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“Vielleicht Esther”

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Sample translation by Arabella Spencer

Prologue

Thanks be to Google

I would rather I didn't have to start my travels here, in the wasteland surrounding the railway station, that still bears witness to the destruction of this city, bombed and devastated in the course of victorious battles, it seemed to me, in retribution. For it was from this city that the war had been directed that had caused infinite destruction, far and wide, an endless Blitzkrieg on wheels of iron, with wings of steel. This is such a long time ago now, that this city has become one of the most peaceful cities in the world, almost pursuing this peace to the point of aggression, serving as a kind of reminder of the war.

Not long ago the railway station was built in the middle of this city, and in spite of peace, the railway station was inhospitable, it was as if it embodied all the losses that no train could ever recover, one of the most inhospitable places in our criss-cross united and yet very confined Europe, a place where it is always draughty and where, in the city centre, a wasteland spreads out before your eyes without them being given the chance of lingering on a dense cityscape, alighting on something, before departing, leaving this emptiness in the middle of town that no government is able to fill with any large buildings and any good intentions.

It was also draughty this time, when I stood on the platform, once more scanning the capital letters of the caption Bombardier Welcome to Berlin beneath the arch of the curved roof, sensing the contours, bored, yet at the same time amazed at the harshness of this welcome. A wind was blowing, when an elderly gentleman approached me and asked me about Bombardier.

It immediately makes you think of bombs he said, of artillery, of the terrible, incomprehensible war, and why of all places Berlin should greet you in this way, this beautiful, peaceful, bombed city. Aware of all this, it couldn't be true that Berlin, so to speak bombarded arrivals like himself with this word written in capital letters, and what does it mean, who is it exactly that is meant to be bombed and with what. He was desperately seeking an explanation, for he was about to depart. I replied, somewhat surprised that my inner voice was addressing me in the guise of an old man with black eyes and an American accent, out of breath and growing more and more agitated, he was showering me with

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questions almost without restraint, that I myself had played over and over again, play it again I thought, immersing myself deeper and deeper in these questions, into the remoteness of the questions on the platform, and I replied, that I too would immediately think of the war, so it wasn't a question of age, I am always thinking about the war anyway, especially here in this through station, that is not the terminus for any train, nothing to worry about, you just carry on going, and I thought, he wasn't the first person to ask themselves or me. I am here too often, I thought for a second, perhaps I am a *Стрелочник*, a Strelotshnik, a pointsman, and it is always the pointsman's fault, but only in Russian, I thought, when the old man said: My name is Samuel, Sam.

And then I told him, that Bombardier was a French musical that was enjoying a successful run in Berlin and that many people were coming to this city for this reason, imagine, just because of Bombardier, something like the Paris Commune from back then, two nights in a hotel plus musical all inclusive here and today, and that there had already been problems, because Bombardier was being promoted in the main station, just with this one word, without any explanation, it had already been in the papers, I said, I remember, I said, that it said that the word conjured up false associations, there had even been a court case in the dispute city versus musical, linguists were called in, imagine, who checked the word for its violence potential, and the court pronounced itself in favour of freedom for advertising. I believed more and more in my words, although I didn't have a clue, what this Bombardier in the arch of the railway station roof meant and where it came from, but what I, so enthusiastically and flippantly said and would in no way describe as a lie, gave my words wings, and I soared further and further, without the slightest fear of crashing down, I turned ever deeper into the curves of this never spoken verdict, for he who does not lie, cannot fly. Where are you going? The old man asked me, and I told him everything, without a moment's hesitation, with the same enthusiasm, as if I were condemning the next musical, I told of the Polish town, from which my relatives had moved away a hundred years ago to Warsaw and then further to the West, perhaps only, in order to hand down the Russian language to me, that I was now very generously not passing on to anyone, so dead end and stop, that's why I need to go, I said, go there, to one of the oldest towns of Poland, where they, my forefathers, about whom nothing is known, really, I don't know, where they definitely lived for two, perhaps even for many centuries, maybe even since the 15th century, when the Jews in this small Polish town received their Permits and became neighbours and became the Others. And you? Sam asked, and I said, I am more of a Jew by accident.

