

Summary, Commentary and Sample Translation

by Alice Thornton

Summary:

It is 1919, in Hildesheim, and Medical Consultant to the police Magda Fuchs has just found out that her prosecutor husband, Bertram, has been murdered. In a bid to escape her reputation as a helpless widow, Magda moves a year later to Berlin – a city whose dark underbelly she is about to discover, particularly through her work as a Medical Consultant to the police. Indeed, following the dark years of the war, things are starting to get out of hand in the big city...

Magda starts work at a police station, meeting her colleagues Lamour, Mehring, and Wagner, and finds accommodation in the Bleibtreu Guesthouse. There, she meets the daughter of the owner, Celia, who is trying to free herself from a loveless marriage with her husband Albert. She has been forced to drop out of her medicine course– Albert earns enough for the both of them, and that’s that! Doris, another resident at the guesthouse, lives in a dream world, imagining that she will soon be whisked away by a movie producer and will become a glamorous movie star. It seems that dreams, for young women, at least, are not worth having in Berlin – unless they take things into their own hands, that is.

A few days after her arrival, Magda is called to the scene of a brutal murder: it appears that a man has murdered his wife and left himself critically injured, leaving behind his son Otto – who has since disappeared – and his 6-year-old daughter Elke. Elke is too traumatised to tell Magda about what she saw, and when Magda finds out about the illegal child-selling going on in the city, she becomes extremely concerned about Otto’s whereabouts. Indeed, as the gruff welfare worker Ina tells her, “in this city, you can buy anything...”

Meanwhile, the investigation into the death of Magda’s husband continues. Not only Bertram had been murdered, but a woman he had been questioning as well as another man – Kurt Berneis – have been found dead. All of them were killed with the same weapon. How could all of these deaths be connected?

While all of this is going on, Celia meets a divorce lawyer, to discuss leaving Albert and return to her studies. But when Celia breaks the news to Albert, he grabs a pistol and shoots himself – and the police seem intent on blaming his death on Celia.

Magda returns to the case of little Elke, who tells her that her mother was not actually killed by her father, as the police had initially thought, but rather by her Uncle Rille. But before Magda and her colleagues get the chance to question the young girl further, Elke gets taken away by her Aunt Carola Wichmann, and is nowhere to be found. After some investigations, it turns out that this so-called Uncle Rille is actually a pimp, Giselher Zerkowski, and that he did indeed kill Elke’s mother. Zerkowski apparently offered to sell off little Otto, the missing boy, which led to a scuffle, ending with the death of the children’s mother. Back at the station, Wagner and Lamour, Magda’s colleagues, ridicule her for taking the story of Elke and Otto so seriously – she is just a Medical Consultant to the police, after all, not a detective. And this kind of thing happens all the time! Magda is offered a way out of her frustrating situation when, following the sudden death of Celia’s father, his medical practice is offered to her. She needs to think long and hard about this, as to abandon her job as a Medical Consultant to the police would mean abandoning all of these lost children, too...

Meanwhile, Magda returns to the case of her husband’s murder and soon discovers a difficult truth: the circumstances of her husband’s death are tangled up in a similar scandal. Indeed, the two other people found dead at the scene, had a child together whom they had sold to Peter Hartlieb. Regretting the choice later, the father tried to get his son back, but eventually was shot dead together with his lover. Magda’s husband happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time – but it seems that this tragic practice of selling children is following Magda around wherever she goes.

Some time later, Magda happens upon a beggar girl, and, upon closer inspection, Magda is sure that this is in fact her – young Elke was not only stolen from the hospital by her aunt, Carola Wichmann, but also put on the streets to beg! Magda and her colleague, Mehring, who seems to be the only compassionate one at the police station, raid the building where Elke is being held and save her. Mehring and Magda arrest Frau Wichmann and, following a fight outside his workplace, Mehring shoots Zerkowski dead. Peter Hartlieb’s fate in Hildesheim seems sealed, too, as the police are on his case regarding the triple murder of Bertram, Herta, and Kurt Berneis.

