

## THE SEVEN LIVES OF FELIX KANNMACHER

by JAN KONEFFKE

### English Sample Translation

(„Die sieben Leben des Felix Kannmacher“)

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*In the first chapter I, Felix Kannmacher, German emigrant and disabled piano-player, who had three fingers crushed by an SA man, reach the Gulf of Balchik in July 1935, under the false name Johann Gottwald, along with the great pianist Victor Marcu and his daughter Virginia, encounter dolphins, donkeys, camels and habitual pessimists, observe (involuntarily) strange fingers on strange knees, have to endure being tormented by a child, make up (again involuntarily) stories and am to be married to a Tatar, until a murder in the palace of the Romanian queen mother Maria, “the sultana,” brings my stay in paradise to a premature end.*

*Great was my need (p. 40-49)*

Today it seems to me as if my memory were one of those made-up stories, a story of a strange land and distant time. A story in which I, in the afternoon, when Marcu did not release me from my duties and get into a rowboat with his daughter to go fishing, accompanied Virginia and Mira as they rode the little Tatar’s light gray donkey to the top

of the limestone rocks or to the fertile hollow by the river, where they nibbled on berries, explored grottoes and climbed cliffs.

Mira, with eyes like glowing coals and eyebrows like two black crescent moons, was just under ten, though no littler than Virginia. That was due not least of all to the work she did. She had to fetch water from the well, haul coal, scale fish and embroider pillows (Mira's fingertips were covered with scars and pricks), rub and scrub clothes on washboards, not to mention scything and milking. But it also had to do with Virginia's delicateness, if the age difference was scarcely noticeable. Virginia was more childlike than her friend Mira, moved in a jerky and dangly fashion like a young foal and had bold ideas. And besides being playful, she was an impudent beast, who took particular pleasure in tormenting me.

Mira and she mounted the hoofed animal, around whose neck colorful glass bead necklaces hung, and plodded out of the winding, shadowy lanes to the foot of the mountains of limestone rising sharply into the azure. I trudged along beside the two of them, in the blazing sun, in the dust that the donkey raised, panting and sweating and worried about my straw hat, which Virginia liked to brush off my head, bursting into cheers when it took its rolling journey and disappeared into the depths.

Or the donkey had a fit of defiance and wouldn't budge a millimeter. Mira suggested walking. No, that was not to Virginia's liking. Mira assured us that if she reasoned with the donkey enough, it would pull itself together, all it needed was attention and consideration. She leaned forward to whisper in the animal's ears. No, Virginia, who sat in front, fended off her friend. *I am going to spur on the donkey*, she demanded curtly.

Virginia never gave in, that was clear. If I refused and sat down on the limestone rock, we would only roast in the sun's blaze. I slammed myself into the animal, which jumped up in the blink of an eye and struck out with its hind leg (I dodged in time, and its hoof kicked into the air). I dug my fingers into its neck to pull it meter by meter up to the summit. The donkey only behaved all the more stubbornly, to Virginia's special delight. She found nothing funnier than my helpless efforts to break its will. Mira joined in her friend's giggling, though more restrainedly, not a bit maliciously. I noticed that she was worried, undoubtedly more about the donkey than me, and I stroked its flank soothingly. Suddenly it let out a hoarse "hee-haw" and galloped in a zigzag to the mountaintop (and I

got to rest on the shady slope).

That Virginia hid from her father how she pestered and tormented me goes without saying. And I myself kept silent.

Victor Marcu did not suffer from modesty, no, he was demanding, extravagant, profligate. He was insatiable, a quality he harshly condemned in others, who perpetually wanted more money or were after fame, craved power or collected lovers as simpler people did seashells and stamps. “These people expect life to be generous and fate to behave selflessly,” he remarked with his dripping irony, which made acquaintances and friends insecure. They applied it, and not without reason, to themselves.

Marcu’s own demands of fate and life escaped his sharp powers of observation. He wanted to be revered, receive applause, bathe in fame, had to be at the center of attention, whether in the Athenaeum of Bucharest, a Parisian concert hall or in the smallest circle of friends. In the collecting of lovers he could rival Carol II. It was again his yearning for recognition that drove Marcu into countless women’s arms.