We are also waiting for this train, said Sam after a slight pause, we are also travelling with the Warszawa Express. With this train that looks like a thoroughbred, the way it emerges from the fog, an express train, that journeys according to the timetable, yet contrary to time, in the time of Bombardier, for us only, I thought, and the old man continued, his wife was looking for the same, that it to say the world of her grandmother, who had come from a small Belarusian village near Biala Podlaska to the USA, and yet it was not his homeland or that of his wife, it had been a hundred years ago and many generations back, and neither of them knew the language any more either, but Biala Podlaska sounded to them like a forgotten lullaby, God knows why, a key to the heart, he said, and the village is

called Janow Podlaska, and almost only Jews used to live there and now only the Others, and they would both travel there, in order to see this, and, he really did say again and again *and*, as if he were stumbling over an obstacle, naturally nothing had remained there, he really did say naturally *and nothing*, in order to emphasise the futility of his journey, I also often say naturally or even by nature, as if this disappearance or this nothing were natural or even self-evident. The landscape however, the names of places and a stud farm for Arabian horses, that has been in existence since the beginning of the 19th century, founded after the Napoleonic war and amongst experts the best there was, all that was still there, they told me, they had googled all this. A horse from that place could cost as much as a million dollars, Mick Jagger had even looked at horses from this stud farm during an auction, his drummer had bought three, and now they would travel there, five kilometres away from the Belarusian border, thanks be to Google. There was even a horse graveyard there, no, the Jewish cemetery had not survived, it also tells you this on the internet.

I'm a Jew from Teheran, the old man said, when we were still standing on the platform, Samuel is my new name. I came from Teheran to New York, said Sam, he could speak Aramaic, had studied a lot and always carried his violin with him. He was meant to study nuclear physics in the USA, but had enrolled at the academy of music, had failed the entrance exam, and that was how he had become a banker, and he wasn't that either any more. Even after fifty years, his wife said, when we were already sitting in the train and the metal rainbow Bombardier Welcome to Berlin was no longer pressing down on our heads, it didn't matter whether he played Brahms, Vivaldi or Bach, his wife said, everything sounded Iranian. And he said, it was fate, that they had met me, I looked like the Iranian women of his childhood, he had wanted to say Iranian mothers, perhaps he even wanted to say like my mother, but held himself back, and added, it was also a stroke of fate that I knew more about researching genealogy than they did and that I was going to Poland with the same aim and the same train, to the extent that you can call the urge to seek those who have disappeared an aim at all. And no, it is not fate, I said, for Google watches over us just like God does, and if we are searching for something, then it just gives us variations on a theme, in the same way that, once you have purchased a printer online, you still get offered printers for a long time after, and if you buy a school bag, you still receive the advertising for years, not to mention dating sites and if you Google yourself, at some point your fellow namesakes disappear and only you remain, as if, when you sprain your leg and limp, the whole town is suddenly limping, perhaps out of a sense of solidarity, millions of limping people, they form a group, almost the majority, how is democracy meant to work, if you only get, what you were already looking for, and if you are what you are seeking, so that you never feel alone or always do, for you have no chance, to meet the Others and that's how it goes with searching, you stumble across like-minded people, God googles our paths, so that we don't derail, I am constantly meeting people, who are looking for the same thing as I am, I said, and that is why we also met here and the old man said, that was precisely what fate was. He was obviously more advanced in exegesis than I was.

And then I thought of the musical, that really had caused a stir here years ago, when the advertising spaces of the city carried the words Les Misérables, without explanation, unlike the film bearing the same title, that names the wretched prisoners of fate. The musical addressed everyone as Les Misérables, as if one constantly had to be consoled, Oh you wretched ones! Or was only an allusion to not just one but all of us finding each other again in misery, united in misery, for given these enormous letters, given this wasteland in the middle of the city, we are all wretches, not just the Others, but I too. Logically the letters of Bombardier in the curve of the railway station roof fill us with their echo, like organ music fills a church, and nobody can escape.

And then I really googled: Bombardier was one of the largest train and aeroplane construction companies in the world, and this Bombardier, that determines our paths, had recently started the campaign Bombardier YourCity. Fast and safe. And so we travelled with the Warszawa Express from Berlin to Poland, with Bombardier's blessing, surrounded by curtains and napkins, its insignia with the logo WARS, an acronym as old fashioned and passé as Star Wars.

A Walk

- I will give you a word and you tell me, what it means. Yes?
- OK. – Babi Yar. – Has it got something to do with Indians?
- Not quite. – What then? – It is a ravine near Kiev.

(The Naked Man in the Stadium. Film by Konrad Wolf, 1974)

I haven't been here for a long time. Babi Yar no longer lies on the edge of town. Nowadays you can take the Metro to this ravine. The city of Kiev long ago swallowed up Babi Yar. A Tuborg stand, a kiosk, the memorial for the children killed. On the pedestal there lies a small blue sock. Somebody has lost it. I need air, I can't take this place. Sportswomen jog, boys play football, men drink beer on the benches and pensioners collect bottles – the metabolism of a completely normal city. The flats in the area are no cheaper than anywhere else, an estate agent tells me, for Babi Yar is a park. I am trying to find my way. Babi Yar. Women's ravine. An unusually cute name. Do you mean Baby Year? – a librarian in Berlin asked me, when I enquired after books. But no, I won't lose my bearings here, I have got several maps and city plans on me, even one map for orienteers for Babi Yar from 2006, which seems like a mockery to me, but perhaps only to me and to nobody else?

