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The Immortal Family Salz
440 Pages

Rights Sold: Persian language
ISBN 978-3-423-28092-1

The Immortal Family Salz

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Sample translation by Aaron Kerner

Emma Salz, 2015

My grandmother died twice. But the first death didn't kill her.

On July 15th 1990, just a few days after taking possession of the Fürstenhof in Leipzig, and for reasons which remain unclear, Lola Rosa Salz, in spite of her eighty-five years, clambered up onto the roof of the hotel, and then fell.

The fall was so bad that her heart failed. When it began to beat again, it was too weak to bring her back to life.

Thereafter she lay in a deep sleep that my father (her son) referred to as coma. But was it really? Even Aunt Ava, her daughter and nurse, was amazed how smooth the process of feeding her was. (The patient favored éclairs with extra helpings of cream.) Chewing, swallowing, digestion, excretion—all of it, with a little assistance, was no problem. She lay stretched in her French bed with wide-open eyes, and muttered away. Most of the words were incomprehensible, and the few you could make out lacked any clear connection. As if scraps of her dreams were slipping out into the world.

Apart from I, the four words she most frequently said were: Mama, Herr Salz, and Maria. (Herr Salz presumably referred to her long-dead father, and Maria to her even longer-dead grandmother.) Was there something she wanted to confess? Did she want to pass on a bit of her experience, so as not to slide into oblivion? Or was she simply babbling nonsense?

Her life stretched so far back that most of its years had long since found their place in the history books. She was a living example of how little of what we are remains. It's not for nothing that we tell stories about the past. Because it's nothing more than that. Just a story that the living tell about the dead.

In my case, it could turn out to be a very short story. I don't know if I'll still be alive next year. I believe that I will. But I don't know. Which is why I find myself thinking of my grandmother so often. What did she have to share? And what about me—what do I have to share, the much younger grandchild?

Maybe her words meant more than we suspected—maybe, as someone approaching death, she was telling a story about the living, one from which, even though it was merely a story, we could have learned a good deal.

Should we have tried harder to understand her?

My mother, who'd never been particularly fond of her, called my grandmother's incomprehensible monologue Lola's job-interview for Death. Death, however, didn't seem especially interested in her—nowhere near as interested as he is in me. He ignored her for a long time. Whatever was happening in Lola's head, she drifted for years, someplace between here and there. Always at the Fürstenhof, where her family had once made its home. There, as an undead resident guest, she exercised her lifelong right of abode—she occupied a suite under the roof from which she'd fallen. And waited for her second death.

Lola Rosa Salz, 1914

I've never told anyone about 1914. It was the year my family committed a murder and I rescued Mama. But now it's high time. I regret so many of the decisions I've made in my life. Not this one. My children have to hear. They need to know that I'm more than the diabolical figure they see in me. So I beg you, whoever you are, listen to me. If you don't, it'll be as if I'd never spoken.

Do you understand?

The last thing I remember is the sky over Leipzig. On the very day I took possession of the Hotel Fürstenhof, in July of 1990, I managed to fulfill a long-cherished wish: to climb onto the roof. I hadn't been up there since 1914.

The ascent took me a good deal longer than it had my nine-year-old self. At the peak of the roof, right in the middle of the letters HOTEL FÜRSTENHOF, I sat down and let my legs dangle. I was hoping to meet an old friend. But he stayed away. Maybe he didn't recognize me—no question that time had put me through the wringer.

So he didn't show up. As I took this in, I looked around: I wasn't the only one who had changed. The air of this new old Germany smelled bland. In it was no trace of the history of this place, of our history.

I began my descent.

The next moment I woke up here. I have no idea where here is. I'm surrounded by silent darkness, a perfect, noiseless, starless black. I call it: the Realm of Shadows. A little dramatic, sure, but rather fitting. In my life light has played a subordinate role, serving, at most, to generate shadows.

I wonder how much time has passed. Minutes? Hours? A day?

Darkness doesn't care about time. When I seek to stir myself, to make myself move—here a finger, there an eyelid—half an eternity seems to pass before I have to give up.

On the other hand, has even a second elapsed since I was fed bite-sized pieces of éclair? Was that you? The end of every life should be so delectable.

Taste is the sole sense that remains to me. I am a prisoner of the Realm of Shadows. Only my words can escape—I hope they're safe with you.

