Somewhere in Germany

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOVEL

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In memory of my dear brother,
Max

Somewhere in Germany

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On April 15, 1947, the express train from Osnabrück arrived with unexpected suddenness in Frankfurt on the Main despite a two-hour delay at the control point between the British and American occupation zones, after a travel time of close to nineteen hours. The travelers in the compartments and corridors were not prepared for the abrupt stop, which felt like a sudden shock rather than a release. Still numbed by the coldness of the night and the unusual warmth of the morning hours, and their view blocked by the cardboard screens on the glassless windows of the train, the passengers lost their orientation, and for a few minutes their senses deprived them of the long-awaited certainty that they had reached their destination.

They hesitated before putting their rucksacks, bags, and suitcases on the floor, exposing their belongings to the dangers that were unfortunately typical for the new times, which in the most aggravating way had dispensed with the moral concepts that had still been intact during the last years of the war when, in spite of all the suffering, things had after all been less chaotic. The lucky few passengers who had robustly fought for their comfort, which they considered just and democratic, were not willing to relinquish their seats or standing room in the passageways by getting out too early.

Only those travelers on the running boards and roofs of the train, already envied for their excellent physical condition, realized immediately that the blackened beams of the open hall, the loose hanging wires, the

piles of shards glittering in the sunlight between the tracks, and the stones that had been piled up from the rubble were indeed the heart of the Frankfurt Grand Central Station. At first only a few people dared to get off the train. Almost simultaneously, men with backpacks climbed off the roofs; women with headscarves and determined, sooty faces jumped off the running boards.

Those passengers spilling out of the train had a much better vantage point for conquering Frankfurt than the Redlich family, which was returning from exile in the last car. That one was locked from the outside and first had to be opened by a remarkably well-nourished American corporal with a tendency toward slow leg movements but fast jaw motion.

Wearing the heavy gray coat that he had received three days earlier as a last gift from the British Army in London when he was released from the military, Walter Redlich hesitantly stepped off the train. He carried the two suitcases that originally came from Breslau, had left German soil ten years ago, and were now touching it again. His wife, Jettel, followed him in the dress that had been sewn by the Indian tailor in Nairobi especially for her return to the now foreign homeland. In one hand, she clutched a handkerchief that was wet from crying all night, and in the other, a hatbox she had been unable to be separated from during the ten years of her emigration in Kenya.

Their daughter, Regina, whose fourteen-year-old body had trouble filling out one of her chubby mother's dresses that had been altered for her, concentrated on the task of not crying like her mother while she got off the train and, above all, of not annoying her by allowing a trace of the hopeful smile that her father expected to steal into her face. She carried her one-year-old brother, Max, who missed the decisive moment of his arrival in the new homeland. He had dealt with the hardships of the journey and a stomachache, caused by an unaccustomed diet of lettuce leaves between slices of white bread, by incessantly screaming with a vehemence that had not let up the entire night. Now he was asleep, rocking on Regina's stomach, his head on her shoulder. When the first breeze of the Frankfurt air touched his face, he only slightly clenched his fist but did not wake up.

The British army had carried out its obligation of releasing a soldier to his homeland in a circumspect and responsible way. After arriving at

Hoek van Holland, the Redlichs had been brought to Osnabrück and housed in a refugee camp for the night, with the admonition to avoid any contact with enemy Germans as best as possible.

In Osnabrück, Walter, Jettel, Regina, and the baby had been put into the locked train car with rations to which a soldier without special physical exertions was entitled for one day. Their fellow travelers included a British major and a Canadian army captain who had boarded the train with two bottles of whiskey each and had very quickly emptied one of them. Except for some orders addressed at regular intervals to the "bloody baby" to "shut up," and the occasionally uttered observation "fucking Germans," when Jettel was sobbing too loudly or Max cried too self-confidently for a baby on the losing side, there were no further contacts. The major and the captain had already left the train when Walter took a first look at Frankfurt.

"We were supposed to be picked up," he said. "That is what they told me in London." Ten minutes after their arrival, this was the first sentence he uttered in the town he wanted to be his home.