Things were more confusing regarding his hunger for power. Marcu did not aspire to a political office, he disdained politics. To control other people from without did not suit Marcu. He preferred to control them from within, by binding them to himself with his power of attraction. “He is like a star,” said Haralamb Vona on one occasion, “orbited by planets, by blue and gray, inhospitably frozen, crater-scarred planets, by planets shining in gas clouds, by boiling, damp and dead planets, which cannot escape his gravitation.”

Only when it came to money and possessions did he seem to be immune. This impression proved to be overhasty, if not false, if you were intimate with Marcu. He attached considerable value to possessions and money without placing them at the center of his interest. It did not occur to Marcu to boast of high concert fees he was making in Berlin or London or what he earned from radio stations and record companies. He relinquished this job to Bubi Giurgiucă, who was at his best when he could brag about the contract amounts he achieved in endless, arduous negotiations. In both respects, Bubi was the money-grubber and glutton, usurer, haggler and miser. He assumed this role without reservation, in accordance with his nature, enabling Marcu to play the part of a man free of base instincts like avarice and acquisitiveness.

To look at Marcu's cards was hard. He bid the full value of his inner hand, and played exclusively for high stakes.

As for his relationship with his daughter, it took me months to understand why he did not treat her more strictly. Without more precise knowledge of what was going on, he was able to figure out easily how she plagued and tortured me. In his eyes I deserved nothing better! Not because he disliked or scorned me – he felt sorry about what had happened to me in Germany and was not stingy with his sincere affection. No, I deserved nothing better from his Virginia!

His love for his daughter was boundless, and he was not willing to share that love. He tolerated no one aside from himself in that warm nest. He could not permit anyone else to creep into his daughter's heart.

Excessive was his love for his daughter, excessive was his jealousy. He did not suspect me of seeking to enter the love nest. But to provoke his chronic mistrust, no particular suspicion was necessary. He lived in perpetual unease. And if his daughter treated me in a beastly fashion, he could be a bit calmer. That did not contradict the sympathy he had for me, or his insight into Virginia's moody nature.

I was relieved when they climbed into the convertible in mid-July to take a trip that Marcu estimated at two to three days. They wanted to visit the Port of Constanța, stroll on the promenade and play a few rounds of roulette in the casino, an impressive domed building on the Black Sea. The day before their departure he called to book them accommodations in the Bellona, the new, myriad-story hotel reminiscent of an Atlantic steamship in a resort near Constanța. When they said there were unfortunately no more available beds, he had them get the hotel manager on the telephone. He berated the man, to whom his name meant nothing, as a mediocrity, boor, philistine and numskull, brandished his connections to Carol II and to the patriarch in Bucharest until the hotel manager gave in.

With his trip he aimed to catch two rabbits at one stroke: to offer his daughter something special (the first rabbit) and to savor the honey pot of a beloved (the second) – letters in dainty handwriting had been arriving incessantly at the Gulf, postmarked Constanța. And in order to be freer, he suggested that I come along. I did not even have

to decline with thanks, Virginia beat me to it. “Without Herr Felix,” she demanded furiously, pounding on his chest, “I want to be alone with you, tata.”

As the automobile twisted up the curvy street toward the plateau and, shortly before the blazing limestone rocks, looked as small as a toy, a glistening black insect hastily receding, I noticed my relief. Finally I had time to collect my thoughts. Finally I had three days of peace and did not have to think up any stories, push the donkey, hold a turtle race, play hide-and-seek, run to the harbor square to buy meringues from Hagi Jusub, give quizzes on vocabulary and declensions.

I went into the abandoned piano room, opened the lid of the Steinway, plunked out, standing and with only the right hand, a Mozart adagio. I did not dare to sit down on the stool.

