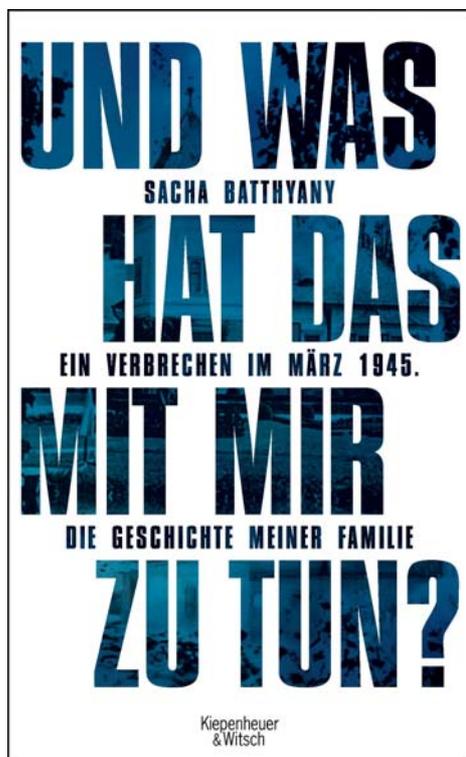


Sample Translation (pp.7-30)

# **What's That to Do With Me? A Crime in March 1945. The Story of My Family. by Sacha Batthyany**

Translated by Anthea Bell

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Publication: February 2016 (Hardcover)

258 pages

ISBN: 978-3-462-04831-5

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Iris Brandt [ibrandt@kiwi-verlag.de](mailto:ibrandt@kiwi-verlag.de)

Aleksandra Erakovic [aerakovic@kiwi-verlag.de](mailto:aerakovic@kiwi-verlag.de)

## Prologue

Agnes came out of her bedroom. She had put on make-up, done her hair and prettified herself for me. Her daughters, standing around her, were pleased to see their mother like that.

“It’s your visitor from Europe,” they told her. “The grandson.”

“Who?” she asked, in slightly too loud a voice.

“You know, the grandson.” But Agnes didn’t know; I could see that from her face.

We greeted one another, and sat down at her circular living-room table somewhere in Buenos Aires. I knew Agnes from my grandmother’s diary, the journal that I had with me in my bag. They grew up together in a tiny village in the west of Hungary, seeing each other every day as children, although their lives were very different. Agnes’s parents kept a delicatessen shop, my grandmother’s parents had a small castle. There was a courtyard with a gravel surface and a chestnut tree growing in the middle of it. *We lived a quiet life in the country, my grandmother wrote about her childhood, a life determined by the seasons of the year.* Until the war.

Until a day in the spring of 1944 when the well-ordered routine of centuries disappeared from that village, and with it a whole world. First came the Germans, then the Russians. The castle burned down, my grandmother’s family lost all their land, their status, their place in society.

And Agnes was sent to Auschwitz.

I was passing through, that was how her family had prepared Agnes for my visit, telling her that I had found information concerning her in a diary. “About your parents,” they said, about a time seventy years ago. And now, they told her, I was here to read her a few extracts from it.

“How wonderful,” she said.

Sitting beside Agnes, I could see the number tattooed on her arm by a guard in Auschwitz. It was disappearing into the folds of her wrinkled skin now, leaving the figures barely legible. 802 . . . 6? Or was that an 8?

“Apple or curd cheese?” I was asked.

“What?”

Agnes was eighteen when she was deported to the concentration camp; today she is over ninety. Her walking frame stood within reach, beside her chair. I saw photographs on a small shelf: her late husband, the weddings of her daughters, a whole life.

“Apple, please,” I said, holding out my plate. And when we had all eaten our slices of strudel, I began reading aloud: about the train from Budapest, how you could see it coming a long way off because of the cloud of sooty smoke it puffed out – here Agnes nodded; about the cranes on the way into the village; the cherries preserved in syrup that stood beside the cash desk in her parents’ shop; about her father Herr Mandl, who had such red cheeks.

“Oh yes, so he did,” she interrupted me cheerfully, and we all rejoiced with her, although none of us felt like it. Because we knew the truth.

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A day later, in Departures at the airport, I asked myself: have we done the right thing? Apart from a man with a cleaning trolley, going from one end of the terminal to the other and leaving alternate darker and lighter stripes on the carpet flooring, there was no one else around, not a human soul in sight.

