

Edgar Selge
SO YOU FINALLY FOUND US
Rowohlt Buchverlag
304 pages / 19 October 2021

A twelve-year-old boy tells his story: that of a life shaped by prison walls and classical music.

A child grows up in the early 1960s, in a town that is neither large nor small, in a middle-class family that spends a lot of time making music together. The father is a prison director. It hasn't been that long since the end of the war, and the parents' dedication to music and literature is an attempt to make up for what they call their lost years.

Yet the boy sees cracks everywhere in this orderly world. He listens attentively to the political debates between his older brothers and parents at the dining table. But he remains an observer. He increasingly takes refuge in the worlds offered by his imagination. This boy, whom the author sees as a distant brother, tells us about his life and, in so doing, discovers his view of the world. Every now and then, when the 73-year-old Edgar Selge speaks as himself, it becomes clear that the shadows of the generation that lived through the war reach all the way into our present time.

Edgar Selge's narration is breathless, physical; it takes risks. It is filled with wit and musicality. Whether as Bach or Beethoven, Schubert or Dvořák, a military march or gospel, music wraps itself around the story like a second narrative, accompanying its unflinching push for freedom.

Edgar Selge, one of Germany's foremost character actors, was born in 1948. He grew up in Herford in eastern Westphalia. His father was a prison director. After studying Philosophy and German Language and Literature in Munich and Dublin, and Classical Piano in Vienna, he completed his actor's training at the Otto Falckenberg School in Munich in 1975. Selge has received numerous awards for his work. He is married to the actress Franziska Walser; the couple have two children. *So You Finally Found Us* is his literary debut.

- An exceptional literary debut: exemplary and deeply, radically personal.
- 30,000 copies sold within two weeks!
- Jumped directly to # 8 of SPIEGEL Bestseller list!
- Sample translation available.



EDGAR SELGE

SO YOU FINALLY FOUND US

HOME CONCERT

I'm off to practise, my father says, disappearing into the piano room and shutting the door behind him. He spends every spare minute at his grand practising. I stay in the hall, with nothing much to do. But it's not as boring as all that. I can listen, or I can hold conversations in my head. And sometimes someone comes by and talks to me.

My father is practising for the home concert. As soon as one is over, the next come onto the horizon. We pretty much live between concerts. It actually consists of two performances each time. In the morning come the inmates from the borstal next door. Not all of them of course. There are four hundred. But around eighty certainly. My father makes a selection; as governor he has a good overview. In the evening my parents' friends are invited, academic couples from our small town.

On those days there's a lot of shifting furniture around. The borstal lads, as we call them, bring their chairs with them for the concert. This means our furniture has to be moved out of the way: tables into the corners, chairs and armchairs alongside the sofas against the wall. Before the evening event our own furniture has to be rearranged into a concert setup. And afterwards it all has to go back in its original place. All this rearranging is dealt with by four lads under my father's direction. The week before is stressful. I pick up on that because I spend so much time out here in the hall. It's pretty long, like a bowling alley, and everyone has to walk past me. You can grasp the tension in handfuls. My father still has to master the tricky sections and practises the same passages over again obsessively. Sometimes slowly, sometimes fast. Some of them get better, some refuse to yield, some remain risky.

My mother feels the pressure too. She's up to *here* with the preparations. Although food is not the main thing, not at all – it's constantly emphasised that the concert isn't about food – it's still nice to offer people a little something. And the inmates shouldn't be deprived either. They get liver sausage sandwiches and apple juice.

But what stresses my mother the most is dealing with the professional violinist. He comes a few days early, from Hamburg, stays with us, and rehearses with my father. He is fussy about food. As soon as he arrives everything revolves around him. He's an artist, calls the shots and sets the standards – not solely in musical areas but altogether. My father should be grateful he gets to accompany such a musician. He's very lucky. And although he normally radiates self-confidence, funny and quick-witted with it, he panders to this artist without question.

For her hospitality my mother receives a free lesson from the Hamburg violinist. For that she needs to prepare properly, but barely has time to practise. Nevertheless she is grateful. A lesson from such an outstanding virtuoso is quite something. But afterwards she goes around with tearstained eyes. His merciless criticism of her playing upsets her. And when I meet her in the corridor like that it upsets my stomach. There's no talking to her and she just shakes her head when I ask what's up. But she has her own opinions about everything and will not be deterred. At the dining table she disagrees with the violinist where she sees fit, but does it so that my father doesn't get the feeling the man's freedom of speech is being restricted.

Late at night, when my parents have gone to bed, from their bedroom I hear my mother saying things such as: I think we might be allowed to point that out without him feeling we're undermining his status as an artist.

Whether my father dreams of being a pianist, I don't know. He is pragmatic and only gives thought to problems he can find a solution for.

I suspect he is wholly content being what he is: a prison governor who plays the piano very well.

Once, while I'm standing in the hall listening to him practice, my brother Werner passes by. He stands next to me, in front of the double doors to the living room. His eyes light up, he puts his finger to his mouth and his ear to the door.

Listen to this, he whispers.

Inside we can hear a tak, tak, tak, tak...

It's the metronome. Otherwise silence. Dad is probably still absorbing the beat he's set. Then he starts. A Mozart piano sonata, A minor, not for the concert – he's playing it for fun. He immediately finds the right tempo, expressing himself naturally as if telling a story.

Wait a minute, Werner whispers.

And it's true – in the second theme with the semiquaver runs dad is speeding up. He's left the metronome beat behind.

Hear that?

I nod.

He's playing too fast, no doubt about it. You can tell straight away because he's ahead of the metronome. But he carries on playing, unperturbed. Clearly he prefers his own speed.

My brother laughs quietly. He isn't listening to it! he says. It doesn't bother him in the slightest! Can you tell? He's got no sense of rhythm at all. Werner shakes his head repeatedly, can't stop laughing, leaves me standing there and shuts the various doors behind him to go and practise cello in his room.