1914, then—that decisive year. What happened then marked my family forever. To be honest, it makes me a bit nervous to go back to the beginning of my biography. But who knows how much time we have left. Maybe these are my last moments. Better we start right away.

Are you with me?

In January of 1914 I was living with my family in Munich. My parents held the lease of the legendary Löwenbräukeller, and this strange Bavarian structure served as our home as well. The smaller tower with the pale shingles, which faced onto Augustenstraße and has long since ceased to exist, was part of our private residence, and housed, among other things, the nursery. Within was a wall on which hung the framed silhouette portraits of my family, arranged as if forming a genealogical tree. In the middle: my plump and potato-nosed mother, next to my father, with a thick beard and boasting a full head of hair. Level with them: the dainty profile of my Aunt Alli, Mama's sister, alongside with the cylindrical head of her husband, Uncle Brem. Above the siblings: my flabby Grandmother. And underneath the lot: my sister Gretl, a younger version of my mother, and myself, whose finer features recalled those of my father.

Every year, for our birthdays, Mama would prepare a new, updated silhouette for each of us. As a child, it never occurred to me to ask how exactly she went about making her own. These days I'd give plenty to learn how in the world she managed such a feat.

So as to let her cut the profile in peace, we were forced to sit stock-still in her silhouette-chair—something that I, by far the twitchiest member of the family, possessed slim talent for. I proved this yet again in January

1914, just a few days before my ninth birthday.

“Don’t move,” said Mama, as forcefully as she could. This wasn’t, as it happened, all that forcefully; her manner was much too sweet to make me stop fidgeting.

“My dear,” she said finally, “do you actually know why I’m always cutting our silhouettes?”

While I was considering whether or not I did, in fact, know, she went on: “It’s a secret.”

“Does Papa know?”

She shook her head.

“And Gretl?”

Another shake. “You’re the first person I’m going to tell. Not everyone would understand.”

Now I absolutely wanted to know.

“If you pay close attention,” said Mama, “you’ll understand that every shadow, painted or not, can tell you a piece of the truth.”

I thought about this briefly, and came to the conclusion: “Shadows can’t talk.”

She smiled. “Are you sure? They don’t use words, true. But they can still say plenty. I remember perfectly what they first told me about you.” She paused for a moment and looked at me. “As you were born, the light of a lamp threw your shadow on the wall. A black and blurry, swirling stain, announcing the still unformed personality that only a moment later I would be holding in my arms. But even after I’d taken you and pressed you to my breast, and kissed your face and said your name to you for the first time, I found my eyes drawn once again to your shadow on the wall, which was being rocked by the shadow of a mother.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because it was the shadow that assured me, truly convinced me, that you’d arrived; it was and is your imprint on the world, the final evidence of your existence. In other words: without you there would be no shadow, and without your shadow, no you.”

“And if I lost my shadow?”

“Then,” she said, gesturing to the wall and its hung silhouettes, “you can always find it here. That’s why I make them.”

I thought about how many times I’d resisted sitting for Mama’s portraits. Suddenly I felt ashamed, I was sorry. Right away I sat up straighter on the chair. “I won’t move until you’re done,” I announced, “I’ll be as still as a stone, Mama. I promise!”

And what did she do? Instead of rushing to seize the opportunity, she pressed me to her breast, and kissed my face, and said my name, as if she was seeing me for the first time. Only then did she proceed with her painting.

It would be my last silhouette.

From then on I looked at the portraits with new eyes, and struggled to read them. I spent hours before that wall in the nursery, studying the curves of the lines between dark and light. Still, it was hard to see those silhouettes as more than mere black surfaces.

“I don’t think I’m very good at reading the truth,” I admitted to Mama the following day.

“You’ll get there eventually,” she said. “It takes plenty of practice.”

That might have been true, but for plenty of practice you needed plenty of discipline, something that I was hard put to muster at less than nine years of age. My illiteracy was so frustrating to me that I decided to take extreme measures: I considered involving my sister.

You have to understand: Gretl and I had nothing in common, aside from a last name and parents. As far back as I can remember, she was surrounded by an invisible shield that screened her off from life, and life from

her. It was rare that she asked a question or expressed an interest, even rarer that she displayed a reaction to anything, apart from perhaps a little smile or an apathetic gesture. Usually Gretl did exactly what was expected of her. Her shadow, I secretly believed, wasn't concealing any truth I wasn't already long familiar with.

