

This sample translation was commissioned by *New Books in German*.

www.new-books-in-german.com

nbg@london.goethe.org

Die Überlebten

The Outlived

Three Stories

Hinrich von Haaren

Luftschacht Verlag, Vienna, 2010

183pp.

On a Dark Lake

By the pool at the Aswan Hilton, a waiter in a white uniform is serving the Welcome Drink. It's 27 degrees, exactly what the travel agent predicted for January. The Welcome Drink is a pale red juice and tastes of the can it came in, but we find it delicious. Our little international group is sitting chatting on sun loungers covered with towels. We are from Germany, England and America. Margret, one of three nurses from Weimar, is so moved by her first experience of Egypt (so far she has only seen the airport and the hotel), that tears well up in her eyes and she has to be comforted by her friends. Then they all order a gin and tonic. Apart from the nurses and Christoph and me, there are an English couple and two American ladies travelling with us. We have been thrown together because not enough people have booked on for the individual groups. Business is bad at the moment. "Terrorists," says Margret.

Sabina and Doreen are from San Francisco, and we say that San Francisco must be very lovely too.

"Really lovely," says Doreen, "but I think Egypt is a truly special place illuminated by history. Egypt epitomises this part of the world."

We all nod, including Corin and Janet.

"This trip is our birthday present to ourselves." Corin explains. "We'll both be 50 in March."

Sabina, Doreen's friend, thinks this is a romantic idea.

"And where are you from?" asks Lydia, the second nurse.

“Cardiff,” says Corin.

“Is that in Scotland?” Sabina asks.

“Wales,” says Janet from behind Corin’s back.

“That must be really lovely too,” says Doreen and the nurses smile good-naturedly.

Yassir, our guide, pours more of the pale red juice into our glasses, but Lydia offers to get a round of gin and tonics. Corin would prefer a beer and I would like a Coke, but the nurses protest. “No no, you have to have something special on your first day in Egypt,” says Margret. So I order a gin and tonic too. Only Janet and Yassir hang on to their Welcome Drinks. Janet smokes a Chesterfield with hers, and Yassir hands out the photocopied itineraries for our week-long trip on Lake Nasser. Tomorrow morning we will board the *Nubian Sea* with an Italian and French group, and sail towards Kalabsha, just behind the Aswan Dam. The itinerary is a list of fascinating-sounding names: Beit al-Wadi, Wadi al-Sabua, Dakka, Amada, Abu Simbel.

“Please have a go at pronouncing the names,” says Yassir, and grins as we read aloud from our sheets. But even with our poor pronunciation the places sound exotic, full and round, as if the words have never been touched before. Sabina tells us that she and Doreen have been taking an evening class in the cultural history of the Arab world.

“We learnt all about the gods,” she says, “it’s incredible how many variations there are. We sketched their faces. They were ‘many-faced’ gods, our teacher said. I wish I had lots of different faces.”

“I don’t blame you,” says Doreen, “I wouldn’t want to be stuck with just that ugly mug either,” and they both laugh loudly.

Corin and Janet are getting a bit impatient now. They’re itching to tell their story, as they have been to the Aswan Hilton before. Two years ago they went on a Nile cruise from Luxor to Aswan.

“But on the Nile the boats are anchored next to each other, and you never get to set eyes on the bank,” says Janet, blowing out the smoke from her Chesterfield with a disparaging noise. “Egypt makes me sick. That’s why we went for the open seas this time round.”

“It’s a lake,” says Corin, “So if that’s the case, we’ve gone for the open lake.”

“Everything open here, nobody double-parks,” says Yassir hastily.

We're happy. This reassures us that we've booked something better than the usual Nile cruise, something off the beaten tourist track. The nurses, who don't care whether they're on the Nile or Lake Nasser, just want to enjoy themselves. They've left their husbands and children at home, come to Egypt off their own bat, and have made a firm decision to enjoy their holiday to the full. Karen, the third nurse, who is sitting there like a statue, has four guide books with her.

"I've been reading for months," she says.

Corin thinks the Baedeker is still without doubt the best guide. They had a Baedeker with them on their Nile cruise and there was nothing, not even the smallest temple, that wasn't in the book.

"Corin had his nose in the stupid guide the whole time – it's a wonder he saw anything at all," says Janet. Behind the thick lenses of her glasses, her eyes are very small, and they get even smaller now as she laughs. We all have another drink and Yassir finishes the Welcome Drink jug. As it gets dark, Christoph announces that he wants to go for a swim. "Excellent idea," says Janet, laughing loudly again for some reason. Then she lights herself another Chesterfield and watches him from behind her glasses as he goes to the room to fetch his swimming trunks. "Did you see? All her bottom incisors are missing!" says Christoph to me later in the room. I did see, and we both laugh. "I wonder how she eats," he says.

