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Return to Berlin

Our mother Clarissa Boschwitz was born in Berlin on September 25, 1911.

In 1933, when she was 22, she left the house at Hohenzollerndamm 81 in Berlin. Since the Nazis came to power Mother hid in the underground system, in order not to endanger the rest of the family. Clarissa, a beautiful girl, was presented only a few months earlier as an example perfect Arian. After being presented as such, she declared she was of Jewish descent. At that time, this was a sufficient reason for persecution. Before she left Berlin, she stealthily sneaked into her house and took a few things as keepsakes, among them an artbook which was an unimpeachable source for me as a child.

Here began her long journey to Palestine. Mother missed her home, she missed the world she has left behind, a world which seemed to us, the children who grew up in the Kibbutz, quite imaginary. When she talked about her home, we thought she was daydreaming and inventing stories. Indeed, longing and memories are turned into dreams.

Mother told us about her mother, our grandmother Martha. She remembered people who say that the maids who opened the door were always pregnant. Indeed, Grandma would have taken into her home unmarried girls who got pregnant, without hope for life outside the streets, and give them work and security.

Grandma Martha was an artist who studied Painting and Art History in Munich Academy.

Martha continued to manage the family-business after her husband, our grandfather Sally Boschwitz, died a few months before her son, our uncle Ulrich, was born. I imagine her standing at the door – a strong, dominant woman who guided the life of her family through the hard times of World War I and the years following. She would give the worker's salaries to their wives or mothers, so that they won't waste them on drinking.

Our mother, Clarissa, had inherited grandma's compassion, and she studied Social Work and taught at an orphanage children of syphilis-stricken families.

Grandma Martha was a decisive, uncompromising woman, but her sensitivity and poetic spirit were present in her paintings of landscapes and flowers.

In 1935 grandma Martha and her son Ulrich left Germany never to return, perhaps due to the Nuremberg laws, or because her brother, the judge Alexander Wolgast was murdered in the street after he declared that those laws were invalid. They had left behind the house and all their property and started wandering through Norway, Sweden, Luxemburg, France. For their living they sold grandma's paintings which might be found even today in some private collections.

Grandmother painted Ulrich's portrait and sent it to my mother in the Kibbutz. The portrait on the wall accompanied us all our childhood and youth, so it became an integral part of our life and still accompanies us. To me, a lonely and weak child, he was a friend and companion, in his silence, his noble, reserved face and his eyes, as if looking far away – he seemed an icon, a guide.

Indeed, we had an uncle who was very much present in his absence, and we did not have the honour to meet. Not once we dreamed that one day we will discover him on a desert island. Some time later I found out that Grandma also believed that he was saved and alive on some desert island.

It hurts, to think how many books were lost by his death.

At the end of their journey, Grandma and Ulrich arrived at London, a branch of Martha's family came from England, Yorkshire.

In 1939, when Ulrich's book "The Man who took the Trains" appeared, under the penname John Grain, the son finally joined his mother. It seemed they had arrived at a safe haven. But then World War II broke and Martha and Ulrich were taken to a detention camp on the Isle of Man, and there Ulrich wrote a legend, an enchanting allegory "Winter Tail" which was illustrated by Martha.

After a while Ulrich was taken to a detention camp in Australia, with thousands German refugees, among them boys who grew up in England, some of them of the "Kindertransport", on the notorious ship Dunera.

The crew was mainly assembled of prisoners who bought their freedom by joining the ship's crew. Many such ships, bearing refugees to detention camps in Canada and Australia, were torpedoed by German submarines. Besides the fear for their lives, the prisoners suffered abuse; all their property was left on the dock and things which seemed to lack value were thrown into the sea. This was the fate of Ulrich's manuscript too.

Dunera was also followed by a German submarine and two torpedoes were shot at her, which caused a small damage and certain objects from the ship were scattered on the water not far from the U-boat.

The U-boat crew waited until the Dunera sailed away and then gathered some items – books and pages of paper written in German and some clothes. The U-boat commander contacted the military command in Germany, and was told to accompany Dunera to its destination. On their way they saved hundreds of German seamen from a German war ship which drowned. It is a historical irony that many lives were saved due to this episode.

After the fall of the Wall of Berlin in 1989, me and my mother were invited by Berlin Municipality with other Berlin-born people who fled from Germany.

By a miraculous coincidence, my mother met on the plane a man called Hananya Feiner, an artist from Kibbutz Ein Gev. Mother introduced herself as Clarissa Boschwitz. Hananya wrinkled his brow, as if trying to remember, and said: "I knew a man named Ulrich Boschwitz in the camp in Australia..." Later in we dined together in a Chinese restaurant.

Hananya told us about the hunger and suffering and the hard condition on the sail to Australia; In the detention camp there were refugees from Germany aged 16 to 70 years old. There were respected persons, professors, artists, yeshiva students and rabbis, among them Freud's grandson. At the camp they developed rich cultural and spiritual life, studies, theatres, lectures. But Ulrich did not take part in all this activities, except for chess playing. He dedicated his time to writing, on a desk which one of the detainees has built for him.

In 1942, before Ulrich started his way back to England to join his mother, Hananya helped him to tie the manuscript of his new book, "Days of Dream", around his body, in case the ship drowned, and he would somehow survive.

The ship Abosso was torpedoed on a stormy night, and all of its passengers and crew drowned – only one witness survived; another disaster among so many which took place in the sea at those terrible years.

Grandmother was released at the end of the war, and like countless other mothers, she was never comforted on the loss of her son, nor did she take part in the life of her daughter Clarissa and her grandchildren. But every now and then she would send me postcards with drawings and paintings, of Leonardo da Vinci and urge me to study them.

Three years ago, again by fate's mysterious ways, my friend Avner Shapira, born in Kibbutz Einat – our family's Kibbutz – a journalist of "Haaretz", who writes frequently about German literature, made contact with the editor Peter Graf. Regarding the same matter, Noa Cole, a friend of Avner and a translator from German to Hebrew, found in the German Refugees Archive in Frankfurt, the original manuscript of Ulrich's book which was translated into English in 1939 under the original title "The Traveller".

The book of our uncle, young Ulrich Boschwitz, who died at the age of 27, a forgotten German-jewish writer, was recognized in Germany thanks to Peter Graf, who edited the manuscript and published "The Traveller".

We are short of words to thank Peter Graf for completing the Odyssey and getting out of the depth of oblivion the memory of Ulrich, revealing his work to us and to the world.

My mother left her home in 1933, alone, to an unknown land, whose history and landscapes she knew from the bible. She tied her fate to a culture which was foreign to her and she never felt a part of it. She did not assimilate in the culture and social life of her new country, and was often lonely.

She left Berlin full of fears and worries, and here we are now, her descendants, children, grandchildren and grand-grandchildren, accompanying her return home.

In my mind's eyes I see my grandmother, my mother and Ulrich go up and down on the doorsteps, among their beautiful furniture and the collection of statues and paintings on the silk-covered walls. Of all of the house contents only the few things she took with her at the last night remained.

I see my mother growing up, her beauty, her education, her soul so rich and fragile, criticizing her full of compassion, dreaming of creating a better world, and Ulrich – the dreaming boy, absent-minded, curious, who sees everything, a lovely young child.

And here they meet again, after all the tribulation and adversity of life. Mother is looking at the trees at her window and listening to the voices and noises of the street she missed so long.

I'll end with that great passage of the Corinthians, which took from Plato's philosophy which my mother asked me to read in her funeral, and those are the words carved on her grave:

"For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but

then shall I know even also I am known. And now abide faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.”