

Translated excerpt

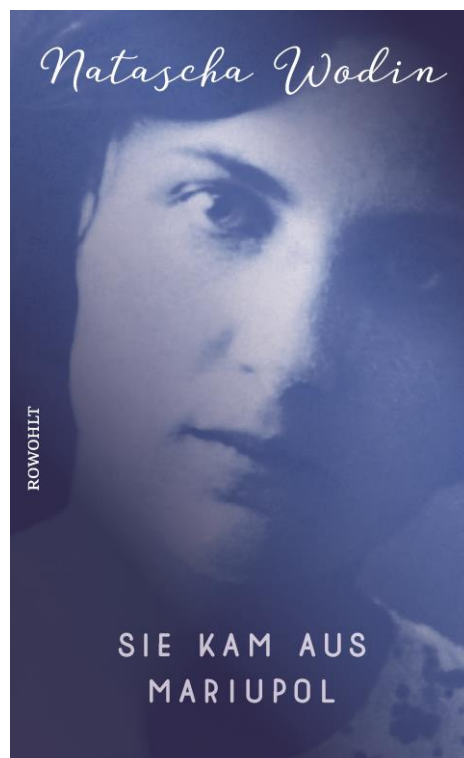
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Sie kam aus Mariupol

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Natascha Wodin
She Came from Mariupol

Translated by Rachel Hildebrandt



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Extracts translated by Rachel Hildebrandt

It was on a whim that I typed my mother's name into a Russian search engine. Over the decades, I had tried repeatedly to track down information on her. I had written to the Red Cross and other search agencies, to various relevant archives and research institutions, to complete strangers in Ukraine and in Moscow. I had scanned faded victim lists and card files, but I never came across even the trace of a trace of her, not even a vague hint about her previous life in Ukraine, of her existence prior to my birth.

During World War II, she was deported from Mariupol at the age of twenty-three - along with my father - to Germany to work as a forced laborer. All I ever knew was that both of them worked in an arms factory belonging to the Flick corporation. Eleven years after the end of the war, my mother took her life in a small West German town, not too far from a community of *displaced persons*, which is what they called the forced laborers back then. Except for my sister and myself, there probably was not a single person left in the world who knew her. And even we, my sister and I, did not really know her. We were only children. My sister had just turned four, and I was ten years old on that October day when she left our apartment without saying a word, never to return. She was only ever a ghost in my recollections, more of a feeling than a memory.

I eventually gave up searching for anything on her. She had been born over ninety years ago and had only lived for thirty-six of those - not just any years, but the years of the civil war, the purges and catastrophic famine in the Soviet Union, the years of World War II and the Third Reich. She had been caught in the shredder of two dictatorships, first under Stalin in Ukraine and then under Hitler in Germany. It was delusional to think that decades later I could find the trail of a young woman in the ocean of forgotten victims, a woman about whom I knew practically nothing except for her name.

When I entered that name into a Russian internet site one summer night in 2013, I was immediately rewarded with a single hit. My astonishment only lasted a few seconds. One of things that had made my searches more difficult was the fact that my mother possessed very common Ukrainian names. There had to have been hundreds, if not thousands, of Ukrainian women who had the same name she did. The woman on my screen bore the same patronymic as my mother. She was also Jewgenia Jakowlewna Iwaschtschenko. However, even the name of my mother's father, Jakow, was so widespread that my discovery did not have to mean anything.

I clicked on the link and read: Iwaschtschenko, Jewgenia Jakowlewna, born 1920 in Mariupol. I stared at the entry. It stared back. Regardless of how little I knew about my mother, I was aware that she had been born in 1920 in Mariupol. Was it possible that there were two girls with identical first and last names born the same year in the small city that was Mariupol back then? Girls whose fathers were both named Jakow?

Although Russian was my native language - one that I have never fully lost over the years and one that I have used on an almost daily basis since moving to post-Reunification Berlin - I was unsure if I was really reading my mother's name on the computer screen or if I was only seeing a mirage in the desert that the Russian internet was for me. I was processing the Russian used here almost as if it were a foreign language. A newspeak that was rapidly changing, constantly incorporating new words, adopting Americanisms on a daily basis, the etymology of which was almost invisible as a result of the Cyrillic transcription. Even this page pulled up on my screen had an English name. It was called "Azov's Greeks." I knew that Mariupol was located on the Sea of Azov, but why the sudden appearance of the phrase "Azov's Greeks"? If I were English, I could have aptly said: "It's all Greek to me."

I knew next to nothing about Mariupol at this point. Despite all the times I had tried to search for something on my mother, it had never occurred to me to look into the city from which she had come. For forty years, Mariupol had been called Shdanow, and it was only after the collapse of the Soviet Union that it was once again called by its old name. The city had always remained an internal, mental space for me, one that was never illuminated by the light of reality. I have always been comfortable with suppositions, with my own images and conceptions of the world. External realities threaten my inner comfort zone, which explains why I avoid them as much as possible.

My earliest image of Mariupol was shaped by the fact that, during my childhood, nobody differentiated between the various Soviet satellites. The citizens of all fifteen republics were considered Russians. Although during the Middle Ages, Russia took root in Ukraine - out of the Kievan Rus, which people call the "Cradle of Russia," with Kiev serving as the mother of all Russian cities - my parents spoke about Ukraine as if it were simply part of Russia. My father said it was the biggest country in the world, a powerful nation that stretched from Alaska all the way to Poland, incorporating one-sixth of the entire world's land mass. In comparison, Germany was only a tiny dot on the map.

