

Sabrina Janesch

SIBIR

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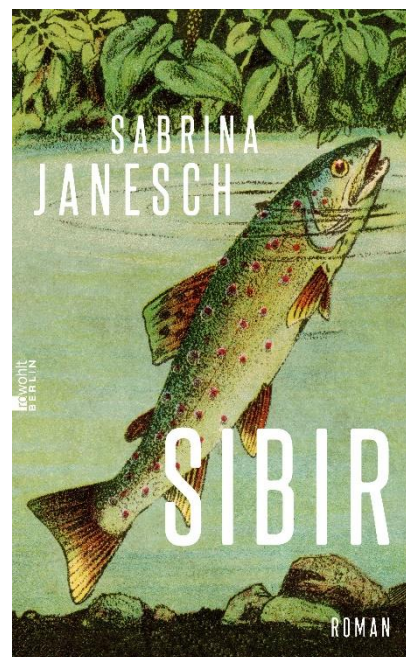
Memories are the true home.

The word that Josef Ambacher picks up sounds terrifying: *Siberia*. The grown-ups use it for everything that lies in the distant, unknown east. It's 1945 and hundreds of thousands of German civilians are deported there by the Soviet army, among them Josef. Kazakhstan is the destination. Once there, he finds himself in a harsh but also wondrous world full of myths, and he learns to prevail against the steppe and its misrepresentation.

Mühlheide, 1990: Josef Ambacher is confronted by his past when a wave of ethnic German immigrants from Kazakhstan arrive in the small town in Lower Saxony. His daughter Leila is caught in the middle and has to mediate – at a time when she herself is grasping the horror of the story and trying to keep it at bay.

Sabrina Janesch narrates the history of two childhoods, one in Central Asia after the Second World War, one 50 years later in Lower Saxony, compellingly and in glowing colours.

In the process, she masterfully traces an arc that connects unknown, untold chapters of German-Russian history with one another. A great novel about the search for Heimat, the ghosts of the past and the love that might conquer them.



“Sabrina Janesch impressively demonstrates how narrative can reassert itself as a productive form of remembering.”
FAZ about *Katzenberge*

Sabrina Janesch was born in 1985 in Lower Saxony. She is the daughter of a Polish mother and a father who was deported to Central Asia from Wartheland/Posen. Janesch has been awarded numerous prizes. *Die goldene Stadt* (2017) was a bestseller. For her research into *Sibir* she spoke to contemporary witnesses and read diaries and historical documents. Her travels eventually led her to the Kazakh steppe village in which her father had spent his childhood. Sabrina Janesch lives in Münster with her family.

- Two childhoods, two worlds: Sabrina Janesch’s great novel about an untold chapter of German-Russian history.
- Rights to *Die goldene Stadt* were sold to Italy (Neri Pozza) and Spain (Almuzara).

SABRINA JANESCH

SIBIR

To my father

Моему отцу

Әкем үшін

What's that you're writing, Papatschka?

Nothing much, sweetheart. Just words running through my head.

Father and I are sitting on the terrace. It's early morning. Wisps of mist break free of the lake's surface, still ruffled by two recently landed mallards. Their muffled chatter drifts over from the reed island and the familiar smell of washed-up mussels, water plants and moist sand hangs in the air. Two cups of black tea steam gently before us. Father dunks the tip of his index finger and uses it to inscribe something on the dusty table.

I lean forward to try and decipher it but it's pretty much illegible. Through the open window I hear my mother tossing and turning in bed.

Two days have passed since she phoned me, but I can still hear her voice as she told me father was going to lose his mind once and for all.

So what's happened?

Doctor Wiechmann has already written the referral letter. There's a place coming up in Ahrensbüttel six weeks from now.

You've had Papa referred? And you're only telling me now?

Mum must have heard my barely concealed anger. She switched to Polish, her first language, as she told me how dementia can suddenly accelerate, that's what happens and anyway Josef's over eighty now. There are so many days when he hardly remembers a thing, neither my childhood nor his.

How long's it been like this?

A good week or so, Leila. But that's not everything.

She was talking hurriedly, on a bit of a monotone. I suspected she'd taken a tranquillizer but didn't dare ask.

Leila, your father hears voices.

And what do they want of him?

What they want of him? What's that got to do with it? Josef hasn't just got dementia, he's schizophrenic with it. What if he harms himself, or me, or someone else?

Her voice faltered and she burst into tears.

Is that what he's said? He wants to harm himself?

Not as such. Just that it makes him so miserable not to remember the old days. He regrets destroying everything. He seems not to have forgotten the fact that he actually wanted to forget. Now he really has forgotten, he can't bear it.

At first I just thought: Mum's exaggerating. But the fact she'd already consulted Doctor Wiechmann and that he'd written a referral letter – if what she was saying was true – alarmed me.

Have you got any of his notebooks?

You mean his diaries? No. He destroyed them back then. Or lost them. They're all gone, anyway.

D'you mean all?

She talked herself into a frenzy in the belief father could still be helped. If only his memory would come back, if only for a moment, maybe there'd be no room left for the voices and he'd be saved.

But I thought you wanted to have him referred?

Can you come home? Stay a while?

Yes, sure. Tell me one more thing: in what language?

What d'you mean?

In what language do the voices talk to him?

How should I know? You think I hear them too?

My mother hung up and I started packing.

My father, Josef Ambacher, spent his whole life fending off the ghosts of the past, the djinns of the steppe, as he called them. He first told me about the voices when I was twelve, soon after the snowstorm that had turned our lives upside down. My father never saw himself as crazy. Nor had he ever told anyone else about the voices, as far as I know. Perhaps they were an echo of every story he'd ever heard and every story he'd ever told. It was this echo – as I picture it – that had at some point torn him apart inside.

The return of these voices, now, of all times, might mean he hasn't laid the ghosts of his earlier life, that these memories are his, non-transferable, even if he really wants to get rid of them. It's like he's trying to pull himself up from the depths to see himself for what he was. His stories have always driven him on, he's bound to need them and maybe that holds for me too.

Father's felt cap is on back to front, his velvet waistcoat hangs on him, and the buttons are done up wrong. As he seems to nod off, chin dropping towards chest, he clears his throat, then murmurs something I don't catch, and I can't tell what language it's in. When his body tips worryingly far left and threatens to fall from the folding chair, I rush to clasp him and save him and find his body surprisingly light, smelling of the bee propolis cream he likes to apply each morning. I hold him in my arms for a moment, I the daughter, he the father, and all of sudden I sense how much I miss him even though he's still there.

As I let go of him, I notice how chilly it's become. I catch sight of one of mother's huge woolly cardigans on a chair and put it on. It's just before seven and still nothing stirs apart from the mallards, noisily defending their territory on the reed island. Where there is fear of loss, a sense of quiet anger prevails. My father, a lifelong story-teller, can't remember, my mother, a lifelong listener, doesn't want to remember, nor does she want to create from a loose tangle of tales just one sustainable story that can stand its ground. No recollection of his childhood, nor of mine. My mother had hit the bullseye, quite without knowing. Our childhoods, with more than forty years between them, reflect one another and carry on.

Well, that's just fine, I think to myself, as I shrug off my mother's cardigan in a melodramatic fashion and then edge round my father to go inside for my laptop. Back on the terrace, I flap it open. That's just fine – I'm going to set my own voice against those other voices, and this time nothing will be left out or handed down in words, or held silently in the heart. This time everything will be recorded in writing. Two halves will make a whole and every component will be put in its rightful place, however long it takes for what belongs together to come together, stone by stone, to build a shelter for retreat or to leave behind forever. I position the laptop on the table, get my peephole lined up and take a breath.

Only now do I realise what my father had traced in the dust. The languages he'd so carefully mapped, the words he'd collected, they're all still at his fingertips. 'Siberia' is there, on the table, three times over, in German, Russian and Kazakh: *Sibirien*, *Sibir*, *Tosaq*.

Siberia – easily recognisable through the peephole. Everything my father recounted, everything he left unsaid, is playing out here at one and same moment, there for the taking, turning and watching, any which way.

