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The Benjamin Family's Exile in Italy

(Villa Verde oder das Hotel in San Remo. Das italienische Exil der Familie Benjamin)
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Prolog

Berlin 1933

Longing to Get Out!

In July 1933, the sky over Berlin was gray and cloudy. It rained a great deal and the temperatures were unseasonably low, not even 18 degrees (64F). At times, Dora even had to heat the large rooms of the Grunewald villa. But it wasn't the weather alone that awoke in her this irrepressible desire to "simply get out."¹ It was this sense of desperation hanging over her that was to blame: her brother-in-law, the physician Georg Benjamin, was incarcerated at Plötzensee* and reportedly subjected to severe torture for not only was he a Jew, but a communist as well. His brother, her divorced husband, author and philosopher Walter Benjamin, had managed to leave the country just in time, first going to Paris, then to Ibiza, from where he sent sad letters. He was sick, practically destitute, without a doctor deserving of that name and he was no longer allowed to work for his main employer, German radio. Now he could get assignments only from newspapers such as the *Vossische* or the *Frankfurter*, where he usually wrote under pen names like "Detlef Holz", "K.A. Stempflinger" or "C. Conrad".

They were married from 1917 to 1930 and had a son together, Stefan, born in Berne, in 1918. Theirs was an intense, occasionally very difficult marriage, and in the end little more than a friendship with both of them going their own separate ways.² Dora, born in 1890, was Benjamin's senior by two years. She hailed from Vienna. Her father was the Zionist and Anglicist Leon Kellner, her mother, Anna Kellner, née Weiß, a respected literary translator from the

English. Dora studied chemistry after graduating from an elite high school, later she added philosophy to the curriculum, first in Vienna then in Berlin, together with her first husband, Max Pollak, with whom she had been unhappy from the very beginning. It was an arranged marriage. Her parents had chosen this man, the son of wealthy Jewish parents from Bielitz³ -her mother's home town- for financial reasons and for the sake of decorum. For Dora was tall, blonde with long legs. She had far too many admirers, a risk not to be countenanced. For this reason, she needed to be married off quickly. Nobody seems to have her happiness in mind, for Pollak was mentally ill and extremely short-tempered. The marriage was never physically consummated.⁴

Dora's first encounter with Benjamin was something akin to a revelation for her. It took place in the spring of 1914, in the cultural center of the *Freie Studentenschaft* (Liberal Student Body), a forum for young, mostly Jewish intellectuals, who discussed Fichte, Nietzsche, George, pedagogics, eroticism, hiking, nature, student life, youth and many other topics, often very passionately and until deep into the night. Here, on May 4, 1914, she listened to the young philosophy student speak on the subject of *Helping* that she had suggested.

*It felt like redemption. Everyone was barely breathing. [...] Benjamin said that the act of helping could only be successful, if the involved parties loved each other. My heart stood still. I understood the extent of what he implied in its entirety: that only those who love and are being loved are allowed to help. I had always sensed this possibility.*⁵

They quickly fell in love with one another, although their backgrounds were very different. Hers was a Viennese background with strong East-European roots, while his grand-bourgeois Berlin family put up a tree during Christmas time and only went to the synagogue on major holidays. Nobody was speaking any Yiddish. Nobody was a Zionist. They acknowledged their Jewishness, but like many assimilated Berlin Jews, they weren't really "religious", even though almost all of their friends were Jewish. His father was a *rentier*, independently wealthy, with investments in various companies, including an art dealership, a construction company, a chicory factory, the Berlin Ice Palace. His business enterprises were very complex, at least for Walter Benjamin, who never quite understood where his father's wealth originated from and

why he was able to afford this huge house in Berlin-Grunewald, one of the best neighborhoods in the city, furnished with rugs, bric-a-brac and kitsch, including a Moor standing on a gondola.⁶

Like a Dream?

There were times, when it must all have seemed like a dream to her: being in love for the first time, the outbreak of the war, the separation from Pollak, the first weeks of living together with Benjamin in Seeshaupt, on Lake Starnberg; the wedding attended by many, some of them very embarrassing, relatives, the years in Berne. It was here that he wrote his dissertation, *On the Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism*, and where Stefan was born in the cantonal hospital. It was a happy time, although it soon came to an end. In 1920, unable to make a living in Switzerland, they were forced to return to Benjamin's parental home, to the villa in Berlin-Grunewald, Delbrückstraße 23.