"I thought the Germans were always on time," Jettel answered. "That used to be their best feature."

"Nobody rolled out the red carpet when we arrived in Africa, either. And at least here people do understand us. Give it time, Jettel."

"They are taking their time," Jettel sniffled. "I cannot go on any longer. The poor child. How long is an innocent little child supposed to endure such hardships? I cannot even face him."

"You don't have to. After all, the poor child is asleep," Walter said.

Regina stared at her feet. She tried to focus on not feeling the hunger, thirst, or fear that had caused her body to stiffen after she saw the first destroyed houses upon crossing the German border and the one-legged men on crutches at the train station in Osnabrück. She rubbed her face on her brother's warm skin and resisted the temptation to whisper the few Jaluo language words to him that would have given her the strength to fight her fears. It was not good to wake the child of a mother who could not keep her own eyes dry. Only when Regina realized that her parents had stopped fighting and were staring in the same direction did she permit her eyes to relax and look around.

Her father was no longer standing next to her; and her mother had put her hatbox down, stretched out her right arm, and called out loud,

"Good God, Mr. Koschella. What is he doing here? He was at our wedding."

Regina saw her father running. He stopped in front of a man in a gray suit, shook his head for a moment, extended both arms, and suddenly let them drop again. It was the stranger who grasped Walter's hand. He had a deep voice and Regina could hear from a distance that this voice was used to traveling far.

"Walter Redlich," the man said, "I could not believe it when I was told yesterday to go and meet you. I still cannot believe that someone would be crazy enough to return to this country. Where in the world are you coming from? Oh, well, I know. The entire justice department has been talking for days about nothing but the madman who has abandoned the fleshpots of Africa so that he can starve here as a judge. Good heavens, don't tell me the baby is yours, too."

Regina very closely observed how the man held out his hand to her mother and how all of a sudden the smile of those dead days, before she had known about their return to Germany, lit up her mother's face. Regina tried to extend her hand to the man, too, but did not succeed because her brother became even heavier and started sliding down her hip. She tried very hard to shape the name Koschella in her mouth and, at the same time, to follow her parents' excited talk and the hastily spoken, somewhat sharp-sounding words of the man; she took too much time deliberating what the words "attorney general" might mean and if they were important to all of them.

Regina finally managed to translate the happiness her parents expected of her to the regular movement of her legs and the challenge of keeping pace with the men and her mother. She noticed that her father walked quite differently here than in Africa. She listened to the sound of his shoes and saw the dust they kicked up: it was dark and dense, no longer light and transparent as in the good days of warmth.

The group exited from the gray of the station, stepped into the light of spring, and crossed a street lined with bombed-out houses on either side. Old women pushed carts piled high with their belongings. Small children sat on cardboard suitcases and gray blankets. They had the lackluster eyes of the leprous beggars that Regina had encountered in the streets of Nairobi. The bell of a light yellow streetcar chimed in high notes. The doors of the streetcar were ajar; the tightly crowded people

on the running boards seemed like the old trees that the wind had caused to grow together on the farm in Ol' Joro Orok. Robust bushes of yellow flowers grew on the rubble mounds of the dead houses. Birds were twittering. Walter said, "Even the birds sing differently here than in Africa." Koschella laughed and shook his head.

"Still the same old joker," he said.

Her father pushed Regina into a big, clean room that was very dark and smelled of antibacterial soap, which reminded her of her school at Lake Nakuru. She forgot for an instant that she had hated the school and smiled at the thought that she was becoming just like her mother, confusing the good memories with the bad. Still, she saw the flamingoes rise and had to prevent her eyes from getting immersed in the pink cloud.

A young, very blonde woman with bright red lips was sitting behind a long table. Her blue dress had a white collar. Her head, its hair coiffed in evenly shaped waves, was on the same level as the highest of the yellow roses in the blue vase in front of her.

Koschella's strong voice increased in volume when he announced, "Attorney General Dr. Hans Koschella." After a slight pause, which the woman filled with an annoyed glance, he added, "This is district court judge Dr. Walter Redlich from Nairobi. Yesterday I reserved two rooms for him and his family."