He has recently become a music student. I'm still at junior school.

Ok, so our father has a rhythmical deficiency. That doesn't help me much. He is strict and demands respect, whether or not he plays faster than the metronome.

The next time my father retreats to his piano room, I stand behind the door again. Listen, I think, perhaps he'll be out of time with the metronome again. But nothing comes. No metronome, no piano. Just footsteps on the carpet.

I look through the keyhole; there's no one around this minute. I'm amazed at the image in front of my eyes: the picture frame is shaped like a Ludo figure, at its centre my father, walking in aimless circles around the carpet. Something is bothering him. He finds some fluff on the ground, picks it up and places it carefully on the table. He walks towards his favourite painting, Rembrandt's *Man with the Golden Helmet*. It almost looks like he's talking to the painting. Then he strides to the grand, turns round looks straight at the door I'm behind. I start, but I'm not that stupid; he can't see me. He places a hand on the black lid of the grand and... takes a bow. He is standing alone in his piano room bowing towards the door I'm looking through! All the while he's smiling like an old cat and nodding repeatedly in all directions. In mine too. As if I was an auditorium full of people! The thought flashes through my mind that he's a lot like me.

Now he pulls his handkerchief out of his trouser pocket, wipes the sweat from his palms, sits down at the keyboard, tosses the handkerchief deftly onto the music stand, next to the metronome, and plays his Mozart sonata.

Again he pulls of that theme beautifully. Easily. Effortlessly. With that inner agility which makes notes into music in the first place.

Who can I tell what I've just seen? My father is a serious man. I can't embarrass him! Perhaps he does dream of being a pianist after all.

The inmates walk from the borstal door to our flat in single file. Each is carrying a wooden chair in his hand, while the warders stand at a few metres' distance on the little cul-de-sac and watch that none of them make a run for it. The orders resound through our flat: Put the chairs down quietly! Don't bang the chair legs on the parquet like that! Keep off the furniture by the walls! The inmates in their blue overalls fill our rooms with their voices and smell, three large rooms: the dining room, piano room and study, connected to each other by sliding doors. A few borstal staff are already sitting in the piano room on the two fitted sofas right and left of the door: the psychologist, the two chaplains, the doctor and several social workers and teachers, most with their wives, the

Catholic chaplain with his sister. All except for Fräulein Arens, the only woman who works at the borstal. She is a social worker, runs the inmates' theatre group and comes from the Rhineland. My father calls her a clever woman because she can talk at meetings without using notes, even when the minister from Düsseldorf is present. She is sitting on her own.

The warders are standing along the walls and down the hall in green regulation jackets and caps waiting till it finally starts so they can sit down too.

Then my father comes through the piano room door with the violinist from Hamburg, both in black. They bow to the applauding audience, get settled with their instruments and sort their music out. Finally my mother comes in and sits on my father's left to turn the pages. Then there is a moment's silence. My father raises his bushy eyebrows and looks over the rim of his glasses to the violinist, who lifts his bow. And our classical music adventure begins.

Bach, Handel, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann. Sometimes Brahms.

Simply violin sonatas.

My father making music in the midst of his inmates: I've described it to so many people, again and again, differently each time, my whole life long.

Now I'm sitting here writing it down. Let's hope I don't get lost in the words. The more precise I am, the more distant I feel from myself.

The inmates come one after the other through our front door. It's a deluge. Eighty young men. Both sections of the door are opened so they don't bash into anything with their chairs. They board our flat like a ship.

I wish they wouldn't clomp about like that! my mother says in the kitchen, where she is spreading slices of bread. She's worried about the parquet. We'll have to have it sanded and varnished again. Why can't he do his concerts over there, in his institution? He's got heaps of room there!

My mother isn't really like that. Something else must be up which I don't know about.

It's perfectly clear why our father brings the inmates over to us. Prison walls and stone floors make too much echo. Like churches. Here the ceilings are over four metres high, with wooden floors, heavy curtains at the windows and there's a large Persian rug under the piano. The three rooms have a combined floor space of 120 square metres. The acoustics are incredible!

Also: being on the inside of a prison isn't for everyone. The professional violinist might be scared. All those cell-lined corridors, bars everywhere. Every door has to be unlocked and locked again before the next door can be unlocked and locked again. It's annoying. Sometimes you hear shouting. Visitors find it disturbing.

I think there's another reason though, why dad likes to have his lads over to our flat. They need to see what a family is like. They need to see how we live. He is proud of his four walls. My mother must know that really.

The inmates wear hobnailed boots. How could they not clomp on the floor? And they're not allowed to stop and take a good look around when they come in: wow, it's nice in here! They have to keep moving and make room for the ones following them. They aren't invited personally. We only know a few of their individual names.

They are prisoners. They are the masses, uniformed masses. Musicians rather like playing to the masses. The masses applaud vigorously. The masses can be frenetic.

The academic couples who come in the evening act cautiously as storks. And they whisper the whole time. Their voice catches in their throat when they cry out, Bravo! This is like a rally in comparison.

Here, one of them shouts, at the top of his voice so everyone can hear, It's my sideboard! My sideboard! I made that! He spreads his arms out and tries to span the entire width of the six-door birch cupboard in our dining room. I think, he'll get a bollocking from the warders any minute. They're not meant to touch our furniture. But the uniformed warder is the carpentry teacher. He stands next to the lad, looks at the sideboard and says, Nice work. You did a good job there. The boss bought it. That's an honour. You should be pleased. Now sit down.

And he does sit down, but still can't control himself. I made that for the apprenticeship exam! he shouts to the whole crowd he's sitting with. Got a distinction for it.

And now Frau Selge's keeping her silver in it, his neighbour says.

You can check, another said.

I lined all the cutlery drawers – with velvet!

Then he catches sight of the Van Gogh, the framed art print hanging right above his sideboard. A pear tree covered in white blossom in a field. It upsets him. Clearly the picture lends the piece of furniture a significance he could never have dreamt of while making it.

