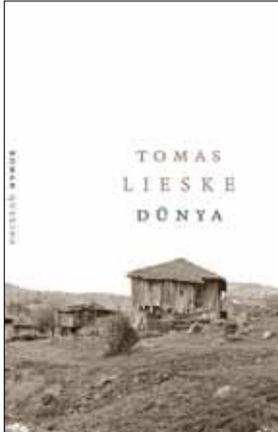


Vivid picture of a confused world



Tomas Lieske

Dünya

‘MY NOVELS always evolve in the same way: I wait until I have a subject, a theme that I’m passionate about, and then I find a suitable time and place for it,’ Tomas Lieske said in a recent interview. He is not a writer who likes to stay close

to home. *Dünya*, his latest novel, is set in Turkey shortly after the First World War. He has written about Turkey before, in his novel *Nachtkwartier* (Night Quarters), but not when it was poor and ruined, not at the time of the Armenian genocide – still a burning issue ninety years later.

The story consists of two parts: first we hear the monologue of *Dünya Şuman*, a widow from the rich, fashionable *Beyoğlu* quarter in Istanbul, who has been exiled to rural Turkey for stealing a bottle of perfume from a shop. She becomes housekeeper to two Dutchmen, Simon and Otto, who harbour a secret – they’re looking after a child, a young Armenian girl named Julia, whom they found in a war-torn area. After they fought with the Allies and became prisoners of war – the Netherlands was neutral during the First World War but volunteers fought in the British Army – they were ordered by the Turkish army to cross a devastated region to a deserted, apparently barren plain, to work on a large project commissioned by Ataturk; constructing an airship. At the same time, they have to bring up the girl, who is led to believe she is the daughter of Simon and a young Turkish woman who died. *Dünya* helps them and develops such a strong bond with the child that she sets aside her own desires – to return to the civilised world, Istanbul in particular – and does all she can to protect Julia and conceal the secret of her origin.

With a great sense of atmosphere, with detail and historical facts, Lieske paints a vivid picture of a desolate, confused world at a politically sensitive time in which there is room for love and ideals. In blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction – the accident with the Hindenburg plays a role – Lieske persuades the reader to believe in the authenticity of his characters and his novel, to be gripped, right to the thrilling dénouement.

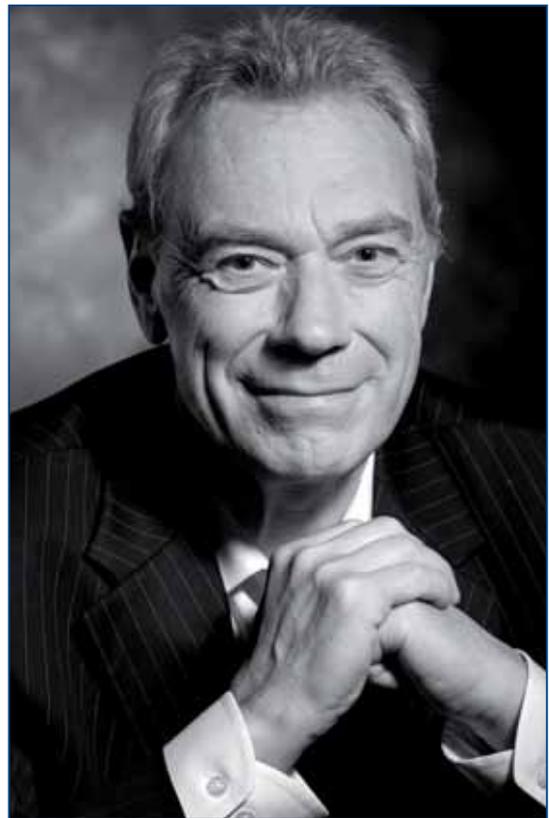


photo Leo van der Noort

Tomas Lieske (b. 1943) writes poetry, prose and essays. His debut, *De ijsgeneraals* (The Ice Generals, 1987), a collection of poetry, was followed by *Een tijger onderweg* (A Tiger Underway, 1989). He received the Geertjan Lubberhuizen Prize for his prose debut, *Oorlogstuinen* (War Gardens, 1992). His novels *Nachtkwartier* (Night Quarter, 1995) and *Gran Café Boulevard* (2003) were nominated for the Libris Literature Prize. *Franklin* was awarded the Libris Literature Prize in 2001. 2006 saw the publication of Lieske’s widely praised poetry collection *Hoe je geliefde te herkennen* (How to Recognise Your Beloved), for which he received the prestigious VSB Poetry Prize.

There is a very good chance that Lieske will again be nominated for the Libris Literature Prize.

NRC HANDELSBLAD

It is precisely here that Lieske’s greatest literary strength resides: the telling of stories through suggestive imagery.