Then I tottered onto the terrace and leaned against the stone balustrade. One could not tell where the horizon began. The sky sank into the vastness of the sea, the seawater flowed into the sky. I spotted the beach photographer, who today came to the beach with a camel, on which he wanted to take pictures of the children of the industrialists and politicians. Last week it had been a chimpanzee (which had caused a commotion among the beachgoers when it scampered chattering from sunshade to sunshade, pilfering popcorn and stealing magazines and attempting to delouse two ambassadors’ wives), and on our arrival it had been a clumsy tiger, which was less than ten weeks old. By a rope he pulled the camel onto the sand, which was acting more stubborn than Mira’s donkey. Every ten meters it went down on its knees to rest. Chewing and obstinate, it lay among the sunshades and ignored the beach photographer, who circled it despairingly and tore at his hair. Finally the camel stood where it was supposed to stand. In order to set up the apparatus, his camera with its black bellows and the curtain in front the lens, and to ram the tripod into the ground, he knotted the camel rope around his belly.

I turned away, walked to the courtyard fountain, held my face in the water jet, washed the dirt off my soles and sat down next to the fig tree.

With a stabbing sensation in the heart area, I woke up. It couldn’t have been more than minutes that had passed, as I determined by the position of the sun. I marched once again into the piano room, where I lifted up the lid of the Steinway. I closed my eyes, I hesitated, took a deep breath and fell onto the piano stool. I was sitting too low in front of

the keyboard. Victor Marcu, who was broad-shouldered, heavy and thick, without seeming corpulent or plump, measured roughly six-two, about four inches taller than I.

I shifted the stool onto the side wheel, raised my arms, let them float in the air and hummed the beginning of the *The Well-Tempered Clavier*. My head echoed as if it were an empty concert hall into which a rapturous stream of piano sound poured. I sang and moved my arms. They floated from left to right or from right to left, wandered far apart, came back together. My fingers began to run and jumped from one octave to another, I spread them, pressed chords into the air.

I didn't know what I was doing to myself as I lowered them onto the ebony and ivory keys and, trembling with pleasure, started playing a Bach fugue. My fingers did not obey me. I bungled, I blundered, I was sloppy and careless, and not only at difficult points. What came out of the Steinway was a miserable botchery. And the pain in the fingers I forced onto the keys ultimately became unbearable. I broke off, slammed the lid, ran outside.

I hurried from the harbor toward the beach, where I met Marietta, who waved with a parasol and made an insulted face when I declined to accompany her to the beach (the Saxons apparently lack good breeding, she complained, as I headed off), I hurried to Mamut's coffeehouse, ordered a mocha, which I downed with one sip (Mamut only furrowed his eyebrows when I tried to pay, "the gentleman must be doing badly," he remarked pityingly, "if he has no time to enjoy the coffee, and he who has no time, sir, is punished enough by Allah, from him the honest Mamut cannot accept money"), I climbed a staircase and a second (the streets abound with stone steps), until I ran into Mira in the town, carrying a yoke with two sloshing buckets on her shoulder.

Without a word she took me by the hand. Side by side, we climbed uphill, until she pushed open a squeaky wooden gate with her toes and invited me into the inner courtyard. In the courtyard square surrounded by a house and extensions, stables and sheds, a horse and three donkeys picked at bales of hay. On the ground floor was a narrow veranda. On the second floor of winding wooden galleries and balconies, which protruded two meters and rested on slender pillars, I spotted scurrying female figures.

Mira pulled me by the hand into a low-ceilinged small room, in which it was pleasantly fresh, and pointed to the bench in front of the coarse clay wall, telling me to

make myself comfortable on the cushions. One might think we were alone. No human voice penetrated to my ear, only the noise of the livestock in the stables. I looked up at the wooden ceiling, which was painted with golden crescent moons, suns and stars. Two oil lamps hanging low from the beams swung in the draft from the courtyard.

Mira silently served me meringues, halva and baklava, almonds and figs, and drew tea for me from the samovar. Soon Mira's father, whose name was Akif, entered the room, bowed with a murmur, and sat down next to me. We sat cross-legged on his cushioned bench, without exchanging a word with each other (he was not proficient in Romanian, still less so in German), which we made up for with winks and nods, ate almonds and figs and sipped the hot tea.