But in the end that wasn't the reason I decided against inviting her to join me in my shadow-reading. Mama had told her secret to me alone, it was a bond between us. I didn't want to share it with anyone else.

So I kept it to myself, and postponed the analysis of shadows to some unspecified point in the future, like a piece of boring homework—I should have made more of an effort to tease out their secrets! Maybe I could have prevented what happened later. Mama's silhouette, for example: How much of what I know today, and how much more than that, might I have been able to read there?

Mama had been raised in the convent at Pasing, and had therefore received an education ill-suited to prepare her for the wider world. She was an innocent creature who saw the purpose of marriage as the production of children, just as they'd taught her at the nunnery. And she'd fallen in love with, of all people, Herr Salz, who, having worked as a waiter in London and half the world besides, knew every trick in the book, not a few of them dirty.

Though I'm reluctant to describe him as that, Papa was considered an ideal gentleman. His handsome silhouette portrait gave nary a hint of his most distinctive features. His eyes held a striking grey-blue chilliness. And he was short—too short to be an entirely attractive man. And I might add: this wasn't the only respect in which he was lacking.

Only one silhouette in my family was more exhaustively scrutinized and admired than my father's: that of my Aunt Alli. Every man who saw it wanted to make her acquaintance, and every woman made haste to drag her man away from it. Aunt Alli's profile stood out as clearly from the others as she stood apart from the rest of the family. This was probably due to the fact that she'd entered this life under genealogically hazy circumstances: she was the result of an early indiscretion on the part of my grandmother, Maria Franziska Grasberger, which was then tidied up by means of a hasty marriage to the simple and honest Herr Olwerther. An open family secret. Even those who didn't actually know it suspected. No one else in the family came close to Aunt Alli's beauty, charm, and lust for life. Even her love of luxury and extravagance seemed attractive to members of the other and sometimes even of the same sex. Had she lived during the time of Ludwig I, her silhouette would have hung in Munich's Gallery of Beauties. For as long as anyone could remember, she'd borne the nickname "Countess Guckerl."

But already in her younger years her destiny began to show its blemishes: she had plenty of suitors. One of them, a Baron, who was especially intent on catching her, overwhelmed her with gifts, among them a wiry, spider-thin greyhound, with which Aunt Allie was so enamored that Grandma sent it back immediately, since she understood that such sumptuous presents were a definite sign that the Baron's admiration was far from Platonic. She put an end to the liaison and began to take steps to marry her frivolous daughter off. Now, finding Aunt Alli a husband was no great chore. The choice fell on Herr Joseph Brem, a solid type, and he fell for Alli. Joseph Brem, like my father, used to be a headwaiter at the Bamberger Hof, and by that time had taken over the lease of the much-frequented Munich Station Bar.

At their wedding they were forced to suffer through that idiotic custom of tearing the veil in two, so as merrily to announce: Tonight her virginity will be destroyed! In Aunt Alli's case, however, such a declaration was far from accurate. Mama prepared a special silhouette of her sister especially for this fête. Afterwards, everyone who saw it understood immediately: She was Uncle Brem's greatest luxury good—and that was saying something, considering that, thanks to his lease, he was stinking rich (as he was sure to inform anyone who couldn't flee quickly enough, for example by mentioning that he'd been one of the first

passengers to accompany Graf von Zeppelin for a flight on his new airship). From him she received a three-stranded pearl necklace—not cultivated pearls, but pearls from the bottom of the sea—with matching earrings, rubies, and emerald rings. She was considered one of the most elegant women in Munich, draped exclusively in tailored clothes, all of them prepared at Schober's, where she occasionally mounted a life-sized, stuffed, and discreetly walleyed horse in order to evaluate the width, length, and pleats of her riding skirt.

The blemishes on her destiny began to spread, though Uncle Brem apparently picked up on it neither from her lifestyle nor her silhouette: Aunt Alli had plenty of affairs, as well. She began an especially serious one in early 1914 with one Herr Tott, son of the owner of the Regina Palace Hotel on Lenbachplatz. The two met occasionally, dined together, reveled in music. They rarely attended plays—after all, you had to think too much there. But Aunt Alli never missed a performance of Tristan and Isolde, even though she was completely unmusical. In this particular show, adultery was celebrated, and Aunt Alli, champagne to her left, Herr Tott to her right, simply melted. She was predisposed that way and simply couldn't help it, just as Tristan and Isolde couldn't help it, because Brangäne had mixed something into the potion.