Does a place stay the same place if you commit murder in that place, then bury, blow up, dig up, burn, pulverise, scatter, silence, plant, lie, tip rubbish, flood, fill in, silence again, cordon off, arrest mourners, later erect ten cenotaphs, that commemorate one's own victims once a year or you think, it has nothing to do with you?

Many years ago I asked David, an old friend of mine, who always went to Babi Yar on that day, whether he had any relatives buried here. At the time he said, that was the most stupid question that he had ever heard. Only now do I understand, what he meant. For it is not important who you are or whether you have your own dead to lament here – or did he wish it wasn't important? – for him it was a question of decency. I would like to tell you about this walk, as if it were possible to conceal that my relatives were also killed here, as if it were possible, as an abstract being, as a being as such, and not just as a descendant of the Jewish people, with which the search for missing gravestones connects me, otherwise hardly anything else, - as if it were possible, as this type of being, to take a walk through this strange place called Babi Yar. Babi Yar is part of my story, and nothing else is given to me. But that is not the reason why I am here, or not the only reason. Something draws me to this place, for I believe that there are no strangers, when it comes to victims. Everybody has someone here.

I have always thought that the Jews in the ghetto were privileged, I would almost say, happier. You had more time to understand what course things would take, and that you would probably soon die. Ten days after the Germans marched into Kiev, at the end of September 1941, here in Babi Yar, the entire remaining Jewish population of Kiev was killed, hardly concealed from the eyes of the rest of the citizens and with the help of the West Ukrainian police. Kiev, the oldest Russian city, in which the Jews had also lived for thousands of years, became free of Jews. Yes, these victims are habitually called Jews, but many people just mean the Others by this. It's misleading, for those who had to die there, were not the Others, but school friends, children from the backyard, the neighbours, the grannies and uncles, the old biblical ones and their Soviet grandchildren, that, on the day of the 29th of September, could be seen walking down the Bolshaya Schitomirskaya of Kiev in an endless train to their own burial.

I have never understood why this misfortune should always be the misfortune of the Others. 'All Jews of the city of Kiev and its surroundings are on Monday, the 29th of September 1941 at 8 o'clock in the morning to be at the corner of Melnik and Dokteriwski Street (by the cemeteries).' This is what the Wehrmacht had posted, and the caretakers kept the books ready, to ensure that All really did go. When they arrived at Babi Yar, they had to undress, were driven naked through the rows of police, shouted at and beaten – and there, where through the opening you could see the sky, on the edge of the ravine, they were shot from both sides with machine guns. Or else: the naked living lie on naked corpses, then the shooting commences, the children are simply thrown onto the corpses, in order to be buried alive, which saves ammunition.

I am walking through a flat landscape covered with undergrowth. The mission had run smoothly, the Leader of the Sonderkommando, reported back to Berlin at the beginning of October 1941. Was it here? People are walking, talking, gesticulating in the sun. I hear nothing. The past swallows up all the sounds of the present. Nothing else gets through. No more room for anything new. It seems to me as if these walkers and I are moving on different film screens. Is there something in their gestures,

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that betrays the origin of human violence? Or the inclination, to become a victim? Would I prefer it if Babi Yar now looked like a moonscape? Exotic? Poisonous? Everyone – eaten away with suffering? Why don't they see, what I see?

Kiev was one of the many places, where it happened, it is said that it was the largest two-day massacre of the Holocaust. 33,771 people were done away with in two days. A strangely precise number, and later another 17,000 and even later they stopped counting altogether. The first to be killed in Babi Yar were, however, the patients of the psychiatric clinic. They were murdered in silence on the edge of the ravine in gas vans, in the grounds of the mental asylum. A few days later it was the Jews turn. The killing went on for two years: prisoners of war, partisans, sailors of the Kiev navy, young women, more Jews from the region, passers-by who were arrested straight off the street, three entire gipsy camps, priests as well as Ukrainian nationalists, who had at first collaborated with the Germans and then also became their victims. According to scientific accounts between 100,000 and 200,000 human beings were killed. This plus-minus 100,000 – it isn't even known, whether there was one or there were two Babi Yar's.

Before there used to be a Metro here I went to Babi Yar with my parents, from the other side. First we looked at the frescos from the 12th century in the Kirill Church, the Last Judgement, the angel rolling up the sky, and then at Michail Wrubel's art nouveau frescos, the Madonna with her far too solemn gaze and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit onto the Apostles, for which the lunatics from the neighbouring asylum had served as a model. It was with this spiritual padding that we walked through Babi Yar, and I only vaguely knew, what sort of place this is, I didn't even know, whether this place had anything to do with my family and what kind of life affirming ritual – so it seemed to me – were we performing on our own. Their grandparents were lying here somewhere, my parents told me much later, the beautiful Aunt Liolja too. My Babushka also lies in Babi Yar, my father told me many years later, she just hadn't managed to get as far as here.