For me, Ukrainian culture was subsumed under Russian culture, and whenever I imagined my mother in her previous life in Mariupol, I always envisioned her in the Russian snow. Wrapped in her old-fashioned gray coat with its velvet collar and cuffs, the only coat I ever saw her wear, she would trudge through dark, icy streets in some indefinite space through which blizzards raged for all eternity. The Siberian snow that covered all of Russia, including Mariupol. The sinister land of the never-ending cold in which the Communists ruled.

My childhood image of my mother's birthplace survived for decades within the dark chambers of my mind. Even once I know that Russia and Ukraine were two separate countries and that Ukraine had nothing to do with Siberia, my Mariupol remained intact - despite the fact that I was not certain that my mother had actually come from this city. Maybe I had simply assigned her to it because I liked the name so much. Sometimes I even doubted if there ever had been a city with this name, suspecting that I had simply made it up, like so many other things related to my personal background.

One day, as I was flipping through the sports page in a newspaper and was about to move on, my eyes fell on the word Mariupol. I read that a German soccer team had recently traveled to Ukraine to play against Iljitschewez Mariupol. The sole fact that the city had a soccer team was so sobering that my mental Mariupol instantly crumbled like a moldy mushroom. Nothing in the world interested me less than soccer, so it was ironic that this was my first encounter with the real Mariupol. I learned that the city was known for its remarkably mild climate. A harbor city on the Sea of Azov, the flattest and warmest sea in the world. It is famous for its long, wide, sandy beaches, its vineyards, its endless fields of sunflowers. The German soccer players sweltered in the summer heat that almost reached the forty-degree mark.

It seemed to me that the reality was much less real than my own conceptualization. For the first time since her death, my mother became a person who existed outside of myself. Instead of in the snow, I suddenly caught sight of her in a pale, airy summer frock, strolling along a Mariupol street, her arms and legs bare, her feet strapped in sandals. A young girl who did not grow up in the coldest, darkest spot on Earth, but rather close to the Crimea, on the coast of a warm southern sea, under a sky that perhaps resembled the one over the Italian Adriatic. Nothing seemed less compatible than the idea of my mother and the South, of my mother and sun and sea. I had to transplant all of my ideas about her life into another temperature, another climate. The old unknown was now transformed into a new unknown.

Years later, a Russian novella whose title I have forgotten revealed to me what winter in Mariupol was truly like during the time that my mother lived there: *Damp snow drifted down on the other side of the Hotel Palmyra's window. A hundred steps from the sea, whose sound I never could have described as crashing. It chuckled and wheezed, that flat, unimportant, dull sea. The nondescript town of Mariupol snuggled up against the water, complete with its Polish Kościół and its Jewish synagogue. With its stinking harbor, its warehouses. With the tattered tent from a traveling circus on its beach, with its Greek tavernas and the lonely, wan lantern at the entrance of the aforementioned hotel.* This passage struck me as an intimate message about my mother. She had once seen all of this with her own eyes. She must have walked past the Hotel Palmyra at some point, maybe in her gray coat, maybe in the same damp snow, the stench of the harbor in her nose.

I learned several astonishing things about Mariupol from the website on which I had landed. At the time that my mother had been born there, the city still bore the marks of a strong Greek influence. In the eighteenth century, Catherine the Great had gifted the town to Greek Christians from the Crimean Khanate. It was not until the mid-1800s that other ethnic groups were allowed to once again make their homes in Marioypoli, which was the town's new name. A Greek minority still lives in the city, and for whatever reason, my mother's name had led me to a forum for ethnically Greek Ukrainians. A vague memory floated to the surface of my mind. I had nothing more than a very thin, barely retained memory of what my mother had once said about her life in Ukraine. However, what had taken root in my recollections was the conviction that her mother had been Italian. Of course, I could no longer be certain after so many years that this was an actual memory. It might have been some random, residual information that had been tucked away in my mind. What seemed the most likely scenario was that as a child I had invented an Italian grandmother and added her to my mythical adventure stories. Perhaps the Italian grandmother had sprung up from my once fervent wish to escape my Russian-Ukrainian

skin, to be something other than I was. I now asked myself if perhaps I had simply remembered things wrongly. What if my mother's mother had not been Italian, but Greek? Would this not line up well with what I had now, first now, learned about Mariupol? Had my mind imperceptibly transformed the Greek woman into an Italian one, perhaps because in my youth, Italy had become the focus of all my longing and dreams?

It seemed to me as if I had entered a new darkness, as if I were suddenly rooted in an even more alien, ultimately unrecognizable space. I stared at my mother's name on the screen and had the feeling that the meager identity that I had cobbled together over the course of my lifetime had just burst like a bubble. For a moment, everything around me dissolved. The world only first resolidified when it occurred to me that the Greek roots of the newly discovered Jewgenia Jakowlewna Iwaschtschenko were only significant to me insofar as they proved that this woman could not be my mother. Of this much I was certain: I had never heard my mother utter the word *greki*. If I had, I would have clung to that word as something extraordinary and exotic back then in our closed-off, squalid world of shacks - although it was hard for me to believe that my mother had never mentioned her hometown's Greek heritage. What I had learned from the historical background provided on this forum was that the Greek culture was still very pronounced in Mariupol during the years she lived there.

My previous research attempts had too often turned up nothing for me to feel that my discovery was promising. However, since Azov's Greeks was also a platform to help people doing genealogical research, I decided to post a message anyway. In order to leave a post, I first had to register on the site, something I had never done on a Russian website before. I doubted if I could actually overcome this technical hurdle, but to my surprise, everything was very easy, much easier than the process on German sites. A minute later, I had full access to the page.