Now more and more inmates realise between them they've made everything here, every table, every cupboard, the bookshelves, corner cupboards – fine pieces, lots of walnut. Every chair is made by them, and the fitted sofas too. And they lovingly designed the radiator covers, like little toy prisons. They even sanded and varnished the parquet. We're surrounded by some incredibly hard work.

These are all their apprenticeship exam pieces. The uniformed carpentry teacher strokes a wooden rod running down from a fabric lampshade: This is the only piece of wood in this flat which hasn't passed through my hands. The inmates who hear this laugh.

The two black grand pianos are the only foreign bodies, an old Blüthner and a new Steinway. Two instruments which demand respect, on shiny brass wheels. My mother's mother sent the Blüthner straight after we moved in, from Berlin, so the music carried on.

We didn't have much. We were refugees, from Königsberg in East Prussia. We had been through a lot. Not me, of course – I was only born in '48 – but my parents, my brothers.

Originally we were Berliners. My mother came from the affluent, civil servants' area around the TV tower in Charlottenburg, west Berlin, Hölderlinstraße; my father from Lichterfelde. He came from a family of musicians; she from a family of music lovers.

They bring a real Berlin concert atmosphere to this little East-Westphalian town!

The war has been lost and national pride is at an all-time low. They have only survived the aftermath of the war by the skin of their teeth, yet the arts have remained intact. They are convinced of that. Even though there is not a single Jewish artist left in the country.

Culture is at their core; it is unshakable. Their heads are filled with poetry, above all my mother; music is in their blood and their fingers, above all my father.

Our parents have some stubbornly life-affirming resources to draw on. Somehow there's still so much energy there. Everything must be put right, condensed – feverishly and intensely. They still know what words like nation, identity and belonging mean.

And now they've discovered morality, especially the distinction between truth and lies. Here the focus is on me, because I am showing disingenuous tendencies. My parents are determined to rid me of them. At some point they won't be around anymore. There'll be nothing more they can do for me.

I'm sitting amongst the inmates waiting, like everyone, for it to start. I have a great seat: first row in the middle, between the sliding doors. My feet are dangling into the piano room. I've got a good view of the musicians and of the packed room beyond them: forty inmates, chair to chair. And then there's the forty behind me.

But what's driving me crazy is the way they're all watching me. It's hard to cope with. Where do I end and where do the inmates begin?

Finally, I lose my cool and feel a snigger coming. I suck my cheeks between my teeth till it hurts so that no one realises. Probably looks stupid, but somehow I have to hold it together. They're staring at me, I think, staring at me. The thought dominates all others.

Where have my older brothers got to? I've never asked either of them how they really feel amongst the lads. Music is always the main topic in our family, not the inmates; they're just part of the picture, like the neighbours, and the borstal next door. We're very much the people on the outside, which is fine by us.

And it is fine. We treat the inmates with respect, expose them to classical music, involve them in family life. They work for us, make our furniture, heat our house, keep the garden tidy, grow vegetables for us. Sometimes one of them makes a run for it, locks the warder – who was supervising him stoking the stove – in the basement, grabs one of our bicycles and scarpers.

Yes, it happens. Even amongst the ones already on day release, with a job outside the borstal, who leave it early in the morning and return late afternoon. Just at that point they run away, right before their release. Obviously they're caught. They're sent to another institution, for an extra year's sentence, at least.

I get terribly worked up about that. Why don't they wait? It won't be long till they're free!

My father raises his brows, gazes into the distance and nods imperceptibly to himself. Normally he deals with my questions swiftly. Not this one. He shrugs his shoulders. There are clearly some unresolved feelings lurking in him. It's not so long since he was a prisoner of war. He can understand the runaways. He knows what it's like as the release day approaches, after all that time, the day you've been dreaming of throughout. He grasps his chest with both hands, his neck, shows me the oppressive feeling of being in a cell which seems to be getting smaller and smaller. You just want to get out. Out! Out!

I still can't understand why someone would run away today when they are being released tomorrow. That's prison for you, he says patiently. Once the door has been locked behind you, and bolted from the outside, you start counting time in a different way.

Aha, I think. A different way of counting time.

They begin with Bach. My God it's beautiful when the violinist opens a Bach sonata with those rich bow strokes. Right from the first bars the music opens a door. I can hardly keep my legs still for delight. The violin glows and shines. Its tone is freeing, creates space. It's strong, life affirming. You breathe differently straight way. I'm proud to live in a family where I can hear this in the flesh. It's beyond beautiful. My parents call it sensual. To me a violin tone like that is a seduction. It's an invitation to enjoy pleasure the like of which doesn't otherwise happen in my life. All the violinists who play with my father have vibrato and bow strokes which make my jaw hang in amazement. And the violin sonatas, from Bach to Brahms, make it explicit that human beings are libidinous beings. This unsettles the assembled company.

It disturbs the inmates, who are obliged to sit still and listen. They are sitting opposite me. I observe them from my front-row seat. I notice how life comes into them, how each of them has to decide if they like it or not, if they want to open up to it or not.

Fräulein Arens, for instance, cannot help but smile. She has a ginger lady-moustache which now broadens with a sunny glow. The priest's eyes light up, Rev Kubis with the wooden leg. His wife tries to control her lips. Everyone is affected by the music and has to respond to it.

Now I can see both my big brothers' heads. They fit in well amongst the faces of the inmates. Martin, the oldest, is currently doing his school certificate, then has to do national service. Werner doesn't need a school certificate because he's studying music.

Martin and Werner: they'll both be leaving home soon, my parents say. It sounds terribly final. Leave home? Will they never come back? I ask.

Only to visit. Get used to the idea now and focus on your little brother from now on.

Suddenly I realise how influenced I am by my older brothers, every day, by their voices, their rebelliousness, their opinions. Without them daily life in our family would be lifeless. I immediately picture myself floundering between my parents, these two tanks whose manoeuvres I can never understand.