"You'd better enjoy it in silence," Mama counselled her once again, as I listened on the sly, during afternoon coffee klatch in January, on the eve of my ninth birthday—since for Aunt Alli "keeping a secret" was an utterly foreign phrase, and she'd been narrating her adventures in salacious detail.

"Not on your life! If I kept it all to myself, it would be almost as if it had never happened!" (With which sentiment I, if only retrospectively, absolutely have to agree.)

"Aren't you afraid that Joseph will find out?"

"Of course! That'd be frightful!" Aunt Alli wolfed down an obscenely large piece of peanut-brittle and went on, with her mouth full: "But you all won't tell on me, will you?"

She looked at Mama, who immediately shook her head, and then at my father, who did likewise. Aunt Alli's humor enlivened every gathering. Admittedly, these gatherings had to include at least one man, in order to keep Aunt Alli from getting bored.

Mama, a much tenderer soul than her sister, asked: "Don't you want to have children, then?"

"Of course we do!" cried Aunt Alli. "Half a dozen at least!"

"But then how can you be sure," whispered Mama, "that all of the little ones . . ."

". . . will be his?" Alli finished for her. She shrugged her shoulders. "Well, one can't be sure."

My parents exchanged a look.

"Oh," said Aunt Alli, "a little mixing of the bloodline never did a family any harm. Sometimes the prettiest children come from outside the fold. Just look at me."

Even my generally sober father joined in the laughter that followed. Mama's response was different: lowered eyes and a bright blush. She couldn't defend herself against such jibes, she was simply too sweet. Indeed, she presumably thought she had to put up with as much of such impudence as her sister dished out, since my mother and father had Aunt Alli to thank for their lease on the Löwenbräukeller.

A few years earlier, she'd had the idea of setting out to see the Öberschte, the head of the Löwenbräu brewery—wearing one of her most sophisticated outfits, topped with a delicate black fascinator—in order to beguile him, to toast their fruitful collaboration with glasses of beer, meanwhile managing to insinuate a bit of fine print into their pleasant conversation: Saying that, if he were to grant Alli's sister and her husband the lease on the Löwenbräukeller after the current one expired, then the Brems might (here she inserted a pause, then repeated this seemingly innocent word: might) consider continuing to serve Löwenbräu beer at the railway station bar, or might . . . might pass the concession on to a different Munich brewery.

No might about it, that would have meant a tremendous loss for the Löwenbräu brewery. Back then, people

didn't yet travel south by car—and everyone setting off for the Tyrol, Italy, and points further, inevitably stopped in at the Munich railway station to sip, swig, and spill the famous beer. So that the Öberschte was left with no other choice—which as it happened was, in economic terms at least, the best choice. My father turned out to be a clever businessman, I have to give him that. Under him the establishment boomed, especially during Carnival season, during which he, a Rheinlander, succeeded by means of extravagant decorations and cabaret performances in drawing all sorts of customers to the Löwenbräukeller, who greatly amused themselves there, filling the grubby, smoke-stained corners of the place with whoops and shouts. When the season was over, he carried more than one hundred thousand gold marks to the bank. However, during the Carnival procession, for which the Löwenbräukeller had, as a matter of fact, its own float, drawn by a pair of draft horses, it wasn't my father who was enthroned way up on top—rather my grandmother, just as she was on the wall of silhouettes.

Maria Franziska Olwerther, the vigilant matriarch, was an active, brainy, but also overbearing woman, who wasn't about to retire without a struggle. As fief of the Löwenbräukeller's garde manger, she oversaw its operations in a snow-white apron. Since she was a co-holder of the establishment's lease, there were inevitably quarrels, above all between her and my father, since she laid so much stock in a well-run business—whereas my father put the emphasis on profit.

Grandmother's silhouette greatly resembled that of a toddler: a triple chin, podgy nose, and rubbery lips; the only significant difference were the bushy eyebrows. One suspected that even as a young woman she hadn't been the sort that a man would give a second look. (Aunt Alli, that early indiscretion, must have been sired in the dark by a man as desperate for sex as he was dazzlingly handsome.)