I’m only the messenger, I had persuaded myself before flying out. I have something that belongs to Agnes, that was why I had come, but now I wasn’t so sure. Was I really only a courier?

Seven years had passed since I first set out to track down my family’s wartime secrets. I had been to Hungary several times, and to Austria; I had flown to Russia, and now to Buenos Aires. But above all, I was now the father of three children, which made everything more complicated: I learned to change nappies and blend baby food, and I had learnt about my roots; I spent days in a little place called Rechnitz to find out more about a massacre of 180 Jews, I trudged through Siberian snow in search of the remains of a labour camp, and finally I ended up in South America. I discussed all this every week with my psychoanalyst in Zürich. While other people were lunching on pizza, we talked about Stalin, the Holocaust and mass graves, Only recently I had asked him, “Do you think I’m genuinely sick?” To which he replied, “How would I know?”

It felt like living in a time machine that merged yesterday with today. I travelled from the past to the present, looking down at myself from above as I moved around my biographical axis. Seven years. That’s about the life expectancy of

European moles. I read a good deal about those animals in my grandmother's diary, because she was always comparing herself with them.

So I sat in the Departures lounge looking out, I saw runways black with rubber, and beyond them dingy fields, the great expanses of Argentina.

Agnes's daughters had given me a slim volume by their mother when we said goodbye, her memoir of the war years, and it was now in my bag with my grandmother's diary. The life stories of two dissimilar women, intermingling and foreshadowing the present. I was leafing through them. All we need now is my own story, I thought, taking my notebook out of my jacket, smoothing a new page, and writing the date in the top left-hand corner: *October 2013*.

What am I going to write, I wondered, a letter? Who to – to myself? How do you begin a letter like that?

Then my flight was called.

It all began one Thursday in April, about seven years before my visit to Buenos Aires. At the time I was working for the Sunday edition of the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*. It was early in the morning, when there was hardly anyone in the office, and all was calm. I was writing a column about a sperm donor from the Netherlands when a rather older woman colleague, who seldom had much to say to me, put a page of newsprint down on the desk and said, “That’s quite some family you have, don’t you?”

I glanced up and smiled at her. Only then did I look at the article she had torn out of the paper to show me. I was expecting something to do with the 19<sup>th</sup> century, elaborate period dresses maybe, or horses. Some bridge or other named after one of my forebears, an Àdám, Zsigmund or Ladislaus Batthyány; my surname is well known in Hungary. The Batthyánys had been counts, princes, bishops. One of them was prime minister of the country in 1849, another, Ladislaus Batthyány-Strattmann, was beatified in 2003 by Pope John Paul II for his services to Rome as a medical doctor. The family history can be followed back to the Turkish wars of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, although here in the West few people know the name, and why should they? They generally take it for a Tamil name, because the two letters “y” in it suggest Sri Lanka. I get asked about it only during the Christmas holidays, when they show the trilogy of films about Sissi, the Empress Elisabeth of Austria, on TV at eleven in the morning, and the Empress, played by Romy Schneider, dances with a Count Batthyány who wears a baby-blue uniform and has a large amount of brilliantine on his hair.

So I expected something like that when I glanced at the newspaper, something harmless. Instead, I read the headline “The Hostess From Hell”, which I didn’t understand, but I recognized the woman in the photograph at once. Aunt Margit. The story said that in March, 1945, she had taken part in the massacre of 180 Jews in the Austrian border town of Rechnitz. Apparently she had thrown a party, with dancing and drinking, and at midnight, for fun, the guests held pistols to the heads of naked Jews, men and women alike, and pulled the triggers.

“Thanks,” I said, putting the sheet of newsprint aside and returning to the cursor blinking on my screen. I still had two hours before handing in my report on the Dutch sperm donor.

Aunt Margit? My great-aunt with the pointed tongue?

When I was a child, we went to have lunch with Aunt Margit three times a year, always at the most expensive restaurant in Zürich. My father chain-smoked in our white Opel all the way, my mother combed my hair with a plastic comb. We called her Aunt Margit, never just Margit, as if “Aunt” were a title. She was tall, with a large torso and thin legs. In my memory she always wears a skirt suit with the jacket buttoned up to her throat, and silk scarves with horse patterns on them; her crocodile handbag is claret-coloured with a gold clasp, and when she talks about deer in the rutting season or cruising in the Aegean, she puts out the tip of her tongue like a lizard in the pauses between sentences. I sit as far away as possible from her. Aunt Margit hated children, and while I push chopped calves’ liver around my plate I keep looking at her. I want to see that tongue.