In the query box, I could not include much more than my mother's name and her birthplace. Her patronymic, Jakowlewna, indicated that her father's name was Jakow, but I had long forgotten my mother's maiden name. I knew that she had had a brother and a sister, but I did not know their names either. I was in possession of her Ukrainian marriage certificate, which stated that my mother married my father in July 1943 in German-occupied Mariupol. A work visa authorized by the Leipzig Bureau of Labor documented that she, along with my father, was deported to Germany in 1944. That was all that I knew about her.

So the question was: For whom was I actually searching? It was a given that her siblings were no longer alive. If so, they would have already reached biblical ages. Even their children - assuming they had any - my potential cousins, would already be advanced in years, just like me. They could hardly have known my mother, and it was debatable as to whether they actually knew of her existence. Perhaps no one had told them about her. At the time of her departure and over the following decades, it was dangerous to be related to people like my mother, a person who had possibly let herself be deported to Germany, or who had at least not succeeded in avoiding working as a forced laborer for the enemy. Someone who had not committed suicide in the face of no other options, which was what Stalin had called for all true patriots to do. Nobody told stories to their children about such relatives, who were deemed traitors to the motherland. Nobody would have put their children at such risk.

[...]

The more research I did, the more atrocities I encountered about which hardly anyone seemed to be aware. I was not the only one who was learning about these for the first time. None of my German friends, many of whom I considered enlightened, historically knowledgeable individuals, had any idea how many Nazi camps had once existed within the boundaries of the former German Reich. Some of them guessed around twenty, while others estimated two hundred, a few up to two thousand. According to a study by the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, the number is actually closer to 42,500, not including the smaller and the satellite camps. In an interview with *ZEIT* published on March 4, 2013, the American historian Geoffrey Megargee, who had contributed to the study, remarked that the horrific number of camps confirmed that almost every German had to have known about the existence of these camps, even if they had not comprehended the extent of the camps or the conditions within them. It was the old story: Nobody knew a thing, despite the fact that with over 42,500 camps the entire country must have functioned like a single gulag.

I delved deeper and deeper into world history, into the ghostly tragedies of the twentieth century. The studies on the use of forced laborer in the Third Reich were full of blind spots, inconsistencies, and contradictions. My subject matter kept slipping away from me, eventually towering over my head. I wondered if it was perhaps already too late. Maybe I lacked the energy to do justice to this vast amount of material. And were there really words for all of this, words for the life of my mother who had vanished into anonymity, whose fate functioned representationally for the millions of others?

I had long forgotten about Azov's Greeks by the time I received yet another email with strange symbols in the sender line, the ones that concealed Konstantin with his Greek last name. I read:

Dear Natalia Nikolajewna!

I have looked around some more and have come to the conclusion that the Jewgenia Jakolewna Iwaschtschenko whose name appears in our archives is, in all likelihood, your mother after all. Let me begin a little further back. During the nineteenth century, a Ukrainian estate owner from the Chernihiv oblast, a noble by the name of Epifan Jakowlewitsch Iwaschtschenko, lived in Mariupol. That was your great-grandfather. He was probably one of the first non-Greeks to settle in Mariupol during this time. At that point, Mariupol was still a small merchant town on the Sea of Azov with about five thousand residents. He purchased a house on Mitropolitskaja Street for himself and his family. He became a city councilman, a shipowner, and the director of the harbor customs board. Over the course of time, he acquired a few more properties in the city, opening several stores through which he increased his social status. He was married to Anna von Ehrenstreit. Our

knowledge of her is limited to the fact that she was a member of the Baltic German aristocracy. According to the church records, she lived from 1845 to 1908.

Your great-grandparents had six children, two boys and four girls. The oldest son was named Jakow, and he was your grandfather, your mother's father. The church records reveal that his younger brother Leonid died of epilepsy at the young age of twenty-six. We know nothing about the sisters Jelena and Natalia, but we do know that Olga, the third sister, married the well-known psychologist and philosopher Georgi Tschelpanow, who had Greek roots. This may explain why not only your mother's name, but information on the entire family linked to the Tschelpanows by marriage landed in our archive.

Your grandfather's fourth sister, your great-aunt Valentina, belonged to the crème de la crème of Mariupol's intelligentsia. Her name is still known in the city. You can read more about her in the attached article.

Unfortunately we do not have any information about your grandmother, only that her name was Matilda Iosifowna. Your mother's sister was named Lidia, and she was born in 1911, according to the church records. Her brother's name was Sergei, and he was born in 1915. He was an opera singer, and during the war, he sang at the front and received a medal for this. You will find the digitized honorary certificate attached to this email.

A book about Georgi Tschelpanow was published recently, and it includes multiple references to his wife's family. Your great-aunt Olga obviously suffered from some kind of mental illness, and at the age of forty-three, she jumped out of a window in Moscow. We will ask the author to send you a copy of the book.

Your mother's siblings are probably deceased by now, and their descendents will also be difficult to track down, because the Iwaschtchenko name is quite common here. In addition, we do not know anything about your Aunt Lidia except for her first names. The search for women is always more difficult if the husband's name is unknown. This is why I propose that for now we continue the search by concentrating on your Uncle Sergei and his descendents. To start, we could contact the producers of the television series "Wait for Me." This is a very well-known program for genealogical searches, and it is broadcast in both Russia and Ukraine.

I understood none of what I was reading. Who was this Konstantin? Some internet spook, weirdo, hack? In this time in which it was once again popular in Russia to have at least one drop of blue blood in your veins, was he trying to entice me with the allure of aristocratic ancestors so that he could press me to make an advanced payment for other tidbits of his "knowledge"? There was no way I believed that my mother came from the background he had described, from the upper crust. The woman I had known had not belonged even to the lowest of the low, much less to the upper echelons. She had been marginalized out of all groups: a Slavic *Untermensch*, a pathetic, desolate figure that people threw stones at on the street. If she had ever made even the slightest hint about noble heritage, I would have eagerly sopped up that information in my desperate childhood longing for social advancement. It was as if the person behind the email had somehow accessed the mental

specters from my childhood, regaling me with the same lies I had told myself all those years ago. I was clearly dealing with a particularly obscure blossom from the digital jungle.