At some stage we reached the monument, the first, and at that time only memorial, that had been inaugurated 35 years after the massacre, in the wrong place and on the wrong day. Muscular Soviet heroes: a sailor, a partisan and a Ukrainian woman conquering the past. "Heroism, Courage, Fatherland, Daring" – these words bounced off me like ping pong balls. Not a word, to say that the Jews of Kiev lie here too.

When in the summer of 1943 the Red Army was approaching Kiev, the three hundred prisoners of war from the neighbouring concentration camp Syretz had to dig up the dead day and night, heap them into mounds of 2500 corpses, burn them and then pulverise their bones. You can't count dust. The people were forced to cover their tracks, and they too were to be murdered afterwards, so that those who had borne witness would also be erased and in the end nothing would remain, no trace, not a soul, no story. The prisoners of war guessed their fate and tried to escape. Of three hundred, fourteen at the most survived and became witnesses.

After the war research was conducted, although there was hardly anything left to research, but Stalin's anti-Semitic policies soon put an end to this. Authors of books like the "Black Book", who only gathered facts, were persecuted, then also Jewish doctors, accused of being poisoners. The shooting of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee was one of Stalin's last actions; among the members of the Committee there were also writers, the last people who still wrote in Yiddish. Hitler killed the readers and Stalin the writers, was how my father summed up the disappearance of the language. Those who had survived the war, were again in danger. Jews, half Jews, quarter Jews – one got to know the taste of percentages again, which made your tongue freeze on cold steel. They were stigmatised as homeless cosmopolitans, perhaps because they were killed irrespective of all borders, they maintained forbidden foreign relations, which meant they weren't allowed to be part of the big family of Soviet sister nations. All Soviet citizens had a fifth line in their passport, the so-called fifth-record, that gave away if you were a Jew, Cossack or Georgian, a method of discrimination that found favour. For twenty years there was no reference here in Babi Yar to the massacre, no monument, no stone, no plaque. Killing was followed by silence.

Today if I search for the majestic ravine – before the war, two and a half kilometres long, up to sixty meters deep and very steep -, I can't find it. For ten years a brick factory pumped its waste – sand, clay and water – into the ravine, the government also wanted to eradicate Babi Yar as a place. But in 1961 a bank of earth collapsed at Babi Yar, an avalanche of silt poured into the city and killed 1500 people. This was also kept secret. The silt was transported back to Babi Jar and used to level out the ravine.

A few months later a poem by Yevgenny Yevtushenko was published in the Literaturnaya Gazeta. Above Babi Yar there is no memorial. / A precipitous slope – one unhewn gravestone. / I am frightened. / I am old, today, / as old as the Jewish people. / I think, I am now / a Jew. My mother tells me how people called each other. We cried for joy at finally being able to speak about the disaster out in the open. A Russian poet had taken up the cause of the Jewish victims, all of them, it worked wonders. For him they were not their dead, the dead of the perpetually Others, and it was printed in the paper. Every old man shot here -: me. Every child shot here -: me. Within a month the poem was translated into seventy languages, into German by Paul Celan, and Shostakovich set the poem to music in the Adagio of his 13th symphony. It seemed as if this world catastrophe was no longer homeless, as if the honour of the memory had been restored.

Just not in Kiev. It was not until six years later that a small memorial stone was laid in Babi Yar. But when every year on the 29th of September people arrived at this stone with flowers, the militia tried to prevent these "actions", as it called them. My friend David and many others emigrated, not just because living in the present was made difficult for them, but also, because their past, their grief, their places had been stolen. Once David had been arrested for 15 days, when he had left flowers by a tree in Babi Yar, "for violating public order and littering a public place".

There must have been hundreds, thousands of people, who saw the Jews passing through the city at the end of September in 1941, there must have been tens of thousands, who had heard about it. In October the whole city knew, what kind of relocation had taken place, especially when the clothes and valuables of those murdered were distributed among the German army. When Kiev was liberated in November 1943, only a fifth of the population of the city was still alive. Some were at the front, many on the run in the depths of the country, a large proportion had been murdered or deported to Germany. Who was there to talk about Babi Yar, and to whom? Anatoly Kuznetsov grew up not far from the ravine. He was eleven years old when the shootings happened right next to his parents' house. After the war he studied ballet and danced in the opera in Kiev, but Babi Yar never let him go, he could not bear the silence. For years he collected all the evidence that he could find of what had happened and questioned witnesses. In 1966 he published the first book on Babi Yar, and he escorted many people through the ravine – also the poet Yvgenny Yevtushenko – in order to show, that there wasn't anything to show any more, only to relate.