After her death we seldom mentioned her, and my memories of our lunches faded, until the day when I read the report in the paper about that Austrian town. Rechnitz. About a party. About a massacre. About 180 Jews who had to strip naked before they were shot, so that their bodies would decompose more quickly. And Aunt Margit? She was at the centre of it.

I phoned my father and asked him if he knew about the party. He said nothing for a while, and I heard him uncorking a bottle of wine. I saw him in my mind’s eye, sitting on the shabby old sofa that I like so much in his living-room in Budapest.

“Margit had a couple of affairs with Nazis, there was talk about that in the family.”

“It says in the paper that she threw a party, and the high point, as a kind of treat for dessert, was when 180 Jews were lured into a stable and guns were handed out to the guests, who were all dead drunk. They all joined in, Margit too. She’s described as the hostess from Hell. The English newspapers are calling her the ‘killer countess’. And there’s a picture of her captioned: ‘Thyssen countess had 200 Jews shot at Nazi party.’”

“Nonsense. Yes, a crime was committed, but I think it’s unlikely that Margit was involved. She was a monster, but not capable of doing that.”

“How come Margit was a monster?”

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Before I read that newspaper story about Rechnitz and Aunt Margit, I hadn't been especially interested in my family's history. I had little contact with it. If I had been born in Hungary it would have been different; there were places and monuments there with connections to my ancestors. However, I grew up not in Budapest but in a four-roomed apartment on the outskirts of the city of Zürich, and when I was eight we moved a hundred metres further to a grey town house shaped like a Rubik cube, the puzzle that everyone was playing with back in the eighties. We had a ping-pong table in the garden, and a large fridge in the American style that the previous occupants had left behind. It smelled so good when you opened the freezer compartment and put your head right in, past the frozen peas. I remember, even more vividly, the smell of the fuel station where we sometimes stopped on the way back from visiting friends of my parents. My two brothers and I used to sit squeezed together on the back seat, and I always hoped the tank would need filling. Then I would wind down the car window, close my eyes and breathe in through my nose. The gasoline and the cool air, and all of us together in that car on the way home – I never felt safer in my life. And when we arrived I would pretend to be asleep, so that my father would carry me into my room, with his shirt still smelling of wine and cigarettes and summer. That was my childhood.

Like whales who make for calm waters when they are about to give birth, my parents had withdrawn from the outside world to settle here. But unlike whales, who then return to the ocean depths, my parents remained stranded on the outskirts of the city.

Maybe they were hiding from their past. From their memories of Hungary, of the war, of flight and concealment.

Or possibly they simply wanted to begin again in this undefiled place. Rather than thinking back to earlier times, they wanted to make this dead-end spot their home. And it almost worked.

Switzerland is a good country for beginning again and shedding the burden of the past; there is nothing in it to remind you of Hitler or Stalin. The two totalitarian systems of the last century, National Socialism and communism, the concentration camps and the gulag, are only chapters in school history books to the Swiss. There are hardly any memorials to the victims of wars, hardly any families, apart from those of immigrants, whose stories are interwoven with those atrocities. People don't ask, "Grandpa, what did you do in the war?" No one in Switzerland was deported or

gassed. There's nothing that the Swiss have to "come to terms with", there is nothing to "come out", as the newspapers always say about revelations in other countries. There was no collective failure, there were no crises outside the world of banking. Switzerland has known only years of prosperity and security; the minds of the Swiss were at ease, particularly in my youth at the beginning of the nineties, when everything was even brighter than before, and people living in city suburbs would get on their bikes at weekends and cycle out to the lakes.

You might expect the colour of such an idyll to rub off on its surroundings. You might expect such carefree attitudes to transfer themselves to a family's fortunes. It isn't always like that.