I opened the first attachment and read the bold-faced title to the article: “Valentina Epifanowna Ostoslawskaja - an unforgotten daughter of our city.” Underneath it was an oval, medallion-shaped studio photograph of a woman. I caught my breath. I knew this woman. I had known her as long as I could remember. She was in a printed photo that was sitting in my desk drawer at home, on the back of which my mother had written “Grandfather and two acquaintances.” The woman who now gazed at me from my screen looked somewhat younger, a little thinner, but without a doubt, this was the same face: that of an intellectual, with high cheekbones, stern features, and a somewhat haughty mouth. In this picture, she was also wearing a dark, high-necked dress, a pair of pince-nez perched on her nose.

It felt as if the lake outside of my window was surging. Everything around me suddenly seemed completely new and strange. I stared at the face of the woman on my screen, and as if in slow motion, it dawned on me what this meant. This photo was the unbelievable, phantasmagoric proof that the Jewgenia Jakowlewna Iwaschtschenko I had found on the Azov’s Greeks forum actually was my mother. And the woman I knew so well from the photo, the one my mother had called an acquaintance, was in reality her aunt, her father’s sister.

I flew breathlessly through the article. I learned that Valentina Epifanowna had been born in 1870 and that she had founded a private high school for girls from financially disadvantaged families. The article described how she spent her entire life fighting for social justice. It was thanks to her engagement that countless girls from Mariupol had access to higher education and were able to escape lives of uncertainty and poverty. Idealistically speaking, she was close to her brother Jakow, my mother’s father, who had studied law and history in college. Already as a student, he had been linked to the underground Bolshevik movement. He was arrested by the Czar’s secret police at the age of twenty-three and was banished to Siberia for twenty years.

The article explained that Valentina Epifanowna, my mother’s aunt, married Vasilyj Ostoslawskij, a man from an extraordinarily wealthy Russian aristocratic family that was known for its high levels of education, open-mindedness, and liberality. I read that after the Revolution, this man starved to death along with millions of others who lost their lives in Ukraine during the period of catastrophic starvation. Valentina’s high school burned down during the civil war, and she died shortly after that at the age of forty-eight from the rampant Spanish Flu. Her son Ivan Ostoslawskij became an influential aerodynamics engineer, whose books were standard reading for students of flight and aerospace engineering across the entire Soviet Union. A photo showed him as an old man who, with his coarse facial features and smart, sparkling eyes, resembled a St. Bernard. Valentina’s daughter Irina Ostoslawskaja rose to the position of deputy minister for public education. However, under Stalin, she was arrested as an enemy of the people and was banished to Siberia.

I learned something else as well. My grandfather Epifan, the estate owner from the Chernihiv oblast, supposedly became increasingly addicted to alcohol in Mariupol, and he eventually lost his entire fortune. At some point, he seemingly disappeared without a trace, leaving his wife Anna von Ehrenstreit alone with their six children without any means of support. According to one rumor, he fled to India on one of his former freighters.

It felt like I needed a second head to process everything, to soak it in and fully comprehend. Before now, I had only ever experienced truths that later proved to be lies. It was hysterical that my childhood fairy tales now seemed to carry a kernel of truth in them.

What disturbed me the most was the great distance that it seemed my mother had fallen. Why had she never spoken about her family? She had never said even one single word about them. Why would she have lied about her Aunt Valentina by calling her a mere acquaintance? In my eyes, my mother had always been an ordinary woman from impoverished circumstances. Her true heritage, which still struck me as a fanciful invention, now conveyed to her fate an entirely new, incomprehensible dimension of brutality.

I opened the second attachment to the Azov's Greeks email with numb fingers. What appeared on my screen was a digital scan of a weathered, discolored document. I was only able to decipher the severely faded Russian typescript by zooming in on it. I read:

The Order of the Red Star is being granted to Iwaschtschenko, Sergei Jakowlewitsch, born in 1915 in Mariupol. Party member, in the Red Army since 1939, Sergeant, on the front since the earliest days of the war, enlisted in Kiev, no injuries.

As a soloist in the "Red Banner" choral ensemble, Comrade Iwaschtschenko has made an outstanding contribution to Russian classical music by performing arias from Russian operas for the soldiers and officers at the front. The "Indian Song" from the opera *Sadko* by Rimsky-Korsakov and Galitsky's aria from the opera *Prince Igor* from Alexander Borodin became favorite melodies among the units and companies in front of which Comrade Iwaschtschenko performed. He never shrank in the face of any danger or hardship. Even under the most dire of circumstances, he would perform, sometimes even at the risk of his own life. His performances always reached the highest quality of artistic achievement, which is why the soldiers at the front loved and admired him so greatly. The comrade distinguished himself through his exemplary work ethic and discipline. He has remained true to the party of Lenin and Stalin, and has selflessly served his socialist homeland. He has already been honored with the Medal "For the Defence of Stalingrad." The Soviet government herewith awards him the Order of the Red Star.

Director of the Department of Media, Propaganda and Agitation

Colonel B.F. Prokofiev

I spent the next few days in a state of shock. I did what I always did. I sat out on the balcony, I went for walks along the lake, I cooked meals for myself. But that was not me. I watched as a stranger went through the motions. I saw her stare pensively for hours at a wall and break into inexplicable laughter. It went so far that, inside my mind, I engaged in

incomprehensible discussions with invisible people, suddenly gesturing in argument or nodding in agreement. If anyone had seen me, they would have thought I had lost my mind.