Take some interest in Andreas, they keep saying and give me an area of responsibility. That makes me panic. How can I play with my little brother? I don't play any more! I don't even want to! I want to be with the older ones, watching what they do.

As consolation they give me a knife for Christmas. It's a fixed blade knife with a staghorn handle in a leather sheath you can fix to your belt. For the outings with the Young Men's Christian Association. What's known as a travelling knife.

Is the blade really sharp? is my first question at Christmas dinner.
Try it outside! Not inside! They all shout: mum, dad, Martin and Werner.

Who was I then? I feel no different today than I did in the hallway as a child. I rarely get bored. I bore holes into the air with my gaze. I talk to myself. I'm the same dreamer.

That daft reflex question shoots through my head: can you see prison in the faces of prisoners? Is there a trace of their crimes in there? There must surely be something you can identify of the deed they've done. Their criminal energy must be expressed somewhere.

Criminal energy – if only I've never heard that expression.

Dad often shoots his mouth off. He doesn't notice I'm sitting there, then afterwards he's hopping mad that I heard everything. He doesn't notice me because he's talking so intently with my mother and my older brothers.

He's talking about Tino, the child murderer. He's been talking to Tino again and he's shocked at how delicate he is. Just a heap of misfortune. Tino barely says a thing. He's all clammed up. He's committed the worst crime imaginable yet he seems to lack any kind of criminal energy. When you see him among his fellow inmates he looks like he's been locked up by accident. I've been talking to him till I'm blue in the face trying to get him to speak again, my father says. He needs to be here in the family! He needs to come to the home concerts. He needs to understand that life carries on. What is criminal energy? I ask dad.

My high, piercing voice makes him jump. He is furious he's talked about Tino in my presence. He's managed not to notice me yet again.

Why aren't you in bed? he shouts. There is no such thing as criminal energy! If you really want to know what it is, take a look at yourself! The lads in the borstal here, especially the ones who come to our home concerts, all have good reasons for serving their sentences. And I'll hear no more about it!

Yes that's true. Compared to Tino I feel like a weak-willed small-time crook. My white lies and petty thefts are insubstantial. Tino has substance. Lamont too. My father respects them. It's because of their personalities and their crimes. The one is inseparable from the other.

To be on the safe side I'm banished next Sunday when my father reads aloud from *The Brothers Karamazov*. He's got to the chapter where Grushenka seduces Dimitri. Apparently it includes all sorts of things I shouldn't hear under any circumstances.

Edgar will just get the wrong end of the stick. He's too young for Dostoyevsky altogether. So just get to your room!

Why? I ask, bewildered. In my imagination Dimitri is my brother Martin, Ivan is Werner and I'm Alyosha. But of course no one in my family knows that.

I was looking forward to this chapter. Can't we just wait and see what happens? I ask my father.

Out, he says. I know what's coming. If we're not careful you'll be telling all sorts of stories to the neighbours. Away with you!

I go and stand just outside the door. But there I can barely understand a thing. I have to picture it all for myself. Above all the passages about Alyosha – I urgently need to know what they say, so I know who I am.

Of course I pass on lots of what I hear at our dining table to the neighbours. The warders' wives who make me hot chocolate in the afternoons are very curious. And when my father gets going he always says more than he meant to.

Against his better judgement he recently let slip that Frau Joswig, who lives above us with her husband and sons and comes for a bath in our tub once a week, only has one breast. He had to mention it because he wanted to demonstrate that I couldn't have seen her naked through the keyhole as I claimed, otherwise I would have noticed she only had one breast. That proved I must be lying.

I was just looking at the black triangle between her legs, I said truthfully. She was drying herself at the time so she was probably holding the towel over her breasts

She's only got one! dad shouted.

I passed on the story about the breast and eventually it got back to my father via Herr Joswig. I was in a lot of trouble then.

You just can't say anything when Edgar's at the table, my father said remorsefully. Basically all we can do is eat our soup in silence.

Criminal energy. How that expression claws away at me.

Could be I'm taking everything out of context, as my father says. Could be I'm connecting things which have nothing to do with each other.

Tino, whose crime of murdering a child rid him of his speech, has nothing to do with Frau Joswig, who lost one of her breasts – is what dad would say. But it's not like that in my head. There the image of my father biting into a white-fleshed peach on the sunny Chapel Bridge in Lucerne, dripping juice all down his front and looking delighted about it, takes equal prominence next to the image of Tino, the child murderer, and the naked Frau Joswig drying her breast in our bathroom. Here, in these rooms, at this concert, they belong together: my father at the grand piano, accompanying a Bach sonata, Frau Joswig sitting in the corner sofa with her arms folded, squeezed up next to Fräulein Arens and Rev Kubis, and Tino, who I can see in the first row, straight ahead of me on the other side of the piano room. The wild gigue in the final movement of the Bach sonata connects us, and the pervasive tone of the violin does everything in its power to give these various lives a shared meaning.

Tino's face looks thoroughly trustworthy. He can't be more than nineteen, but I see him as thirty or older. It's broad, pale and still, with a benevolent expression. I can gaze at him incessantly, as long as he doesn't notice. Right now he's leaning forwards, his elbows resting on his thighs, holding his head firmly with his hands. The music is pouring into him and just as I have to bite my cheeks when I can't handle other people's gaze, he has to hold his head tight because he can't handle the beauty of the music otherwise.

Sure I look for clues in the inmates' faces. I would really like it if life and its circumstances were painted onto people's faces so that you could translate their expressions back into the story of their lives. But life moves through people's faces in other ways, invisible. You can maybe sense the force of past events, nothing more.

I know next to nothing about the inmates. It's disgraceful how little I know. What does it mean, someone is a child murderer! Murderer altogether! What a monstrous word some people have to lug around with them, like a mark of Cain. And they all look so different: funny, serious, frightened, withdrawn, forthcoming. Some have eager, childlike faces, others look exhausted by life already, condemned to grief.