I wander from memorial to memorial. Grandmothers are walking with their grand-children and are looking at the monuments, frequently just because, I happen to be doing that. When the Ukraine gained its independence twenty years ago, in time, all the groups of victims got their monument. Ten memorials, but no collective commemoration, a wooden cross for the Ukrainian nationalists, a monument for the Eastern Workers, one for the members of the Spiritual Resistance, a plaque for the gypsies. Even in commemoration the inhuman segregation is upheld.

What I am missing, is the word human being. Who do these victims belong to? Are they orphans of our miscarried memory? Or are they all – ours? There stands a Menorah on the hill, like a burned tree. It is the first Jewish memorial for Babi Yar, inaugurated fifty years after the crime. A plaque that was added at the end of the eighties to the first monument with the muscular heroes and that now displays the words about the Soviet people and their daring in Yiddish, especially torments me. I wonder how many people in this city can still read Yiddish? Twenty? Do languages disappear of their own accord? Or is the plaque addressed directly to God?

In one of the large synagogues in Kiev there was a state-owned puppet theatre after the war. One of the puppeteers of the theatre was Dina Pronicheva who had managed to save herself from the ravine on the 29th of September 1941 and who appeared as a witness at many trials. The last chapter of this metamorphosis, it seems to me: a puppet theatre in a synagogue, where a survivor of Babi Yar works.

I continue onwards, away from the Metro, through the area of the memorials in the direction of Kirill Church, climb the hill, the undergrowth grows wilder, the people disappear, and you can't hear the noise of traffic from the Prospect any more. On the left a thickly vegetated steep face opens out, and I see three graves with metal crosses. The unauthorised graves of Babi Yar. On one of them it says: And people were shot here in 1941. Grant their souls peace! Never before had I seen a grave with And. Now I have arrived in Babi Yar; I am standing in the wood, a mourning wreath hangs high up in the tree. Who brought it here? Do wreaths grow on trees here? Should Babi Yar be left to run wild?

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Animals and plants? Suddenly a light metallic sound flows through me, and a surprising picture unfolds before my eyes. Dozens of young people in richly decorated garments are enacting Tolkien's Lord of the Rings, in a glade lit by golden foliage. No path leads to here. I ask the Lord of the Rings, how to get out of here, in the direction of the church, and he says, The Angel will help you. That is the name of the boy who accompanies me. We are up to our knees in foliage, see a few overgrown gravestones, with Russian or Hebrew letters, maybe it is Yiddish, I can't read it. At some time there were cemeteries here, the old Jewish, the Russian soldier's cemetery and the Karaite cemetery – after the war they were demolished, today a television tower and television studio stand on one part of the huge area. There are still a few scattered graves peeping out of the earth like mushrooms, pursuing an inner growth.

We are walking on a closed path, and it is, as if we were doing something forbidden, were moving against the flow of time in the direction of the psychiatric asylum and the church, in which the angel is rolling out the sky, and when I cautiously ask my angel, where we are, he says, Babi Yar used to be here.

Maybe Esther

May the Lord God grant you as much knowledge as I have not, Babushka would say again and again. She repeated the phrase, slightly affronted, but also with pride. Her grandson Marik, my father, was exceptionally well read. By the time he was nine he had already devoured hundreds of books and would ask the grownups questions that to his mind were very simple, elementary questions. Most of the time Babushka did not know the answer. She also did not know Socrates dictum, I know that I know nothing. Perhaps she wanted to console herself with her phrase or reprimand her clever grandson, for Babushka persisted with her motto that sounded like an ancient aphorism, May the Lord God grant you as much knowledge as I have not.

Apart from this saying of my great-grandmother's, my father's Babushka, only two other things remained: a photograph and a story.

When the family fled the German army in Kiev in the August of 1941 and my grandfather Semjon had to go to the front, Babushka remained at home alone in the Engelstraße, a street that sloped steeply down into the grand Boulevard Krestschatik.

Babushka was left behind. She could hardly move any more, and throughout the entire summer of the war she had not once managed go down the steps and out into the street. Taking her along had been out of the question, she would not have survived the journey.

The evacuation was reminiscent of an outing to a dacha, and Babushka was left behind with the thought that everybody would come together again when the summer was over. The month of July
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called for a change, and all these people in the streets carried suitcases or bundles, just like they always did in summer, only the haste and that there were too many at once, gave away that what was happening, in spite of the appropriate time of year and the usual belongings had nothing, nothing at all in common with an outing to a dacha.

I think her name was Esther, my father said. Yes, maybe Esther. I had two grandmothers, and one of them was called Esther, exactly.

What do you mean, Maybe!?! I asked, taken aback. You don't know what her name was?

I never called her by her name, my father replied. I said Babushka, and my parents said Mother.