The lake lies black and gleaming in the desert, like a polished stone. The water is so dark that nothing is reflected in it, not the sky, not the desert, not our ship. Everything is swallowed up by the deep colour, pulled down to the bottom. The desert around the lake is silent and bare and hesitant, as if it is keeping something secret from us. It draws to a halt at the lake, drawing a sharp line of black water through its yellow sand. Lake and desert live side by side in stoic endurance. It's hotter than it was yesterday in Aswan: even in the morning, it hits 35 degrees. Whilst we are sailing towards the temple of Kalabsha, I sit on the upper deck with Janet. Christoph had promised to keep me company, but when he saw Janet sitting up here, he turned on his heel and vanished. Yesterday evening, while we were eating, Corin bored him for over an hour with stories about his Nile trip. It has become apparent that Corin is a self-proclaimed expert on

Egyptian history and the ancient gods (“There’s Amun and Min and Hathor and Theth and then every crossbreed you can imagine”). Christoph, however, has been studying this subject for months, and nobody can tell him anything new when it comes to gods. But Corin doesn’t have the slightest interest in what Christoph knows, he just wants to sell him his own half-baked histories, and when Christoph raises an objection he simply talks louder.

“Do we *have* to spend our holiday with people like that?” Christoph asked me after dinner. “One more word and I’m going to throw him overboard.”

Janet chain-smokes and talks about *Gladiator*. She’s seen the film 17 times on DVD: it was a present from her daughter, a souvenir from the airport on her way back from Malta. *Gladiator* is Janet’s favourite film, and in it she finds a wealth of hidden depths and meanings. For example, she thinks that the scene where Maximus returns home to find his wife and son hanged by the Romans is a dream. “He didn’t really go back,” she says, “maybe they are actually dead, but he doesn’t know that for sure. He has this feeling, an intuition, and maybe it’s a very accurate intuition, but at the end of the day he’s not quite sure. He couldn’t bear it, it would eat him up inside.” She gives a confirmatory nod. “Eat him up.” Then she carries on talking about the film, though she sometimes interrupts herself to point out something on the shore. She says: “See those ruins there?” although there is nothing else to be seen for miles around. “Not exactly top quality, are they?” She grins with her empty mouth. “I love Russell Crowe,” she carries on without drawing breath, “his face has something secretive, something mysterious about it.”

I ask her about the Nile cruise, but she is reluctant to tell me anything and says I would be better off asking Corin, as Egypt is his specialist subject and she doesn’t want to tell me something wrong.

“Wrong?” I ask.

“About all the kings and gods and all that. I don’t remember things like that. Though I liked the king in *Gladiator*. The mean-looking one with the oily hair.”

At about midday Corin turns up from the bar, and despite the scorching heat the two of them go for a swim in the little pool on the sun deck.

In the afternoon we visit Kalabsha and Beit al-Wadi. It's the first time we've had shore leave, and although the sun is literally burning into our skin we are impressed by the raw beauty of these sites. Whilst Corin always walks at the front of the group, interrupting Yassir with questions and lame jokes, Janet traipses along far behind us. At the temple she spends most of the time sitting in the shade, and every time Yassir mentions the word 'gods', she rolls her eyes idiotically. Then she wanders a little way into the desert and smokes another Chesterfield. She is wearing shorts over a black swimsuit, the straps of which cross over on her back. On her head sits a great white straw hat. I catch the nurses watching Janet, and then exchanging a sympathetic glance. They all have a can of Diet Coke in their hands. Later, when we get onto the sundeck, all the good loungers have been taken by the French and Italians, so we have to content ourselves with the older, dark blue ones right by the pool, where there are no sun umbrellas. Janet lies face down on one of the loungers in her swimsuit.

"Like a barbecued sausage sizzling in its skin," says Corin to the nurses, who acknowledge this quip with a professional smile. They have decided to enjoy their holiday, particularly the jokey, lazy hours on deck. They have no time for Corin. Karen puts sun-tan lotion on Margret, and then Margret gives Karen and Lydia a thorough coating. Corin, now without an audience, falls asleep on his lounger, a can of beer in his hand. Next to him, Janet lets out a relaxed, contented snore. Sabina lolls on her lounger, but doesn't take any clothes off.

"Wonderful," she says, "I'm going to sleep here tonight."

"You'll be in good company," says Doreen, nodding in the direction of Janet's snoring. We are a nice little group. There is a communal holiday spirit, a determination to spend this week being happy and contented. Everything is right, down to the last detail. We have left our domestic worries behind us and entrusted ourselves to Egypt's tender ministrations.

"Who'd like a four-o'clock drink?" asks Karen, stretching and getting up. She is tall and very fit.

"I'd love to have your figure," says Sabina, and Karen smiles, pleased but at the same time uneasy. "Do you get a figure like that from running around in the hospital?" asks Sabina, and Karen's smile immediately disappears. Sabina belongs to a category of

women she doesn't understand, one that is unashamedly aggressive but at the same time popular with everyone. Karen on the other hand seldom lets down her polite façade.