Sometimes, however, it is precisely the ugliest people who dedicate themselves to the preservation of beauty. First thing every morning, before going in to work, Grandmother polished the brass plate above the doorbell of her Munich residence. The house lay directly opposite the Löwenbräukeller, on the corner where the Briennerstraße debouched onto Stiglmaierplatz.

Having been summoned by her, I rang that doorbell on January 22, 1914, my birthday. The girl who answered, naturally clad in a white bonnet, showed me inside. The living room was typically bourgeois, it even had a kind of dais by the window, where Grandma sat, as she so often did, looking out onto Stiglmaierplatz. Beside her stood an expansive oaken sideboard, displaying a stuffed fox with glass eyes that my father, a passionate hunter in his younger years, had shot.

"Ah, Lolo, take a look in the sideboard," said Grandma. I can still hear her croaking Bavarian.

My German sounded tame in comparison: "Do you have something for me?" My father set great store by my not speaking Bavarian, and corrected my pronunciation at every opportunity, presumably to tick off Grandma.

I cautiously folded back the doors of the sideboard, a little afraid that the stuffed fox might snap at me, and found a toy dog with a button on its ear, staring at me with a heartbreaking look. I immediately clutched it to my breast.

"What's its name?" I asked her.

"What do you think it should be?" she replied.

I looked at him for a moment. "Foxl," I answered.

"Foxl?! But it's a dog!"

"Can't a dog be named Foxl?"

"A fox in dog's clothing. We already have one of those in the family."

"We have a fox? Really?"

She didn't answer that—and it would be years before I realized what she'd meant. Instead, she stared out

again at the Löwenbräukeller, as if scanning the horizon for foul weather.

“Look, Lolo, don’t worry,” she said, without shifting her gaze or blinking, “no matter what happens, I’ll take care of the family, and make sure that everything goes well. Nobody can stop me from doing that.”

Nobody—except for one.

Grandma made the acquaintance of Death two days after my birthday. She suffered a stroke during a visit to the Tegernsee. They took her to the hospital. She lay there unconscious for hours. Mama dabbed the sweat from her brow. Aunt Alli lingered in the doorway, as if overcome by a fear of contagion. Dread hung in the air. You could hear it in the stillness. Today I ask myself what exactly they were dreading. Certainly the sisters feared losing a person they loved. But that wasn’t all. I’m convinced that they were afraid of what would happen to them once their protector was gone.

The burial took place beside the praying marble angel at the Eastern Cemetery. As we were leaving, Aunt Alli caught up with me by Doctor Gudden’s tomb, and said softly to me, in spite of the shock: “You know, Lola, the two of us look better than anyone else in our mourning outfits.”

Aunt Alli was hiding her fear and what’s more, she had hardly any foresight. But if you’ve been paying attention, you will have understood: With Grandma not only had our oldest family member departed, but also our guardian, our garde famille. The old order of things was no more, even if this was at first only suggested by a minor change: Grandma’s silhouette was removed from the wall and those of my parents, along with Aunt Alli and Uncle Brem, were raised to the highest position. In the process of which, the new hooks weren’t placed with precision: Anyone who looked closely could see that my father’s silhouette hung just a little higher than the rest.

After that, no more than a month passed before the incident that would steer the course of our lives in a fresh direction. Lion Feuchtwanger, the famous writer and frequently seen guest at the Löwenbräukeller, even referred to it in his novel *Success*, though he didn’t mention my parents by name.

I should tell you, before I go on, that in Munich, more than anyplace else, it was seen as essential that, whether you took your beer in a stein or a glass, it should be topped by a full head of foam. Now no longer under my grandmother’s punctilious management, but rather my father’s new, profit-maximizing style, this began to get out of hand—and in ways that boded ill. These gargantuan heads of foam rubbed many an honest Munich drinker the wrong way. My father was accused of “unfair pouring.”

It came to trial—and in the first instance, my father was acquitted. But then Aunt Alli stood up in the courtroom, applauding as if she were at the opera, and shouted: “Bravo! Braaavo!” She lacked, as I said, foresight, since this applause, in turn, rubbed the public prosecutor the wrong way. The judgment was appealed. When it came up again, my father was found guilty. Ten days’ detention. All of the family’s efforts to reduce this to a fine backfired. He was one of those damned Northerners, and had to be made an example of.