When about an hour had passed, he went into the courtyard and gave harsh orders. And from all corners people came into the room and pressed a kiss to my hand (as if I were a minister of the gate of Istanbul or the Sultan himself), his bulky wife, who eyed me intently, his toothless mother, who was more stooped than a tree bent from the sea wind on the cliffs, and eleven children ranging in age from three and a half to their early twenties, whom he proudly introduced to me one by one. Mira translated his words for me: His littlest was strong-willed as a unicorn; his second-to-last born son brave as a janissary; his daughter, born before the second-to-last born son, soft as velvet; his daughter, born before the daughter born before the second-to-last born son, quick as a bird; his daughter, born before the daughter born before the daughter born before the second-to-last born son, fiery and wild as a wildcat; Mira was sweeter than a grape and more kindhearted than a deer; his seventh son had prophetic wisdom; his eighth was unfaltering and strong as an oak; his daughter Ratibe possessed a white heart, innocently white as the linen before the wedding night, and was full of grace, the grace of an angel; his second-born son was faithful as a dog; and his first son busier than a bee.

"Great was my need," Akif said in conclusion, "when I was young and had no family. My heart stretched like the steppe to the horizon and was bare as the plain. They came like the rain," he pointed from one child to another, "they came like the rain upon me, turning a loveless land into a lush pasture."

He waved at the children, the wife and the mother, who dispersed into the corners of the courtyard. Akif and I sank into our cushions. The only one who remained with us

was Ratibe, who shyly and self-consciously served olives and capers, black bread and the salty feta from the goat.

Mira had disappeared without a trace. Only once I set off did she accompany me to the courtyard gate and ask me to come again soon.

In a daze I walked home and in a daze I entered the house, which received me emptily and desolately. Its lifelessness seemed uncanny to me. Aise was only a silent shadow creeping on tiptoe, and Haralamb Vona, hiding away in melancholy, stayed in his room.

I sat down in a living room armchair and listened to the surf before the slope. I remembered the stabbing sensation in the heart area that had jolted me out of my morning snooze. It was better not to deceive myself. Without the “God at the piano” I was a nothing (only Mira’s Tatar family received me like a minister of the gate in Istanbul). Without his company and that of his daughter I stood before a dizzying abyss into which my past had sunk. And what stared at me as the future from out of the depths was black and icy emptiness.

Darkness spread in the rooms of the house. Aise set the dining room table, served the breadbasket, brought me beans and meat. In the milky blue glow of an oil lamp I ate my plate clean and gave thanks with a nod when she appeared in the doorway like a ghost to take away the silverware and basket. I leaned against the stone balustrade (and didn’t notice when she went home to the wooden house by the river).

There was a new moon that night. On the harbor square four solitary gaslights were burning, in the windows of the main street shimmered lamplight. Darkness swallowed the town ascending the mountain slope on both sides of the river– only when the moon shone on it did it have light.

I strolled to the gramophone box on the weathered grindstone by the fig tree, opened the case, screwed on the funnel, reached for the record with hits from Bucharest. “Good Night, Mimi,” blared to the Gulf.

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*To the end an open game (p. 74-85)*

Our time in Balchik came to an end, and did so, contrary to custom, already in August. Usually one left with the autumn storm that lashed the land toward the end of September and crowned the sea with yellow crests. Rain clouds swallowed up the horizon and hung low before the limestone rock wall. When the Gulf splashed its dirty spray on the cliffs and sloshed mud from the town to the valley, one could set off for home without melancholy.

This year it was different. To the relief of Bubi Giurgiuca, who felt like half a person without a telephone and could finally crawl out of his Bulgarian hole, and to the particular grief of Virginia, who embraced the donkey with defiant howling and would not let go of Mira when they said good-bye, we left early.

It was the events in the “Quiet Nest” of the monarch that prompted Marcu to bring forward our homeward journey. From his last visit to the palace “Tenha Juva,” as the castle in the hollow of the valley was called, he returned home full of unease. At the ostentatious celebration that took place in the garden by the sea, a relative of Maria’s had disappeared. It was midnight before anyone noticed he was missing, which was not especially astonishing on grounds that stretched three hundred decares and extended from the beach to the mountaintop.

It was a full moon night, which the monarch loved. A silvery shimmer emanated from rose terraces and a waterfall, wrought iron pergolas, wells and gigantic stone crosses (with weathered indentations in Bulgarian church script), water pools reminiscent of the Alhambra, an abundant cactus collection called “Allah’s garden,” Muslim tombstones decorated with turbans, archaic vases imitating pine cones, a Hellenistic marble throne and urns from Morocco that were three meters tall. Crickets chirped around the castle with the pillar of the minaret, torches illuminated the colonnades leading up to the Byzantine chapel, and by the water lily pond glowed a swarm of yellow fireflies.