Neither my father nor my mother really felt at home in Switzerland, that most comfortably padded of all European countries. They did learn to speak Swiss German, they went skiing, they bought a sandwich toaster when everyone was buying them, and in winter they ate *raclette* like everyone else, pouring melted cheese over potatoes, maybe adding a little extra paprika. But in reality they participated in the life of the country only when they had to. They exchanged civil greetings with their neighbours, but they would rather get to their car unseen by any acquaintances. In secret, they smiled at Switzerland and the Swiss, or so at least it seemed to me earlier. My parents weren't bothered by the occasional xenophobic remarks of other inhabitants of Zürich – what a funny surname we had, we spoke German pretty well for foreigners, our rusty car didn't really suit this city – because they knew that they were never going to put down roots there. As they saw Switzerland, it was never more than a toy country, life there wasn't the genuine article, or at least not real life with its ups and downs, with its joy and grief. Because no one who had not at least lost a few relations in the war, who had not known what it was to see a foreign power, whether German or Russian, turn everything upside down, could truly claim to understand life. Suffering was the common currency. Idyllic happiness counted for nothing. The past was always more important than the future, old was always better than modern.

And so they probably dreamed of another life in their own way, in that little house on the outskirts of Zürich, a city without yesterdays from which my father soon moved.

Two years after the Iron Curtain came down, he packed his bags and went to Budapest. My mother also left Switzerland, and did not seem to feel that she was

missing anything. I never bore her a grudge for that. All of a sudden they were both gone, but they had left me with a sense that I was living in the wrong country.

I stayed where I was, all the same, perhaps out of inertia; studied at university, because that was what everyone did, and became a journalist. Soon I was writing about armed gangs of kids in Liverpool, I slept in the caravan belonging to a high-ranking Ku Klux Klan member in Texas, I spent several days walking around the streets of a Zürich suburb to report on the case of a girl of thirteen who had been gang-raped, and I sat on the Dutch sperm donor's sofa with a lesbian couple who wanted a child. I saw him give them a small container and a syringe, so that one of them could inject herself with his sperm. "I'm just going out to do a bit of shopping," he called, already in the doorway. "Do you want anything? Cola? Crisps?" The women shook their heads, taken aback. Cola? It was a baby that they wanted.

Hungary might be my parents' country, but what business of mine was that? I was in my early thirties, newly in love. The Second World War and a war crime involving the murder of 180 Jews couldn't have been farther away. We had our own problems, I thought, immigration, disorientation, globalization, I wrote about such subjects: too much consumption, too much pornography, too many opportunities.

But after coming up against my family history on the morning when I recognized Aunt Margit in the newspaper article, I began to do some research. I wrote to members of our family in Vienna, Budapest and Munich. "Hello," I began my letters. "We haven't met, but we're distantly related. Have you read what's said to have happened? Do you know anything about it?" I got hold of files on Aunt Margit and her husband Ivan, my grandfather's brother; I read books about the Thyssens, the history of Hungary; I spent whole days in archives in Berlin and Berne, Budapest and Graz; and I had many conversations with my father. Aunt Margit had set me travelling back into past history; because of her, I faced the story of my origins for the first time in my life.

It was the massacre of 180 Jews that brought me closer to my family.

On a Sunday in the spring of 2008 I went to Rechnitz for the first time, to find out what my aunt really had to do with the crime. I arrived in Vienna first thing in the morning, on the night train from Zürich, hired a car, and drove past woods and vineyards; the grapes on the vines were still small and hard. Rechnitz is no beauty spot, there's not much more to it than a main street, lined to right and left by low-roofed houses with narrow windows, curtained to keep out prying eyes. There is no town centre, no market place, and the castle that the immensely rich industrialist and art collector Heinrich Thyssen left in his will to his daughter Margit, our Aunt Margit, no longer stands. In 1945 the Russians bombed it when they marched into Austria, whereupon the inhabitants left, taking all the furniture, the pictures and the carpets with them. The Refugius association organizes an annual commemoration service for the murdered Jews. Songs are sung and prayers said at the Kreuzstadl, a historic ruin on the way into the town that is now preserved as a memorial. The speeches made in 2008 repeated that the crime must never be forgotten. I stood a little way to one side, knowing no one there, and looked around. The sun was shining, dandelions were in flower, the grass was ankle-high and still a little damp. Somewhere under it, 180 skulls lay buried. In spite of many years searching for it, the mass grave has not been found to this day.

