

Sepp Mall

## A Dog came to the kitchen

*Nominated for the German Book Prize 2023  
(Longlist)*

*War and the Nazi era from the point of view of a child. A novel about South Tyrolean emigration and Nazi crimes against people with disabilities.*



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**A novel against oblivion: about Nazi "euthanasia", fellow travelers, emigration and returning home.**

A family from South Tyrol decides to emigrate to the German Reich in 1942 in the course of the "Option". The 11-year-old Ludi tells of the last days in the village and the first stop in the German Reich: Innsbruck. On the orders of the doctors, his disabled brother Hanno has to be taken to an asylum near Hall. The rest of the family moves on to Upper Austria. The father is drafted into the Wehrmacht and Hanno does not return either. A letter from a "sanatorium and nursing home" of the Reich is all that the family has left of him.

Sepp Mall is considered one of the most important writers in South Tyrol, whose work deals with complex themes of recent contemporary history. How can the incomprehensible be understood and how does one survive a collective trauma?



**Sepp Mall**, born in 1955 in Graun (South Tyrol), studied in Innsbruck, lives as a writer in Merano. Various prizes and scholarships, including Merano Poetry Prize, State Scholarship of the Austrian Federal Ministry and Large Literature Scholarship of the Province of Tyrol. His novel "Wundränder" was chosen as an "Innsbruck reads" book in 2005 and is now school reading. His most recent publications are his novel "Hoch über allem" (Haymon 2017) and the poetry collection "Holz und Haut" (Haymon 2020).

## **A Dog Came into the Kitchen**

By Sepp Mall

Sample Translation by Isabel Adey

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In our family there were no words for farewells. My father had none, nor did my mother. As if the vocabulary had fallen out of a bag over time, letter by letter, and had been lost along the way. Or my parents simply gulped those words down if they ever came into their mouths.

In springtime, when we visited the maternal family grave to plant a bunch of pale red carnations, everything had to be just so. Mum knelt down on the compacted gravel and didn't bat an eye when I asked how long the flowers would last or how many weeks until they'd have to be replaced. She leaned over the wooden border and pushed the root balls into the black hole she had dug with her hands. I repeated my question. Mum stopped mid-motion, then just gently shook her head and returned to kneading the crumbly soil around the flowers.

This was the place where my mother's parents were buried. They were silent, too. The cross had their names and dates on it, wishing them rest in peace. Their year of death was the same; it was the year I was born. When Mum told the story, she said Grandpa had died first – passed away, she called it – and barely a week later she was giving birth and the midwife had to pull me out of her belly with forceps. Grandma, who watched over us from the funerary relief with her wide smile, was still around when I came into the world. But a month later to the day, she died too. Of grief, Mum thought, because she wasn't very old – only sixty-eight. Her husband came to fetch her, some of the people in the village said. Not to her face, not to anyone from the family, but she heard about it all the same.

Imagine saying that, she looked up at me, talk about the depths of stupidity. She bent over and patted down the earth. You can't come to fetch someone when you're the other side, silly old wives' tale. Two deaths and a birth in forty days, you'd have thought they could keep their mouths shut—

There's no way these carnations will keep for more than forty days, I interrupted, someone will have to replace them.

Mum sat up and looked at me in surprise. She wiped her dirty fingers on her apron and let my comment trail off over the gravestones. The words floated away with the wind, over the cemetery wall and its wooden coping, over the tops of the nearby chestnuts and birches, up into the May air over the church steeple. I gazed after them, until they faded away in the sky patched with white.

Words to do with farewells or meeting again no longer existed in our house. It had been that way for a couple of months. And whatever we did, we weren't allowed to say we might never get the chance to do it again here in Mariendorf, where we lived – not my light-footed mother, nor Dad with his square moustache, nor my little brother Hanno and I. Future was another word my parents didn't like to hear. We all hovered in the present; that was that. And wherever we were, it was always right now. Now, now, now. Questions concerning anything other than the present ended in silence or shrugs.

Hanno must have picked up on something that was bothering him, but what exactly was going through his mind was a mystery to me. Every night that week at bedtime he'd bombarded me with his gobbledygook. Usually I had just nodded off when I felt him turn towards me and prod me on the shoulder.

What is it? I asked him.

He opened his eyes wide, as if that would help him talk. Then he repeated the same broken sentences he'd whispered into my ear every other night that week, always phrased in exactly the same way.

You, he said, taking a loud, deep breath, do you know?

Hmm?

He began again, and as always, the syllables and words resisted.

I'm waiting, I said.