Maria was the first to miss the uncle. Usually he stayed in the smoking lounge, where he played rummy, belote or chess. Only occasionally did he take a walk in the garden, to the water lily pond or the marble throne, to move his stiff joints. He was strikingly tall and robust, had protruding ears and a coarse face, came across as gruff and

cold, except at the game table. A bachelor out of necessity or insight, lack of options or a wise decision, he didn't care at all for female acquaintances in a sexual sense. In the presence of Maria, whom he trusted, and whom he addressed affectionately as Missi, which showed how connected the two of them were, he displayed a liveliness otherwise absent in his character.

In Maria's palace he was a permanent guest. He was familiar with the park, its paths and steps, terraces, lanes and pools. He had definitely not gotten lost, even a bad fall was hard to imagine. Despite his age – he was approaching seventy – he could move confidently in the dark, and he drank alcohol in moderation. And to consider a tryst in the depths of the park was in his case absurd.

Maria learned from the other rummy and chess players sitting in the smoke-filled lounge that he had gone outside for some fresh air about one and a half hours ago, without finishing his chess game with the commander of the guard ship. She found the latter information particularly unsettling. Prince Anton never left an open chess game and stayed away from the game table for ninety minutes.

Alarmed, she sent a bugler up to the minaret, who with his signal summoned the visitors scattered in the garden, about two hundred people, who gathered in no time in front of the palace entrance, curious to know what was going on. When Maria informed them, they buzzed off in all directions in search of the vanished prince. Only at dawn, which was gray over the water, did they abandon the search without success.

The next day Marcu sat down at the Steinway to rehearse his Debussy program. He hastily consumed a tomato with telemea, two eggs and caviar salad and recounted the night's incident as he chewed. "I bet it was a heart attack," said Bubi Giurgiuca, leaning against the fig tree and smoking, "and he is resting among fragrant roses in the garden of Gethsamane." – "What is our life," Haralamb Vona interjected, "if not a chess game that we do not finish. It remains to the end an open game." Marcu, who had instructed Aise to hurry to the harbor and wake Titi (his chauffeur slept upright in the automobile), gave no reply and jumped up when the convertible honked outside the gate to the main street. He wanted to go to the monarch's castle, which was about three kilometers from the heart of the town, and check whether they had found the relative.

They had not, and in the afternoon ten detectives arrived from Bucharest and

searched the garden for clues. In the vicinity of the marble throne they found a cigar stub of Prince Anton's preferred brand Villar y Villar – how old it was, one day, three or seven, they unfortunately could not say. At the Hellenistic marble throne they stumbled on a button from his vest. And in the mouth of a grotesque moss-covered stone face on the east side of the park they located his talisman, a gold locket with photographs of his parents. Only Prince Anton remained vanished without a trace.

Even when they expanded the investigations and explored the area surrounding the castle, climbed from cliff to cliff, bent over the canyons, searched the Gulf with boats all the way to the port, they had no success.

Virginia refused her lessons on those days, which escaped her agitated father, and wanted to investigate on her own. Mira and she mounted the donkey and set off into the neighboring valley of Duranlar and the fig tree forest in Batova (and I followed the two of them on foot).

One afternoon Mira whispered to me that her father Akif was awaiting me most urgently at his house, where he wanted to propose an exchange to me. I was too taken aback to reply that Akif was apparently misinformed, for I unfortunately did not have the money to buy woven goods and embroideries. Mira seemed to read my thoughts. The deal Akif wanted to offer me was not about money, she remarked with a wink.

When we returned home from Batova, Virginia ran gasping with excitement to her father. In the fig tree forest she had discovered a silver container with three blue pills. It had with one-hundred-percent certainty belonged to the vanished prince, she would not accept any other explanation! I hurried to the courtyard fountain to wash myself unnoticed by father and daughter, and hastily put on fresh clothes.