Was it the ostentatiousness, the stiffness of the ambience? The factory owners and director generals in the neighborhood? The hostility emanating from Walter's parents and his sister- whose name was also Dora? Brother Georg had left home already some time ago and stayed in the background. Of course, it was primarily money that he, Benjamin, didn't earn, because he was more inclined to engage in researching and writing, rather to find a bread-and-butter job as a bookdealer, editor or banking clerk, as his parents had so fervently hoped he would. They had frequent arguments about this issue until they finally moved out of the Grunewald villa, only to move back in again, simply on account of their financial straits, no matter how hard Dora worked as a translator, editor or journalist. She was the author of short stories, reviews, satires and journalistic reports. She wrote for almost all Ullstein publications and the *Literarische Welt* (Literary World), sometimes late into the night. She did so very successfully, but "fighting this eternal battle to make a living"⁷, often pushed her to the limits of her physical strength.

They became alienated from one another, frequently fell passionately in love with others. Separation was brought up a number of times, but then they always got back together again, even if only as friends. He was abroad a great deal, Paris, Capri, Naples, Moscow. She stayed in Berlin to earn a living, to be there for Stefan, for herself, but also for Benjamin, who

hardly had any income until he discovered the radio for himself as a suitable medium at the end of the 1920s, which turned him into a much sought-after author of reviews and radio plays.

Then, in 1930, divorce proceedings began because of another woman, the Latvian actress and director, Asja Lacis, who, however, left him again soon afterwards.⁸ It was a tremendous shock for Dora. She thought things would go on as they had forever, this “companionate marriage”- as it was called then- very modern, very open, but permanent. She was utterly wrong. A horrendous trial followed, during which Benjamin suddenly came to relish the much “despised German laws”⁹ for the sake of ruining her reputation. He was determined for her to lose custody for Stefan and even attempted to get her evicted from their apartment, however, without success.¹⁰ His case was thrown out as implausible and unsound.

That had been three years ago. In the meantime, they reconciled and now had to battle with more weighty problems: the global economic crisis, the “assumption of power”, the reprisals against Jews, existential anxiety, the financial strains, Georg’s situation, whom they might perhaps never see again. Initially, they got together again only reluctantly. In July 1931, Dora invited her fellow writer, American author Joseph Hergesheimer, to her home for dinner. She had translated several of his novels and developed a relationship with him that, at least at times, by far exceeded the purely collegial. “I don’t need to tell you that my love and caring for you has been unaltered and now that we are so far apart, your image has not lost any of its radiance and significance for me,”¹¹ Hergesheimer wrote in a letter in 1935. Benjamin did not allow himself to be irritated by the intimacy between the two, instead engaged Hergesheimer, whom he greatly admired, in intense conversations, although Hergesheimer was not particularly impressed. He almost felt sorry for Benjamin, compared him to “someone who just descended from one cross, only to get onto the next one.”¹²

Since this encounter in their old home in Berlin-Grunewald, Dora and Benjamin kept seeing each other more frequently and exchanged letters. Everything was as before, only without a marriage certificate. They also found a solution regarding the payment of alimony. Dora had not insisted on the monthly alimony payment of 300 Reichsmark that she was entitled to, rather she agreed to a monthly mortgage payment on the house. Benjamin was able to breathe again. She was not out to ruin him. All of her claims had been “met to the fullest

extent”, the notary handling the case, wrote.¹³ In hindsight, both of them may well have asked themselves what their costly and painful divorce had been in aid of.

A Daring Idea

Dora, who since her divorce was no longer Dora Benjamin but called herself Dora Sophie Kellner, lost her editorial position in early 1933. It was one of the many constantly changing jobs she had held since the mid-twenties as editor of a newspaper publicized via radio under the auspices of Ullstein. But since the publishing house was gradually “cleared of Jews”, she was suddenly stranded without any income. Stefan, now fifteen, attended the *Grunewald Gymnasium* and kept growing at such a fast rate, one could almost watch him grow. He constantly needed new clothes, new school books, new skates, a new bicycle. In addition, the operational costs for the huge house were very high, and although the house had been subdivided into several apartments, it became increasingly difficult to rent them out, as most Jewish renters were either destitute or had left the country.