I kept rereading Konstantin's email and the attachments. I needed to repeatedly assure myself that I was not dreaming. In amazement, I would gaze at my grandmother's name. So that was her name, my mother's mother: Matilda Iosifowna. A Matilda whose father had been named Iosif. It was a feminine name that I had never encountered in Russian. Konstantin had access to the digitized church records in Mariupol, and he informed me that Matilda Iosifowna's church affiliation had been listed as Roman Catholic. In connection with the name Matilda, this clearly pointed to my grandmother's Italian heritage. There were also several indications that her patronymic, based on the name Iosif, was actually the russianized version of Giuseppe. However, these things could not settle into my mind in the onrush of information.

It felt as if I had invented the name of my mother's mother. Matilda Iosifowna, the woman for whom my mother had wept so many tears, the woman who had undertaken the long journey to find her banished daughter Lidia and who never returned. It seemed to me as if my discovery was undoing the part of my mother's unhappiness that had been rooted in the pain tied to her missing mother and that had contributed to her inability to continue living. I kept imagining myself running to my mother and bringing her the news: Matilda Iosifowna, your mother, I found her again. Matilda, do you still know her? I really have found her, here she is, look...

The magic of names. My mother's siblings were also suddenly actual individuals. Lidia and Sergei. I found it very easy to accept that these and not others were their names. I was surprised that I had never come up with them myself. Lidia and Sergei, two names that sounded like natural extensions of my mother's name. My Aunt Lidia and Uncle Sergei. I read Sergei's award certificate over and over again, the document that proved he had been awarded the Order of the Red Star, searching for clues about his life, which would have also been clues about my mother's life.

[...]

One of the primary ghosts from my childhood was a relative of my mother's, whom my father claimed had suffered from an incurable mental illness. Even treatment by a famous psychologist had been unable to help her. My father was convinced that my mother and I had inherited this same mental disability. Throughout my entire childhood and teenage years, I waited for the onset of my inherited illness. Years later, after I had long abandoned my father's sinister genetic theories, I wondered if perhaps this hypothesis had existed as a means for him to conceal his fears related to his own instability, the widespread Russian maniaphobia that Pushkin referenced in one of his most famous poems. Once I reached adulthood and the trauma from my childhood began to flood my mind with pointless, absurd fears that brooked no contradiction, I occasionally suspected that perhaps my father had been right after all.

My psychological mess might be rooted in my familial heritage, like a species of couch grass that you could yank out of the ground all you liked without ever being able to eradicate it. In the same way, I might not have even the slightest chance of freeing myself from the destructive influences from my childhood.

It was now clear to me that my mother's supposedly mentally ill relative had to have been her Aunt Olga. She was described in the book as psychologically disturbed, and as Konstantin had already told me, she had jumped out of a window at the age of forty-three. And the famous psychologist my father mentioned, the one who tried to cure her, must have been none other than Tschelpanow, Olga's husband.

Besides the numerous photos of him and other Russian philosophers of his time, the book also included several pictures of his wife. I studied the the materialization of my childhood spook. This relative had actually once existed outside of my mind. She did not belong among the fictional people from my childhood, but instead had been a person of flesh and blood. One of my great-aunts, a dark-haired woman with a soft, childish face, small and quite dainty with large, serious eyes. One of the photos pictured her in an opulent ball gown, flowers in her heavy locks. Another photo showed her next to her husband in an elegant traveling outfit. A third had caught her in the circle of her family on the terrace of some dacha, half-submerged in a green thicket. The author of the book described her as extremely intelligent, sophisticated, and soulful. He quoted excerpts from her letters, which she initially sent from Mariupol to her fiance in Moscow and then later from Moscow to her parents in Mariupol. A voice swathed in nicknames in the Russian diminutive form, a kind of tender singsong full of yearning for her mother and siblings, full of concern for her brother Jakow in distant Siberia. The earlier letters to her fiance reflect a weak sense of self-worth: She strongly urged him to carefully rethink their marriage. He - this wonderful, beloved man to whom all of the doors to the highest scientific institutions and the finest Moscow salons stood open - deserved a different, better woman. She was neither lovely nor likeable, had always had a weak constitution, was aging prematurely, and often could not shake herself of recalcitrant, dark thoughts.

Nonetheless, the marriage took place. Olga gave birth to three children, and managed with the help of a governess and a housekeeper, a large household that frequently entertained guests from Moscow's spiritual and cultural elite. She was supposedly a tender mother, and she loved her husband with great devotion. She also seems to have suspected early on the political developments that would lead to his doom. She frequently accompanied him on his trips abroad, to New York and Switzerland, to Leipzig to meet with the famous German experimental psychologist Wilhelm Wundt who collaborated closely with her husband, to Berlin multiple times to visit the Charité. During the final years of her life, she supposedly suffered from obsessive ideas. She lived in a constant, incessant state of fear for her children and her husband. It was said that her thoughts were fixated on things and events that she could not clearly articulate. She reacted severely to even the smallest hint of unfairness, and the most trivial of things would cause her to break into tears. Her suicide in 1906 was not described in detail and was not supported with documentary evidence, remaining an unsubstantiated claim by the author.

Konstantin was acquainted with him, The author lived in a remote village in southern Ukraine and had almost no links with the outside world. All attempts to contact him in order to ask about Olga and the sources of his claims came to nothing. He refused to answer either Konstantin's or my emails.

The longer I thought about this story, the odder it seemed to me. Had Tschelpanow, who advocated the theory of "innateness," detected an innate mental illness in his wife's psychological instability? Had Olga possibly become a victim to his work in experimental psychology? Did all of us - Olga, my mother, and I - suffer from the Tschelpanow illness? Had I now found the originator of the idea that might have possibly driven both Olga and my mother to suicide? Had it been Georgi Tschelpanow's idea that had been picked up by my father, surviving over the course a century and continuing to bloom in my mind?

