

Chapter 5: A German affair (1971)

I took the night train to Munich. It was the beginning of October but winter had arrived early that year. Dawn found us in Austria beyond the Brenner Pass: snowy peaks of the Alps, picturesque little villages—smoking chimneys on the rooftops of cute little wooden houses. It looked to me like a scene from the *Sound of Music* or color illustrations from the Hebrew translation of a book by the Brothers Grimm I had enjoyed as a child. At the German border officers of the border-police, clad in long black leather greatcoats, loudly stormed into our compartment. In guttural German they ordered: *Alle Pässe bitte!* I shuddered. As the son of holocaust survivors I sensed that I am entering an enemy land.

My Munich affair turned out to be a dead end. The Schwartzs allocated me a folding bed in the living room; their two teen-aged daughters, both covered with acne, spoke German, Russian and French but no English. Herr Appel handed me the promised 2000 DM adding: “we would have invited you to dinner but we’re leaving for Spain.” At the medical school I was told that in order to register I would have to complete a year of German language studies at the Goethe Institute; 2500 DM per month. I burned my days walking up and down the endless Leopold Avenue, freezing in my thin Israeli flight jacket. I stared with interest at the appealing hookers around *Schwabing* but did not have the heart to spend 100 DM per any one. Then, when one night I overheard Mr. Schwartz whispering in Polish to his Russian wife: “When will *he* leave; how long will *he* be sleeping in our living room? I knew I had to move on. *Why not drop in on Jascia?* It was more than a year since our brief love affair in Israel.

Anotehr night train; this time across Germany, from Munich to Aachen, arriving at that medieval University town at five in the morning. Light snow was falling and the air smelt of coal fire and fresh baked bread. From the *Bahnhof*, in my thin summer shoes, I sloshed in the dirty, already melting snow, towards the student dormitories where, according to my address book,

Jascia was residing. From the doorway I rang Jascia's apartment. She replied, after a few rings, in a sleepy voice, "Ja?". "It's me, Moshe," I said.

"Who?"

"It's me, Moshe."

Silence. She must have been aware that I had gone to Italy to study medicine and here, suddenly, I was knocking on her door at six o'clock in the morning.

"Oh', please come up." She stood at the top of the stairs, clad in a morning gown, her hair wild, and face sleepy. We kissed. "What are you doing here?" she asked, "let me prepare some coffee." If my surprise visit was unwelcome she was too well mannered to show it. Sitting near her at the breakfast table I could smell her unwashed body, the vestiges of the that perfume which I remembered so well—and I wanted her badly. But I restrained myself.

We spent the rest of that day driving, in Jascia's tiny Fiat 850, through the neighboring Netherland. We chatted and laughed like two old friends but maintained physical distance. In the evening we sat down for dinner in a cozy Indonesian restaurant. Here, under the dimmed light, I hugged Jascia trying to draw her to me. She resisted. "What's wrong? What's the matter?" I asked. She said nothing and continued as if nothing happened. But the next day—I spent the night on a separate couch in her room—she told me that it was all over. Apparently, a few months after her vacation in Israel she had met somebody older and "more mature." Unlike me, I thought to myself: on a vacation in Israel it was so natural to fall in love with a young Israeli soldier. But now, what does she have in common with that non European and somewhat outlandish creature, whose dark hair is curling down his neck? I realized that there is no hope to revive Jascia love towards me—my dream had been shuttered and a melancholy descended on me. It would last a year or so.

I had to move on, away from Jascia, away from Germany. I called my father for instructions, which were: "Son, you'll have to return to Italy. Why

don't you try Bologna. But you'll need a car. Let me talk to David in Nuremberg." David, a distant relative, had been only thirteen years old when the allies liberated Sachsenhausen, the concentration camp where he had miraculously managed to survive. After the war he remained in Germany, engaging in business—now selling carpets. So I bid farewell to Jascia, who drove me to the station and—only now—hugged and kissed me warmly. I climbed on the train to Nuremberg where, in pouring rain, "uncle" David—dark, balding, with a physique of a wrestler—his German wife (average looking blond), and their two little well behaved blond kids, were waiting for me at the *Bahnhof*. David's modest *Opel* station wagon delivered us to their small and unassumingly furnished flat.

Next morning David loaded me into his *Opel* and we were off to Schweinsfurt, a smaller town in Bavaria where he owned a carpet store. About one hour out of Nuremberg David left suddenly the *Autobahn* stopping at a smallish village. "We'll stop for coffee, with a friend", he explained. His Hebrew was rudimental and we communicated in a mixture of Polish, Yiddish and German. We arrived at a driveway of a neat Villa and he knocked on the door. His friend appeared: it was a she—tall and blond, in her late 50's but very well preserved; they hugged and kissed.