On the day of the verdict the sky was ostentatiously blue. The family hadn’t delivered the disastrous news to me, the nine-year old daughter, in all honesty: Mama had simply told me that Papa would be going away for a while. Which is why, on that day, my greatest concern was for my little wooden animals. Arranging my various and brightly-colored Noah’s Ark menagerie was an arduous task. I labored at it all afternoon, until finally they crowded the whole front parlor. When my father came in, I called out, eager to show him my work. He didn’t react, didn’t even seem to notice me. He wandered into the room like a sleepwalker, loosing a scream when he stepped on a zebra. Now he was wide awake. He snatched a shotgun from his cabinet, shouted: “Let’s go hunting!” and swung its muzzle in all directions, annihilating my zoo.

I leapt up. “That’s mean!”

Since he showed no signs of stopping, I subjoined a phrase that I’d picked up from him: “How perfidious!” Of late he’d been labeling thus all things Bavarian.

Finally, he paused a moment. “You think that’s perfidious?” Only now he glanced at me, with a coldness unusual even for him, and I didn’t dare answer.

“I’ll show you perfidious,” he said, laying down his gun, and stepped over to the window to which I’d tied my Foxl with a little ribbon, and pushed him, so that the dog tumbled out and dangled at the end of his little leash above the ground. With a child’s vivid imagination, I imagined my Foxl was being strangled. I shrieked. I begged him to pull Foxl back inside.

But my father left the room—and shortly after that the city as well. He fled to Hamburg, in order to find greater freedom in America, as he phrased it in a brief note that Mama discovered that same evening on the kitchen table.

In the hours that followed, weeping reddened her eyes as much as a smoky Carnival party at the Löwenbräukeller. When I asked her how long Papa would be gone for, she answered me with more tears. She took his silhouette down from the wall, looked at it yearningly, and soaked it with her tears. When she went to bed, she laid it beside her on my father’s pillow.

The same night, Uncle Brem set out after him, and found my father the following day in the Hanseatic city, before he had a chance to board an outgoing steamer. They came back arm-in-arm, and we celebrated with a family supper, almost a plagiarism of Da Vinci’s, albeit without Jesus, though with Mama as Mary, who throughout the meal patted my father’s hand, as if to say: “It’s okay that you left us in the lurch. These things happen. All that matters is you’re back.”

But was he, really? I believe, no, I know that Uncle Brem had merely brought back a gentleman called Salz, but not my father. My real father had left us long ago. My real father would have spared us what was to come.

Herr Salz spent ten days in prison in Marquartstein and so served his sentence. After which my parents had their lease revoked. Herr Salz had to cast about for a new establishment. He set down to this task at the Café Luitpold in Briennerstraße, where he leafed through the trade journals and agonized over the future. That’s what he told us, in any case. He never let any of us come along. Those afternoons belonged to Herr Salz—and Herr Salz, during those afternoons, belonged to the coffeehouse. There he would before long stumble across a for-sale notice whose text, composed in the dry, awkward fashion of a history textbook, was riddled with the name of the same hotel that would soon dominate my life.

The Fürstenhof in Saxony’s Leipzig did not originally bear the name Fürstenhof. The house, which would only later come to be known as the Fürstenhof, was erected in 1770 by the wealthy Leipzig banker Eberhard Heinrich Löhr on the promenade, opposite the theater. For a long period of time, the future Fürstenhof was a beloved resort for the polite society of this flourishing city of commerce, books, and universities. But in 1813 imperial troops occupied the town, and the grand army made it their headquarters. Napoleon came, and the Fürstenhof’s landlord died. His widow and daughter were forced to yield the Fürstenhof to Napoleon’s city commander, who filled the place with raucous parties. Following Napoleon’s withdrawal, the Löhr ladies, back from their exile in Weimar, returned with precious items of the finest quality. So that the family could dine in the Fürstenhof in a manner befitting their rank, the Löhrs furnished the Fürstenhof with a luxuriant dining hall, which they had adorned with serpentine stone, “the marble of the Saxon Kings,” and doors of carved ebony. The Fürstenhof remained in the possession of the family until 1886. At that point, the Fürstenhof was purchased by the Leipzig Real Estate Company, which partitioned the property and resold it at great profit. In

1889 the building was converted into the Hotel Fürstenhof. Now, at last, Leipzig possessed a first-class hotel, affectionately referred to by the Saxons as the "Fürstenhöfle", where everyone of rank or name gathered to socialize.