Mira was waiting for me in the street, along with the donkey, which looked clean and pure, as if it had never been in Batova. A wreath dangled around its neck, tail and ears had been adorned with bows. "You climb on," said Mira, "I'll walk." I had not the slightest desire to hop onto the stubborn animal and break my tailbone. She would receive blows from her father, Mira said, if she rode into the courtyard and not I. "I can get on outside your parents' house," I suggested. She did not like that idea at all. She begged me with a persistence bordering on desperation, and I gave in.

On the road paved with rough and uneven stones into the town, I realized why she

had declined my suggestion. From a well Akif's son waved at us, the eighth, who was strong as an oak. In the shade of a mulberry crouched the son who had prophetic wisdom, nodding to us sagely. On a stone step sat Akif's second-to-last born son, brave as a janissary, following us with his watchful eyes. And in a pine I spotted the daughter born before the daughter born before the second-to-last born son, who was quick as a bird. And like a bird she began to twitter and announced our arrival to her parents' house. We met all Akif's children on the way to the courtyard, except his daughter Ratibe, unless she, with the grace of an angel that she possessed, had been around us without my noticing.

Again we both sat cross-legged on his cushioned bench, Akif and I, ate meringues, baklava, almonds and figs. In the low-ceilinged small room it smelled confusingly like a mixture of jasmine and oranges, fresh baked goods and peppermint. Akif's littlest, the unicorn son, and his velvet-soft daughter, born before the second-to-last born son, fanned us with two palm branches and drove away unwelcome flies. Mira sat in a corner of the small room on a stool, patient, humble and unassuming, to translate for her father Akif. At first she had nothing to do, Akif remained silent.

Outside the small room on the veranda I saw Akif's gathered flock of children watching us with silent, restrained curiosity as we drank and nibbled. His bulky wife was embroidering a cloth and sitting to the left of the entrance. To the right sat his toothless mother. Between her wrinkled lips she was crunching sunflower seeds (with what was a mystery to me), and scattering the shells on the floor.

In this quiet of rustling palm branches, buzzing flies and our chewing and swallowing, my unease disappeared. I sank into time as into Akif's comfortable cushions. And forgot why he had summoned me, until I noticed a movement in the entrance. Akif's wife lowered the cloth into her lap and Akif's mother the bowl of sunflower seeds. And his motionlessly waiting children dispersed to make way for their sister Ratibe. She had on a swishing dress, which seemed an unreal white, like a flickering glow. And around her head of full, black hair she wore a white embroidered scarf. It accentuated her thin face, high cheekbones, dead straight nose and crescent moon eyebrows, which revealed her as Mira's sister, two eyes with a tinge of foreignness, as if they remembered her Altaic descent, lips half open, pure and pale red. Ratibe's face had a childlike softness

and showed the loveliness of an awakening woman.

Self-consciously and shyly, she entered. Unlike on my first visit she was not performing any tasks, stopped in front of our cushioned bench and waited with silent humility for what fate held in store.

And Akif began to praise her. Again he spoke of his daughter's heart, which was white and immaculately pure, like the linen before the wedding night. She was innocent and graceful as only an angel, had the freshness of a young tree and its symmetry, was clear as mountain water, kindhearted as a deer and fertile as the Balchik ground. She was modest as flowers in winter, had a silent earnestness like the cliffs by the sea. She was a locked treasure chest. She spun, she wove, she washed, Akif went on, she swept and lit the fire in the stove with the pleasure of the serving woman. She was experienced in all areas of life – Akif took a sip from the teacup and Mira's murmuring interpreter's voice went silent for a moment – except in love and devotion to a man.

I was too confused to be distraught. And I had good reason to be distraught. Akif was offering me his very young daughter! I, Felix Kannmacher, German emigrant, without a job and with a false passport, was to take Akif's daughter as my wife! It was enough to make you tear your hair out. And I sat cross-legged on Akif's cushioned bench, without interrupting his speech. Indeed, I accompanied it with persistent nodding (to show that I'd understood), as if the deal were already half arranged.

There was a pause, and I let it go by. Mira rose from the stool and brought us more tea, two bowls of goat milk, poppy-seed cookies, telemea, sardines, olives and capers. Her sister Ratibe stood ghostly white in the middle of the room and stared with bashfully shadowed eyes at the nothingness of the wooden floor. She did not dare to look at me. Nonetheless, she scrutinized me intently. How she managed that was not clear to me. I noticed I was becoming embarrassed. And out of pure embarrassment I nodded to Akif, who took this nod as consent to begin with the haggling and bargaining.