There is the train, there are the cattle wagons in which hundreds of civilians, seized from their settlements, are being deported. The wagons snake to the far horizon. I'm right there with my father, we crouch by the knot-hole in the wooden wall, watching, tracking, trying to keep it all in sight. Together we strain to hear what's next.

There is the humble home from which Red Army soldiers dragged my father and his family. Josef is ten, crouched by his mother, his little brother is there, too, still alive then, hanging on, thinking of it is unbearable, as is thinking of the young woman as she crouches next to him, this is my grandmother, hanging on, the other young woman near her is my great-aunt, the dear old folk in the corner my great-grandparents. I ache with love for all those I never knew.

There is the steppe, the earth hut, the snowstorm, the wolf, there is the hunger, the cold, and the superhuman effort. All that, scraped together, put together, in one word, is Siberia. That's what the deportees called the dark horror behind the Urals and extending southwards beyond Europe, therefore at the end of the world. Everything in that place, the whole of Central Asia, the Russian Far East, no matter whether tundra, taiga or steppe, all of it was referred to as Siberia, but only ever from behind the speaker's hand, eyes wide in terror. Siberia meant death.

Whatever my father had no words for, he dressed up in stories. As a child I fed on these tales that seemed eerily to tell me and my friends about everything that bothered us and drove us on. We built huts, stockpiled food and cultivated a sense of fatalism that lent a significance to our games. My father's stories felt like a key to everything. With tenderness I rescued them from his memory and tried to make a connection between his life and that of all those who lived with us on the margins of our town.

The term 'margins' was a good way of describing our community and the lives of its members. Mühlheide is a small town on the southern edge of Lüneburg Heath and our house sits in an offshoot on the eastern margin of town. My best buddy, Arnold, and I, together with the other kids from our housing estate never, never sat in the middle of the classroom, always to the side, a bit distanced, in constant fear of being asked a question or prompted to take part. We knew instinctively that our parents were perpetually under the critical eye of those at the centre of the community, were mocked or plain disregarded. In the eyes of this well-fed, north German society, their idiosyncrasies must have seemed alien and unsettling; stories told by my father and all those around us brought the grotesque events of World War Two dangerously close.

The term 'immigrant' wasn't widely used then and, in any case, wasn't accurate for us – yes, us – because the inhabitants of the town's margins had been deported as civilians, then imprisoned as civilians, eventually to return from ten years of exile during which they had both won and lost.

During my childhood I believed that my father was, in a special and fateful way, at the centre of our community. Those who couldn't sleep at night would come to him after wandering the streets to the point of exhaustion. Those who sought him out were sock-hoarders, rabbit-eaters, obsessive foragers and berry-dryers, map-makers, secretive types, visionaries and near crazed depressives.

Looking back I tend to think these were the voices that later in life supposedly pursued him, maybe he'd absorbed those stories and laments like a sponge and never got rid of them.

My father always came across as a dapper man, with an athletic build and a penetrating gaze, his eyes an unforgettable pale blue. He probably represented the most striking and unexpected link between the margins of Mühlheide and the rest of the world. For years a computer programmer, greatly in demand, he still lived on the periphery, on the bypass that separated the hastily built fifties' housing estate from the moorland and the heath. While others rarely had the confidence to leave the local area – the word 'local' must have triggered a mental alarm against departure – my father was often away on work trips, freelancing for different companies here and there: 'independence' was his favourite word.

Now, years later, I recognise there a certain volatility that stayed a lifetime with many neighbours and acquaintances, and on top of that a fear of constantly having to try and fit in with the local community. At parents' evenings or school celebrations, my father always stood a little to one side and so gave the impression of a man in a position of responsibility or leadership, often being mistaken for the head teacher, the senior caretaker or sometimes the mayor. Even then I knew he would do his utmost to avoid conversation with other Dads. While the various Messrs Wagner, Kemper, Schmitz and Frick discussed what they'd read in the regional news pages, exchanged views on company housing schemes and new-build projects, my father would stare up at the ceiling. The only thing he ever read in his free time was Chekov, and that was only on cheerful days.

I needed the drip-feed of my father's stories, always wanting to know what he was thinking, what was troubling him, his moods and low spirits never bothered me as they did my mother. Whenever my father was away on work trips lasting several weeks, she would liven up. But I always dreaded saying goodbye to him and feeling the inevitable pain that followed. Any child fears separation from its parents, but for me it stirred up a genuine horror whenever I saw him drive away in the dark grey BMW, leaving me feeling that he wasn't simply going to a different place but vanishing inside his stories, stepping into them and away from me for ever, becoming untouchable.

Arnold viewed the histories of our parents and grandparents as a stigma and felt ashamed of his father with his drinking, and of his grandmother who spoke of nothing but her grandchild's health. By contrast I found my father impressive, distinguished by those idiosyncrasies that made him special in my eyes, someone of real significance. And all those who paid daily visits to our garden and terrace must have felt the same. My father, who had lived through everything, suffered everything, brought his insights to every situation, was rarely judgmental and, even then, only mildly so. In many ways I wanted to be like him, wanted his captivating aura, wanted to swim like him, run, climb, and be free like him. That's what I truly thought: my father was a free man.

That's how I saw him on our numerous hikes, exploratory walks and expeditions. Our shared sensitivity to nature and the inspiration we experienced with every step made for a strong bond between us. When we walked across the moor or set off into the woods, my father often spoke of the immeasurable scale of the universe and of his own vision of a God. So he and I became connected by our shared knowledge of our surroundings, far and near, and by the spiritual map that we created for ourselves as we made our escapes and roamed freely. He loved me very much, and I him.

In one specific regard he really was free; free of fear. Arnold and I had always battled with fears, the most recent episode being November 1989 when they really got on top of us. Arnold Kolb had been my best friend since kindergarten, his soft-featured, freckled face as familiar to me as my own. Apart from the fact he was strong and tough, what marked him out was his ability to think and react like lightning and adapt to any situation. What welded us together were the feelings of wonder and alienation that we both experienced whenever out in the world beyond our housing estate. We thought like twins and often said the same things, liked the same tastes, smells and colours.

Our fears and worries were similar too. We still carried within us the mood of that evening when we, with our parents, saw the existing order disintegrate before our very eyes.

Arnold and I were huddled behind the beige leather sofa, our gaze switching between the TV screen and our parents as they watched. World history interpreted through mime, sweat and tears. On the flickering screen a mass of humanity edged over the wall, streamed through the dark streets, bypassing police and army alike. Something about it was terrifying, and I remember how I clawed at the dark green rug beneath me.

A country torn in two has come together again, pronounced by father, as Arnold's Dad raised his glass to the TV before downing his drink in one. The only thing I knew about the GDR was that it had always complicated our annual journey to my Polish grandparents' farm. No sooner had the GDR gone than I found myself mourning its disappearance and that of the young border guards with their oversized caps and even greater unfriendliness, after which came that rite of passage to the East. Now this route was open, for both sides, a novelty that gave me and Arnold something

to ponder. We couldn't grasp the broader consequences but did understand that here was a radical change. And we knew from the books we'd devoured at the Mühlheide Library that radical change brings chaos, confusion, anarchy, lack of resources.

In the months that followed, we did nothing but scout out hiding places, build huts, and make provisional preparation for an emergency. We smashed up the old shed behind the school sports hall and created a nest of sorts using wheelbarrows and benches. This was our food store.

In good times we could stockpile here a couple of dozen twists of liquorice, shrink-wrapped whole grain rye bread, processed cheese and spready sausage. Adjacent to the electricity sub-station on the new housing estate, between the reservoir and the bypass, we'd built an extension of sorts from dried reeds and stashed away a cake tin – suitably solid and secure, we felt – containing an ancient Colt revolver. When my father was once clearing out his office, with its many cupboards and a strong-room, we'd fished it out from a pile of stuff on the floor when he was taken up with something else. Nobody ever said anything to us. Maybe he didn't even notice it had gone.

We managed to spin the cylinder and saw the gun was half-loaded, a discovery more shocking than inviting. We closed the barrel again but without removing the ammunition. Not once did we try it out for this was an object with such potential that we revered it as if sacred.