Lamont, for instance. Where is he then? I haven't seen him at all yet. Perhaps he's sitting behind me.

Like Tino, Lamont looks much older than he is and has a long sentence to serve. He will never run away before his release date. I don't think he can even picture himself outside of prison. Maybe one day they'll have to drag him out to freedom.

Unfortunately he'll only be staying with us till he's eighteen. It's possible my father can keep hold of him a little longer, but he would have to justify that clearly to the juvenile court judge. By twenty at the latest, youth custody is over. Then adult sentences begin. There, even my father's hands are tied. And harsher practices are in force at adult prisons than at ours. The reoffending rate is high. It's there that a lot of people really learn what criminal energy is.

[...]

STOMACH PAINS

Have you washed your hands? my parents ask when they catch me looking at their books.

Yes of course, I reply automatically.

Let's see!

If they're 'filthy black', as they put it, I'm sent straight to the bathroom. Scrub them with soap and a nail brush. Then show them again.

Now you're welcome to take a book down, my father says, with a gesture worthy of a chamberlain.

He indicates the bookshelves. He might as well add: His highness the book will see you now!

But by then I'll have gone off the idea.

My parents have just gone into town, so I go into the piano room, with filthy hands, and take down a book I've had my eye on for some while.

Like children's books it's slightly taller, not as thick, and bound in stiff card, its pages made of yellowish, hard paper. Wartime paper, it's called.

It's about soldiers 'in action' and it's written for the people back home who want to know where their sons and husbands are fighting and, if they have fallen, where they are buried. That's what it says on the back cover.

A dramatic front cover, like a film poster. Even the title, *Embattled Rome*, has a wild design. 'Embattled' stretches right across the book, in handwritten script, shaded with charcoal, so that the letters smoke like rubble. 'Rome' is in typescript. Beneath it is a drawing like something from an art lesson: a broken-off Roman column with a German oak wreath circling it, a black pine, sea and mountains sketched out in green and dark blue. Right at the bottom it says, 'Accounts from the battles of Monte Cassino – with 32 colour plates by the author'. His name is Wilhelm Wessel.

When I open the book a folded sheet falls out: nine signatures on a blank page, originals, in ink. This is it! This is what I've been looking for. My unwashed fingers have found the place in the bookshelves. As ever when I land on a clue about my family's past I feel more secure.

Years ago, watching from the dining room, I saw my parents standing right here with this book and this sheet of paper excitedly reading out names. It must have been these signatures. Important people probably, and I think my parents were of the opinion they had been done an injustice.

Someone has written a dedication down the whole first page of the book. The handwriting is tricky, hard to decipher:

To Chief Prosecutor Selge,

I offer this small token of my deep gratitude. During your brief sojourn here your noble gentility has assisted myself, and my companions in destiny, in forgetting previous indignities, and has alleviated the privations of our imprisonment.

May your and your family's future path be guided by a lucky star!

Werl, 28 September 1950

Kesselring, Field Marshal of the former German Wehrmacht

On the insert with the nine signatures it says:

God's blessing and our best wishes for your new home.

October '50

The 'new home' must be where I am standing, here in Herford. And the incarceration of which Kesselring writes, the prison in Werl where we used to live. We moved there from Bückeberg, in a tearing hurry, because our mother didn't want to see the sandstone front step any more, because of Rainer and the hand grenade.

I heard that in Werl our father was a kind of boss, briefly. He couldn't have been a real one because the real bosses were the occupying forces, in this case a British colonel. Vickers, he was called. He soon kicked our father out. Selge is too lax, he decided.

I had heard this sentence from our mother, who clearly didn't consider it something to be ashamed of, and repeated it at lunch. Our father still didn't really enjoy hearing it, and put on a haughty face to hide his feelings.

He had been responsible for supervising the higher officers imprisoned there, most of them generals, and apparently he fraternised with them. Now I know that this word comes from 'frater' which means 'brother'.

The move to Herford was about ten years ago. I have one or two clear memories of Werl. But no one believes me. The adults are all of the opinion you can't remember anything properly before your third birthday. At the earliest! In my case they talk of delusions. What am I supposed to do? I guess memories aren't there for other people to believe in.

When I look at Field Marshal Kesselring's handwriting, I have to say, that man is not without delusions of his own. He signs his name a bit like Herbert von Karajan. Tall, parallel letters like a thunderous squadron of planes.

I know Karajan's signature from the little book with caricatures of musicians. It must be shelved somewhere around here. My father got it for his birthday, one of those mini books published by Insel. Werner told me the artist was an anti-Semite. The Jewish musicians all refused to sign it – perhaps because the caricaturist had seized on their noses. The other musicians had obediently signed their autographs beneath their likenesses. In his afterword the artist claimed the Jews didn't have a sense of humour.

Karajan was drawn as a propeller plane. He must have been flattered because he doesn't just direct the Berlin Philharmonic, he is also a pilot. Our father laughed his head off at the plane with its Karajan haircut.

Werner immediately objected that Karajan had joined the Nazi party twice, to be sure of not missing out.

That spoiled our father's fun.

You'll be lucky if you ever play under Karajan's baton.

I'd rather play in a hotel orchestra, Werner cut in, than be conducted by that pompous buffoon.

That pompous buffoon, our father replied, trembling now, is currently traveling the world with an army of musicians to regain Germany's place at the forefront of global recognition!

Well of course, Werner said, that's what German music is composed for: to serve on the front, to achieve global recognition for Germany. Up there with Volkswagen basically.

After that it went quiet.

Reflecting on Karajan and Kesselring's signatures I fail to notice that my parents are now standing back in the room, two metres away from me, directly below the ceiling light. I didn't hear the front door, or hear them taking off their coats. And I've missed whatever they said in the hallway too.

They seem different actually, standing there with serious looks on their faces. They don't even notice my dirty hands and the book with the sheet of paper in it.