Mira translated his words for me: "Six lengths of canvas and ten meters of silken cloth, that Akif offers you if you take his daughter as your wife." Akif's eighth son, strong as an oak, came with a length of canvas on his shoulder into the room, and his daughter, who was fierier than a wildcat, carried the silken cloth to me, which I had to carefully view and touch. I could not think of anything to say to save my neck.

Helplessly, I reached for the steaming teacup, took a sip, sat up straight again and said nothing.

Akif did not seem to take my silence the wrong way. In his blinking eyes I recognized respect for me, a man who showed patience and did not get wrapped up immediately in his lengths of canvas and his silk cloth. Calmly, he leaned into the cushion. Calmly, his mother turned to the sunflower seeds, and his wife calmly reached for needle and thread.

It was not hard to guess what he was expecting from me. Akif did not have to know whether I had possessions. I was close confidant and guest of a man revered in Europe; who was on good terms with the sultana; who was welcomed by Fatma when he arrived in Balchik; who came with two automobiles, a Chevrolet and a Ford (which together cost more money than Akif could earn in a lifetime). I ate from his meals, slept in his house on the mountainside (unlike Titi and Bubi Giurgiuca) and devoted myself to his daughter. On top of that I was a German, and even in Balchik people spoke of this people with reverence. Why shouldn't Akif entrust Ratibe to me?

“Six lengths of canvas and ten meters of silken cloth; a woven Persian rug that belonged to his ancestors; twenty casks of his best wine and a donkey – that Akif offers you if you take his daughter as your wife,” Mira translated her father's words. Akif's son, who had prophetic wisdom, hastened to fetch the woven rug from the next room and unroll it in front of my seat. And his first son, busier than a bee, carried a wine cask to our cushioned bench and drew a sample drop for me. And his littlest, the unicorn son, pulled the donkey away from the bale of oats into the room.

You have to pull yourself together, I told myself, and put an end to these dealings. And what did I do? I let the wine melt on my tongue and shook my head. I shook my head as I inspected the donkey and Persian rug.

What came to my rescue was a distant cannon blast, which shook the floor and walls. At the second cannon blast our teacups jingled and the lamps fastened to the beams with chains moved creakily. One dull crash of thunder followed another. It must have been the sultana's guard ship firing its cannons. Akif ordered his daughter who was quick as a bird to scout out what was going on. And in the unease that seized Akif's children and did not spare his daughter Ratibe, who looked at her father with pleading eyes (and

was paler than Akif's goat milk and the moon rising against the afternoon sky), I finally found the courage to turn to Mira.

It wouldn't work, I said hoarsely, and Akif's tasty wine was not to blame if I was forbidden from agreeing to this exchange. I was not the right man to taste the clear mountain water of his Ratibe and to till the fertile field; not the right man to rest in the shade of the young tree and to lay down in the pure linen; not the right man to open the lock on the treasure chest that was his daughter Ratibe.

Akif listened to me motionlessly and nodded in the end. And I noticed Ratibe's relief when he waved her out of the small room. With two bows, toward her father and me, she floated to the veranda, where she joined the other siblings. An exchange of words took place between Mira and her father, not a trace of which bespoke excitement. And without looking at me, he finally said that he had met an irreproachable man whose presence was honorable. His eighth son, upright and strong as an oak, would bring me a cask of wine to the villa on the mountainside as a sign of his gratitude, that of the father of the daughter Ratibe. And with those kind words he released me.

I reeled as I entered the inner courtyard beside Mira, who accompanied me to the gate. Again she seemed to have guessed what was going on in my head. Akif had meant it sincerely, she said, he was full of gratitude, and the same went for Ratibe. We had received ten warnings just in time. I understood that Mira was speaking of the cannon thunder. "And besides, I'm not blind," Mira called to me as I stepped into the street from the courtyard, "and I know who you've been promised to." I gave her a look between curiosity and astonishment. "You've been promised to my friend Virginia." And she shut the wooden gate.