I kept seeing Olga's small, dainty feet strapped in traveling boots and scurrying across the streets of Berlin at her husband's side as he made his way to the Charité over a century before. She had once been so close to me, before I ever existed, only a twenty-minute walk from my current apartment in Berlin.

A decade after her death, soon after the outbreak of the Revolution, her husband's star burned out in the scientific heavens, just as she had predicted. He was accused of mysticism, idealism, and anti-Marxism. He lost his professorship at the University of Moscow. He was no longer allowed to even enter the institute he himself had established. His books vanished from the libraries. One of his daughters became a party-loyal artist who created monumental, heroic sculptures. His second daughter married the French philosopher Brice Parain and moved with him to Paris, into the capitalist West, which served to discredit Tschelpanow all the more. His son, a Germanist and ancient philologist, was involved in the creation of a German-Russian dictionary, which was branded as counter-revolutionary and fascist after its publication. Its three editors, including Tschelpanow's son, were sentenced to death and shot. It was a miracle that Tschelpanow himself escaped physical annihilation. In his final years, lonely and destitute, he would linger around the entrance to his former institute, asking the passers-by if they still remembered him. He has been rehabilitated today. His books are back in print, and his life and work are the focus of research and published studies.

I kept going back to the family photo of the Iwaschtschenkos with the indoor palm. Had my mother known the original picture? Had she held it in her hands? Were her invisible fingerprints on it somewhere? The more I stared at the image, the more unreal it seemed to me that she came from this world in front of me. Nothing, absolutely nothing, from it had left a visible mark on her. Should it not have occasionally sparkled, glimmered through, despite all of the fearful disavowals of her background? How could a person vanish so completely from their own skin? Or had I as a child simply missed the signs, not seen what I might have easily detected today?

[...]

What might my mother's birthplace have looked like back then? It probably had little in common with the bright, southern coastal town that had displaced my wintry imagery after

reading the newspaper article about the soccer game in Mariupol. My conceptualization of the city changed once more. Mariupol had been an industrial city prior to the Revolution, and during the Soviet period, the industrialization was heavily promoted. Shock workers set world records for work productivity. The city was soon overshadowed by the large factories' belching smokestacks. The noxious emissions hanging in the blue summer sky, raining down on streets and people at all hours of the day and night. There is the Torgowaja Uliza with its numerous stands and booths, whose offerings did not increase much after the Revolution: some *quark*, meat, a few tomatoes and potatoes from private gardens - unaffordable for the majority of the hungry populace. The Fontannaja Uliza with its fountains from which people had drawn water for themselves and their animals before the turn of the century. The Gretscheskaja Uliza, where my mother's cousins probably lived before they were expelled from their palace.

The Italjanskaja Uliza, where my Italian great-grandparents' house had probably once stood. Horse-drawn carriages rumble across the broken cobblestones. And then in 1933, the year my mother turned thirteen, the first streetcar line was built, a single set of tracks on which the streetcars drove back and forth.

The wilderness begins right outside the city center. The paved streets disappear, giving way to a labyrinthine network of trails and paths, beaten down by foot. Cottages with tiny gardens, snuggled up against each other, intertwined one with the other. Stone cottages, wooden huts, plaster ones, shanties, arbors, sheds, shacks. People living everywhere, three and one-half square meters of living space per city resident. No sewer system. Garbage, refuse, stench, poverty. Epidemics, typhus, malaria. Homeless children who had lost their parents in the turmoil of the civil war roam around, sifting through garbage, stealing, sleeping during the winter in the roadside tar kettles that the construction workers use during the day to keep the tar hot for their road work.

And the sea, the Sea of Azov, the flattest sea in the world. Practically tailor-made for my mother, the non-swimmer... Had she ever gone swimming there, or at least visited the beach sometimes? With other girls, with boys? What kind of swimsuit had she worn? Did people back then even own such things, or did they go swimming in their clothes, their underwear? Despite everything, were there also lovely, untroubled moments in my mother's daily life, times of youthful exuberance? Had she gushed about poetry, the latest hit songs, boys? Did she go to the ice rink in the winter, the one where they rented skates and an orchestra played tunes to which the young people would flit across the ice? Did she attend plays, concerts, or dances at the cultural center? Had she liked one of the many admirers she probably had? Or had she secretly been in love with the one boy who did not want her? Did she dream about him and write letters to him that she never sent? Or was my father her first love? Had she ever even loved him?

[...]

On October 8, 1941, my mother was twenty-one. It was the day the German Wehrmacht took occupation of Mariupol, as part of Hitler's Operation Barbarossa which was intended to decimate the Slavs and create more *Lebensraum* for the Aryan master race. At the time of

occupation, 240,000 people lived in in Mariupol. Two years later, this number had dropped to 85,000.

I do not know what inspired my father to leave Russia and move to Ukraine. I have no idea when or how my parents met. But I do think that it was during the war and that it was the war that catalyzed this marriage. Hatred of Stalin might have also come into play. My cousin Igor is convinced that this was the strongest area of common ground between his parents Lidia and Juri. Regardless, what did play a decisive role was the fact that in the inferno of war my mother had nobody left except Tonja. She was completely on her own. Perhaps in her state of desolation and deathly fear, she simply went along with somebody who could promise her protection. The Russian from the Volga area was twenty years older than her, and he possessed the very abilities that she lacked. He could fight, slog his way through, survive. A handsome, roll-up-your-sleeves kind of man, who probably immediately took control of her life. She was an unforeseen godsend to him - a young woman who was still graced by the aura of the pre-Revolution elite, which he, as the son of a small-scale grocer, could never have accessed. She - very young, beautiful, innocent, and completely alone - fell into his hands coincidentally. A gift from the war to him. Attracted by his strength and fascinated by his coarse, domineering demands of her, she experienced her first passion with him, something which in the war, in the constant presence of death, was made all the more existential and vital.