I remember once hearing my father whisper to my mother that he'd hidden cash for the dark hour in the base of the wardrobe. The dark hour – this was what Arnold and I feared most from now on. The assumption that at any moment, in fact quite soon, this dark hour could occur, became a certainty that summer. In our imaginations the fall of the wall and of Communism were a distant echo compared with what was about to happen to us.

The dark hour. I already knew this term from another context, for it represented a crucial moment during the flight of the Ambacher family in April or May 1945. It came to them, of all times, at night. Of course. Like a living creature, as my father said, the hut held its breath. The shelter's earlier reactions to sounds from the Front had been nothing more than a creak of its wooden beams or a gentle rustle of straw, but now, as Red Army soldiers stood in the doorway, there was only silence. The mother, the little brother and Josef pressed themselves against the back wall and, in the pitch black, strained to hear.

Now there was no relying on this space or time – this moment between the hut holding its breath and the soldiers knocking on the door seemed to expand without end and everything possible found its place within it, including the memory of that afternoon. Earlier, from his lookout post in the wagon, Josef had been the one to discover the hut, tucked away behind an unruly group of willows.

He loved huts for their promise of protection and concealment. He'd felt so proud: Harla had actually stopped at this one and had the family stay there overnight.

The Ambacher family was Josef, little brother Jakob, mother, grandparents and Aunt Antonia. The bigger convoys had long since headed off. It had been much harder for his grandparents to leave their country than it had been for others.

If I ever followed up with 'Which country was that, Papatschka?' my father would delve a long way back, ponderously so. In the eighteenth century my father's family had lived in Galicia, an easterly corner of the Habsburg monarchy. The Austrian Empress Maria Theresa had wooed the German settlers for their farmers and craftsmen. They responded to the invitation in their thousands, streaming from the Palatinate and Saarland and, a little later, like my own ancestors, from the Egerland, in the west of what is now the Czech Republic. The Egerlanders took with them their own peculiarly cumbersome German dialect together with their resilience, efficiency and unshakeable belief in God. In Galicia they built themselves houses, streets, whole estates, whole towns, they built themselves a homeland. From 1920 Galicia belonged to Poland, the political climate changed to the disadvantage of the German settlers and a period of dispossession and victimisation started. In 1939 Galicia was occupied by Russian troops and from then on belonged to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, so my ancestors did what the majority around them did:

filled with heartache and distress, they left everything they had built and listened to the momentous call of 'Home to the Reich'.

They were taken 'Home to the Reich', recounted my father, not back to Egerland but to Wartheland, Polish at the time. He told how the Nazis had settled them in a place where everything felt sinister. They sensed it everywhere, in the meadows and the fields but most of all, he said, it permeated the homes of displaced Poles. This was an appalling injustice: German soldiers driving out Polish farmers. And what of them? German farmers, who found themselves back on the farms of expelled Polish famers, that too was an injustice of which my father felt ashamed.

For six years they slept in the Poles' beds, ate at their tables, sat on their chairs, cultivated their fields. The Galician Germans, who had lived for so long among Poles, Ukrainians and Jews, spoke many different languages, with Polish and Yiddish being the most common. People said of Harla that he spoke Polish with a High German accent and Yiddish with an Egerland twang. But his High German was intermingled with so many borrowed words and stylistic features from Polish, Ukrainian and Ruthenian that hardly anyone who had grown up west of Lviv could possibly understand him.

None of this was of the slightest interest to Red Army soldiers. They cared nothing for the Austrian-German-Russian history of previous centuries, asked nothing about Egerland or Galicia, about right or wrong. They were following an order that said deport anything German, no matter how old or young, how delicate or fragile.

That night of the knocking, when the rifle butt struck the plank door, Josef heard his grandfather stir and get up in the darkness. Harla opened the door and said: Good Evening. *Dobry wieczór*.

That created confusion. The Russian soldier at the door let out a snide laugh, mother gasped as she held Josef and Jakob tight, and then all of them had to go to the door.

It was twenty kilometres to the nearest station. The grown-ups carried whatever bundles they were allowed to keep, for his own reasons young Jakob stuffed his little pockets with straw, and Josef felt only guilt for spying out the wrong hut. He couldn't get shake off this thought: the wrong hut. From then on he was preoccupied by the question of what would constitute the right hut. Probably invisibility, a stock of food, weapons and blankets.

Once at the station, Josef was jolted from such musings. Dozens, no, hundreds of people stood there, staring fixedly at the rail track as if hypnotised. Nobody moved, asked any questions, tried to find out what was going on. It was as if everybody was paralysed inside, for they were motionless and showed no connection to their surroundings. Josef checked out his arms and legs, his tongue, his mouth, to see if everything was still working. If you can still walk and talk, you're not completely beaten. This is why he carefully pushed past his grandparents and went over to one of the young Red Army lads watching them. Josef straightened up and faced the soldier, asking him loud and clear: Where to?

The young Asian-looking man replied: *Sibir*.

It was barely a whisper but everyone heard. The paralysis vanished, murmurs and whimpers rippled through the crowd – and there, now on the horizon, was the train, pulling towards them until it drew close and halted with a deafening screeching of brakes. Josef felt nauseous, was nearly sick. He hated the young soldier who, in reply to his question, had offered only that hideous word, detested him for reducing his mother and aunt to tears.

And yet he'd been struck by something familiar. Maybe it was the uniform, my father said later, that reminded him of his own father, also a man in uniform. He'd fallen as an ordinary soldier. And now he wasn't there. But little Jakob was sobbing, so Josef swallowed hard and was the first to board the train.

The cattle wagon soon occupied by Josef, his family and a couple of dozen others, had on its floor a paltry covering of straw that didn't taste good. Even if you faced starvation, it still didn't taste good, didn't taste of anything, even if you chewed it for hours, ground it up, mixed it with your saliva. In sheer defiance Josef swallowed some of it down. How come it's given to cows to keep them alive but not humans? He thought about his little brother who, a few days after the train had

set off, had fallen asleep next to him and never woken up. The potato peelings found by their mother at one of the brief stops hadn't agreed with him. Josef had held his hand until the next stop at Bialystok. Their mother, grey-faced with grief, had carried his lifeless body to a nearby church and placed him in the arms of the Polish priest. Meanwhile, Josef stayed by the railway line and, like the others, crammed into his mouth whatever was there.

After that it was his aunt, Antonia Ambacher, who looked after him, handing him water and potato peelings, singing him songs, as many as came into her mind. Her sister, Emma, just sat, eyes closed, hugging her knees to her chest, while the family left her in peace.

In his own state of grief, Josef started making things from straw. He split and divided individual strands, bound them with any loose thread he could tug from his shirt and fashioned them into stars. When he thought the grownups wouldn't notice, he would push a straw star through a gap in the wooden wall and let it go, sometimes catching a glimpse of it gliding near the track before landing. Even if I only get two or three straw stars a day through that gap, he thought to himself, nobody can possibly miss the right way home.

The other good thing he found to do was collecting and storing up words: Golod, Smert, Vostok, not forgetting Kartoschka, Soloma, Pistolet. Josef quickly realised that he didn't need to write them down to remember them. It was enough for him to picture how his hand would move the pen across the page. At times the Asian soldiers shouted something at him but no matter how hard he tried to understand the words, the sounds eluded him.

The weak, the sick, the young, and those driven insane by misery, survived barely beyond Minsk and before they reached Moscow there was so much room in the wagon that people could lie down flat. Mother had gathered herself just a little and began to rub Josef's cramped legs for him, helping him stretch them out a bit, as much as was possible anyway. They'd been bent and buckled for so long that her efforts only caused Josef pain, so she stopped.

Josef looked at Harla, now on watch from the outer wall. In his breast pocket was a carefully folded photo of the family outside the farm, standing in front of the cherry trees, all in blossom. If the train passed through a station slowly enough for him to decipher the Cyrillic script on the board, he would note down the place name in pencil on the back of the photo.

Through the clatter of the train's wheels, Josef asked: What will you do, Harla, when there's no more space? So Harla left off peering through the knot-hole and put the photo back in the breast-pocket of his coat.