Entranced by the thought that in acquiring the Fürstenhof he would be all but obtaining for himself the title of Fürst, Prince, Herr Salz returned home bearing the notice as if it were a trophy. Assuming that Mama would unquestioningly help him buy it, supplying the necessary cash which would, for her family, be mere chump change, he began to read the description to her out loud.

He got no further than the fourth word.

"Saxony?" she interrupted.

Herr Salz nodded, and started again from the top.

Again, he got no further than the fourth word.

"Saxony!" she cried.

One last time, he went back to the beginning.

This time, she stopped him even sooner.

"Saxony," she said. And that was that.

He had underestimated the Municher in her. Mama hadn't the slightest interest in separating herself from her home, which she loved in so many ways, even for its defects.

She loved Munich for our apartment in Lucile-Grahn-Straße, right around the corner from the Prince Regent Theater, where we'd moved into in March 1914, just after the beerfoam trial. It had a spacious nursery that Mama gleefully decorated with her silhouettes, alluding to the fact that there would be plenty of room for more. Likewise, she loved the Hofgarten, where we occasionally observed Prince Albrecht (whose silhouette Mama secretly longed to cut) maniacally ripping out snowdrops. And she loved it for the zoologically broadminded gentleman who promenaded daily past our front door with a fox on a leash, for every time she saw him, she said: "Grandma would have enjoyed that!" Above all she loved Munich because it represented the natural environment for a creature by this period all but extinct, namely, the Schienaramma-Resi, the rail-pushing woman. This was an exclusively female species whose members sat on little iron seats, thickly wrapped in winter, clad in dirndls in summer, winters and summers alike wearing traditional Bavarian hats with jaunty feathers, and who—for instance on Max-Weber-Platz, the junction of several streetcar lines—used long metal sticks to push the rails into the correct configuration, so that the passengers would arrive unscathed at their respective destinations. Mama felt, as she once told me, profoundly connected to these Rail-Pushers, in virtue of their responsible "steering work," even when she hadn't exchanged so much as a word with the women. Mama did not love Munich's Café Luitpold, where Herr Salz spent more time than in our apartment. But then, she did love the city for its old-fashionedness, its populace with their resistance to progress, of which Uncle Brem furnished an excellent example. Every time he stepped out of his station bar, and one of those stinking automobiles hissed by, he'd proclaim: "That has no future."

You could say the same for the Fürstenhof, the short Herr Salz must have thought as he saw himself confronted with Mama's unconditional love of Munich. A full-blooded Bavarian like her would never invest her family's fortune in Saxon property. So Herr Salz had his hands tied: He didn't buy the hotel, and we didn't move to Leipzig. If only that's how things had ended!

Yet Mama's love of Munich fostered a new, foolish love, one which would have a destructive effect in every conceivable way. Aunt Alli shared the following with me in a letter, which I received only after my parents had

begun to distance themselves from her. She told me: One of her more unbecoming hobbies was collecting the love-notes she'd been slipped by various gentlemen. Among these many writings there was even a nude photograph. All of these trophies were preserved in a box in Aunt Alli's linen closet. That was more than a little stupid.

The trysts with her men took place so frequently in hotels in Rome, Paris, and elsewhere, that gradually Uncle Brem began to find her absences a bit questionable. He decided to have his wife shadowed by a private detective. As she set off once again for Wiesbaden—God only knows for what kind of cure, since she was fit as a fiddle—she became beset by doubts as to whether she'd locked her box of mementoes properly. From a hotel phone-booth she called my poor, innocent Mama: On some pretext she had her enter Aunt Alli's room, in order to take this box before Uncle Brem could find it. But she impressed upon her that she should under no circumstances open it.

The detective had been listening in on this conversation. Mama behaved like a loyal sister. Her brother-in-law met her at the door: "You're too late, Rosa." Then he passed her the nude photograph. The naked man was lolling in a pose that distantly recalled the aesthetic of one of Michelangelo's frescoes. He was stretched out as if he were trying to make himself look taller.