Elke is adopted by Magda’s family, and Magda decides to split her time between the doctor’s practice offered to her by Celia’s family and the police station – meanwhile, Celia is finally acquitted of her husband’s death and can move on with her life, now an independent student. The whole affair can finally be put behind them. The novel ends as they all attend a New Year’s Eve party, bringing in 1921 with style – Celia with her new lover, Edgar, and Magda with Mehring (to her own surprise!).

#### Commentary:

*Das Leben, ein ewiger Traum* captivatingly interweaves the stories of a number of fascinating women, all struggling to assert themselves in the bustling city of Berlin. We meet the lovable and principled Magda Fuchs, Medical Consultant to the police and grieving widow, the ambitious Celia who wants nothing more than to free herself from her forced marriage, Doris, the loveable dreamer,

Ina, the gruff welfare worker, and finally Ruth, the divorce lawyer who cares little about conventions and whose husband wears makeup (shockingly!). These women must all take their lives into their own hands, otherwise they will be lost to the mindlessness of traditional domestic life – indeed, what they all share, and what makes them stand out from the rest of the world, is their capacity to dream for a better life.

Much of the plot is revealed through the dialogue – a lot of which is written in dialect, which definitely makes for a unique reading experience – and, as a result, the strength of Helene Sommerfeld’s writing lies in the relationships that are created between characters. Helene Sommerfeld is actually a pseudonym, with the author – or authors! – being a married couple living in Berlin. Their knowledge and love for the city comes through very clearly, with Berlin becoming almost a character of its own: one that is beautiful, but extremely flawed. Indeed, the duo often write about Berlin, with their trilogy about the Berlin doctor Ricarda Thomasius being a roaring success, coming in at #1 on the SPIEGEL bestseller list.

Though many of the topics covered are extremely serious, *Das Leben, ein ewiger Traum* remains heart-warming. As the women grow closer, readers really get the chance to sympathise with all of their situations. As a result, we gain an authentic, clear image of what life in 1920s Berlin was like for young professional women. This is overall a rousing reading experience – with there being much to gain from it for a contemporary audience, too, highlighting the importance of sisterhood and of carving your own way in a world not necessarily made for you.

This novel is bound to captivate the masses as we enter the new 20s, providing escapism in this time where it is very much needed!

Sample Translation:

**S. 12 – 17**

**Silence for the Inspector**

**1920**

This noise! All these people!

Berlin was hustling and bustling, pushing and shoving, smoking and steaming. Nevertheless, Magda pushed her way through the midday rush on the much-too-narrow platform of the Lehrter Bahnhof. Where had this mass of people come from? She had never seen so many people in one single place before. She raised her arm to show the service man who was barging through the teeming mass that she needed him to take her heavy suitcase. As he came over, an elegant gentleman in a bowler hat

glanced at her scornfully – and thrust his own luggage into the service man's hand. They both marched off. Magda was so taken aback by this that she stopped in her tracks, immediately being elbowed.

At first she hardly noticed that someone was pulling at her coat, and when she turned around, she saw no one so much looking in her direction.

“Apples! Buy apples ‘ere!”

A little girl's arm seemed to be reaching out to Magda from beneath the platform. Her hand, clutching a rosy red apple, was inching closer and closer to her face.

“Sorry, I'm in a rush.”

She was indeed running late. Shortly before their arrival in Berlin, an autumn gale had toppled a tree onto the track, delaying the S-train for half an hour. She certainly wouldn't make it to the police headquarters in Alexanderplatz on time.

So Magda hurried on with an uneasy feeling. She would have gladly bought something from the poor child, but she'd really been caught at the most inconvenient moment. On top of that, she would have had to put down either her suitcase containing all her clothes or her doctor's bag – in the middle of this crowd. Who on earth had given this child the idea of selling her apples here?

“A penny a piece an' nothin' more!”