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The night between 24 and 25 March 1945 is bright with moonlight. A party for Nazis and their hangers-on is being held in Margit Batthyány-Thyssen's castle in Rechnitz in the Burgenland district, near the Austro-Hungarian border. Members of the Gestapo and local Nazi bigwigs, like SS-Hauptscharführer Franz Podezin, like Josef Muralter and Hans-Joachim Oldenburg, are talking to members of the Hitler Youth and the castle staff, while they drink sparkling wine. The National Socialists know that the war is lost and the Russians have already reached the Danube, but that is not allowed to cast a pall over the festive atmosphere. It is eight in the evening. At the same time, about 200 Jewish forced labourers from Hungary are standing on Rechnitz railway station. They have been working on the construction of the south-east rampart, a huge fortified line of defence intended to run from Poland by way of Slovakia and Hungary to Trieste and hold back the advancing Red Army. At nine-thirty in the evening, the truck driver Franz Ostermann tells some of the Jews to get

into his truck, and after a short drive hands them over to four SA men, who give the prisoners shovels and tell them to dig an L-shaped pit.

The Hungarian Jews begin digging; they are tired and weak, the ground is hard, there is much drinking and dancing in Aunt Margit's castle. About nine o'clock, SS Hauptscharführer Franz Podezin receives a phone call. The party is so noisy that he has to go into the next room to take the call, which lasts less than two minutes. Podezin concludes it by saying, "Yes, yes!" and adds, "What a bloody mess!" He tells Hildegard Stadler, head of the local branch of the League of German Girls, to take about ten to thirteen of the party guests into another room. "The Jews from the railway station," he tells them, "are sick with typhoid fever and have to be shot." No one demurs. Karl Muhr, the ordnance officer, hands out guns and ammunition to the guests. It is just after eleven o'clock. Three cars are ready in the castle courtyard; there isn't room for the whole group, so some walk. It isn't far.

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I phoned my father. "You knew Aunt Margit was there that night," I told him, "and you knew about the massacre, too."

"Yes."

"But did it never occur to you that she might have been involved in it?"

"Is this an interrogation?"

"Only asking."

"I never thought there could be any connection between the party and the massacre, no, not the stuff they're saying in the papers these days. Wait a moment." He coughed, and I heard him take a cigarette out of its packet.

"You smoke too much."

"How's the little one?"

"She's getting her third tooth and crawling. How come you never discussed the war with Aunt Margit?"

"What would you have expected me to ask her? Can I give you a little more wine, Aunt Margit? Oh, and by the way, Aunt Margit, did you ever shoot any Jews?"

"Yes."

"Don't be naïve. Those were courtesy visits. We used to talk about the weather, and she pulled various members of the family to pieces. 'Rotten seed,' that was how she described the Thyssens and the Batthyánys, she thought they were all

out of their minds. 'Rotten seed.' It was her favourite saying. Do you remember that tongue of hers?"

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Between midnight and three in the morning, Franz Ostermann makes seven journeys in all from the station to the Kreuzstadl, each time with 20 to 30 Jews in his truck, and hands them over to the four SA men. The Jews are ordered to undress and leave their clothes beside the pit. They kneel, naked, on the edge of their L-shaped grave. Podezin and Oldenburg stand there, fanatical Nazis both. They shoot the Jews in the backs of their necks. As Josef Muralter, a Nazi Party member, pulls the trigger he shouts, "You bastards will burn! Traitors to the Fatherland!" The Jews collapse, fall into the pit, and lie there stacked on one another. More bottles of sparkling wine are being opened in the castle, someone is playing the accordion. Margit is young and likes to have fun, she wears the most beautiful clothes. A waiter called Viktor notices that at three in the morning, when the guests return to the hall where the party is being held, they are gesticulating wildly and their faces are flushed. SS Hauptscharführer Podezin, who has just been shooting men and women in the head, is now dancing with perfect composure.

Not all the Jews were shot that night. Eighteen were left alive for the time being. They were ordered to fill the pit in with earth. They were on grave-digging duty. Twelve hours later, on the evening of 25 March, they themselves were murdered on the orders of Hans-Joachim Oldenburg, Margit's lover, and buried in a field near the abattoir.