“Our financial difficulties are beyond words,” Dora wrote to Benjamin, who was on Ibiza at the time, “it’s almost like the first years after our return to Berlin or worse, as back then we still had some savings. But now, nothing can be done about it.”¹⁴ Against all odds, she still found ways to support him with small amounts of money or by securing assignments for him from various newspapers, the *Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung* (Illustrated Journal) or *Uhu* (Owl)* for instance.¹⁵

Then she came up with an utterly audacious idea: she was going to hoodwink the new rulers. She was planning to pile Stefan, herself, a female chauffeur and two photographers into a rental car to go on a trip to the Black Sea. On the way, they would visit the Transylvanian Saxons, the Danube Swabians and the Sudeten Germans, who of late were considered the guardians of German national traditions and most of them had jubilantly welcomed Hitler’s “assumption of power.”

Her plan worked out. The newspapers lined up for the right to publish her serial report. She was offered high advances which, however, needed to be divided by four for herself, the chauffeur and the two photographers. Stefan was looking forward to an adventure and Benjamin was enthusiastic, if only from afar: he wrote to a female friend that the “relatively

best thing” happening these days was his son together “with his wife” going on a road trip through various countries unknown to them.¹⁶ Yes, he actually wrote “with my wife” and was unmistakably proud of the initiative she had taken.

Not much is known about the trip itself, as Dora could only publish under pen names or anonymously. However, one article in Ullstein’s *Blatt der Hausfrau* (The Housewife’s Journal), can be attributed to her without a doubt. “W’r sen doch deutsche Leut!” (We are Germans, after all), is the heading set in Sütterlin script.¹⁷ Underneath is the photo of a “Leutschau Girl in Her Sunday Best,”*taken by Lene Schneider-Kainer, a painter and illustrator from Vienna who, like Dora, was of Jewish descent and worked for the Ullstein magazine *Die Dame* (The Lady). Schneider-Kainer was used to operating a camera and then used the photos she took as a blueprint for watercolors and drawings.** *Girls of Leutschau* was not exactly her subject of choice, nor were “high bonnets denoting virginity” or “village scenes in “Schönhengstgau.”*** However, they had no choice but to deny their own inclinations, become untrue to themselves by confirming all the clichés dictated by the current *zeitgeist*: the vastness of the country, family sense, woman as “protector of domestic virtues”, cooking tirelessly from day to night, feeding the geese and bearing children. And all this against the backdrop of this “ur-German spirit” and the “ur-German people.” In a way, this was pure sarcasm. But nobody noticed, because luckily irony was not a concept the Nazis ever understood, nor were they aware that the two authors were Jewish.

On their way back home, they made a detour through the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, home to about 450 000 ethnic Germans, most of them farmers, artisans and small shop owners. At the steering wheel was Gert Wissing, twenty-six, the adoptive daughter of a Jewish physician couple, wife of Benjamin’s favorite cousin, Egon Wissing, also a physician. She was beautiful, long-legged and a drug addict. And she loved the sea. Therefore, it made perfect sense to go from Ljubljana, where they had stayed overnight, to Opatija, formerly known as Abbazia. It wasn’t far.

Dora knew and liked the town. Almost thirty years ago, she had spent a summer vacation there with her parents, Leon and Anne Kellner, and her siblings, Viktor and Paula. The narrow lanes, the small churches, the magnificent villas, the camellias, the oleander- all had

seemed completely Italian then, although Habsburg flags were flying everywhere and busts of the emperor were displayed in store windows. In 1930, she paid homage to this region in her novel, *Gas gegen Gas* (Gas against Gas) that was first printed in a program booklet issued by the Frankfurt radio station, and later published in two Austrian papers under the title, *Das Mädchen von Lagosta* (The Girl from Lagosta).