Did she know about his first wife when she married him? The Jewess with whom he had two children? I only learned about this marriage later by accident. For me, it is one of the darkest parts of my father's entire shadowy life. He never talked about his past in the Soviet Union. It was locked inside of him, like a chest to which not even he had the key. After her death, he never even once mentioned my mother - as if she had never existed. My sister and I were left alone with him, a man who lived within a state of opaque, internal migrations. Excepting his unpredictable outbursts of violence, we only knew him as a silent man who drank, smoked, and read thick Russian books that he had delivered once a month in large packages from the Tolstoy Library in Munich. Occasionally, when he was in a good mood, he would talk about his pre-Revolution life in Kamyschin. About the traditional religious festivals, the weddings and funerals, about singing in the church choir. And, over and over again, about the largest, juiciest watermelons in the world that grew along the practically unending Volga, in comparison to which the German Elbe (Had he actually ever seen it?) was a mere trickle. The only important information he ever shared about himself was that his parents both died of typhus when he was thirteen, and that he had rescued himself and his three younger brothers from starvation by selling their parents' shack for a single bag of flour. Decades later, I learned from Lidia's accounts that this must have been one of those exploitive transactions that her father later looked into as an investigative judge.

I could never find out anything about the fate of my father's first family, but their existence highlighted a point of connection between my mother and me: We were both born into our fathers' second families. We were something like the second-act children of aging men who had left their first marriages and married much younger women. Jakow's first wife had probably remained in Siberia, while he took their son with him to Warsaw. But what had happened with my father? Was he already separated from his first family when he met my mother? Or did he abandon his wife and children in the midst of the frenzied hunt for the

Jews, in order to start a new life with a twenty-three-year-old woman in Germany? Left alone, were the ex-wife and my step-siblings murdered by the Nazis, or were they perhaps already dead by the time my parents met? I will never know. This and doubtlessly other secrets were taken by my father to his grave. He died in 1989 in a German retirement home, thirty-three years after my mother, a blind, mute old man.

The large-scale deportation of the Ukrainians to Germany was accompanied by a pervasive propaganda effort on the part of the occupiers. At every turn, the Soviet citizens were called to report for work duty in Germany. They were promised paradise there. The brainwashing occurred everywhere: during the opening programs at the cinemas, over all of the radio stations, in the workplaces, at the train stations, in the theaters, on public squares and streets. Large, colorful posters depicted happy Ukrainians working at progressive German workbenches. Smartly dressed Ukrainian domestic servants were pictured whipping up German Sunday cakes. Ukrainian women were especially popular as maids. In 1942, Hitler ordered that half a million of them be employed in German households, which resulted in many German women losing their jobs. The press circulated daily pleas, like this one:

UKRAINIAN WOMEN AND MEN

The Bolshevik commissioners have destroyed your factories and workplaces, and are cutting you off from work and bread. Germany is offering you useful, well-paid employment. In Germany, you will find excellent work and living conditions, and you will be paid according to the tariff and based on your productivity. We take especially good care of the Ukrainian workers. So that they can live in conditions that are suitable to them and can retain their cultural distinctness, separate settlements are being constructed for them. They will provide everything that you will need to live: cinemas, theaters, hospitals, radio stations, swimming pools, etc. The Ukrainians are living in bright, nicely furnished rooms, and they are given the same things to eat as the German workers. Furthermore, the factory canteens cook the specialties of all nations, which is why the Ukrainian workers will find *Wareniki*, *Galuscki*, *Kwas*, etc. on the menus.

Germany is waiting for you! Hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians are already working in free, happy Germany. What about you? During your stay in Germany, we will take good care of your family back home.

The propaganda was initially effective. Not all of the so-called *Ostarbeiter* were forcibly deported. At the beginning, many of them reported voluntarily. Gradually the truth about the downright nightmarish work and living conditions in the German Reich trickled back home. At first, letters conveyed hidden messages, for example, in the form of flowers drawn in a letter from a sixteen-year-old to his mother. The flower was the agreed-upon signal that things were not going well for him. As time passed, more and more deported Ukrainians returned from Germany, physically destroyed and shoved off back home, because in their condition they were no longer useful. Their stories quickly cut off the hopeful rush of those volunteering for work duty: a serious problem for the German war industry, since the German men were at the front and no longer there to fill the workplaces.

Meanwhile, the war was requiring a sharp, unrelenting increase in productivity. Germany's victory would rise or fall on the imported slave laborers from all over Europe, especially from the Soviet Union and specifically from Ukraine. Hitler appointed his model *Gauleiter* Fritz Sauckel as the General Plenipotentiary for Labor Deployment. The son of a Frankish postal worker and a seamstress, who was later described at the Nuremberg trials as the "greatest and cruelest slaver since the pharaohs," Sauckel issued the order to "finally shake off the last dregs of sentimental humanitarianism." And with this command, the human hunt began. Ukraine was the favorite region of operations for the hunters. The Ukrainians, who composed the largest percentage of the "Ostarbeiter," were perceived as the Slavs of the lowest possible value.