After the war, seven people were prosecuted for committing multiple murder and atrocities, in other words crimes against humanity. They were Josef Muralter, Ludwig Groll, Stefan Beigelbeck, Eduard Nicka, Franz Podezin, Hildegard Stadler and Hans-Joachim Oldenburg. But in 1946 the trial ground to a halt, because the two principal witnesses were murdered. First of them was Karl Muhr, the ordnance officer at the castle. He had handed out the guns that night of 24 March, and saw the faces of those who would fire them later. A year later Muhr was found in the woods with a bullet in his head, his dead dog beside him, and his house was on fire. The cartridge case that the police took away from the crime scene disappeared. The second victim was Nikolaus Weiss, an eyewitness who had survived the massacre by hiding in a

Rechnitz family's shed. A year later, when he was on his way to the town of Lockenhaus, someone shot at his car. It went into a skid, and Weiss died on the spot.

After these two murders, the people of Rechnitz lived in fear of retribution. No one talked. Their silence has lasted to this day. In the seventy years since the crime was committed, the town has become a symbol of Austria-Hungary, with its Nazi past. Any one who mentions Rechnitz is alluding to the suppression of facts.

On 15 July 1948, Stefan Beigelbeck and Hildegard Stadler were cleared. Ludwig Groll was condemned to eight years' imprisonment with hard labour, Josef Muralter was given five years and Eduard Nicka three years in prison. Podezin and Oldenburg, the ringleaders of the massacre, were on the run. The Burgenland police suspected that they were with Countess Margit Batthyány-Thyssen in Switzerland, living in an apartment not far from Lugano.

Interpol Vienna sent the Lugano police a telegram on 28 August 1948: "Risk of the two men going to South America. Please arrest them." The order to arrest the fugitives was posted in the Swiss Police Gazette, page 1643, on 30 August 1948, but there was no result.

Summing up at the end of the trial, Dr Mayer-Maly, the Austrian public prosecutor who was supposed to be clearing up the case of the massacre, said that "The real murderers have not yet been found."

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I visited Rechnitz for the second time at the end of August, when the vines were red and the trees in their full summer foliage. I had come to visit Annemarie Vitzthum, aged 89, and probably the last surviving guest to have been at Margit's party.

"I'd really dolled myself up," she remembered. "We sat at round tables in the little hall on the ground floor, with the Count and Countess in the middle of the room. Countess Margit looked like a princess – she wore such lovely clothes."

Men in uniform had kept coming and going, she told me, but she couldn't remember their names. "There was such a commotion," as she had also told the public prosecutor in 1947 when she was questioned. "Everyone was drinking wine and dancing, I didn't know this kind of life because I was only an ordinary girl, I was the telephonist." At midnight a soldier had escorted her home, and up to that point the Countess had not left the castle. Frau Vitzthum had heard about the Jews only later, she said, as we ate her home-made sponge cake with crumble topping. What a terrible thing that was.

Then I went to see Klaus Gmeiner. He was Aunt Margit's forester, and had been the last person to see her alive. Margit owned 1000 hectares of land in Rechnitz, and came to hunt there every year. "She was an excellent shot, she'd had experience of hunting game in Africa. She was very pleased when she bagged an animal, a mouflon or a deer, I never saw her happier." In all the years since the war they had never mentioned the Nazi period, said Gmeiner, who like so many in Rechnitz thought Margit was wonderful. He was sure she had nothing to do with the crime, he told me.

"We went stalking," he said of the evening before her death, "and she hit a mouflon ram with a well-judged shot through the shoulder." He remembered exactly how the animal had staggered twenty, maybe thirty steps towards her, and only then collapsed. He still recollected, he said, how she had complained that evening of the many people who were always begging her for money. "That was the last thing she said." Next morning she did not appear at breakfast time.

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"How was it in Rechnitz? Did you find anything out?" my father asked me on the phone. He sounded tired. A few weeks earlier, a little dog had suddenly appeared outside the door of his weekend house on Lake Balaton, a mongrel who refused to move from his side.

"What's the dog doing?"

"Getting on my nerves."

"But you like him, don't you?"

"Tell me about Rechnitz."

"The people in the village called me Count, some of the women almost curtsied to me."

"Terrible, all that fuss and bother."

"Witnesses say that Margit's husband was at the party too."

"In the family it's always been claimed that he was in Hungary that evening."

"Everyone tells a different version of the story: the family say they didn't know anything and never asked any questions about Margit's role; the media go after headlines about the bloodthirsty Countess; and the people of Rechnitz want to sweep the whole thing under the carpet. To them, Aunt Margit is a saint."

"And what do you want?"