Somewhere between Kazan and Ekaterinburg a swallow got into their wagon. My father enjoyed referring to this bird incident, it seemed to relieve the narrative for a while, as had its survival. Many of the other wagons had long been decoupled and diverted to a siding. The train, now shorter by a good half, stopped a while in open country. In the distance columns of smoke were rising from a small settlement and into the blue skies.

The bird must have found the gap between the side walls and the roof. Josef thought all the grown-ups around him had nodded off; his grandparents, definitely, his mother, well, he wasn't sure. Ever since Jakob's death she'd been mostly silent and kept her eyes closed even when awake. A quick look in the bucket near Harla confirmed the water had run out. His throat dry, his belly sore, Josef watched the bird as it fluttered in panic against the ceiling, its wings beating wildly at the wooden surface.

When the train set off again, the bird slid down one of the side walls and Josef had only to reach out to catch hold of it. Its little body was trembling; Josef felt its heart beating in his hands. He gave none of the grown-ups a chance to see what he was doing as he sneaked the bird under his shirt, right on the spot where he'd had such an ache for days now. He hadn't said a word about it. Who'd care about a tummy-ache at the moment? Far worse was happening in the wagon. In his right-hand trouser pocket he had a little stock of potato peel. Whenever he thought he might pass out, he would cram some between his lips. The swallow didn't want any. From time to time he fed the bird a few flies that had landed on his legs, now out of service.

They were now well behind the Urals. Through the knot-hole Josef had seen mountains on the horizon. Harla had made another note on the back of the photo. While his grandfather was asleep, Josef had carefully picked the photo out of his breast-pocket and laboriously deciphered an unusual word: *Asia*. Now this was the word that accompanied him, he let go of Siberia, the word that had made him shudder at every turn. *Asia*, thought Jakob, maybe it was this forest that never wanted to end, a dense green wall rushing past the knot-hole, a sea of birch, spruce and pine trees.

After a few days the wood seemed to thin out until it almost vanished. So Josef began to think that *Asia* wasn't the word for the 'wood' but must be used to describe something else, the unknown, the unimaginable. Since passing the last scattered clusters of trees, the train moved onward through nothingness, a featureless landscape, as flat as those planks beneath the straw, empty, a wasteland. Sandy surfaces alternated with strips of low-growing steppe grass, yellow, green, yellow, green. Nothing of any height disrupted the effect of that two-colour pattern, and if you stared for too long out of the knot-hole, the world became a blur. Whatever you thought you were seeing would begin to shimmer then disperse. There were no more stations to stop at, no more signs with place names to note down.

When my father spoke of death, it was always in the same way: he said his heart had missed two or three beats. He said he'd never been sure whether he'd been asleep since sunset or whether he'd stayed awake all night – for some time he'd been unable to tell what was sleep and what wasn't.

His forehead was drenched in a cold sweat, he held the bird more tightly to his chest and leaned his head against the plank wall. There, the heartbeat was back. The train was moving more slowly than usual. The first rays of sun were on the horizon and daylight began to creep over the empty space they were traversing.

Josef wondered how he could possibly have missed seeing the horseman galloping alongside the train. He couldn't get it out of his head that the rider had been there for some time and that the sight of him out there, by the train, was in fact long familiar.

What a magnificent animal he was riding there! Josef had vague recollections of the horses his father had bred, huge, strong heavy horses, but this one here... It was black apart from a fine blaze, faster and with more stamina than any horse Josef had known. Galloping alongside the train didn't tire this creature. He maintained the same pace, effortlessly carrying his rider with him. And this rider, as if he had sensed Josef watching, suddenly twisted in the saddle to look straight at the knot-hole. Josef felt only horror, for beneath the scarf covering head and shoulders was nothing more than a faceless void.

He wanted to tear himself free of this sight and cling to his mother, Harla, anyone, but then the strangest thing happened. The faceless space had become the countenance of his father, of his uncle, who'd died the previous year, and the face of his little brother.

The horseman drew closer, his arm outstretched towards Josef, the tips of his fingers touching distance from the outer wall. He could almost reach inside the wagon carrying the family. Then Josef had an idea. With the greatest of care he felt inside his shirt and instead of giving the horseman his hand, he passed him the young swallow. Just as he saw the open hand closing around the bird, he felt someone shaking him by the shoulder and dragging him to his feet.

His heart beating wildly, his eyes darting everywhere, he remained standing, next to him his mother, his aunt and his grandparents, and he eventually realised the train had stopped. His legs, so long out of use, buckled, straw stars began to dance before his eyes as dizziness overcame him. Harla grabbed him in the nick of time and leaned with him against the outer wall. Both listened intently. There was none of the customary bawling from soldiers, no wheel-tapping either, only a strange silence outside. Josef pressed his face against the knot-hole and looked out at the steppe. He marvelled at it again; an empty space, nothing there, nothing moving. The endless snake of a train had shrunk to a handful of wagons now halted not even at a provincial station but at a hut, little more than a shack clinging to the railway embankment.

Beyond the embankment, far on the distant horizon, there was movement of a different kind; dark clouds had gathered to form a front line and were changing from grey to deep blue.

The soldiers could now be heard as they pushed open the wagon doors – one of them shouted the same word over and over: *Buran! Buran!*

Aunt Antonia repeated it. *Buran*, she said. Neither she nor anyone in the wagon knew what they were supposed to be doing. Resolutely she secured her scarf yet more firmly under her chin, checked it was sitting correctly and fully to her liking. Whatever happened, Aunt Antonia was ready for anything. Josef was glad of that.

One soldier was fiddling about outside with their door, and Josef recognised him as the one who'd given him the word *Sibir* several weeks before. Impatient now, Josef put his hand through the knot-hole and, with the other, gestured towards his mother or aunt, shouting out, *Sibir? Sibir?* Laughter came from outside, just a burst of it, but with it two new words that none of them had ever heard before: *Sary Arka*.

My father loved recounting Aunt Antonia's next action. Finding the soldiers' noisy fumbling with our wagon door intolerable, she pushed her shoulder against it so hard that it burst open. And that's where she stood, recounted my father, four-square in the doorway of the cattle wagon, Antonia Ambacher, just arrived for exile. Her headscarf smartly knotted, her stance absolutely determined, father related how the soldier with the machine gun instinctively took a step back.

Father told how Aunt Antonia had then said, *Sary Arka?* What on earth's that? The steppe – or what?

Fifty years later and it was the Heath. This is where I grew up, this is where my life, my childhood played out. Like anything to do with my own and my friends' circumstances, everything about the place seemed scaled down, tamed and transposed from its raw obsolescence into something at once more normal and yet also more insignificant. My father reinforced this impression when he spoke of the heathland and woodland that extended beyond the bypass, and did so with sympathy, never with enthusiasm or love.

Why d'you ask? This was his baffled response when I delved a bit. Why? He just said everything was alright. The heath was alright. Mühlheide was alright. He was alright, he said. I was alright. He clearly attributed a greater significance to everything being 'alright' than the banality of the word might suggest. Maybe the word took on something sacred for someone who'd lived through things not being alright.

My father loved planning, organising, sorting. He applied this to all manner of information but also to foodstuffs, especially those cultivated by people living on the margins of town. Every summer, when the redcurrants, courgettes and cucumbers grown in the larger gardens on our housing estate were ready for picking, everyone would help with the harvest. I remember how, together with my father, my mother and the Kolbs – Arnold's parents – and our own neighbours, the Peltzers, I would stay up late in the garden at Aunt Antonia's, bent over a fifties-style outdoor table that she'd dragged out of the shed, and would help de-stalk berries by the bucket load. My father had arranged the buckets according to a specific system, to the right blackcurrants, in the middle any red or pink fruits, to the left white, and nobody was to move them. I always wanted to be on the left so as not to have everyone see my stained hands the following day. We sat there together, listening to the sounds of the night, our faces illuminated by the naked bulb dangling above our heads, moths and midges getting stuck to it by the second.