Maybe Esther stayed in Kiev. She moved around with difficulty in the sudden emptiness of the flat, the neighbours brought food. We thought, my father added, that we would be coming back soon, but we only came back seven years later.

To begin with nothing much changed in the city. It was just that the Germans had arrived. When the call for all Jews of the city of Kiev to report punctually etc. reached Babushka, she immediately began to get ready. The neighbours tried to dissuade her. Don't go! You can't even walk!

The inspection left no loopholes. The caretakers combed through the addresses, the lists of inhabitants. So that in Russian 'all' and in German 'everyone' went, schools, hospitals, orphanages and nursing homes were searched. Reporting in person was checked by German and Ukrainian patrols. But in house number 11 in the Engelstraße the caretaker was prepared not to report the old woman, to forget about her. Not in order to protect her from death, no, nobody thought about death, or better said, nobody thought about the consequences of what was happening, limping behind the events. Just imagine to yourself: Why should an old lady set out on a journey, even if it were to the Promised Land, if she can't walk. Don't go, the neighbours said. She remained stubborn.

The city centre had been burning for a few days. The explosions that had terrified the city didn't stop. Houses were blown up with fatal regularity. First the overcrowded building of the Occupational Authority, then a cinema during a screening, a soldiers club and an ammunitions depot. There was no end to it. The houses were mined by the retreating Soviet army and blasted via remote control. Only a few days and the Krestschatik lay in ruins. Fires blazed everywhere in the city centre. The Germans who to begin with had settled almost amicably in the city were at first at a loss, then they started to panic and were overcome by a state of frenzy in the face of the hitherto unknown kind of partisan war. It seemed like the summons for 'all' and 'everyone' was a logical consequence, a retribution against the supposedly guilty, as if they hadn't been guilty all along and condemned long ago, as if the summons had been decreed spontaneously, as if everything hadn't already long ago been pre-determined to flow in a certain course. But Maybe Esther seemed not to know anything about this, or what was happening in the city not even half a kilometre away from her house.

Even the bakery at the corner of Engelsstraße and Meringowskaya was, as the neighbours informed her, always open. Only three steps down. Didn't hear the explosions? Didn't detect the smell of burning? Didn't see the fire?

If 'all', then 'all', she said to herself. As if it were a question of honour. And she went down. Everything else stood still. The story leaves us in the dark as to *how* exactly she came down. Although, no. The neighbours must have helped her, how else?

Down at the crossing the bending roads wound away in the distance, and yet you could feel that the earth was still turning. On the road, she was alone.

Apart from a patrol there was at this moment nobody to be seen. Perhaps everybody had already gone. Two flaxen haired, strapping, almost elegant men, were strolling leisurely and dutifully at the crossing. Back and forth. It was light and dreary, like in a dream. Maybe Esther approached them and saw: It was a German patrol.

The number of Ukrainian police who were on the streets of Kiev on the first day of the operation in order to check that everyone turned up was not counted. Historians are not sure either. There were many Ukrainians, but presumably or even definitely, Babushka would rather have approached the Germans than the Ukrainians whom she distrusted. But did she have a choice?

She approached them, but how long time did this *approach* take? I will leave it to everyone to imagine for themselves.

Her approach developed like an epic event, not only because Maybe Esther moved like the tortoise in the Aporias of Zenon, step by step – slowly, but surely -, it was so slow, that nobody could catch up with it, and the more slowly it moved, the more impossible it became to catch up with it, to stop it, to bring it back, let alone overtake it. Not even the swift footed Achilles would have been able to.

She went a few meters down along the Engelsstraße, a street that used to be called the Luteranskaya and now bears that name again, after Martin Luther, a street, on which the most beautiful trees grew, where since the nineteenth century German merchants had settled and where, right at the top and on the corner of Bankowaya, two German churches had been built, one of which stood directly behind my first school. Forty years after Babushka's walk, I walked past these German churches every day.

First it was called Lutheranskaya, then Engelsstraße – street of angels or Angel Street. Everyone who did not know in which kingdom this street lay, might imagine that it really was dedicated to the angels. It suited this street that was so impossibly steep, so precipitous, that it added wings to everyone's

step going down. I was a Soviet child, I knew who Friedrich Engels was and kept my feet on the ground.

Maybe a linguistic error was reflected in Maybe Esther's hesitant walk. For the older Kiev Jews Yiddish was still a mother tongue, irrespective of whether they were religious and respected tradition or whether they rushed after their children, straight ahead into the bright Soviet future. Many old Jews were proud of their German, and when the Germans arrived, perhaps they thought, in spite of everything that was being said, that flew through the air and could no longer be described as a lie, that they, they in particular, the closest relatives of the occupying troops, were endowed with the special right of those, for whom the word is everything. The rumours and reports that made their way from Poland, and the Ukraine that was for the most part already occupied, were simply not believed. How could one have believed such rumours?