We turned back on our way into town, says my father. Mummy has such bad stomach pains she has to go to bed.

I nod, shut the book and put it back on the shelf. The sheet with the signatures slips out and lands right at my father's feet. But they don't notice. I look at my mum. Why doesn't she go straight to bed? She stands next to my dad, immobile, holding both hands to her stomach. Between her eyebrows is a vertical crease. Her lips are tight. If you didn't know about her stomach pains you'd think she was concentrating hard on something. Her gaze is turned inside.

Our mother gets these stomach pains once a year, mostly in November. Every time she stands there just like this. Sometimes she quietly asks if someone could make her a hot milk. Her hands are always one on top of the other against her stomach, as if she were trying to staunch a wound. And she always gives the impression of utmost concentration. Now it's time to stop messing around. We switch in an instant. In her expression I read the secret message that tomorrow is judgement day and for the next twenty-four hours I have the chance to start afresh and put everything right. And my brothers and my father also become friendlier and more generous. We all offer to help with the housework, each seeing the concern in each other's faces, each aware that the family is really just her and without her the rest of us are just a pile of pointless male existence. Our whole life is just a fragile edifice we now realise, amazed now that we keep forgetting it.

Can I make you a cup of hot milk? I ask my mother. She shakes her head almost imperceptibly. Quietly, she says, I just want to go to bed.

But she doesn't move. And my father rapidly abandons his attempt to accompany her into the bedroom. A tiny gesture from her indicates that she doesn't want to be touched. Or pushed. From now on she will decide herself. And we will respect that and just watch her.

I think her stomach pains are her ultimate reckoning with us. She's had it with us.

She has a pronounced atlas vertebra and a very long neck. My father had an art postcard framed, of a renaissance painting showing a lady with a distinctive atlas bone, an idealised image of our mother, according to him. The picture hangs next to his desk. When I feel his blows during my Latin lessons I stare at it and focus on the story of Atlas, who couldn't let the globe fall although it weighed a ton.

Standing beneath our living room lamp now, her forehead with its vertical crease says one thing only: enough! This can't go on.

Again and again she suppresses her stomach pains with the rolling treatments. And then we think, now they're gone and they won't be back. But each year, by All Saint's Day at the latest, they're back. Sooner or later they burst through. They stab their way out systematically, these shooting pains, from the inside out, and their battle cry is: All wrong! Got everything wrong in life!

Husband: wrong!

Every child: wrong!

Edgar: a disaster!

Herself: just not made for family life!

Maybe not even for men!

She should have been a vicar's wife – married to a female priest.

A nursery teacher, companion to another teacher – a woman.

A poet, companion to another – another woman.

Sitting each evening with her colleague discussing poems.

Not spreading her legs for a man.

Not this family. Not all this housekeeping.

Not this barbaric eradication of her real talent: her way with language. Because she had it, you know. She could have made something of it.

Instead she runs the gauntlet of household chores, a daily obstacle course.

The Sisyphean tasks, the ghastly cycle of meals: clean the house, get up, plan the meals, go shopping, get out the pans, the knives, the boards, chop vegetables, trim beans, prepare meat, heat water, fry onions, make sure nothing burns, carry the whole lot back into the kitchen after the meal and wash up, keep the floor clean, take out the rubbish, beat the rugs, make sure the kids have enough clothes to wear, darn, sew, take things to the cleaners – there's no end to it. Strip beds, make beds, clean windows, write lists of everything needed, organise who will buy what where, feed the birds, deal with the fruit that arrives by the truckload in crates on the kitchen doorstep from the allotments, cook it, bottle it, juice it, sterilise the jars – jam and endless compote. And the effort it takes to persuade the others to help, which they never do off their own bat, meaning it's all left to her.

It's all left to me! That's the story of her life, a story told in sighs. Like the story of the golden goose. She will never be free of the pans, the beds, the brooms, the shopping lists, the laundry – she's stuck with the lot.

When she's lying exhausted in bed at night, her husband lies down next to her and reminds her: Herr Whatever will be paying us a visit tomorrow. Perhaps you could bake a little Streuselkuchen. These Streuselkuchen! Which mother-in-law has always baked better than she has, the base always thinner, the Streusel thicker, sweeter, more buttery, melting sooner in the mouth. Mother-in-law has frequently tried to teach daughter-in-law how to make Streuselkuchen which melt in the mouth like that, how you get the base of the Streuselkuchen so soft it's already down your throat before you think: But I've still got to chew the base. No with a base like mother-in-law bakes you can concentrate fully on how the Streusel melts so ethereally under your palate. So the base shouldn't be too hard, but not too moist either. Something is always wrong with it.

And this conversation you have to make with the visitors. As bland as it gets. But you have to put on a bright expression the whole time, as if they've just invented the light bulb. Whether things are going well, going badly; batting the political situation about, even though everyone agrees already, never too in-depth. No thoughts provoked or developed. No one really listens. Everyone plays at listening. Everyone puts interested faces on but nothing reaches their hearts. Not hers anyway.

Her husband doesn't notice; he has his music, his piano. He can happily make small talk with guest to unwind. When he's had enough he yawns like the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer lion, upon which every guest makes their escape and doesn't return in a hurry. He could at least put his hand over his mouth!

Recently her husband invited six psychologists to look round his prison. He brings up a bottle of wine, his Kröver Nacktarsch. She says to him, I'd like apple juice. I can't handle wine. The acidity eats at my stomach. Gnaws at it. You know? He obediently pours her an apple juice, everyone raises their glasses. A fine wine, he says, and the stupid psychologists nod. One of them says Spätlese, which is nonsense, and she takes a sip and nearly spits out her first mouthful.

What's this you've given me?

Apple juice, he says.

But it's totally fermented, she complains. And after the next sip she says, You've given me wine, not apple juice. And he gets really cross and points to the glasses: Look at them, he says, all the same colour except for yours.