Berry juice, berry compote, berry jam, cake, biscuits. In our world, any food you'd got for yourself was what counted, whether cultivated, shot or scavenged, regardless of your financial position. A fair few folk had access to a surprising fortune. Just as they'd never managed to bond with north Germany, nor had they got any rapport to their savings and preferred instead to hide the money away, hoard it or use it to buy as much land as they could get their hands on. The town's margins: it might look a humble place when viewed from the centre but that wasn't an accurate assessment – the circumstances in which we lived were not humble but temporary. Here nobody believed in the longevity of any objects or relationships. This hurt the child that I then was and made the simplest and most ordinary items seem highly desirable and yet unattainable.

I recall one time in particular when my father and I had come back from a long expedition through the woods. We'd traced a bigger arc than usual and so arrived at a more westerly point in Mühlheide, in one of the rather well-to-do areas with rows of neat bungalows and manicured lawns. In the mixed woodland on Schreven Lake we'd spotted a huge puffball, the size of a football. Such a find had left us both in a state of euphoria. We were already planning to slice it, coat it in breadcrumbs and cook it in the oven that same evening. Pleased and proud, I bore our discovery past the bungalows with their gently babbling water features, their gleaming cars, with the latest in VW registration plates, parked out front. I was so entranced by my lovely round puffball that I hadn't noticed a girl from my school getting out of one of these cars. Quite suddenly, and unwillingly, I found myself face to face with Jeanette Hasenjäger; me with mucky shoes and a snowy white puffball, her with a pretty straw hat and a snowy white giant teddy. Schützenfest, the most important festival in Mühlheide, had completely escaped my parents' notice. I stared at the giant teddy and was left tongue-tied.

What on earth is *that*? asked Jeanette Hasenjäger.

Yes, what *is* that? enquired her father, visibly the worse for drink.

Calvatia gigantea, said my father. It's edible.

I also recall an incident to do with my strange aversion to butter cake. I feel the same even now, whenever I step into a north German bakery. When our primary school teacher, Frau Frerick, would ask us about our plans for the weekend, all my classmates would reply one after the other,

row by row, that they'd be going to their grandparents to eat butter cake. I always pictured an oak table decked with a homemade lace cloth, the cake topped with buttery smiles that would blend with crystals of sugar to create the cloying sweetness.

Once, when it was my turn to relate my plans for the weekend, I could bear it no longer and shouted out: 'My grandma died in World War Two! And so did my grandpa. And my uncle. All dead, dead, dead. I hate butter cake.'

I got so worked up that I was sick on the classroom carpet. Then I sank back down into the chair, pale and faint. It was a fact; I hated butter cake. After this Frau Frerick never asked again about our plans for the weekend.

In spite of his many business trips and his fine Italian worsted suits, my father always bore the mark of someone living on the margins of town. Our estate was notorious as a refuge for oddballs and loners. Its reputation radiated down to us, the children, long before we had any idea what it signified.

My father once accompanied me to a parent-child meeting in the second year. I felt proud when I saw how others looked at his suit, his hat and leather briefcase. After he'd rather awkwardly greeted Frau Frerick, I was eager to show him where I sat. First row on the left, between the washbasin and the window façade. My father hesitated and, with a slightly distracted expression, looked at the room, the windows and the seats near the door, already occupied. It was clear he'd have preferred to sit down and so to make it easier for him, Frau Frerick encouraged him to take a seat, saying that it wouldn't take long. Perhaps she thought my father wanted to sneak out before the end. She couldn't possibly have known that he always thought in escape routes and emergency exits. With some reluctance he sat down on a chair next to me, his fingers clamped around the handle of his case.

I can't remember what Frau Frerick talked about but I do remember how her gaze repeatedly, and sympathetically, came to rest on my father's elegant, if strained, face. He was in the process of noting something down in his neat handwriting – on graph paper, as I noticed, slightly embarrassed but also touched. Then it happened. There was a loud knocking at the door. The thudding filled the room, every head turned, and then someone was pulling at the door, rattling the handle. Sometimes the door would stick, it needed lifting, that was all. But there was no lifting, just more knocking, more and more urgent, more penetrating. Before anyone could get to open it from the inside, my father had got up, knocking over his chair in the process, frantically opened the window and jumped out. The graph paper flew off the table and landed near Frau Frerick's feet. From the mezzanine it was no more than a metre drop to the ground, and woodland surrounded the school, but some of the mums shrieked out loud while Frau Frerick stood open-mouthed and those who'd been sitting by the window sprang up all the better to follow what was happening. I had to push my way through them all to get a look at him, partially leaning against a spruce tree but slightly bent forward, his eyes wide and startled.

Papa, I yelled, Papschka!

It was as if he neither heard nor saw me. He went on standing there, staring at the open window he'd jumped from, not reacting to Frau Frerick as she called his name. While the grown-ups around her were craning to see outside and my classmates started to giggle, I noticed from the corner of my eye that they were trying to get hold of the piece of graph paper. I slid down from the windowsill to go and keep my grandfather company but he suddenly moved off and ran through the playground. Frau Frerick picked up the graph paper, her eyebrows raised as she examined the Cyrillic script left by my father.

Arnold, always more quick-thinking than I was, stood up and proclaimed loud and clear: Leila's Dad is an actor and is preparing his new role. That's all.

That's all. Arnold was a great thinker and an even greater friend.

Anything viewed as exceedingly odd in Mühlheide, so odd that it burned itself into the collective memory, would have attracted scant attention on our housing estate. Those living on the town's eastern margins were almost exclusively people having a tough time inside or outside, unable to sit

still, suffering from disturbed sleep, fearing the babble of voices, silence, memory, trains, cellars and winter. I think most on our estate were united in the belief that winter was unbearable. The season of darkness made for enforced retreat and nobody was up to that. And so we had the heating neurotics who, regardless of how cold it became, kept every window open, and the self-proclaimed survival experts who would go off bivouacking in minus zero in the woods or by the local lakes, and then we had a handful of pragmatic types who sought solutions in infrared and daylight lamps.

I remember one particularly hard winter when my father couldn't get it out of his head that the darkness was creeping into the house. At first my mother and I tried to work out exactly what he meant; whether it was a draught or whether the bulbs maybe needed changing. But father was convinced that it was in fact darkness creeping into the house, and nothing else. One day my mother and I came home after visiting friends only to find that he'd put brown parcel tape around every single window, two even three layers of the stuff. He sat there on our dark green carpet, all in a sweat, encircled by empty tape spools and let my mother's tirade wash over him. I stood in the doorway, no longer wondering whether all families were like mine.

The afternoon visiting friends had given me a boost, everything there was as normal as anything north German but our return home presented something I was all too familiar with: the exhaustion that comes of living with excessive demands. My father, giving the darkness a hard time with parcel tape from the stationer's, my mother, giving my father a hard time – my impulse was always to run, to get outside, and roam around with Arnold. Unconsciously we were adopting from the grownups in our community their very behaviour patterns; everything that happened indoors was unbearable and the only thing that helped was to run away, run away, run away. In many ways Arnold was the more radical of the pair of us. He would fantasise about getting out and vanishing. I guess this was his outlet. His plans were really smart, he was far more intelligent than our teachers perhaps realised.

As my mother burst into tears of rage, my father got up, pushed us from the living room and locked us out. That made my mother so furious she put her foot through the plywood door and gave herself such a fright that she left my father on his own and spent the evening with me in my room.

Formica tables, plywood doors, lino flooring. The houses on our estate were similar and yet entirely different. They'd all gone up in the sixties with limited resource, built entirely by 'returners', back to settle in Mühlheide.

The fact that they were known as 'returners' spoke volumes. 'Released' would have been more fitting. Many of the old-established Mühlheide residents assumed this was all about the prisoners-of-war whose freedom from dark Soviet dungeons had been bought for them by Konrad Adenauer. And because everyone liked to stay among their own kind, there was never any dialogue. Most lacked the words to say what had happened to them.

They had all been dragged away by the Red Army when very young, very sick, or very old. Ten years in the steppe meant that some had spent more of their lives in Kazakhstan than in Germany. Civilian prisoners, not POWs. Even after the 'returners' had been allowed to leave Central Asia, they continued to do what Stalin had demanded of every inhabitant of his empire: kept their mouths shut. And that was something greatly appreciated in north Germany.