The only groups under them in the racial hierarchy were the Sinti, the Roma, and the Jews. They were attacked on the streets, in cinemas and cafes, at streetcar stops, in post offices, anywhere where they could be easily caught. They were hauled out of their homes in raids, dragged from the cellars and sheds where they had tried to hide. They were driven to the train station and transported to Germany in cattle cars. A countless number of them disappeared without a trace, with nothing except the clothes on their backs. Able-bodied young men were particularly desirable - entire freight trains full of Ukrainian teenagers rolled daily toward the Reich. After a while though, the forty- and fifty-year-olds were taken, and eventually, the elderly and the weak. The populations of entire villages were deported, including grandmothers with their grandchildren. The emptied villages were then burnt to the ground. At first, the minimal slave laborer age was twelve, but then it was dropped to ten. And not only that, but in the summer of 1942, all young adults in Ukraine between the ages of eighteen and twenty were forced to provide two years of compulsory service to the Reich. Up to ten thousand future forced laborers were shipped to Germany on a daily basis, and according to Fritz Sauckel's orders, all of these people had to be fed, housed, and treated as cheaply as possible in order to yield the highest possible productivity.

An East German friend of mine called my attention to a small paperback volume that was published in the GDR in 1962. It contained a short text from Franz Fühmann, who had fought on the Ukrainian front:

In front of us, along the shed wall, stood a silent procession of women, their hips lightly swaying. These were Ukrainian women and girls who were standing three across down the wall and swaying their hips. They were pressed tightly against each other and had linked their arms together. They stood there and swayed silently, like blades of grass in the wind. Bundles sat on the ground at their feet, small bundles: clothes, a pot, a spoon. And they stood there as the wind gusted over the roof of the shed, and then we noticed that the line of women was not really silent. It was humming, quietly, oh so quietly, a soft melody. Guards in fur coats stood in front of the women, guns slung over their shoulders. A sergeant smoked as he tramped up and down. A locomotive whistled shrilly, and then a black freight train pulled up on the tracks. We had not moved a single step. I stared at the women, and one of the women close to us turned and looked right at me, then at Nikolai and Vladimir, the two Hiwis with their armbands clearly marked "HIWI." She then nudged the woman next to her, and the row of women turned, head after head, like a book opening. They slowly turned and

gazed into the faces of the Hiwis, taking in their HIWI armbands, before silently turning back forward, head after head. Chalky white, the Hiwis stood there, their lips trembling. The freight train stopped rattling, as gray smoke suddenly billowed forth, a warm veil. I hoped that the Hiwis would run away under the cover of the smoke cloud, but they did not move, as if they were frozen to the ground. The train's sliding doors clattered open, as the caverns yawned. The women wordlessly picked up their bundles, and the sergeant yelled: "Come on, come on, hurry!" The soldiers were pushing the women forward, when Vladimir suddenly screamed as he dropped the cable reel. He leaped toward the train, and one of the women who had already turned away, looked back at him once more. He shouted a name, a gurgling cry. One of the guards jumped forward and shoved Vladimir in the chest, barking that we needed to get out of here. Vladimir balled his hands into fists, as the guard reached for his gun.

I yanked Vladimir back, and as he felt my hand on his shoulder, Vladimir crumpled, before turning and walking back behind the shed, staggering with his head slumped forward. Nikolai did not say a word, his jaw grinding back and forth. The women vanished into the darkness inside the cars, and suddenly for the first time, I truly registered what I had already seen dozens of times here at the freight station, about which I had sent countless telegrams: a work transport to Germany, to Berlin or Vienna or Essen or Hamburg. But what I noticed was: My God, they had no shoes on their feet, only bundles of rags. They had tied paper from cement sacks around their breasts and backs, and not a single one of them had a blanket. The cars were unheated, no ovens were glowing in them, and on the floor was spread only a thin layer of chaff. Ice was hanging from the bars over the window openings. The sergeant stomped over to us. "What are you staring at here?" he asked quietly. I gave my report, then quickly picked up the cable reel with Nikolai and left. Vladimir was standing in front of the station building, leaning against a tree. He had shut his eyes and was shivering in the frosty air. I placed a hand on his shoulder and searched for something to say to him. I wanted to tell him that the women from Kiev would have it better over there, that they would be taken care of in Germany, but I had no idea how to formulate these words. I pulled out my wallet and gave each of them a cigarette. We smoked as we listened to the thudding of the train, picking up speed and simultaneously dying away. And then the locomotive gave one last whistle before the thudding lost itself in the gray day. Had it been his sweetheart or his sister? I wanted to ask, but did not.

As I read this, it was as if I could see my mother as she leaned against the shed wall at the train station, quietly humming a Ukrainian folk song with the other women. And yet I knew I would not be able to find her in this picture. She did not leave Ukraine by land, but by water, across the Black Sea, just like her Uncle Valentino before her. My memories correspond with the documents from an American occupation agency, which had been sent to me by an international search service. I stared at the papers as if they were ghostly witnesses of a reality that had never truly existed for me. The heavily yellowing pages bear no date, but they must pertain to my parents' particulars and be connected with their numerous visa applications that would have allowed them to travel to the U.S. The stations of their journey leave no doubt that they were running from the Red Army.

I have no idea what my father did in Mariupol during the German occupation. It might be that he had more of a reason to flee in front of the returning Soviet authorities than my mother did. If her earlier guilt was tied to the fact that she came from a family classified as enemies of the people, capitalists, and counter-revolutionaries, she was now also further marked because of her employment in the labor office. She had become a cog in the German deportation machinery, an active anti-Soviet partisan, a traitor to her motherland and a collaborator. The mildest punishment she would have received was the prison camp. If she had fallen into the hands of the returning Soviets, she likely would have been shot on the spot.

Before they set off, they got married. The date on the backside of the copy of their marriage certificate indicates that they were married six weeks before the commencement of the German retreat. Obviously it was already clear that the Soviet troops were about to retake the city. They undertook the distant journey as a married couple, which would have increased their chances of not being separated en route.