"Please meet my friend Elfriede," David introduced us. While coffee and *schtrudel* were served on golden-rimmed porcelain plates I gazed around: spacious rooms, Persian carpets, numerous artworks on shelves and walls—like in an Italian museum. David's body language was telling me that Elfriede was more than a friend and that he was the master of this house.

That same evening, in one of Schweinsfurt's Turkish restaurants, where the *Gastarbeiter* gathered to smoke and play *Shesh Besh*, over *shishlik* and *raki*, David told me his story: after the liberation of the camps, he had been, a thin, almost a skeleton-like, teenager roaming the streets—like a wild animal. She, in her late 20's, who had lost her husband on the Eastern Front, sheltered and fed him. She'd taught him German and manners and sent him to school. "I grew up in the camps...I was a beast...she brought me back to life... my wife doesn't know about her." The

picture became clear to me: this middle aged Jew is leading two separate lives. The first, the official one, with an ordinary German family; the second, the secret one, with his older rescuer and probably lover—to her he entrusted his fortune. As a kid who had survived the death camps David knew better than putting his cards on one table.

After dinner David deposited me in his store for the night; "I have a business to attend to in Munich", he said, "I'll be back tomorrow." My bed for the night was a thick pile of hand made *Tabriz* rugs. I immediately collapsed into a deep sleep. Munich, Aachen, Nuremberg, David's tales, the gloomy October landscapes and weather—so alien to an Israeli kid—stirred up depressing dreams. Suddenly loud bangs on the door: "*Polizei, aufmachen*". I woke up from the dream covered with sweat: *Is this the Gestapo?*

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I unlocked the door barefoot. Luckily it was 1971, twenty-six years too late for the *Gestapo*, although the faces, the long leather greatcoats and the coarse language, could fit the picture. I never learned to which branch of the police they belonged to, or what exactly they wanted. Did "uncle" David deal with smuggled carpets? Most probably. Did he evade tax? Very likely; or did he use the carpet shop to cover up for trading drugs with his Turkish friends? Possible. At that moment, when I was shoved into the back seat of a black Mercedes, together with my only suitcase, I did not know that I would never meet David again.

The police station was neat, organized and well lighted; the policemen grumpy and rigid in the German fashion but not abusive. Once they discerned that the young man with dark curly hair, in shabby jeans and tattered flight jacket, is a foreigner, they asked for a passport. Their *Fuhrer* grabbed the navy blue hard-cover Israeli document in his chunky fingers: left, right, right, left—he turned the Hebrew document frustratingly; "*Scheisse, where does it start and where does it end?*" I helped him to the front page and also produced my student ID from Siena. In primitive German I stated: "*Ich bin Israeli, ich studiere Medizin in Italien...jetzt Ferien,*

tourist...". As to my association with Herr David Blum I explained that he is a distant family member.

Presumably the central database of the *Deutsche Polizei* did not identify me as a drug dealer, or an international criminal, because in the early morning, after a generous breakfast of excellent coffee, fresh rolls, butter and jam, served by a stocky policeman, I found myself a free man, walking the wet streets with a suitcase in my hands. I staggered to the main Post office and placed a collect call to Haifa. My father laughed: "I knew that David is doing *Luftgeschäfte* but now it appears he's in the *Unterwelt* as well...but don't worry about him, he's indestructible, now go and catch a train to Frankfurt, sit in the dining wagon and get yourself something good to eat. I will see that uncle Georg will be waiting for you...if not he, somebody will."

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We had never met before but the man waiting at Frankfurt/Hoechst *Bahnhof* identified me immediately. Thin, of average height, short-cropped white hair, well-trimmed moustache, light blue shirt, dark tie under navy blue-striped suit and matching trench coat, patent leather British shoes: "uncle" Georg looked like a respectable German industrialist. When he hugged and kissed me on my two cheeks I noticed his deep blue eyes and smelled the aromatic aftershave.

"You look like your father...ach... your father and me, before the war, in Lemberg, we'd such a good time together...och, those Polish girls." While chatting to me in perfect Polish the uncle walked us to his brand new sporty Mercedes Benz 450SL; we drove off to Sulzbach along the damp *Autobahn*.