A case in point was Arnold's father. Hermann Kolb had been deported with his parents as a babe in arms and spent ten years on a collective farm in the middle of the steppe. Decades later he still had an aversion to agricultural paraphernalia, and so was never seen walking any field paths but was often spotted in woodland. It was there that the whole of our settlement would often meet up: the Schwarzkopf family, the Hases, the Herlichs, the Diwerts, the Sakowskys, Fiedlers and other such families. They weren't escaping their draughty homes and hideous linoleum, they were escaping the camps, the earth huts and shacks they'd had to inhabit in Kazakhstan. Outside you couldn't get trapped, and I sense that they all had a fear of getting trapped. Even years after arriving in Mühlheide these 'returners' lived in their shabby, temporary housing very much as if they'd never

mustered the strength to build anything for themselves or even been able to decide how their own home might look.

Arnold and I snapped up anecdotes and memories of Central Asia from the adults around us and then tried to piece them together when tucked away in our camps and hiding places. The resulting picture was quite stark and allowed us a frisson of terror. For lack of any concrete information we imagined that the thing that scared us most - *the dark hour* – could occur as a natural catastrophe, or in the form of a familiar event, or – and this is what we most feared – in the guise of someone we knew.

The person we believed would most likely provide a real face for the dark hour was known as ‘the Tartter’, a tag that left us with a feeling of something strange and quite alien. Harro Tartter must have been well over seventy and the fact that he didn’t look his age left us thinking he had a special source of strength that only he knew about.

My father, who called him ‘the man with three Ts’, knew Tartter from his extensive walks across the moorland. As he confided in me later, Tartter had once admitted to him that he had worked at the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp.

Worked? I was dumbfounded. What kind of a word is that in that context?

A German word, my father replied, unmoved, a German word, my child.

Every Friday Tartter would go around our estate with a big grey bucket of fresh trout from his fish ponds on the moor. He didn’t actually live on our estate but in a more conventional district that bordered it.

In his boiler room he was hiding an old SS uniform and a pouch of dental gold. Arnold and I had known this ever since we’d followed Tarttar and sneaked into his cellar.

We’d come across the uniform in a wooden cupboard and, when we’d spread it on the floor, the pouch had fallen out. Without giving it much thought, we took it and ran home.

As I write these lines I find myself thinking yet again that Harro Tarttar must have been a Nazi war criminal and rage to myself at the lethargy and indifference that had prevailed for decades. When I think about it, Arnold and I were the only ones interested in the Tarttar, the only ones bothered by him, the only ones to niggle at him. Two kids against the nation’s legacy. We had been dealt a poor hand but continued playing.

Arnold and I would often run into him when on the way to our hiding places. It struck me that we only ever met him when about to deposit or retrieve an item that we’d pinched from our parents or the weekly market; maybe a couple of bananas, a ring of sausage or a packet of nuts. Soon I felt sure Tarttar was connected not only to a secret source of power but also to everything that happened in and around Mühlheide. Arnold and I suspected that he’d done so many bad things in his life that he had a sure-fire instinct for anything bad. In our secret store at the sub-station lay the pouch of dental gold and we sensed it wouldn’t remain hidden from Tarttar.

On the day the snowstorm moved across Mühlheide, we happened to meet him on our way back from a hiding place in the wood. Arnold and I had just divided up a cone of marshmallow between us and weren’t paying any attention to the junction of pathways ahead. We looked up just as we almost ran into the sand-coloured trench coat. Tarrter! He was carrying the grey bucket which, for some reason, was covered with a makeshift lid.

Arnold swallowed hard and I gasped for air like the trout in Tartters’ bucket. We ran for it, all along the field track, across the peripheral, through gardens and over fences until we eventually found refuge beneath the outside steps at my parents’ house, where we swiftly set up our barricade of planks and empty flower pots. Then we sat and listened hard, peering through the peephole but saw nothing other than the dried out lawn, the slight slope leading down to the road and the distant horizon, a black strip now forming in the sky.

I wanted to retreat as far as possible for I could already see between the gaps in the steps that Tarttar was coming around the corner and into our garden. I remembered that my father had left the house that morning, his leather case full to bursting as he set off for Schreven Lake and my mother had gone to town for the day to see a woman friend. The house was empty and apart from

the fact that I knew one of the cupboard plinths held money for the dark hour, I knew little about what to do when the enemy is at your door.

Swaying as he went, Tartter crossed our garden and stopped on the terrace just in front of the outdoor steps. He set down the grey bucket and looked at the horizon. The dark strip had gathered itself into a compact mass, the sky was black as pitch and something snapped in the cherry tree as a sudden gust blew through the garden

A couple of boards in my ramshackle treehouse had worked loose and fell to the ground. Tartter glanced at the treehouse and the bits of wood and then started going up the steps to our terrace, one at a time. His footsteps sounded sluggish and hollow. As I sat quaking and thought of the uniform and the dental gold, it became clear to me he must have been the one to have called up the dark hour. It was his revenge on us for forcing our way into his cellar, stealing from him and discovering his true character. Tartter was a monster and had come to take his revenge on us for finding him out.

The grey eyes, the grey bucket, the light that had taken on the same shade, this was all his work and Arnold and I, the only ones who sensed what was afoot, were sitting not in a hiding place but in a trap. Everything we'd done this summer had been in vain. I now understood that Arnold and I were still only at the start post, unprepared, mere beginners, and I felt so embarrassed by the childishness of our efforts that I could have wept with anger. I still couldn't grasp where the danger was coming from: Tartter, the darkness, or from whatever the darkness would bring. The darkness would not come alone, not for its own benefit; that was out of the question.

Arnold's face gave away the fact that he'd just thought the same. He looked up and crawled towards me. Then we heard Tarttar knock on the terrace door, once, twice, and when there was no reply to the third, push against the door which had been left ajar and step inside our living room.

We must go, whispered Arnold. Moving fast we lifted the plant pots out of the way, pushed the planks onto the grass and crept out. The temperature had dropped, and I was cold in my T-shirt, damp with sweat.

We hurried down the steps, almost tripping over Tarttar's bucket. Arnold was already down the slope and at the fence, while I was still there, unable to take my eyes off the bucket. The temptation was so great that I lifted the cover and froze: a pair of yellow eyes with narrow pupils stared up at me from inside the bucket, a huge body was positioning itself ready to leap out. This was no trout but the biggest toad I'd ever seen in my life.

I muffled my cry to Arnold. Look! Look at this!

I can still remember how Arnold's eyes widened when he saw the toad's bloated body, watched as her back legs pushed hard against the sides of the bucket in her attempts to escape.

Why's Tartter bringing us a toad? I asked, fighting against the feeling that the toad, with her intense gaze, wanted to share something with me. Without my father present to dispense advice, I felt child-like again, immature and even Arnold seemed confused. A toad didn't fit with our usual schedule, we weren't tuned in to amphibians. It was the second discomfiture of the day and all the boldness we'd been so proud to feel during the summer didn't help.

I looked over at the open terrace door and wondered what Tartter was getting up to for so long, alone in our living room, among my father's chests and his wall rugs. Then we heard steps ringing out more loudly on the laminated flooring and, for the second time that day, ran for it. Now I had a better plan, now I knew a place where neither the dark hour nor Tarttar could have the upper hand. It lay beyond the housing estate and only one person lived there, and that was Aunt Ömir-Ölim.

Aunt Ömir-Ölim was one of the few from our community to be appreciated by people in the town centre, people who even asked her for advice. Ömir was Kazakh for 'life', Ölim was Kazakh for 'death'. Even though every child on the estate called her aunt, in reality she was aunt to nobody other than my father, and of all the kids only I was actually related to her. I took enormous pride in this. She lived in an old forester cottage on the edge of the wood. Arnold and I planned to learn

lots from this lady. But because we were a bit scared of her, as were all the other kids, we visited only if sent by our parents on errands, such as taking her meals or bits of news.