He rolled his head back and forth, and eventually he managed to push the three, four sounds over his tongue and pry them out between his teeth.

Mummy gone, he said, Mummy gone, Mummy leave. He held his breath, his whole face a question mark.

What do you mean?

Gone, he said again, Mummy go away.

I gave him the same response I had every other night that week. We're all going away, Hanno, I said, wiping the spittle from his chin. We're all going together. Mummy and you and

Daddy and me. The whole family. You don't need to be afraid, okay? Hanno, Mummy, Tata, Ludi, all of us together, just you wait and see.

The quiet set in, and after a while I heard him heave a sigh of relief. He pressed his knee against my side and curled up into a ball, like puppies do. I sensed the tension gradually draining from his little body. I thought he was already asleep when I heard him whisper the last words I had said to him: all of us together, all of us together.

We still have a little while, I said softly into his ear, and in the early twilight I saw him smile. He turned away from me as though he wanted to be alone with his thoughts. Soon I turned onto my side too, to help me tumble down into sleep.

Retarded, that was they called it. The neighbour from across the street said it, Uncle Rudi said it, so did the lady from the butcher shop; then they patted my brother's narrow head and chatted to my mum about the wind and the weather. It's going to get worse soon, they said, you can see it coming.

We all have to make sacrifices, the butcher lady said. She pinched Hanno's cheek, and when he began to cry she produced a sweetie from her apron dress. Our neighbour adjusted her headscarf, the spring air was still cold, then she pointed up at the mountains, where the North wind was whipping up streams of snow above the treetops. It's spraying in from over the ridge. That stinging, screeching spray of snow. You have to pay close attention to where the wind is blowing from, the butcher lady said, pushing the sweetie into Hanno's mouth.

When I walked through the village, down the main road to buy the groceries Mum had told me get from the shop, or to pick up a newly re-soled pair of shoes, I did everything I could not to think about how this time might be the last. My last time walking across the church square. My last time passing the village fountain. Or my last time entering the cobbler's shop, with its scent of leather, tan and cigarette smoke that clung to you for hours. To distract myself I counted the people crossing the street, offsetting the men and women against each other. But when the cobbler pushed the shoes to me across the workbench and asked how much longer we'd be staying here in Mariendorf, I was right back where I started. We might never leave, I said.

The boss was a grumpy man, and I'd been afraid of him since my first visit to his shop. He looked like the walrus from the animal portraits that lined the walls of our school corridor, and when he took his pipe out of his mouth he revealed a bottom row of long yellow teeth. The thought flashed through my head that I would never see this face again, because there might not be a cobbler where we were going, or if there was one, it would be someone

different. Someone without a walrus moustache, without questions I couldn't answer, and with teeth that didn't make you shudder. And for a moment I was happy about that.

There was no actual rule against talking about tomorrow or how we'd be leaving and would have to say goodbye. Not in the way it was forbidden to throw a stone at someone's head or spit on the ground at school. It wasn't written down anywhere, not like the Ten Commandments they made us learn by heart in catechism class or the Prayer for the Duce. But Dad soon lost his patience at lunch when I wondered out loud whether I'd be reunited with Kathrina at my new school. He looked up from his plate incredulous, raised his voice and told me it had nothing to do with me and I should mind my own business. My job was to go to school and help my parents and do as I was told. And if I kept talking like that, I was in for a smack. The fact was, I could only really talk about these things with Kathrina.

When we walked home from school together, she happily told me what they spoke about at her house or the kinds of things she overheard from the back of her parents' butcher shop. They'd sold everything already, she said, the shop, their flat downstairs and all the furniture, the slaughter rooms in the yard where they slit pigs' and calves' throats and carved up their heavy bodies.

We're migrating in June, she said.

Migrating? I asked.

That's what they call it when you leave for another country.

Emigrating, I said.

No, migrating, she repeated, letting her wispy braids whip around her nose. She hopped on one leg across the hopscotch the children had drawn on the cobblestones.

I should go to the train station and see for myself, she called out. Almost every day people waited for the migratory train there with their children, she said. They stood around on the platforms with their suitcases and chests, and as the train pulled into the station they guessed it must be theirs. When the people boarded the train, the railway staff and porters lifted the heavy chests through the coach windows. She had seen it with her own eyes, she exclaimed, hopping back in my direction.

At some point we'll be migrating too, I said, I'm sure of it.

Kathrina told me that she had only stopped by the station for the first time a few days ago with her aunt Frieda to see who was leaving the village that day. She had waved at the people in the carriages with a handkerchief as the migratory train moved away.