The Marcu house was in a state of great excitement, and Haralamb Vona told me what had happened. The prince's corpse had been found – in one of the three-meter-tall Moroccan urns in Maria's garden. A servant had noticed the stink of decomposition around the water lily pond. "Unfortunately, it was not Anton's idea," said Vona, "to climb into the urn to take leave of life. Though he supposedly had a black sense of humor and was cranky, which is normal among old maids, it was only measly murder. What they pulled out of the urn was not a complete cadaver, Herr Felix, it was seven pieces, from massive head down to chaste genitals."

The next day Balchik was full of police and Siguranță agents. In the case of Maria's uncle, it could scarcely be a murder out of jealousy, and he had settled all his gambling debts. They had to assume a political assassination, which had struck the prince by chance (he himself played no political role in the country), and was a bloody warning to Carol II. Codreanu and his legion were thought to be the perpetrators of this bestial attack, though it could not be completely ruled out that a foreign secret service had committed it (the Soviet NKVD or Germany's Gestapo).

None of the two hundred visitors at the castle celebration was free from suspicion of involvement in the bloody deed. Some of the journalists and industrialists openly declared their loyalty to the Iron Guard, others (diplomats, bankers, military officers) secretly endorsed the goals of Codreanu's movement. Others were lackeys of foreign secret services and still others hated the man at the head of the state out of self-seeking and envy. He was popular among only a handful of people, all of whom enjoyed his favor.

I learned these things at lunch, which we had been having in a smaller circle for days. Victor Marcu no longer went to the beach, did not have a mocha at Mamut's coffeehouse. He gave up his boat tours with Ismail, and his evening gatherings fell through. Together with Bubi and Haralamb Vona he made the wildest speculations about who was responsible for this murder, and no one was spared his suspicion. And into his afternoon nap burst two Siguranță agents who wanted to ask questions.

Morosely, he received them on the terrace and sat down in the shade of the fig tree. Regarding the crime in the castle park, Marcu had nothing new to offer. He had chatted with two diplomats and chastised a journalist as "Codreanu's whore," had walked with Alexandrina to the water lily pond and with Iulia, the painter's model, to the waterfall, had recited Petrarch's sonnets and Goethe's poems in a circle of politician's wives – "And nothing by Mihai Eminescu?" the smaller of the two agents demanded to know, and jotted a note in his pad – and demonstrated for an actress with the first name Cecilia, he could not recall her last name, the construction of the "Moonlight Sonata." He had not spent a minute in the smoking lounge and had not encountered the prince.

These statements did not satisfy the two agents. Was he acquainted with people associated with the Iron Guard, they wanted to know, who were on the Gulf these days?

No, he was not, he answered forcefully, which prompted the smaller secret service agent to scrawl in his pad once again. He was a pianist, and indeed one of world renown, who appeared in London, New York and Sao Paolo, and had nothing to do with politics.

An hour passed, and the two secret service agents were followed by a squad of six policemen. Unsettled, I looked at the officer with the double chin, who checked my passport and exhibited a dubious twitch at the corner of his mouth. He mumbled as he contemplated me, compared my face with the photograph. “Johann Gottwald from Kronstadt?” My voice almost failed as I said, “Yes.” “Date of birth, August 6, 1907?” He raised his double chin again and stared at Aise, who limped into the living room with a wooden tray to serve the policemen dry sausage and liquor, licked his lips and closed the passport.

And on that full moon night, which turned the valley into a blue, translucent jewel, Marcu decided to leave Balchik ahead of time. Even in scorching Bucharest it would be more comfortable. “Pack your suitcases. We’re leaving in the morning,” he said, as we went to bed.

The next morning we stopped again on the mountainside, which offered an open view of the port and town, to say goodbye to Balchik. Marcu hopped from the seat onto the footboard, where he sank for a while into silent rumination, and his daughter shouted tearfully and defiantly: “Balchika, I’ll come back soon!” In the other convertible Vona grumbled: “It remains to the end an open game,” and whether he meant life itself or the hardheartedness of Marietta he did not say. “Nothing is more boring than the endless sea,” said Bubi, milking his goatee with relief.

Marcu flung himself into the seat and cursed: “Go, go, Titi! I want to be in the capital before nightfall.” And we left Balchik, which shimmered in the sunshine like a mirage.