The old people – and not only they – still remembered 1918, when after the military commotion and the constant turning of the carousel of power, the Germans had marched into the city and seen to it that a certain order was restored. And now suddenly such an order appeared again to be moving in along with the Germans. These precise instructions: All Jews of the city of Kiev and its surroundings are on Monday the 29th of September 1941 at 8 o'clock in the morning to be at the corner of Melnikova and Dokhturovska (by the cemeteries). Clear, evident and intelligible: All, at 8 o'clock and the precise address. And neither the cemeteries nor the demeaning word *Žyd* on the Russian posters unsettled them. Perhaps it was the influence of the Polish and West Ukrainian language in which there was no other word for Jews, but *Žyd* sounds so insulting in Russian. It also said something about being shot. Failure to comply – shooting. Theft of objects by Jews – shooting. But, only if you did not comply with the rules.

During the time that Babushka was on the move, battles could have broken out, and Homer would have started to count the ships.

One of the first stories that my mother read to me and which she, who knows why, told me again and again, as if there were an instructive power in this repetition, was the story of Achilles and his heel. When his mother bathed him in the river of immortality, holding him by the heel, my mother said in a coaxing voice, as if the story were already at the end; she held him by the heel, she said, I can't remember, whether it was the left or the right – but perhaps she never mentioned that and I am the one who worries whether it was the left or the right, although it doesn't matter anyway.

The river was cold, the baby didn't cry, it was in the shades, and everyone looked like a shadow, even the fat baby looked as if it were a paper cut out. She bathed him in the river, my mother told me, so that he would be immortal, but she forgot his heel. I remember how I would grow scared at this point every time, as the saying goes in Russian, my soul slipped down into my heels. If you are scared, perhaps it is safer for the soul to retreat into your heels, until the danger has passed. In that instant I could no longer move and could scarcely breathe, I knew that the heel that Achilles mother held embodied something inevitable, something disastrous. I also thought of the wicked sorcerer from the

fairy tale, Кощей Бессмертный, Koschei the Immortal, who was actually not immortal, his death lay in the point of a needle, the needle in an egg, the egg in a duck, the duck lived in the oak and the oak grew on an island which nobody knew how to find. And here – a naked heel! I saw my mother's shadow on the wall which looked like a figure on a terracotta amphora, I thought of Achilles mother, of the black river Styx and the dark world of shadows, then of our wide river that I crossed every day on the way to school, then of our shadow world and again of my mother, who told the story of the swift footed Achilles in an inconceivably drawn out, epic and rambling way, she told of Troy, of his friendship with Patroclus and of anger. She spat out the word anger several times, and angrily she went on relating how Achilles died because of his friendship with Patroclus, hit in the heel by an arrow that Paris shot and Apollo guided. I did not understand why Apollo, patron and guardian of the muses, had guided the arrow to the place where my frightened soul had gone at this precise moment.

And so the story of Achilles became my own soft spot, my point of weakness, for my mother bathed me in this story, in the river of immortality, as if I myself could thereby obtain the protection of the immortal, but she forgot my heel, my heel, where my soul, plagued by fear and with a fateful premonition, curled up, and I understood, that everyone must have a weak point, heel, soul, death – really the only proof of immortality.

The means of transportation were in actual fact important. Those who could, fled Kiev. When Semjon shouted that the family had to be downstairs in ten minutes, where the lorry was waiting, the tub containing the ficus was already on the back of the truck. The neighbour, confused by the mayhem, had placed it there ready for the evacuation. There were already two families in the back of the truck, sacks, suitcases, bundles, and the ficus in its tub, the symbol of hearth and home. There was no room for another family. With one jerk Semjon unloaded the ficus and shoved the suitcases aside to make room for his wife and two boys. So the ficus remained standing on the side on the kerb of the precipitous *Luteranskaja uliza*.

I see the leaves of this ficus, that now, in 1941, were nodding to the beat of world events. I owe my life to this ficus.

I read what my father wrote about his evacuation. Everything is true, only the ficus is missing, which he used to talk about. Everything is safe and in the right place: a distraught short sighted boy – my future father -, his resolute father in his new uniform, the truck, the neighbours, the suitcases, the bundles, the chaos, the haste. Everything is there. Only the ficus in the tub is missing. When I discover the loss, I lose my footing. The lever and axis of my story are lost.

But I can see the ficus right in front of me: alone and abandoned in front of my father's parental home. Its leaves shivering in time to the marching in of the Wehrmacht. When I hear the stamping to which you could whistle Shostakovich, I understand, that my father only survived because the ficus was cleared from the truck. Of course the ficus had to be cleared away. It would have been absurd if instead of the boy the ficus had been evacuated. But in tune with the logic of the events of the time this could also have been normal. The very conjecture that this little boy had, by coincidence, be it

even through a fictitious chain of events – just imagine – had had to stay in Kiev, brings into question my existence, robs me of the possibility of my story. Lose one card and that's it, you can't continue the game.