This aunt practised natural therapies, was a vet, doctor, nurse, midwife and witch. On top of all this, she kept the chain pharmacy on the edge of our estate supplied with herbs, bark and berries she herself had gathered. The pharmacist, Dr Lilienthal, struggled to get her name right and sometimes called her Ömir, at other times Ölim. Aunt Ömir-Ölim said that depending on whether Dr Lilienthal chose life or death, she already knew which patient or ailment he was talking about.

On the town margins everybody knew what Aunt Ömir-Ölim's name meant. The rumour that during her time on the steppe she'd brought back to life a terminally ill aqsaqal, a wise elder and Kazakh community leader, had reached every ear. In fact the sharp ear of the steppe could detect sounds in the furthest corners and would let nothing go unnoticed. My father remained silent on the matter of this story but it had been enough to seal Ömir-Ölim's authority for all time.

We'd only just turned onto the field track when I found myself having to shout at the top of my voice. Gusts of wind hit us in the face and blew so hard that I realised we'd never have even reached the forest cottage if we had set off any later. The wind grew stronger, ruffling the young spruce and slender birches at the edge of the track. A storm got up, very different from other autumn weather events. Out of breath now, we ran on to Aunt Ömir-Ölim's door, yelling out: Tartter!

Aunt Ömir-Ölim stood with open arms but instead of flying into her embrace and burying our faces in her apron, we halted and stood as if nailed to the ground. Ömir-Ölim was looking straight over our heads, her face expressionless. Breaking away from the wall of cloud hanging over the Isenbruch Moor was something akin to a veil that now swept across the fields. It was heading straight for us.

Before any of us could say a word, she'd pulled us behind the house. The first snowflakes were swirling through the air and what I saw next clean took my breath away. Every door and window of the forest cottage stood open, blinds and curtains billowed in the wind, documents were blown from surfaces and flew over chests full of books and maps, across carpets, jugs and the old samovar.

Get in the barn! With whatever you can carry!

Aunt-

Now!

Grabbing two crates of books and a rolled carpet, we hurried to the barn, the snow coming down even more now, the wind howling in the treetops at the edge of the wood. Summoning what strength she still had, Aunt Ömir-Ölim dragged shut the barn door, heaved the crossbeam in place and sank to the floor. Arnold and I squatted close to her. Aunt's hair had escaped from her usual bun and now surrounded her face like a crown of light. Her hands were trembling as she covered her face. Over at the cottage, windows were breaking as the storm sent the door swinging on its hinges and tore clapboards from the roof as it rumbled and roared. In the darkness I could tell that Arnold had pressed himself against the barn wall, his eyes wide, hands covering his ears.

Aunt, I said, Aunt. Father's out in all that somewhere.

Aunt Ömir-Ölim let her forehead rest against the wall, her voice flat as she whispered: just like his mother.

[...]

Events happened thick and fast during this first Kazakh summer. Father tended to present them as one whole and rarely in detail. What had been fundamental, or so it seemed to him on looking back, absolutely fundamental, had been Harla's decision that they should all survive. Stay here. But one person was missing. In spite of their endless enquiries and searches, Emma Ambacher had not been found.

Even though searches were still in progress, the grandparents were already mourning their daughter, the aunt her sister. Only my father, who'd already had the death of his little brother to mourn, refused to contemplate the death of his mother. He forced himself to believe she was out there somewhere. Full-stop. From then on, his own survival hinged on that.

The survival of all the others hinged on the decision made by the grandfather. That decision formed the basis of everything: their search for their own home, for work and for food. *We're going to survive.* The words held true for everyone who'd made it as far as the settlement. On the steppe words held more strength than anywhere else in the world, as did the wind, the sun and the snow.

He recounted how on the first morning there they'd crawled out of the earth hut, their stomachs empty, eyes blinking in the bright light, all somehow surprised by their own survival and finding themselves on the steppe, of all places. For breakfast there was weak, sweet tea before Heinrich Quapp took his guests to listen to Konstantin Petrowitsch Fadejew, leader of the town's soviet, representative of the central power that would rule their existence from then on. He addressed them directly only once and that was to give one piece of advice: this year and in the years that lay ahead they should all keep away from one another. One German in the collective, on the street, or in a house wasn't too noticeable, but a whole group of them was. Every one of them was under observation and a terrible general suspicion. 'Keeping away' meant: not living near one another, not meeting up together, either by arrangement or by chance, and under absolutely no circumstances whatsoever ever to speak German with one another.

Father told us this procession through the town was the last time he saw together all the people who'd been forcibly brought here in the cattle wagons. After that day they'd all been dispersed across the settlement on the steppe, given accommodation in different locations and despatched to work in different locations too. *Keep away.* These words stayed in their minds, now synonymous with fear and *mistrust.*

The group of deportees stood helplessly outside the grey, dilapidated house that Heinrich Quapp had taken them to. Centrally located in the main square of the settlement, it provided a good view of the stables and barns – grandmother saw straight away that this was where they would be set to work. *Rabota* – work, another new word, sounding dull, of the soil, and quite different from *kuschatj* – eat, which sounded hurried, hasty, the way you eat when your food could be taken away at any moment.

The door eventually opened and out stepped a gaunt individual in a tatty suit, deep in thought, clearly taking his time. This was an uncomfortable task for Konstantin Petrowitsch Fadejew, and he hesitated. When at last he spoke, he got muddled and had to start over. He spoke in Russian and after a few mumbled sentences seemed more certain of the terrain and launched into a proper lecture.

Josef noticed the way the grownups were listening to him as if spellbound even though most of them couldn't understand a word. That's how the spell worked. That was it: a spell created by words. This one, specific little word had barely been uttered and nobody dared move, breathe or reach for a neighbouring hand. Gulag. This was a strong word, a powerful word, it burrowed into Josef's mind.

With all this happening, the grandparents and the aunt had completely forgotten what it was they were supposed to be doing. But Josef had kept his head and was not beguiled either by sleep or the leader's spell. He was a wanderer in the steppe, and yes, he was tired but somehow knew the place. The situation was critical, food had to be found. And his mother.

Now Konstantin Petrowitsch Fadejew took out a pencil, a sheet of roughly torn off paper already covered in handwriting, and prepared to add the names of all those around him. *The list.* Everyone

whose name ended up on this list had regularly to report to Fadejew, was not allowed to leave the town and would, on top of that, be under constant observation. People were asked what their jobs had previously been. Most had been farmers, *fermer*. Now they would work the land of the collective. Only aunt and Harla had different jobs – *medsestra*, *plotnik* – and this caught Fadejew's attention, excited and enlivened him. Aunt had the greatest effect on him for she was the first whose papers he scrutinised and whose name he entered on a separate list. Antonia Ambacher, nurse, would now be put to work in the town's medical facility together with Doctor Juri Sergejewitsch Podgorny. Her father, Abrahan Ambacher, carpenter, was to be allocated to the collective's joinery. There seemed no particular use for grandmother or Josef.

Rabota. Medpunkt. Gulag. Kolchos. Aunt Antonia and Harla noted down the vocabulary before they had to go with Fadejew, leaving grandmother and Josef alone. This was today's word harvest. Josef stored the words safely, sorted them, dried them and rearranged them until the words revealed something you could actually work on.

The grandmother looked all around her for one long moment before taking Josef's hand. Together they left the settlement behind them and walked towards the railway track and the houses behind it. The driving snow had fallen so heavily during the recent storm that the small collection of buildings at the station had been swallowed up. They'd only been two hundred metres away from them but had gone in the opposite direction. So now Josef and his grandmother walked along the track and around the settlement, trying to explain to anyone they met, and in the simplest of words, exactly what had brought them here. But nobody had anything to say about the whereabouts of a young woman, nobody had seen or heard anything. And nobody had found a lifeless body on the steppe.

Where is she then, Wawa? Josef asked his grandmother. Mama must be somewhere, surely?

The steppe is a big place, replied Wawa as she wiped her eyes. There are wild animals, my little lad, and perhaps even things we know nothing about. We've got to carry on, do you understand? Just carry on.

But she's just gone, Wawa. D'you hear me? Gone, not dead.