The woman ran a finger through the lowest wave of her hair. Even though she hardly moved her red lips, she could be heard saying, very distinctly, "Sorry. The Hotel Monopol is off limits for Germans."

"What are you saying? You should have told me that yesterday when I reserved the rooms."

"But," said the woman, smiling long enough for the upper row of her teeth to become visible, "you did not give me a chance to do so. You made the reservation and instantly hung up."

"Well, then refer me to another hotel. Do you think the justice department can afford to have a judge come all the way from Africa and not provide him with accommodations? What are you thinking?"

"There are no hotels for Germans in Frankfurt. You ought to know that, Dr. Koschella. All hotels have been seized by the American military government."

"Let me talk to your hotel director then."

"The Monopol is one of the hotels directly managed by the military government. We do not have a director. I also have to inform you that it is a punishable offense for me to have Germans sitting in the hotel lobby."

Dr. Hans Koschella looked at the woman for some time and then even longer at his watch. He made a small movement toward the baby on Regina's stomach; she held the baby, who was playing with her hair, out to him so that he could touch it, but he withdrew his hand. Then he looked at Walter and said, no longer as forcefully as before but still in a voice that was used to being heard, "I am terribly sorry, Redlich. Something went wrong here. Unfortunately I have an urgent appointment and cannot help you any further. Well, you will soon find out for yourself that the few jurists who are still permitted to work these days are quite busy."

"But what are we supposed to do now?" Jettel said quietly.

"Don't worry, Mrs. Jettel. Your husband's best bet is to go to the housing authorities right away and have them assign an apartment to you. He must have the necessary declaration of urgency from the justice department. Come along, Redlich; don't look so dejected. I will take you to the streetcar. I will take the time to help you. And do not let the officials there intimidate you. They are required to give repatriated applicants preferential treatment. You can no longer afford to be polite these days.

Regina went to the door with Walter. Her feet were heavy and her mouth was dry. She knew that her mother was watching her and so she did not dare ask her father where Jettel, she, and Max should wait for him. She followed Koschella and him with her eyes until their silhouettes dissolved in the bright sunlight. Then she returned as slowly as possible to her mother. She had just come back to the table with the roses when the blonde woman pointed to a leather bench in the darkest corner of the room and said to Jettel, "Sit down over there till your husband comes back. But for heaven's sake, keep the child quiet. If anyone finds you here, I will get into trouble and have to put you out into the street."

The streetcar was so crowded that it took Walter two stops to move inside from the running board. Even though he had hardly eaten anything since their departure from Osnabrück, in order to save the military rations for Regina and Max, and therefore felt dizzy and nauseous,

he welcomed the stress as an opportune distraction from his state of mind, which consisted of a bewildering mixture of outrage, numbness, and shock.

He had been under no illusions when he insisted on his decision to return to Germany against Jettel's resistance and Regina's never openly voiced despair, and he had known that the homecoming would present him with problems that he could not even imagine in the hours of his deepest depression in Africa. But he had never envisioned that an irony of fate would instantly burden him with the same kind of shame as in January 1938, when he had arrived desperate and penniless in Kenya. The shame had started to undermine his self-confidence the moment he had to leave Jettel, Regina, and Max alone in the hotel lobby. He knew from experience that this new humiliation was sure to stay with him for a long time.

Walter, expecting that it would take him quite a while to find the house that Koschella had described, unhappily got off the streetcar. The first man he asked for directions, though, pointed to a gray building with inadequately boarded windows and a wooden door. A cardboard notice, affixed with thumbtacks, read "Municipal Housing Authority."

An old man with a black eye patch sent Walter to a room with the sign "Moves"; four younger men with movements similar to the first perplexedly stared at him, rejected him, and sent him on with very curt words. None of them gave him the chance to do more than mention his name and the fact that his wife and children were sitting in the lobby of a hotel where they were not allowed to be.