I know what I'm drinking, she snaps at him. This is wine!

I know what I'm drinking too, he replies snootily. We all know what we're drinking. Cheers!

And they raise their glasses again, these daft psychologists and her husband, with his weak sense of taste, and she picks up the bottles from the tea trolley to examine them, apple juice in her left hand, wine in her right, holds them up against the light and smiles: This wine bottle is almost full. But the apple juice is empty. You've poured yourselves apple juice and none of you have noticed!

He gives her a look which says: divorce. To show him up like that! Has she taken leave of her senses?

And then the youngest of the psychologists says, Excuse me, I think I've got apple juice too. And my father takes a drink and then looks at the others and says to my mother: You're undermining my confidence. And it doesn't sound good, the way he says it. A wife mustn't do that, undermine her husband in front of other people. It's against the rules. And now, one after the other, all the psychologists say very cautiously: I have apple juice in my glass too, but it really doesn't matter, Dr Selge. It tastes very good, very fresh, Dr Selge. And she reaches for his glass – she's had enough by this point – takes a large drink and cries out: here is my apple juice! And she gives him her glass, and he drinks some. And? What does he do? Instead of apologising? He just beams and cries, Yes, that's the Kröver Nacktarsch! That's the wine I love. Isn't it wonderful! So have you really all got apple juice? Why didn't you say? And he fetches a carafe and tips the apple juice out of all the glasses into it and fetches new glasses – we have plenty enough wineglasses – and pours them all wine and they all toast each other again and he laughs that one could make such a mistake.

His self-confidence! It has always upset her. This self-confidence, when in reality he's way off the mark.

When he first asked for her hand she said no. And stuck to her guns. Although everyone was disappointed. Her father had been particularly looking forward to this son-in-law: a lawyer like himself, talented pianist, liked a good pun, healthy views, nationalist, good looking. To impress their cousins, he flung Meißner plates in the air and caught them like a circus artist. What more could you ask for? Someone you could play every violin sonata with, whip through them. He could even play the César Franck sonata at speed.

It could have been so good.

But his daughter had said no. And was proud of it. No, no, no.

And yet she hadn't reckoned with the men. A year later, when she was in a crisis, not sure if she should study literature or theology or perhaps become a nursery teacher instead, when the Führer was redefining the role of women, the nation was enjoying its great upsurge and everyone was asking what women could do for Germany, her own father wrote behind her back to this piano-playing lawyer or law-playing pianist to say it might be worth asking once more. This time the proposal might be accepted. His daughter, Signe, didn't know what she was doing with her life right now. If he was too forward this time, if he was very understanding, the answer might be different this time.

And Edgar – yes my father's name is Edgar – invited her to Rosenkavalier and in the third act, during the duet between Oktavian and Sophie, it happened. It's thanks to this duet that she is

standing here with her stomach pains under the living room lamp. In the third act, when Oktavian sings,

Sense only yourself, just sense yourself alone
and that we are together!

and Sophie sings along,

It is a dream, can it really be
that we are together!

he simply placed his hand on hers, without pressure, and she didn't withdraw it, because he was looking at her at that moment. And he really did have lovely, deep blue eyes, and his gaze was soft and earnest, and there was no going back.

And they got engaged and he wrote touchingly long letters and very gently outlined how it would be, their life together, making music together, and how they would flourish as part of the greater German race and yet remain special. In his letters he introduced his friends, painting them in the most delicate shades and hoping she would soon find a little affection for them.

Why hadn't she seen this grim little dead-end-street from afar? Why hadn't she noticed someone was deciding everything in advance? The whole future set in concrete. Because he always knew in advance what he wanted to do.

Her body knew. In the wedding photograph she looks like a lamb being led to slaughter. And she didn't want to sleep with him at first.

He didn't force her. That was his good side. He really had the patience of a saint. It finally happened in the 'Wilden Mann' tavern in Meersburg on the way to their honeymoon on Lake Constance. There she went along with it, this husband and wife being 'one flesh' thing he was always talking about – it said so in the bible – and which he recently started claiming a wife was legally obliged to comply with. He said in general. But in reality he meant her. She could tell that much. So at some point she went along with it. Found it quite nice too. But never as nice as he did.

They are still standing next to each other under the living room light, and she can't decide whether to make a move towards the bedroom. A bolt of pain shoots through her face. She's just been stabbed. From inside.

It's her bloody sense of duty! It messed up her freedom to choose. That's why she hadn't withdrawn her hand at the opera.

He's standing there now, this public prosecutor from Königsberg, putting on a long face, worried that her stomach pains will cut her out of his life.

It was all part of the great national upsurge, when mothers were treated like prize cows, '33. She had liked all that: away with the decadent elite! Socialism and nationalism finally united! Yes, standing up to the Jews, she'd liked that too. Time they finally did some work, she thought.

Of course she knows it went terribly wrong. She isn't stupid. And no monster. But she has no taste for grief. She clearly senses the scale of the abyss. But grief? No, she's too proud for that.

She saved the family. During the war. And afterwards. She and all the other women saved what was to be saved of Germany. Not the men, attacking Poland with their chests all puffed-up then

squandering everything with their idiotic two-front war. These madmen who couldn't stop warring. The state they came back from Russia in! What miserable specimens! Ragged and gaunt – that would have been alright, but where was their fire gone? Limp, soulless ghosts. And they still wanted to go to bed with you!

Then he studied theology, her husband, after the collapse. That was something! She was keen on that. He worked as a nurse. The sisters gave him little packages, so his family at home had something to eat. He took the Hebrew exam. She could have been a vicar's wife. She could have run a vicarage, done good deeds, exemplified Christianity.

But no sooner had her husband got his clean bill of health, his denazification certificate, he returned to law. Commuted to Hamm every day, to the regional high court. Left her alone with the children. Then Rainer found a hand grenade. Gone, her favourite son. And Werner injured. Had to get away from Bückeberg, just away. Never see that sandstone step again.