Reluctantly, Magda slowed down, peering down at the girl who had ran up to her side. Her basket was still bulging with fruit, its weight bending the girl's small body into a hunch. Who would impose such heavy work on a child? This must be a crime. The little girl would no doubt fall ill from it! In Hildesheim, where Magda had just arrived from, the war had certainly also brought poverty. But the people there had each other's backs.

“How old are you?” asked Magda. Now that she had stopped, she may as well talk to this poor soul.

“Well, I'm five years old,” said the little girl.

Five? That was all Magda could focus on. That couldn't be right. The child looked four at the very most. “Did your Papa send you off with the apples? Aren't you much too young for such work?”

“If yer take three, yer can 'ave them for two pennies!” cried the girl.

Magda had to laugh. “Well, isn't that a funny calculation! I'll buy one off you.” She set the suitcase down, reached into the pocket of her coat, took out her purse, and exchanged a coin for a single piece of fruit. She looked the little girl in the face, directly this time.

Her skin was snow-white, her eyes deep-set in their shadowy sockets, with the only colour being in her cheeks, stained red from exertion. Although it was very cold, the little girl wore neither a coat, nor a scarf, nor a cap. Her shaggy, matted hair was unusually bright, yellow as wax. Her eyes were crystal blue. There was not a glimmer of warmth in them. Those are old eyes, Magda thought, shuddering at the thought.

“And what’s your name?” asked Magda. But by the time the words had left her mouth, the little girl and her heavy cargo had already vanished into the crowd.

And when she bent down to pick up her suitcase, it had disappeared, too.

All around her, the clamour continued – but Magda just stood there, letting herself be prodded and poked from all sides. All of her clothes were lost. All she had left was what she had on.

What could I possibly have been thinking when I took this job? she thought to herself. How am I supposed to get by in this city?

The people around her hurried by. Crooked backs. Tired, pasty faces. Emaciated. Yet, despite this, they walked on with determined steps. Onwards. On and on and on.

Well, what else could they do? she thought, gripping the handle of her doctor’s bag tighter. She couldn’t give up, not yet. A stolen suitcase was no big deal. This was nothing compared to the past that she was escaping. Here, in this huge city, she intended to forget what had happened. Here, where she knew nobody and nothing. In Hildesheim, every street, every house, every tree reminded her of Bertram. This was a new beginning. Well, at least an attempt at one. Her sister had forced her to promise her she would return if it was too much for her. But Christa and her overbearing protectiveness had been left far behind now.

She was in Berlin now, after all, and she was determined not to let such a silly little incident dampen her spirits. It was just some bits of widow’s clothing, anyway. Magda took a deep breath and stepped out of the station. The strange city greeted her with drizzle that blew into her face with a gust of wind.

“Who’re you here for?” The officer, sitting there in his faded and misshapen police uniform, scowled at Magda like a bad-tempered and weary watchdog. He was crouched in a dark corner behind a glass panel marked *Police Station Registration*.

Coming from the Alexanderplatz station, Magda had been delighted at how easy it had been to find the police station. It was hard to miss the red brick building with its four storeys and clumsy turrets – Berliners called it the Red Fortress. The entrance was located in the narrow Dircksenstraße, running parallel to the elevated railway line.

“I’m here to see Inspector Wagner. I’m—”

The heavy-lidded official cut Magda off before she could finish her sentence.

“Name?”

“Magda Fuchs. I’m—”

“You ‘ere to report a murder?”

“No, I’m the new Medical Consultant to the police. But—”

“You’re new, then? You should’ve said so! You’re in the wrong place. This is the entrance for the public. Right. There’s another one for people like you.”

Magda was so taken aback that she didn't reply.

"Come on, then!"

With that, the man pushed his spindly body out of his cubicle. Magda noticed that he was missing a leg. He lunged at two wooden crutches, equally spindly, which he clamped under his armpits. He opened a glass door and pointed a crutch down a long corridor. "Straight down there. Third passage on the right, second on the left, first floor, fifth door on the left. All the best, Miss Docta." He hobbled off, leaving her standing there.