Even days later, after Mama had managed to get ahold of herself again, she had trouble deciding which hurt her more: that the man was her man—or that she hadn't recognized him at first glance, because she was so ill-acquainted with his naked body. (In the conjugal bedroom—Mama and Aunt Alli had occasionally discussed this—intimacies were exchanged only at night and with the light extinguished. If at all.) Mama kept the nude photograph and studied it behind closed doors. So that was her husband. He seemed to enjoy posing like that, bare as Adam. Was it that he would have liked more naughtiness on her part? Would he loll like that in front of her, too (and let himself be photographed in the act)?

Mama, my much too good Mama, attempted to imitate her sister's free-spiritedness: She blamed neither Aunt Alli nor Herr Salz. She told as much to the adulterers themselves. She was convinced that they were not at fault; Aunt Alli was naturally hungry for love, and Herr Salz had merely sought some distraction from the miserable situation of his life. Rather than rage, Mama felt guilt that she'd driven her husband to such extreme measures as an affair. She was sorry. She spent plenty of time pondering how she might be able to make herself a better—or, should he so desire—a worse wife, and came to the conclusion that she would have to renounce one of her loves in order to save the other.

The following month, we moved to Saxony.

Uncle Brem, the other cuckold, was less understanding: He bought a revolver. It was, quite un-Chekhovianly, never actually fired, yet fulfilled its purpose—the threat of life-shortening consequences—through its mere presence: in as much as it rested beneath Uncle Brem's pillow, and thus beside Aunt Alli's head. He had placed it there so as not to fall prey to his siren wife's arts of seduction, and thus make a divorce untenable. Once the latter had been executed and Aunt Alli was ousted from her position in Munich society, civilized Uncle Brem nevertheless granted her a handsome settlement, and she disappeared into the genteel spa town Bad Kreuth, where she played the bereaved divorcee. There, soon after arriving, she fell in love with a surgeon, Herr Doktor Steinmetz, within weeks sold off her rubies, bracelets, rings, and so on, in order to set him up with a practice, including tortoiseshell vases and Nymphenburg teapots for over a hundred marks each, and regretted it more than a little when he informed her that he was going to marry a younger woman. The very same week I received the letter from her in which she confessed her misconduct. She wrote: "You have to know, or else it would be like it never happened." Back then I wasn't mature enough for such stories, but Aunt Alli, who clearly saw in me a natural ally, paid no heed. She probably knew she didn't have much

time left. Shortly after sending the letter, Aunt Alli accompanied a salesman on an automobile tour along the Isar. Since the roads had not been swept yet, Aunt Alli wore an enormous, flowing veil to protect herself from the dust. Just as they were passing the German Museum, this veil got tangled in one of the car's wheels, and strangled her as they drove.

At the funeral home, they kept her coffin closed. Even stern Uncle Brem was said to have been moved to tears. I can't confirm that, since my parents, Gretl and I had at that point been living in Leipzig for some time, and hadn't returned for the service. Herr Salz's decision. "An unnecessary burden for your mother," he claimed. A terrifying burden for him, I say. He certainly knew how much he'd contributed to Aunt Alli's untimely end. Our only leave-taking ceremony was when Mama, weeping, removed her (and Uncle Brem's) silhouettes from the wall of our private apartment in the Fürstenhof.

Aunt Alli's death was entered in the records of the Munich police as an accident. I'm not so sure. She'd squandered almost everything: property, husband, the close relationship with her sister. Now she wanted to give up the rest as well—but this with unyielding self-confidence and the style of a grand lady of the opera! I believe she deliberately wore the veil unusually tight around her neck, so tight that she could barely draw breath, that she let it flutter from the car, growing longer and longer, like a fishing-line, waiting expectantly, with a heavily beating heart, in anticipation of the greatest climax of her life, until the car's wheel finally snatched it, and ripped her backward with a single jolt.

Are you listening to me? I hope so—to be honest: I presume so! You have to remember everything. No excuses! Take notes if you like. There's no time left for repeating. If my children are going to understand who I am, who I really am, they have to know how it all started.

And please—I'm aware that before each beginning, there's always another. That's why I began with an ending: Aunt Alli left her life behind her; my decimated family the Bavarian blue-and-white—and I, forgive me the pathos, my childhood.