 is assumed to be 30 November 1942.

'Letters of administration are obligatory. 12 March 1959'

The lawyers had in fact already justified the amount of the compensation claim on the basis of the official death certificate from March 1954.

'The missing person did not come forward before the deadline. The time of death is established as 31 December 1945, 24:00. No court fees will be levied.' That was what the declaration of death said. 'The persecuted man was obliged to wear the Jewish star from 19.9.1941 onwards,' the lawyers

wrote, 'and given that the date of his death was established as 31.12.1945, the children are entitled, as their father's heirs, to compensation for 43 months of imprisonment = DM 6,450.'

First the 'State Office for Restitution' had to send notary Hipp the files ES/A 10861. Only then could he sit down at his typewriter and issue the letters of administration. Now the 'State Office for Restitution' wrote another letter. 'To Dr Ulmer, Dr Bundschuh, Dr Ganssmüller, O. Schmidt and Kurt Reissmüller, Stuttgart, Charlottenstrasse 15 A. Regarding the compensation claim of Moritz Olonetzky's heirs, in this case: loss of liberty.

'Dear Sirs,

Having received the letters of administration of the persecuted person from the Stuttgart court of equity, we request that you return to us the enclosed forms, filled out and signed by each of the four claimants. We propose a deadline of 30.6.1960 for the completion of this requirement. After this deadline we shall make our decision on the basis of the files available. Very urgent. 7 May 1960.'

The four claimants lived in two different countries; the forms had to be sent to three addresses in Israel and one in Switzerland. Only when they had been delivered to Avram, Efrem and Paul in Jerusalem and my father in Zurich could they be filled in, signed and sent back. Then more time passed because the officials working in the state offices, notary's offices, court of equity and main finance authorities naturally had a lot of other cases to process.

And it wasn't very urgent.

The next response from the 'State Office for Restitution' that I find in the documents is dated 5 November 1960. It actually contains a decision.

'Dear Sirs, please acknowledge receipt of delivery. Decision on damages to freedom, in this case: loss of liberty and restriction of liberty. The State Office for Restitution in Stuttgart has decided:

The claimants demand, as the heirs of their father, the businessman Moritz Olonetzky, born 1.5.1881 in Odessa, compensation for loss of liberty for the period from 19.9.1941 to 8.5.1945. The geographical jurisdiction is valid. The requirements of §4, para. 1, no. 1b of the BEG are satisfied.

Why has the period now been curtailed to the end of the war on 8 May?

The testator was Jewish and his last permanent address was in Stuttgart. He was required by law to wear the Jewish star from 19.9.1941 onwards and wore it until his deportation to Izbica on 26.4.1942. He has been missing ever since.

There is a valid claim to compensation for restriction of liberty from 19.9.1941 to 25.4.1942. For the period from 26.4.1942 to 30.11.1942, compensation is due for loss of liberty in accordance with §43 of the BEG. The testator was declared dead on 31.12.1945, but the State Office is convinced that he died at an earlier date. Those deported to Izbica were sent on from there to one of the extermination camps Chelmno, Sobibór, Bełżec and Majdanek. This happened in the period from March/April 1942 to 10.11.1942 at the latest. It can therefore be safely assumed that the testator did not live beyond 30.11.1942.

Consequently, the loss of liberty of the testator lasted from 26.4.1942 to 30.11.1942. In accordance with §45 and §48 of the BEG, compensation is set at DM 150 for each full month of restriction of liberty or loss of liberty. For the entire indemnifiable period – 14 full months in total – it therefore amounts to DM 2,100. The claim to compensation has been transferred to the claimants.'

The mills of the 'State Office for Restitution' had ground down the claim of my father and his siblings to the smallest possible concession.

Also, 'loss associated with bereavement', the 'State Office for Restitution' finally notified them on 21 January 1963, 'can in these circumstances only be granted to orphans up to the completion of their 25th year of life (§ 17, para. 1, no. 3). The claimant born on 7.4.1917 had already completed his 25th year of life when his father was deported to Izbica on 26.4.1942. He

therefore has no claim to compensation for loss for bereavement. The relevant claim has therefore been rejected.'

The State Office had struck lucky. My father, the youngest in the family, had turned 25 only 19 days before his father was deported.

Every claim my father and his siblings made resulted in a settlement. However, if you think that this was the end, think again.

Almost ten years had passed since the decision that granted my father compensation of DM 3,000 for 20 months of 'loss of liberty', when the lawyers sent a fresh letter to the 'State Office for Restitution'.

'I refuse, in particular, to acknowledge that the periods of forced labour were not persecutory in nature,' Mr Schmidt wrote. 'That is particularly true of the stay in the "Schlosshof" Jewish work camp in Bielefeld. It is not dependent – this I must stress again – in this context on whether your administration granted compensation for imprisonment or not. What is crucial is that sending him to this camp exclusively for Jews was an entirely persecutory measure. Yours faithfully, O. Schmidt.'

He contested the decision. A certified photocopy proving my father's time in the Schlosshof work camp was enclosed with the letter.