“Wind, sun and water, the dry, aromatic scent of pine needles in the clearing of the forest; the burning of the still wet extremities on the hot flat stones of the beach, refreshed by the cold saltwater; journeys by boat to the coast, its steep rocks contrasting with the green of the agaves and the laurel trees.”¹⁸

Since then, a sense of longing for this region has stayed with her: for the South, its luxuriant vegetation, the Italian language, the cuisine, the music. Perhaps it was a kitschy longing, but one that was shared by Goethe, Mendelssohn and many others. As a student of a girls’ school run by the Viennese reform pedagogue, Eugenie Schwarzwald, Dora had to write an essay on, “Why is Italy the country of longing for Germans?”¹⁹

Now, in 1933, Abbazia no longer belonged to Austria but had been a part of Italy since World War I. Almost everything was still as it used to be earlier: the luxury hotels, the long beach promenade, the villa, where Mahler composed his 4th Symphony, the Angiolina Park with its Caucasian pines and most of all, the mild climate. Dora felt immediately restored again. No gall bladder pain, none of that miserable aerophagia* from which she had been suffering for years. Generally speaking, she had a robust constitution that helped her get through the most severe crises, including diphtheria and bronchial catarrh, at least two abortions and suicidal phases.

She was an Austrian woman used to good air and a beautiful landscape, to lakes, forests, mountains and “romantic meadows” as she once wrote in her novel *Gas gegen Gas* (Gas against Gas). Berlin was simply too gray and too flat, freezing cold in the winter, the summers often “hot as a baking oven.” Without an opportunity to drive out into the country side, one had to squeeze past “carts with plums, cigarettes and ice cream” to get to the other side of the street, got jostled about by hectic hordes of people across “melted asphalt and dusty curbstones.”²⁰ True, she never complained about that. Whatever for? There existed this

terrific cultural life and the many newspapers and publishing houses one could work for: the *Vossische Zeitung*, the *BZ am Mittag* (the *Bildzeitung*=Illustrated Newspaper at Noon), *Uhu* (Owl), *Tempo*, the *Literarische Welt* (Literary World), *Die Dame* (The Lady) as well as Rowohlt Publishers, Ullstein and, finally, radio. Only in 1933, all of that became a thing of the past. No assignments, no income, no friends any longer, only Stefan, the huge house, a handful of constantly changing tenants, destitution and hunger.

Abbazia was not an option as a place of exile because of its political volatility. It was palpable everywhere that the ancient conflicts between the nationalities had not ended, that conflicts between the Italians, Serbs, Croats, Bosnians, Slovenes, Macedonians, Albanians and ethnic Germans kept festering. And the Italian motherland, “the country of longing?” It was indeed a fascist dictatorship but at least, so it was said, antisemitism was nonexistent, which was why many Jews settled there. And, if things were to turn for the worse one day, one could always leave from one of the many ports for America or Palestine. – Barely back in Berlin, in September 1933, she wrote to Benjamin about her plans to settle in Italy to open a Bed and Breakfast or to work as a journalist or perhaps both.²¹ She was going to learn Italian, supposedly rather easy, especially for those with a good grasp of the Latin basics. And as was generally known, she was an excellent cook of Austrian, Russian, Eastern Jewish or Italian cuisine. Even Asja Lacis, her nemesis, was delighted by her “delicacies,” when she was their guest in Berlin once.²² Her recipes for *Die Dame* were famous. Where she acquired this talent, she herself wasn’t sure. Most likely not from her mother, Anna Kellner, who didn’t enjoy standing in front of a stove and was generally not a very enthusiastic housewife. Perhaps she had looked over her grandmothers’ shoulders? Or the cooks’ that worked in their home? Her father had only a small salary, both in the days as a teacher and later as a professor in Czernowitz, on the outer margins of the monarchy, the “k and k* penal colony”, as the city that is in now part of Ukraine, was called maliciously by some. Irrespective of how little money the family had at their disposal, they always had a first-rate Viennese cook. Once, when they lived in England for a year and kept being fed mutton roast, beans and bread pudding all the time, instead of goulash, apple strudel and yeast rolls, the family couldn’t get back home quickly enough.