When I began my investigations, I wanted to know what really happened. I searched archives, wrote letters, drew up files, and wondered who in our family knew anything about Rechnitz, and why no one talked about it. I had often known my grandparents to discuss aunts long dead, the quirks of some uncle or other, the former splendour of Hungary, when people still knew how to behave and had good taste. Why did I never hear a word about Rechnitz? Why no mention of that grave? I thought I might find a clue, where the 180 bodies were buried. It's possible that someone there might talk to you, I told myself, because you're one of the family.

But then, one winter evening, a chance meeting had many consequences. I was out and about in the city with friends, and in a restaurant we came upon an acquaintance sharing a table with the German writer Maxim Biller. We joined them, and at some point the conversation came around to Aunt Margit. Biller had heard of her, which surprised me, and he was the first person ever to ask me, "And what's that to do with you?"

The Nazi Countess, as the papers call her to this day, and me?

I hadn't expected such a question. Absurd as it may sound, I had never yet put it to myself. Strictly speaking, I told Biller awkwardly, she wasn't even related to me; Margit was a Thyssen who had married into our family. "So what's that to do with me?" I repeated, to gain time. "Nothing, why would it? It's all so long ago."

If he were to ask me the same question today, I would have a different answer. Because my focus changed over the course of time. It became less and less a matter of finding out what really happened; I was no longer a journalist approaching the subject from outside, making notes, gathering facts and asking other people questions. Now it was only about me.

I read about associations of grandchildren affected by the war, people of my own age who, because of events seventy years in the past, feel uprooted, disorientated, as if they had been born in a vacuum. "They have inherited their parents' unresolved emotions," I read, "and now they are trying to break free of the fetters of the past." Many would feel guilty for being unable to mitigate their parents' distress and confusion. I read about some who were too hard on themselves, about the deliberate construction of ideal worlds to compensate for a sense of something lacking. One man wrote, "I want to arrive in my own life at last." Another asked,

“What kind of people has our parents’ persistent silence made us?” I recognized myself in such remarks, although I didn’t want to belong to a community of suffering. I am not the kind to join self-help groups.

“Every generation has its own tasks,” said a website dealing with the subject. “The parental generation rolled up their sleeves and set to work clearing up the outer rubble. Clearing up the inner rubble is the grandchildren’s task.” Is that so? Wasn’t it too simple? I had already read that trauma can be inherited, and indeed is particularly likely to be passed on from grandparents to their grandchildren, but I didn’t entirely believe it. As if the hail of bombs through which my father lived as a child was an excuse for my occasional melancholy. As if the ten years my grandfather spent in the gulag in Siberia accounted for my eccentricity. And yet there was a connection – or did I just imagine it?

Wasn’t I the one who always felt guilty for being too comfortably off in Switzerland? Didn’t I sometimes, secretly, wish for a small-scale war? Or at least a crisis. And think how often, as a journalist, I had written about migrants. I accompanied one family on their journey out of Iraq, I spent several days with Africans working in the hothouses of southern Spain, and with refugees from Bangla Desh in old warehouses in Athens. Why did I take such an interest in fugitives? Where did my attraction to suffering come from?

You grew up in Zürich, I told myself, far from armoured mortar-throwers, what’s the matter with you? You dried plants at school, marsh marigolds, blackthorn blossom, your teacher was proud of your herbarium. And then there was that backhand you hit in the third set in 1988, a one-handed shot, winning the match and getting you out of trouble, your socks red with the sand of the tennis court, that’s your life, isn’t it good enough for you? No, it never was. There was always something missing. The cloudless world around me, as white as the polo shirts I wore, turning up their collars in the mid-eighties, was never mine. And the longer I thought about it, the more accurate it seemed to say: I am a grandchild of the war. My father spent the war in an air-raid shelter, my grandfather was dragged off to Siberia by the Russians, my grandmother lost her second son – and my great-aunt was responsible for the massacre of 180 Jews. They were perpetrators and victims, hunted and hunters, were first acclaimed and then despised: the bastards of international history. In the end they went through life with their backs increasingly bent, losing first their self-respect and then their voices. *We were a family of moles*, wrote my grandmother Maritta in

her diary. *We withdrew, we did not believe in anything any more, we retreated into ourselves, keeping our heads down underground, always ducking.*

And how about me?

[END OF SAMPLE]