Next stop Werl, the prison. He was part of the management. Under the occupiers. Under colonel Vickers. Her husband was allowed to look after the generals, the war criminals – victor's justice, no doubt about it. All condemned to death, then pardoned, soon afterwards released – but still a monumental disgrace that they were imprisoned at all! They sat round in the prison garden with her husband reminiscing. While she stood over the stove.

And yet she's the one who knew exactly how neutered officers felt. Not him. She knew. Her own father sat around at home for over twenty years, writing poems, making violins and painting, because the imperial military court had to be disbanded after the first big lost war. She grew up in the atmosphere of that humiliation, with a mentality which saw every attempt to express a contrary opinion as a reproach.

So she's standing in front of me, my mother, holding her hands protectively over her stomach. But it all seems to be escaping. It keeps coming out.

So they're standing under the living room light, with their terribly earnest faces, in which the wrong decision still means something. My mother with her disappointing life, and my father with his fear that his life with her might break apart.

I feel his fear too, and her obligation to do her duty – her anger at this obligation, never expressed – frightens me so much I completely forget her love.

When the exhibition about the Wehrmacht's crimes in the Soviet Union opened in Munich my mother went along and brought me back the catalogue.

You can keep it, she told me. You won't go anyway. You can at least learn something from the catalogue. I've done what I said I'd do – I was there – but I don't want to look at this any more. I don't want to carry this heavy thing back to my flat. I felt sick in the exhibition as it is.

Then she crossed her hands over her stomach and asked if I would make her a hot milk: I'll lie on your sofa till then, if I may.

I'm horrified and blame myself for not accompanying her. She stood for two hours in the slush on Munich's Marienplatz queuing to get into this exhibition, got shunted past countless photographs and text panels, then stumbled home and called on us on the way. At the door she fell into my arms and I just about managed to get her onto a chair.

I might as well throw my whole life in the bin, were her first words. Nothing but criminals, all around me. Your father. My father. Our armed forces. The generals we looked up to. Von

Manstein. Kesselring. Men who strived to be honourable above all else, who put their lives in the service of Germany, all criminals we're now told!

I tried to steer her into more rational waters and said that the exhibition was mainly about the war of extermination against the Soviet Union.

But she wouldn't hear any of it. She no longer wanted to make a distinction.

The phrase 'War crimes of the Wehrmacht' was etched so deeply into her that two weeks later she was admitted to hospital with a perforation of the stomach. She was eighty-three. The stabbing pains had finally hit their target.

She survived the operation.

Whenever she has her pains, I think: It's my fault. I've been talking too much about the Jews again. Once I showed her a photograph of the scratch marks on the walls of the gas chambers. This was 2000, three years after her stomach operation, nine months before her death. Like a twelve-year-old I walked to her flat and demanded she look at this photo I had just seen in the newspaper.

It took her a moment to realise what she was looking at, during which time I told her about the Kapos who waited outside the gas chambers while the Zyklon B was disseminated inside. One of the Kapos, some of whom were also Jews, described how they'd heard the people scratching at the walls as they asphyxiated. And how for many of the people in the gas chambers, standing at the walls, it had taken half an hour till the gas reached them, piped in from the ceiling. And he described how he had to pull the corpses apart because in their fight with death the naked humans had got so hooked up amongst each other. And how they knocked all their gold teeth out of their jaws before shoving the bodies into the ovens.

I carried on talking, in front of the stove in my mother's kitchen, like an expert, like a historian specialising in the holocaust, because I had just discovered this photo.

While my mother, the picture in one hand, reached for the kitchen chair to sit down.

I kept going, saying that the Jews' journey from the ramp where the trains pulled up and they had to jump out of the trucks, to their cremation in the incinerators, took no longer than two hours. That when they leapt off the trucks the families and friends held fast to each other's hands. That the new arrivals didn't yet know what was coming to them. That they saw that the SS men had walking sticks in their hands and Alsatians on leads. That this wasn't a good sign. That minute by minute they realised this place was not the labour camp they had been expecting. That above all else they didn't want to be separated but at any cost to stick together. That this was the reason they held hands, children and their mothers, children and their fathers, siblings, friends, girls and boys, strangers who in the seconds it took to realise what awaited them, formed bonds.

That the SS men suddenly raised these walking sticks, which had earlier seemed so incongruous. That they used these walking sticks to beat all the hands holding other hands. That the sticks came down on these hands forcing them to let go. That the SS had to decide in an instant who would be gassed and who was still capable of work, who should be sent for medical experiments. That anyone who would probably live a little longer was driven in columns to the barracks, at the double, where they had to strip naked, were hosed down with cold water and within minutes shaved – devout, modest Jews, their heads and groins shorn bald, by strangers, hundreds of them in one room.

And that they then had to go to the tables to be tattooed and had their number carved into them. That a kind of sack was thrown to them which they had to pull over their head, a sack with holes

for the head and arms, made of hard cloth. And that within half an hour human beings had been turned into anonymous creatures.

One survivor, around my mother's age, of a similar class, similarly dressed to her, with a similar vocabulary, perhaps from Charlottenburg in Berlin, once said, 'It took just half an hour before everything human about us was gone.'

I was just getting to that sentence. I wanted to repeat it to my mother. But I didn't get that far, because she already felt such bad stomach pain she asked me to leave her flat. She couldn't take any more.

No sooner was I outside I wished I'd held my tongue.

How naïve I was! Of course I showed her the photograph because I wanted it to have an effect on her. But when I saw the effect, I just felt guilty.

I apologised later. But she just laughed. She had to be able to take it, she said. Just that her stomach wasn't so robust any more.

Now she shifts from the spot under the living room light and walks towards the bedroom. A wave of release must have swept through her.

My father bends down and picks up the sheet with the nine signatures. With no hint of a rebuke he says: Put this back in the book where it belongs. Otherwise we won't know where it is.