After walking past the second passage, Magda began to understand the structure of the headquarters – in order to fit in as many offices as possible, they had been grouped around tiny courtyards. Although she encountered countless stern-looking men in suits and hats in the connecting corridors, Magda didn't see a single woman.

Despite her lateness, Magda still felt the need to freshen up a before her first conversation with the inspector. Every single toilet she passed, though, was labelled with a wide-legged M. Not even a single W.

When she finally found what was probably the only ladies' bathroom, she examined her exhausted, worn-out face in the mirror. Her thick auburn curls had always needed the help of a lot of pins to keep her looking presentable. Right now, though, her mane was fighting with all its might against the sensible black hat that was weighing it down. The shadows which had made their home under her light blue eyes after Bartram's death, like stubborn mourners who refused to go home, were even darker than usual. She powdered her face quickly, forced her unruly hair into a tight knot at the back of her head, and pulled her hat back on.

"Madam Medical Consultant to the police," she mumbled to the face peering at her critically in the dull mirror. She was reminded of her sister's reproachful but well-meaning parting words from early this morning: "You've completely lost your mind, going off like this alone, Magda."

"I'm sick of drowning in my grief, Christa," she had replied. She really *was* sick of it. She lifted her head high, grabbed her doctor's bag and set off in search of Inspector Wagner, hidden somewhere in the depths of this huge maze of a building.

#### **S. 47 – 51**

"Where are you from, Miss Kaufmann?" asked the cook, dishing out her Rohrnudeln.

"Elberfeld," the girl answered. "You wouldn't know it," her eyes gleamed for a second. "There's a suspension railway there. It's exactly one year older than me. When you ride it, you feel like you're floating over the Wupper."

Magda had heard of it. The suspension railway was said to be quite the technical triumph.

"And you didn't want to stay there?" asked Liesl.

Miss Kaufmann shook her head. "I haven't told my mother this yet, but I want to be a movie star."

“And how do you plan on doing that?” asked Magda, surprised.

A mischievous grin crept onto Doris’ face. “I trained to be a saleswoman in Elberfeld. At the Dietz department store.”

“There’s one of those in Berlin, too, on Alexanderplatz,” Liesel chimed in.

Meanwhile, Celia had joined the women, too. “It’s the biggest department store in the world,” she interjected, proudly. “When I was a child, half of Alexanderplatz was rebuilt for it. But it turned out so beautifully. You could spend days in there without getting bored.”

Miss Kaufmann’s grin grew wider. “That’s exactly where I’ll be working from tomorrow!” she squealed.

“I see, so you applied for a position in Berlin while you were still in Elberfeld,” Magda concluded. “But how do you go from working in a department store to being a movie star?”

“I’d be interested to find out, too,” Liesl declared with a vigorous nod of her head.

“Gentlemen buy their gloves themselves,” began Miss Kaufmann, “I know that from experience. So I’m going to work in the glove department – I’ll be sure to meet a producer there.” Once more her eyes flashed with glee. “Buying gloves is an intimate affair. You have to touch the hands of men you’ve never met before. It’s quite easy to strike up a conversation with them.” She giggled, throwing Celia a knowing look.

“Well, you’ll certainly have to touch a lot of hands before you find the right ones,” said Liesl with a snicker.

“A girl has to kiss a lot of frogs before she finds a prince.” Miss Kaufmann blushed at her own words. But Magda could see that the teenager was less innocent than she appeared.

“She really said that? That she wants to kiss a bunch of frogs?” Josefine threw her head back with an echoing laugh, certainly not one that was becoming for a young lady in public.

This was one of the many things that Celia liked about her best friend: she didn’t care what other people thought about her. Unfortunately for her, Celia was quite different in this respect. Being with Josefine was like meeting her alter ego. Josefine was so much freer than Celia, who, just like her mother was constricted in her corset that had gone out of fashion.