"What would you say to a gin and tonic before you start your diet?" she asks and Sabina nods, although she hasn't been listening. The other nurses, Doreen, Christoph and I have one too. The drinks are particularly refreshing and Christoph speculates that the barman has a secret recipe, a special Egyptian ingredient to achieve this taste. Doreen latches onto this idea at once and finds the 'secret Egyptian ingredient' everywhere around us: in the lake, the temples, the desert, even in Corin and Janet. It's just our boat that doesn't appear to have it. The *Nubian Sea* is a somewhat unprepossessing ship, although the staff in the travel agent's assured us it was the best ship on Lake Nasser. The interior hasn't been redecorated since the 70s, and great circles in shades of brown and dark green intertwine endlessly on the walls and carpet. Orange plastic chairs and two black leather sofas furnish the billiard room, which also serves as a bar. There is a dancefloor here as well, which lies unpolished and dusty in the middle of the dark sea of carpet. This is a practical ship, one for true travellers. There's nothing snobbish about it, and the various classes of cabin are only differentiated by the fact that the cheap ones are further down. This is where we are accommodated, and the porthole is only a few centimetres above the surface of the water.

Around five, when the sun isn't so stifling, Corin and Janet wake up.

"Good morning, you two," says Sabina, but Janet doesn't answer her. She looks at our glasses, which now stand empty on the floor.

"You're a real sun-worshipper," says Margret.

"We don't get very much of it in Cardiff," says Janet, still looking at the glasses, and then at Margret, who is taking the last sip from hers. "Right now I need a shower," says Janet, and rolls up her towel. Karen stands up and puts her hand on Janet's back, at which she jumps forwards, her face contorted with pain.

"What are you doing?" she cries.

"I just wanted to see if everything was alright. Your back's so red."

"Everything's just fine, don't you worry about me," says Janet, grabbing her sunglasses and the white hat, and she rushes off in the direction of the cabins. "Corin," she says

surprisingly sharply, turning around, “don’t forget the towels, they’re the cabin ones.” Then she hurries off. On her back the straps of her swimsuit cross over her dark red skin. “I think she’s got blisters,” says Sabina. Corin tries making another ‘wife’ joke. Then he departs the sun deck as well, leaving the cabin towels by the pool.

Every morning Corin spends an hour in the Aqua Musica, a little swimming pool allegedly containing water from the Dead Sea, in which you can float around on your back. Music plays under the water for your relaxation, the choice of which is left to the guests. Christoph and I go at the same time as Corin, just before breakfast, because the pool is empty then. Corin brings a CD of the *Gladiator* soundtrack with him, or Celine Dion, clearly both Janet’s choice; we, on the other hand, want to listen to the Beach Boys. Because of this Corin gets up especially early and is always the first there, so that Sue, the pool attendant, puts his music on. When we come in, Corin is already floating in the pool, his legs on a blue rubber ring, his head under the water, where *Gladiator* is playing. We have sailed from Kalabsha to Wadi al-Sabua and haven’t managed to listen to the Beach Boys once.

“Then come in the afternoon,” says Sue, who is evidently on Corin’s side, but Christoph only wants to float in the mornings. And so we put up with Corin, though we find it difficult to relax to *Gladiator*.

Sometimes Janet comes to collect her husband, and when he gets out of the water she wraps him in his towel like a little boy. Whilst doing this she chatters away and Corin listens stoically, or at least acts like he’s listening. Though admittedly when she gets started on *Gladiator*, which generally doesn’t take long, he interrupts her and takes the towel away from her.

“Give over with your damn film,” he says impatiently.

I have noticed that they never take their CD with them, and suspect that Sue puts *Gladiator* on for other customers too. “Is there any chance we could listen to something else?” asks Christoph, but Sue just shrugs her shoulders and says something about “first come, first served”.

“So, how long have you been doing this job?” Christoph asks her.

“Three years.”

“And what’s the best music you’ve ever played?”

She looks at him and then me, and it’s clear that she doesn’t particularly like us. “I’m just the pool attendant,” she says finally.

[...]

The next morning, in the Aqua Musica, Corin receives the news that his wife is dead. Sue, the pool attendant, speaks to him over the microphone from inside her glass cabin. He can’t hear her: her voice is lost in the music from *Gladiator*. He appears to be asleep, and I gently push his rubber ring with my foot to wake him up. Then I point awkwardly to the shell-shaped loudspeaker on the wall, because I don’t know what to say. Sue’s voice says that something has happened to his wife, and Corin says – he’s now talking to the loudspeaker – that his wife is on the sundeck, where she is probably smoking Chesterfields. Then he slides back into the water. Sue switches to another channel and can now be heard under the water. No more *Gladiator*. She says that Janet collapsed on the sundeck and was taken to the sick bay, that the doctor was on shore leave, visiting Wadi al-Sabua, and that Janet was already dead by the time somebody had found him and fetched him back. Corin rights himself, the rubber ring pops out from under him, and he walks with heavy steps through the water to the little ladder on the side. Sue leaves her HQ and helps him out of the pool. His knees are trembling, his swimming shorts hang low and streams of water run down his thin legs. “You can listen to the rest of the CD,” he says, and we nod dumbly. Sue tries to support him as he puts his bathrobe on, but he shakes her off impatiently. After he has gone, we lie in the water and ask Sue to put *Gladiator* back on.

Translation: Ruth Martin 2011

A longer sample translation is available from NBG – please contact Charlotte on
nbg@london.goethe.org