I was seven years old.

The State Office did not alter its decision.

Did, as some people fervently suggest, my father see the poetic side of the absence of people and things? Was he able to pine for them and imagine what it would be like if they were to turn up again? No, he had to come to terms with the fact that his father and his sister were dead and gone. That things he had cherished or simply used remained in the hands of robbers.

Finally, after just under twenty years of correspondence, he received DM 17,000 in compensation for his own suffering. Seventeen thousand deutschmarks. In addition, he and his three surviving siblings received DM 2,100 in compensation for the time their father had suffered 'restriction of liberty due to wearing the Jewish star' and DM 1,717 for furniture, tableware

and objects that Moritz had had to take to the pawn office. They divided these DM 3,817 up between them. My father had, I presume, paid his lawyers many times this sum; it could never have been about the money, and it wasn't over yet. And if you think this is the end now, you're wrong. Claims and responses flew back and forth until 1974, when I was twelve. They were related to my uncle Efrem and his 'loss of professional advancement'. And after that there were the memories.

Door

It tears my heart out to know that my father had to fight so hard for this tiny amount of compensation. The fact that he simply couldn't give up – what unbelievable strength he showed. What doggedness too. And what humiliation he suffered. Wouldn't it have been more noble not to have given a damn? Keep it all, you bloody leeches.

We were still sitting – half a century ago – on the park bench in the botanical gardens. My father had stopped talking. I was simultaneously overflowing and completely empty. I weighed a tonne and at the same time I was floating in the air: the ground had been pulled out from under me. I didn't say a word. We left the gardens by the paths I had glimpsed fleetingly from the bench. That afternoon talk completely changed how I saw the world.

As my father told me about his father and how he had been forced to work and how he was able to escape and what his siblings had been through in that time, the door to the hundredth room opened for the first time, just an inch. The skeletons were named. They were called Moritz and Anna or Chana. But of course their bones were gone, they were nothing but ash – less than ash, I realised. They had been burnt to dust, risen up into the sky; they didn't have graves, I realised. Maybe they too were minerals, bacteria and molecules in Polish soil.

The skeletons in the corner of my room weren't skeletons at all, I realised.

These documents have opened the door wide. The room is an old, abandoned attic of memories, where the rubble of history lies in chaotic heaps. It contains over two and a half thousand pages of documents – I haven't counted precisely how many pages there are. It is an unbelievable jumble of descriptions, explanations and demands. Lists, index cards and tables. Statements and rejections, accusations and doubts. 'The claimant has suggested that he completed his apprenticeship with Bamberger &

Hertz in 1936.' 'He claims...' 'A lack of concrete evidence...' Witness statements under oath, appeals and renewed demands, all of them stamped and dated and sent around for years and years. From one office to another, from the lawyers to my father 'abroad', as is repeatedly noted, then back again.

Reading them, I try to detect an order and a logic, to establish a chronology. Because I know from fairy tales that the hundredth room contains the solution and deliverance. But I can't fill in all the gaps.

Part of my backstory consists only of those few sentences I heard on the park bench in the botanical gardens. Apart from one photo in a flowery frame, there is nothing tangible to back up that story. No chaise longue, no smoking table, no carpet and no necklace with a medallion either as proof of those sentences. Yet the truth of history resides in things! It lies hidden in them so it can outlast time and speak to those born later.

Now the documents attest to another part of my backstory. They replace the objects that are no more. And the lives that are no more. Of course they do not replace them, no. They will never replace them. But the documents speak to me.

As I read them, a picture that once had gaping holes is filled out, fragment by fragment. I crawl into the gaps that remain and look around. I listen out and inhale the air through my nose. Do I recognise anything? Maybe some tiny detail? Do I hear something? Can I imagine the bits that are still missing? Supposition and embellishment live here – an old couple magically attracted to emptiness. They are desperate to fill it; they cannot stand this kind of vacuum.

Since that afternoon on the park bench, the skeletons have names. The documents have given them a history too. It is incomplete, but whose isn't?

I still see them sometimes in the corner of my bedroom. All of a sudden, there they are. As if they've appeared out of thin air. And still I freeze and lie rigid and chilled to the bone in my bed. White with fear. Only for an instant, though. Then I look across at them. There is horror – nothing will ever

change that. Or as the Swiss say: *Das schleckt keine Geiß weg*. No goat can ever lick that away. There is pain.

But now I have a Zlateh. And a hay barn. The barn is the arms that hold me tight, every mensch with whom I share a meal. It is the garden and the forest. It is my home and the furniture that is still there when I go off travelling and then come back. And it is the letters of the alphabet, hanging in the hay, waiting among the blades of grass until I pick them out and line them up. I live in that great haystack. From time to time, I hear Zlateh bleating. She lives inside me.

It has been gloomy all day long. A lead-grey sky pressing down on the city. Towards evening it started snowing again. At first, only the occasional snowflake came down, then more and more. They fall and dance through the air. Now they are trickling down through the beam of the street lamp onto the junction. There is no one out and about, not a mensch, not even the fox.