The sign on the fifth door said "Refugees." An official was sitting at a small, wooden table covered with files, three pencil stubs, and a slightly rusty pair of scissors. Next to those was a tin mug with some steaming liquid. Walter seemed to vaguely remember that chamomile tea smelled this way. Even the word had not occurred to him for more than ten years. The thought occupied him in a way that he considered inappropriate at this moment of utmost tension.

The man was flipping through a pile of gray papers and chewing on a thin, strikingly yellow piece of bread when Walter approached him. He did not seem any different from his colleagues and Walter prepared himself for the tired motion of rejection, but to his surprise the man first said, "Good morning," and then, "Please take a seat."

His voice had the singing intonation that instantly reminded Walter of his friend Oha in Gilgil. He resisted the randomness of his memory when he remembered that most likely all people in Frankfurt sounded like Oha who, after all, had been from Frankfurt. His stomach, which had turned into a knot when he saw the official chewing his bread, quieted down a bit. Walter smiled and was embarrassed by his own timidity.

The official's name was Fichtel. He was hoarse, wore a gray shirt with a collar much too big for his neck, and, in spite of his Adam's apple and sunken cheeks, his face exhibited a trace of good humor that Walter found encouraging.

"Well, why don't you tell me your story," Fichtel said.

When he heard that Walter had just arrived from Africa, he whistled in a long, almost absurdly youthful way, and said, "Oh boy, oh boy," which Walter at first did not understand. Made confident by the alert expression that all of a sudden illuminated Fichtel's face, Walter began to report in detail about the last ten years of his life.

"And you want me to believe that you voluntarily returned to this damned country? Man, I'd rather emigrate today than tomorrow. Everyone here wants to. Whatever made you come back?"

"They did not want me in Africa."

"And they want you here?"

"I believe so."

"Well, you must know. Everything is possible these days. Did you at least bring some coffee along from those Negroes?"

"No," Walter said.

"Or cigarettes?"

"A few, but I already smoked them all."

"Oh boy, oh boy," Fichtel said. "I always thought the Jews were clever and got through anything."

"Especially through the chimneys at Auschwitz."

"That is not what I meant, certainly not. You can believe me," Fichtel assured him. His hand slightly trembled as he pushed the stamps from one side of the table to the other. His voice was uneasy when he said, "Even if I immediately classified your request as an urgent priority, I would not be able to give you an apartment for years. We have none.

Most apartments have been either bombed out or taken over by the Americans. You will be much better off with the Jewish community at the Baumweg. People say that they can work miracles and have entirely different possibilities than we have here."

The sentence confused Walter so much that he did not allow himself to contemplate the emotions that crowded in on him.

"Are you telling me that there is a Jewish community here in Frankfurt?" he asked.

"Of course," Fichtel said. "After all, a sufficient number did return from the camps that everyone is talking about these days. And we hear that they are not doing too badly. They even get a bonus for heavy labor. You are entitled to that, too. Look, I am going to write down the address for you, Dr. Redlich. You will see; you may be able to have an apartment of your own by tomorrow. As I always say: Your own people will take care of you." It was already after four o'clock when Walter returned to the Monopol. At the Jewish community he had only been able to see a woman who had asked him to come back the next day. At the hotel, he expected to find Jettel, if at all, in tears. He saw her from a distance and believed that the hallucinations that had threatened him since he took leave of Koschella had finally gotten to him.

Jettel was sitting in a jeep next to a soldier in an American uniform, Regina in the back with Max on her lap. Walter was certain that they were in the process of arresting his family because they had remained in the hotel. He hurried toward the car, his stomach in cramps, making gestures that seemed as absurd to him as the entire day.

"Hurry," Jettel cried excitedly. "I already thought that they were going to take us away from here before you returned. Where in heaven's name have you been? The child does not have a single dry diaper left and Regina has a constant nosebleed."

"Sir," Walter called out, "this is my wife. And my children."

"Well, then don't leave your beautiful wife sitting in a seized hotel, you fool," the sergeant grinned.

His voice distinctly betrayed the fact that he was originally from Baden; his name was Steve Green, formerly Stefan Grüntal, and because of his linguistic skills he was in charge of all problematic issues involving Germans. The secretary of the Hotel Monopol had called Steve