The two of them were walking along the sparsely lit Bleibtreustraße. Their high heels clicked in unison. It was dark and cold, and the two friends were wrapped up in heavy winter coats. Hidden underneath were light, knee-length dresses that were just right for an evening of dancing to American music. Josefine, at twenty-four, was two years older than Celia and also a little taller and sturdier. She always wore her black, silky fine hair short, but just now had it hidden under a small hat, just like Celia.

Celia knew the pin-straight road that ran from north to south like the back of her hand. Although they were in the middle of the bustling west, a very special kind of calm surrounded the narrow Bleibtreustraße – a distinguished retreat, a protected space. While on the Kurfürstendamm, which crosses it, the neon signs, some of them several storeys high, turned night into day, Bleibtreustraße

remained dark. It was home to upper middle-class citizens – doctors, lawyers, merchants, a handful of successful artists. And so when Celia’s mother opened a small guesthouse on Bleibtreustraße, it came as a surprise to its residents. To think that a person like Doris from Elberfeld now lived here, planning to catch her Prince Charming in the glove department!

Celia was a little embarrassed in front of Josefine, too, even though they were usually very open with one another. For Josefine's family was swimming in money, while her own was forced by her father's rapidly deteriorating health to rent out their own flat to strangers.

That's why Celia felt the need to put her gossip about Miss Doris into perspective. She found it too hard to admit that her family needed to rent to young ladies who gave away their favours so frivolously. Celia tried to make the ‘Bleibtreu Guesthouse’ appear in as respectable a light as possible.

“Such a young thing from the provinces! Her head’s full of nonsense and she’s got a big mouth on top of that,” she said lightly. And she was careful not to mention that they were hardly much older than her. “You said there was another lady moving in, too.”

“A doctor! Imagine that!”

“From Charité Hospital? Any chance I’d know her?” Josefine was now in her second year of medical school.

“Mrs Fuchs has actually just arrived in Berlin.”

“She doesn't have a title?”

“My father once said that a dissertation makes a doctor more of a scientist than a healer,” said Celia. She had the authority on this subject. Her father was an academic, after all, unlike Josefine's dad, who dealt in all sorts of things and had made a fortune doing it. The irony of life had ensured that now, while Josefine was on her way to becoming a doctor, Celia was as far away from fulfilling her dream as ever.

“Here we are!” said Celia.

“Good evening ladies,” said a gentleman in a hat and coat, opening the door to ‘Black Owl’ for them. “I hope you enjoy yourselves!”

The small dance hall was located in Sächsische Straße, which followed on from Bleibtreustraße, just south of Lietzenburger Straße. It didn’t look like much from the outside, but these guests were not interested in showiness. They just wanted to have a good time. The room was packed full of young people who had not had to fight the war against the Americans – the only ones who could stand the new, fashionable American dance music. Germany had only been allowed to dance again for about a year, with it being prohibited during the war. People were desperate for it.

Inside, too, the ‘Owl’ was kept simple with only a few chairs and small round tables. It was the guests who gave the place its glamour. The ladies, just like Celia and Josefine, had adorned themselves with modern, glittering dresses trimmed with silver threads and little sequins. The gentlemen, clearly in the minority because of the war, relied entirely on the conventional elegance of the dark evening suit. The later it got, the more jackets were removed – which would have been quite improper anywhere but at the ‘Owl’.

The band that evening consisted of four musicians. The combination of piano, saxophone, double bass, and drums was not particularly refined. The players mainly relied on rhythm –the audience had come to dance, after all! Celia enjoyed the short dances where people took turns stepping into the middle of the small dance floor. Everyone moved as they wanted, as the rhythm pushed their limbs to move. Legs and arms flew in any and every direction.

**S. 455-458**

On the quiet Rotherstraße that evening, the two of them walked a side by side in silence, their hands buried deep in their coat pockets. When Magda thought she had moved far enough away from the house, she breathed out sharply. She felt like she was about to suffocate.

“What kind of scum...! What human acts like that? Did you see those children? The taller one...”

“...Rudolph...”