Another time she told me she was migrating to a town a hundred times the size of our village. Böhmen, it was called; they were waiting for her there, for her and her family.

And a couple of days later it was a different story again. Her mother, she said as we as we skipped down the steps on the way out of school, was insisting on going to Vor-Adelberg, because so many of the people from here had migrated there already. Vor-Adelberg, that was their destination. It had a lake and big shops and big mountains, just like Mariendorf. They'd be getting a new house, of course, with a garden and a shop where they'd sell meat and sausages. And they'd have a dog, a guard dog, a German Shepherd, to protect them all. And we'd all be neighbours again when I arrived with my family. Vor-Adelberg. In-front-of-Adelberg, whatever that was supposed to mean.

Could be Behind-Adelberg, I said, as we turned the corner at the parish hall. We both laughed, and when Kathrina said how about Below-Adelberg, we had to stop because we were laughing so hard we almost wet our pants. We didn't stop laughing until we parted ways outside her parents' butcher shop. At home I realised that I had no idea where this 'Adelberg' was, in front of or behind us, in the East or the West. My mother wouldn't know either. Best not to even try to ask Dad.

Hanno would be turning six soon, but he still couldn't walk properly because his legs were too thin. He could stand up just fine if he held onto something, but as soon as he let go and tried to walk from the bench by the stove to the table, the tottering would begin. He'd manage three, four steps, then he'd buckle, let himself glide to the floor and giggle as he continued to bounce along. He'd push off with his hands and shuffle across the floorboards on his bottom, making his way from the living room into the kitchen and from the bedroom to the living room. Crawling onto a chair, he beamed from ear to ear because he thought he'd been much quicker than me.

Dad sometimes carried Hanno on his shoulders outside of the house. The winter before we left Mariendorf, he came home from work in the evenings and went down to the cellar, where he was crafting a little cart out of spruce wood for him, with four side panels and a moveable drawbar. He let me watch, and I helped him take the rubber wheels off our old pram and attach them to the wooden carriage. On Christmas Eve, there it was sitting under the Christmas tree. It looked like a horse-drawn carriage made for a rocking horse, and Hanno understood right away that it was meant for him. Outside in the yard I helped my brother climb in. He leaned back, made himself comfortable, stretched out his legs and placed his hands on the side panels to hold on. Giddy up! he cried, and we took it for a spin around the trees, over to the butcher's through the slush, and back to our front door.

From then on, every time I went to the shops to run errands Hanno was allowed to come with me. Holding my hand, he'd make it down the stairs and take a seat in the cart, then I'd clamp the drawbar under my armpits and await his command. Gee! and Haw! Not once did he mix them up.

The wooden walkway that led to the dark forest over the stream wobbled slightly as we pulled Hanno across in his carriage. Kathrina steered and I made sure the wheels stayed on the two planks laid side by side.

In just a couple of days Kathrina's family was planning to migrate. The heavy springtime snow had toppled some of the spruces; now they were lying right across the narrow trail that continued at the end of the bridge. The snow had melted a while back, but no one had cleared away the trees. Many of their branches had broken off and the stubs jutting out of the trunks were sticking into the sludgy earth like lances. It was a struggle to pull Hanno's cart and make progress with so much splintered wood obstructing our path.

We had noticed the smell not long after the bridge. It stinky, Hanno had said, craning his neck and sniffing the air. To Kathrina and me, the smell wafting over from the forest was nasty but not exactly a stench. It smelt of something rotten, decaying, the odour that whirled around us, suddenly vanished and then came back again when we took another few steps forward. Old meat, Kathrina said, it smells of meat that's gone bad. Hanno held his sweater sleeve over his nose and looked the other way.

As we were walking, Kathrina had been filling me in on all the latest details of her migration, everything she could think of. The fact that they had to sit on packed suitcases and chests at home because the chairs had all been loaded up or sent away ahead of them. And that they had dismantled all but one of their beds, which they needed to sleep on in the nights to come, all of them together. I go in the middle, said Kathrina, so no one can push me out.

Just before they reached the clearing Hanno started whimpering, a bit like the neighbours' dog whenever the big church bell rang. I could sense the halting, jerky sounds he was about to let rip. He pointed through the trees towards the hillside.

The foul smell must be coming from up there, Kathrina agreed. She nodded at me, we left Hanno behind and clambered up over the slippery forest floor. We held onto low-hanging branches and progressed hand over hand along bushes and thin tree trunks. A mossy boulder almost blocked our path, and even before we reached the hilltop we could hear the swarm of flies buzzing.