At home, over the years, I had heard much from my father about his maternal cousin Georg. Together with my father, Georg—handsome, blond and blue eyed—had left his Galician hometown at the foot of the Carpathian Mountains to study medicine in Prague. A year later he had decided to switch over to architecture but never graduated; instead, he had excelled in womanizing. When the Germans invaded Poland, Georg was an officer in the shattered Polish Army. With his "pure Arian" look he had managed to

acquire a false Polish Catholic identity and to join the Polish Merchant Navy. This had saved him from his family's fate—turning into ash. After the war Georg had married a Polish woman, had kids and continued touring the world as a ship purser. In 1963, while his ship docked in Hamburg, he had developed acute appendicitis and was hospitalized. After the operation, Georg had decided that enough is enough and that he's not going back across the iron curtain to his Polish wife. It took him a few days to charm a Jesuit hospital nun—a young virgin that could have been his daughter. With the marriage arrived the German citizenship and a new identity of a *Volksdeutscher*; a false architect diploma was not too hard to arrange. Now the charismatic polyglot had joined a large German contracting company and made a career of importing workers from Turkey and North Africa. Eventually he had retired with the ex nun, who gave him a set of blond twins, Kaya and Kayus, in a great suburban house, built on money swindled from the company, by the builders he had imported from Turkey.

Sulzbach proved a rich men suburb on the edge of Frankfurt and Uncle Georg's mansion was grand indeed. Israel in those years was a Spartan-like country and the spacious, carpeted rooms, numerous bathrooms, and color TV were something I previously had seen only in American movies. I found the "new" aunt-ex-nun Mathilde pleasant enough and hospitable but not somebody I would have advised to leave the monastery. Since then I came across a wide selection of German women: however attractive, well mannered, proper and engaging they appear on the outside, there is a detectable hardness and rigidity in their inner structure, as if they had swallowed a long broom.

The next day, in the afternoon, after a few phone calls by the uncle, a shabby looking, pockmarked Turk showed up at the driveway with a Volkswagen Beetle 1200. The cream colored exterior looked in good repair; as to the car's condition the Turk declared: "it's a 1959 model, but the engine is new, and the roof is retractable." The uncle handed out a few bills and announced with great pride: "This is your new car." He immediately hid

the car in the garage so that the respectable neighbors wouldn't see such a wreck on his property.

Finally, after a few weeks, my first German expedition ended. Driving south bound on the *Autobahn* in my "new" Volkswagen, which indeed was the first car I owned, I was elated by the reassuring *pukpukpuk* racket coming from the rear of this reliable "Hitler's people's car." At the outskirts of Darmstadt I picked up a hitchhiker who turned out to be a Scottish student traveling to Italy. Then the window wipers packed up. There was only one solution to combat the shower of mud splashed by the road crazy Germans bypassing us at 180 km per hour: the Scott had to pay for his ride by becoming a human wiper. Every few minutes I retracted manually the roof through which the Scott used a rag to achieve some visibility. Luckily, when we crossed the border into Switzerland, near Basel, the sun appeared and the road dried up. For his gallant service, I treated the Scott, who seemed even more penniless than me, to a meal of sausage stewed with onions and cabbage and a few beers. We crossed the Alps at St. Gotthard. At that time the Gotthard Tunnel served only the railways and the cars had to take the steep, climbing, tortuous Alpine pass; followed by numerous downward bends towards Tessin and Italy. Ice-clear Alpine air, snow covered peaks, deep blue lakes, magnificent villas on the cliffs; further down below the tree line the aroma of fresh hay, cows grazing with heavy bells around their necks...this was my first encounter with the thrilling beauty of Switzerland.

Late in that evening the Scott requested to be dropped off in Como, Italy. In a semi deserted lakeside restaurant we celebrated the last moments of our short-term friendship, wolfing down a plate of *spaghetti Bolognese* and sharing a bottle of cheap wine. I remember that he was a nice lad: for some reasons I recall where and what we ate but not his name. I continued southwards along the *Autostrada di Sole*. Towards morning, around Florence, I turned into the winding road leading to Siena. The Beetle did not possess a car radio but I had a transistor tuned to Radio Luxemburg; however, the best music to my ears was the constant *pookpookpook* of my

new "limousine". *What a lovely car! I love it.* As I approached Siena I noted how the bright dawn illuminates the walls of the ancient city; I also noticed the black, dense smoke from the rear of my car.



Jascia (1970)



Uncle George (Polish Army, 1945)

More pictures below



In my "new" Beetle, crossing the Swiss Alps to Italy (1971)