“He’s seriously ill and clearly needs help. And the little one, Willibald, they beat him and powdered over the bruises. What this woman is doing is basically slave trade.”

Mehring said nothing for a long time as they walked by the railway warehouses. A cold light fell through the windows onto the street, and a dull banging of could be heard – but not a single human voice. He began again only when they had almost reached Warschauer Straße station: “To be honest, I didn’t expect to see anything this bad. But I’m sure we’ve done the right thing.”

“What now, though?”

“We’ll come back, this time with money, and we’ll take Willibald. Then I can arrest the woman in the act, and she’ll be convicted of child trafficking.”

“How long will she be locked up for that?” asked Magda.

“Well, that’s the problem,” The commissioner sighed. “If she presents us with a valid birth certificate and, on top of that, a declaration by the mother that she has given her child up for adoption, we can only really get her for an administrative offence. The punishment for that is a fine. At the very most. That’s why none of our colleagues bother with child trafficking. It’s hard work, it’s a lot of trouble and it doesn’t even bring any money in.”

“But what about the children! They’re the future of our fatherland. We can’t just throw them overboard like that.”

Kuno Mehring grimaced. “Policemen don’t tend to be idealists.”

“And what about you?”

“I don't know,” he said. “I guess I'm a lawyer, first and foremost.”

“Does nobody here have any morals?” Bertram certainly did, Magda added quietly.

“You start off having them, then you learn that they get in the way. And then you meet a woman like you.”

Just as he said that, a streetlamp was lit. The light fell harshly on Kuno Mehring's face. The shadow of a beard appeared on his cheeks and around his mouth. He had narrow, determined lips, and a dimple on his chin. Magda had never noticed it before.

“A woman like me? What do you mean by that?” she asked softly.

He looked at her with a strange look in his eyes. “I've never met a woman like you. You really are incredible”.

This came so suddenly that it almost took her breath away. She did not know how to react. Was he complimenting how good she was at her job? Or how she was as a woman? Her loudly pounding heart seemed to know the answer, but she didn't want to hear it. She quickly changed the subject. “Ina Dietrich, the welfare worker, has a brother who is apparently a big name around here. Apparently he wants to talk to us.”

“Us? Does he know me?”

“He wants to share his knowledge about Zerkowski, if you can ‘handle’ it,” she said, echoing Ina's words.

“Catching a murderer,” Mehring thought aloud. “That would certainly be good for my career.” He smiled. “Things would be even better if we went out for a glass of wine tonight. We've created quite the situation here, you see.”

He had an expression on his face that made her smile.

“Quite the situation? Is that so? I'm afraid I'm going to have to turn you down, though. I have to write a report tonight. A lawyer's waiting for it.”

“I hope you won't be busy writing reports every evening this week?”

“I certainly will be!” she replied, almost hotly.

He reached for her hand, lifted it gently and gave her a kiss right in the centre of it. He lifted his hat and bowed his head: “Good night... Magda...”

“Good night...” Her heart was beating hard “...Kuno.”

She had not actually been about the report. In fact, she was definitely in the mood to have a glass of wine with the handsome inspector. She also needed to carry on discussing their encounter with the terrible child trafficker. But the report wasn't going to write itself.

As she drove home in a daze, she thought through everything that had just happened. She had put work before everything for months. But tonight, she realised suddenly, something within her had changed. Up until that moment with Kuno, her feelings had been constricting her like a corset. A

Sample Translation “Those in the Shadows Vanish from Sight” (H. Sommerfeld)

corset that barely allowed her so much as a breath. She wanted nothing more than to free herself from it completely, to take a deep, fresh breath again. To let someone get close to her. Something that she had thought no longer existed in her had been reawakened by Kuno.

Love? What a big word... Even after all this time, she still struggled with it. She needed to take her time to find out what it meant. Because the thought of the pain that love can cause scared her to death. All that she knew for sure was that from now on, she would see Kuno Mehring with different eyes. The eyes of a woman who knew that she had already fallen in love.

What would happen next was up to fate.