Notes

- 1 Dora Sophie Kellner to Walter Benjamin, letter of October 20, 1933, ADKWBA 17/4
- *Plötzensee Prison was built in the 19th century. During the Nazi era, it was not only a prison, especially for political dissidents, but also served as a central execution site.
- 2 See, Eva Weissweiler, *Das Echo deiner Frage. Dora und Walter Benjamin, Biographie einer Beziehung*, Hamburg 2020. Hereafter abbreviated as : Weissweiler, Echo
- 3 Today, Bielsko-Biala, Poland
- 4 Dora Sophie Morser File (?), NAK, HO 405/36550
- 5 Dora Pollak to Herbert Blumenthal, letter of 5 /5/ 1912, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem, hereafter abbreviated as: NLI
- 6 On Emil Benjamin cf., Momme Brodersen: “Kapitalist, Spekulant und Rentier, ein Porträt Emil Benjamins,” in: *Juni. Magazin für Literatur und Politik*, Bielefeld 2016, pp. 8 ff. Hereafter abbreviated as: Brodersen, Emil Benjamin
- 7 Dora Sophie Benjamin to Gershom Scholem, letter of 5/23/1921, INBJ
- 8 The Latvian actress and director Asja Lācis (1891–1979), whom he met on Capri in 1924.
- 9 Dora Sophie Benjamin to Gershom Scholem, letter of 6/27/1929, INBJ
- 10 Cf . 58 f., 64
- 11 Joseph Hergesheimer to Dora Sophie Kellner, letter of 6/5/1935, Hergesheimer Collection, in: University of Austin (Texas), Harry-Ransom-Center, HCT
- 12 Dora Sophie Kellner to Gershom Scholem, letter of 8/15/1931, INBJ
- 13 Dr. Ludwig Freundlich, Berlin. See certificate issued by Charlottenburg City Courthouse, Berlin, 2/13/1931, WBA
- 14 Dora Sophie Kellner to Walter Benjamin, letter of 9/19/1933, ADKWBA 17/3
- *Uhu, the owl, was a publication by Ullstein, the name meaning literally “owl stone.”
- 15 Dora Sophie Kellner to Walter Benjamin, letter of 12/7/1933, ADKWBA 17/5
- 16 Walter Benjamin to Jula Radt-Cohn, letter of 7/24/ 1933, in: Walter Benjamin GBIV 1931–1934, S. 265

17 DSK (für Dora Sophie Kellner) in: *Ullsteins Blatt der Hausfrau*, 49th volume, October 2, 1933, pp. 36 ff.

*Leutschau, the Germanized name for Levoča, is a town in Eastern Slovakia. It was settled by Saxons and other ethnic minorities after the Mongol raids of 1241/42.

** Schneider-Kainer accompanied noted German author Bernhard Keller on a trip through Asia as a photographer documenting the journey, which was bankrolled by the *Berliner Tageblatt*, which regularly published articles and images of the trip. Schneider-Kainer created over 1000 watercolors and drawings that are now in the possession of the Leo Baeck Institute, New York.

***A region of Bohemia/Moravia (Czech: Hřebečsko) belonging, until 1945, to the German-speaking Sudetenland.

18 Dora Sophie Kellner: “Das Mädchen von Lagosta” (originally, Gas gegen Gas), in: *Innsbrucker Nachrichten*, 1/30/ 1932

19 Annual report of the Girls’ High School (Lyzeum) am Kohlmarkt, Vienna, 1907, p. 83

*Aerophagia is a condition where too much air is swallowed.

20 Dora Sophie Kellner: “Béchamel Bettina” (novel), in: *Die Dame*, 1930/31, *Lose Blätter*, (Loose Sheets of Paper) volume 5–7

21 Dora Sophie Kellner to Walter Benjamin, letter of 9/19/1933, ADKWBA 17/3

22 Hildegard Brenner, *Asja Lacis: Revolutionär im Beruf*, Berlin 1976, p. 67

*k and k, means “kaiserlich und königlich”, imperial and royal. Habsburg Austria was a “double monarchy” that included the Austrian Empire and the Hungarian monarchy.

23 Dora Sophie Kellner to Walter Benjamin, letter of 1/ 1/ 1934, ADKWBA 17/7

24 Walter Benjamin: “Opinions et pensées. Wörter und Redensarten seines Sohnes,” in: Walter Benjamins Archive. *Bilder, Texte und Zeichen*, edited by Walter-Benjamin-Archiv, Frankfurt/M. 2006, pp. 100 and 177

25 Dora Sophie Kellner to Walter Benjamin, letter of 4/8/1933, ADKWBA 17/1

26 Lothar Brieger, *Aus den stillen Städten der Mark Brandenburg*, Berlin 1923