The tribal kinsmen of this boy, those, who had stayed in the city, although, tribal kinsmen is a neutral term, let us say Jews, it is simpler, simpler in the sense, that it is more easily understood, as if one could more easily understand, but it is unfortunately or tragically really more understandable, post factum of course, only post factum, if you know, what happened afterwards, but what happened is still not really justified by it, that is, those who stayed, were rounded up in Babi Yar, or as my mother writes, in BY, as if everyone knew what BY meant or as if she really can't give the place its full name. And there they were shot. But you must know this. Kiev is just as far away from here as is Paris.

Now I know why I need my ficus.

- Papa, you forgot the ficus.
- What ficus? I don't remember a ficus. Suitcases, bundles, sacks, boxes. But a ficus?
- Papa, but you told me about the ficus that was taken off the truck.
- What ficus? I don't remember it. Perhaps I have forgotten.

I had a fixation with the ficus, I was ficussised. I could not understand how one could forget something like that. I could not understand what must have had to happen to someone to make them forget something like that.

The ficus seems the main character to me, if not in world history, then in my family history. In my version the ficus saved my father's life. Although, if my father doesn't even remember the ficus, perhaps it really didn't exist. When he told me about the evacuation, it is possible that in my picture I filled the missing details into the gaps of the street scene.

Was there a ficus or is it just a fiction? Was the fiction born of the ficus – or the other way round? Perhaps I will never find out whether the ficus that saved my father ever existed.

I call my father, and he consoles me.

- Even if it didn't exist, errors like that are sometimes more revealing than a scrupulously recorded inventory. Sometimes it is precisely a touch of poetry that make the memories truthful.

That's how my fictive ficus redeemed itself as a literary device.

Not even a week has gone by, when my father says to me: I think, I remember a ficus. Maybe. Or did I get the ficus from you?

If my grandfather had not removed the questionable ficus from the back of the truck, the nine year old boy, who later became my father, would not have found a space in the Ark of the truck, if he had not made it onto the list of survivors, I wouldn't exist. As there was no ficus, but we exist, this means, that it must have existed, or at least that it must have existed, for if it had not existed, there would be no us, we would not have been able to save ourselves, I say us, but mean my father, because if my father had not been saved, how could he have remembered the ficus, and how could he prior to this have forgotten the ficus? So it has been established or it could be established that we owe our life to a fiction.

Cher offizer, began Babushka in her unmistakeable accent, convinced that she was speaking German: Be so fine tell me, wot I do? I hob de plakats for Yids read but I go not good. Not fast.

She was shot on the spot, with heedless routine, without interrupting the conversation, without completely turning round, casually. Or no, no. Perhaps she asked: Please be so kind, dear officer, please tell me how to get to Babi Yar? That could really be bothersome. After all, who likes to have to answer stupid questions?

I observe this scene like God watching from the window of the opposite house. Perhaps this is the way you write novels. Or fairy tales as well. I sit up on high, I see everything! Sometimes I take courage and come closer and stand behind the back of the officer, so I can eavesdrop on the conversation. Why are you standing with your back towards me? I go round her and only see her back. However much I try to see their faces, to look into their faces – Babushka's and the officer's -, however much I crane to see them, straining all the muscles of my memory, my imagination and my intuition – it doesn't work. I can't see the faces. Don't understand, and the historians remain silent.

How do I know the particulars of this story? Where did I hear it? Who whispers stories to us for which there are no witnesses, and to what purpose? Is it important that this old woman is my father's Babushka? And what if she had never been his favourite grandmother?

But there really were witnesses to this story. In 1948 the family returned to Kiev – seven years after their dacha-like evacuation, after stops in Rostov, Ashgabat and several years in Barnaul in the Altai region. The house in the Engelsstraße had been destroyed, like the entire neighbourhood. Only a shell remained of the house, a skeleton. On the balcony of the fifth floor stood a bed, but there was no way of getting to it any more. The inside of the house was completely gone, so were the stairs. On a German aerial shot taken in November 1941 you can see the bed on which my father had sunned himself in the first summer of war.

In novels victims and executioners often meet in a vacuum, as if they were the only people in the world, condemned to perform the roles assigned to them. When Maybe Esther battled against time on her own, there were a large number of invisible witnesses in our story: passers-by, saleswomen in the

bakery three steps below and neighbours behind curtains of this densely populated street, a nowhere mentioned, faceless mass for the big refugee trains. They are the last narrators. Where have they all moved to?

My grandfather Semjon spent a long time searching for someone who knew something about Babushka. It was the caretaker of the house that no longer existed, who told him everything. It seems to me as if someone had been standing at the window on that 29th of September in 1941. Maybe.