For Josef this made a world of difference but obviously not for Wawa. They walked in silence to the now harvested wheat fields near the settlement. Together they crawled across the stubble, collecting any grains to be found, sometimes a whole ear that had been forgotten. Josef's thoughts drifted, first to his mother who he was missing so much, and then to the train and the rattling he still felt in his legs. When his grandmother wasn't looking, he put a little handful of grains into his mouth and chewed on them for as long as it took to turn them into a grainy pulp.

Then he remembered seeing something passed between Lisbeth Quapp and his grandmother on the previous evening. Tell me, Wawa, was it something to eat? The thing you gave her?

No.

Something to wear?

No, Josef.

Was it - ?

That's enough! Never talk about this again! D'you understand?

Never?

Never.

Teresia Ambacher's anger was apparent as she pulled an ear of corn from the straw. Josef wanted to make her that promise but his mouth remained shut and the words wouldn't come. Did Harla know about it? Did Tonde? He sighed and made himself think about something else, such as wheat grains or the tiny black beetles scabbling between the straw and the soil. Or about the boy called Tachawi. He resolved to find him. He noted this on his own list just as the leader had entered the Germans' names on his: mother, food, Tachawi. The list grew, as did the stock of grains in Josef's right and left pockets. In the evening they would use Quapp's hand grinder to make some flour and bake a flatbread.

Heinrich Quapp had made no secret of his displeasure when, that evening, he'd found out the Ambachers had been assigned to him. They would just have to stay in their earth hut until some other solution was found. The leader of the town soviet had been careful to allocate the other families to ethnic Germans too.

Only years later had my father been able to make sense of Heinrich Quapp's reaction. He realised that Fadejew's instructions were yet another example of harassment against him as a Volga German. Quapp, like all Germans who'd settled in the Russian Empire, had been dispossessed and deported years before, generally slandered and treated with hostility. But what had he ever had to do with Hitler or the German Empire? For centuries the only empire his family had known was the Russian and for them now to be expected to take in these Germans, regardless of their provenance and the accuracy of their story, was something that could only feel like an unreasonable demand, an example of no respect. He and his family were short of food and clothing and didn't even have a proper house to live in, only this earth hut, wholly inadequate over the years, or at least should have been judged so.

As Tachawi's mother, Aigul, observed long afterwards: the Germans fall into more tribes than the Kazakhs and none of them have any respect for one another. My father never forgot that.

That evening Teresia Ambacher baked a flat bread, the sweet aroma filling the earth-hut. Mindful of the obligations of a guest, she offered some to the Quapp family. In silence they accepted the piece offered them by Wawa and, with their twins, returned to their seats by the stove.

Aunt was so tired that she went to sleep as soon as we'd eaten. After grandfather had consumed his own portion, he went out to search again for Emma. Josef wanted to go with him but Wawa curtly told him to stay with her.

That made him angry, just as when grandmother had given the Quapps some of their food. He thought it perfectly obvious that they should be allowed to use their grinder, frying pan and salt, their stove and firewood. It hurt him that Irene and Karl were ignoring him. Harla suggested afterwards that they'd probably been forbidden by their parents. They didn't react to any conversation or gestures. They'd stuffed the flat bread in their mouths without a word and immediately started playing their own game together, one with rules that Josef didn't understand. So he sat behind in his own spot and scratched a bad word in the beaten earth. But it struck him that he would have to sleep right there so he rubbed it out again in haste but couldn't rest and barely slept all night. What makes its mark on the steppe never rubs off; that much he'd learned, and it scared him. For the moment he didn't have strength to display, but strength can be borrowed from, say, Aunt Antonia, who seemed to have an inexhaustible supply.

The following morning aunt's own bundle with her blanket had gone missing. She hunted around for it and, lo and behold, found it on the Quapp family washing line. Lisbeth Quapp had the nerve to claim the blanket had been part of her household for years. Aunt Antonia's face darkened like the horizon before a snowstorm, she seized Lisbeth Quapp's hand and said: Whoever sleeps beneath that blanket will never find happiness.

Lisbeth Quapp's face went white. How can you say that?

There was a lot more that Aunt Antonia could say and do. She had opened up a source of strength that now poured forth and would never be exhausted. At last, Josef thought, something is available, and available in abundance. And it doesn't have to be shared out or saved.

Aul. Josef loved this word, couldn't get enough of it, caressed it with his tongue, rolled it around his mouth over and over again, and pronounced it ten, twenty times in a row. *Aul* meant 'village' in Kazakh, settlement, homestead, and the village where Tachawi and his family lived was called Kökterek.

When out on one of his exploratory patrols Josef had found the way to the village. On that particular day he'd wanted to search the area beyond the ford, had passed by the little wood and then noticed a settlement in the distance.

The Kazakhs, he thought to himself. That must be where they live! He decided to set off in search of his mother. These people here were bound to know everyone and everything, including how to retrieve something swallowed up by the steppe.

Some of the children ran towards Josef, with Tachawi amongst them, laughing aloud and pulling Josef along with him. The grownups looked with surprise at the boy who'd managed to find his way to them, and they scratched under their caps, tschapka and turbans. *The steppe has blown something in.*

My father loved this memory; Tachawi had recognised him. He would elaborate on their encounter, adding in eagles that circled above Kökterek but never over the Russian settlement, describing unkempt, rampant wormwood and hemp plants that grew hip high, and the foul-smelling camel, haughtily watching over the village residents.

There were a couple of dozen or so huts in Kökterek, roughly built from various materials, including wood, corrugated iron, boulders and cattle dung. To the north easterly side, surrounded by a crooked wooden fence, lay the cemetery. Directly opposite and the same distance away was a steppe well with its curved lifting handle and counterweights.

Ana, said Tachawi, pointing at what surrounded them.

Catapult, said father, and held up the weapon he'd made that very morning. All the kids shrieked with excitement and Tachawi had his favourite duty of shooing the other children aside to take a close look at Josef's creation.

Then Tachawi led his friend into the family hut. There, seated on a spotlessly clean rug, was his mother, Aigul Sarsenbayeva, who handed up a bowl of tea and dried curd cheese, something Josef was already familiar with. As ever he didn't expect that small number of cheese balls to fill his belly and satisfy his hunger. It was a Kazakh miracle. He took a couple for his grandparents and his aunt.

Ana, said Tachawi's mother, her dark eyes lowered as she gestured to herself, dressed in a lambswool waistcoat, a blouse of bright poppy-red, and a frayed woollen skirt that reached as far as her boots.

Josef gazed around the hut. Against two of the walls were trunks, blankets and bundles, all piled up, and against the third was a wooden podium, barely knee-high. Then on the fourth wall was the stove, a pitch-black monster of cast iron.

Ana – njet, he managed to reply and tried to explain in broken Russian that his mother had gone missing in a snowstorm. *Ana – buran*, he said. He cried a little and repeated the same words for as long as he thought it would take for everyone to understand what he meant. Tachawi's uncle, Schämschi Sarsenbayev, had for some time been telling others that one of the Germans had lost his daughter. A young woman. This was the first time they'd all realised she had also been a mother. *Iskatj?* asked Josef, hopefully. Search?

Tachawi's mother nodded and stroked his fair hair. Some of the older men who'd been listening in the doorway, spoke to one another and then shook Josef by the hand.

Iskatj, said Tachawi. He put a few more cheese balls in Josef's pocket and Aigul held out two photographs. One must have been of Tachawi's father, the other a young man, perhaps his brother. Both were in uniform and had solemn expressions for the picture. Tachawi took the two photos, turned them round and said: *äke – njet, aga – njet*.

He wiped his eyes, glancing up only when he sensed Josef putting the catapult in his pocket.

Ana – mother, äke – father, aga – brother.

Then they followed the men who had meanwhile swiftly harnessed a horse to an old two-seater carriage. They drove out together, on the look-out, asked all the herdsmen they came across on the way. Every one of them said they were sorry not to be able to help.

Father told us how, years later, the men from the village had still been trying to find out about the disappearance of Emma Ambacher. She had clearly managed to do something that nobody else had – escape the open ears and the open eyes of the steppe.

Josef remained firm in his resolve: keep on searching, no matter how, no matter when. He who carries on searching has not yet given up hope.