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RIGHTS

Querido
Singel 262
NL – 1016 AC Amsterdam
TEL.: +31 20 551 12 62
FAX: +31 20 639 19 68
E-MAIL: rights@querido.nl
WEBSITE: www.querido.nl

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Foundation for the
Production and
Translation of
Dutch Literature

Singel 464
NL – 1017 AW Amsterdam
TEL.: +31 20 620 62 61
FAX: +31 20 620 71 79
E-MAIL: office@nlpvf.nl
WEBSITE: www.nlpvf.nl

Sample Translation

Dünya

(Dünya)

by Tomas Lieske

(Amsterdam: Querido, 2007)

Translated by S.J. Leinbach

About the book

Rural Turkey, sometime around 1930. After she is caught stealing perfume, the cosmopolitan Dünya Şuman is banished to a tiny village in Anatolia, where she finds work as a housekeeper. She is under orders to spy on her employers, two Dutchmen who are helping to build the first Turkish airship. The two men, Simon and Otto, had been taken prisoner in Turkey during World War I and are now working as ‘*Gastarbeiter*’ in a factory where the airship is to be built.

On their release from captivity, the two had seen no other option but to travel across a war-torn Turkey on foot. During their journey Simon impulsively picked up a baby they found on the street, abandoned, and wrapped in swaddling clothes.

‘Are you crazy? What do you think you’re doing?’ Otto cried.

‘Let’s get going,’ I said, clasping the baby in my arms. We stepped over a small barricade and ran down a silent street. We saw smoke wafting around a corner and ducked into a narrow alley alongside a small mosque. Catching sight of the bridge in the distance, we managed to get out of the city safely. No one could have seen us.

When we carefully unwrapped the child, we saw that we had a daughter.

Simon and Otto had named the girl Julia and they took good care of her. She grew up with them in the belief that she was the daughter of Simon and a Turkish woman, now dead, whom he had met in the internment camp.

From the moment Dünya joins the household, a bond is formed between her and Julia. The bond is so strong that for the sake of the girl Dünya is willing to sacrifice her greatest wish: rehabilitation and a return to worldly Istanbul. When the airship makes its test flight, she risks everything to save Julia, whose secret origin must never be revealed.

In the first excerpt, Dünya introduces herself to the reader. Then Simon Krisztián describes how he and Otto do their best to take care of the infant Julia.

Yearning for Beyoğlu

I'm too fat. Too much fig jam over the years. I'm not stupid. There are plenty of people in Beyoğlu who think that fat people are stupid. It's mainly the non-Muslims who think that way. The Westerners. Well, in my case this Western stereotype doesn't hold up. Oh, I beg your pardon: my name is Dünya Şuman. Almost certainly a descendant of the composer.

I used to be skinnier. I know how to write, and I've worked in an office. Tokathliyan Oteli. I've addressed thousands of envelopes that have gone all over the world. And there were all the hotel guests I had to deal with. I know all about the West.

A photographer from the famous studio Sébah & Joallier took a picture of me at the time. The photo hung in the hotel lobby until they decided to get rid of it. So I stole it from the files. Look at me; sitting on a Thonet chair at a wooden desk next to a dauntingly high stack of envelopes, my hair parted and permed, my eyes and mouth full of spirituality and a sense of duty, a pen held firmly in my hand. My nose was friendly and straight. My face was round, I admit, but certainly not fat. The physical feature I was proudest of was my neck, which flowed gracefully from my head into my torso. I used to look at the photo, tenderly and with love. And with a savage, mournful melancholy at the thought of all that has changed since then.

Being overweight now, I've got the idea that I smell. I can't be doing with that. That's why I always had a small jar of Briyantın and a bottle of Venüs on me, carefully hidden. You never know. Some people had the strangest ideas. I'll tell you how I came by the Briyantın and the Venüs.

Anyone who knew Evliya Zade Nureddin could understand why I used to stop in front of her tempting shop and peer at the display, looking for unfamiliar brands or stylish new packaging.

One day I went inside. The handsome young salesman, who was busy tending to another customer, motioned to one of his assistants to come over and serve me. A frivolous young thing with a pert set of tits and a dark frock set off with white embroidery. She had bad breath, which struck me as particularly ill-advised for a salesgirl in a perfume shop. There was probably something wrong with her teeth, I thought. I asked her if she had any *losyon* or *kolnya*. ‘For reinforcing the natural dermatological barrier,’ I added. I hadn’t the foggiest idea what that meant. I said I heard they had come out with a new formula: number 37. Losyon no. 37 or kolonya no. 37. One of the two, I said. Naturally this missy hadn’t a clue that I’d just made it up. I plopped down in one of those fancy tub chairs they had in front of the display case. Miss Embroidery continued to look inquisitively at me, but I stared back so nonchalantly that she blushed, a youthful scarlet creeping over her cheeks. Men find that sort of thing charming, especially if the blush covers such a comely face. I’ve never understood the charm of it myself. It’s a sign of embarrassment and stupidity in an empty-headed moppet. I said that she should do a better job of keeping up with the latest trends. She curtsied in reply and said that she’d consult her colleague at the back. Sitting among the crèmes and the *gliserinli sabun* I suddenly found myself completely alone: the young salesman was showing the other customer out. In that instant I snatched two tubes and slipped them into my handbag. When the girl came back, I was back in the chair, calmly waiting, the bag on my lap feeling warm with success. Her eyes wide, the girl told me that they had ordered a supply of losyon no. 37, but that unfortunately it hadn’t come in yet. It was all I could do to keep from laughing out loud at the absurdity of this news. I got up and asked if there were any new free samples. I saw the girl exchange glances with the salesman, who was just coming back into the shop. You can bet that he understood my question. I expected him to take over from the girl and give me his undivided attention. But he just nodded, pointed the girl in the direction of a large dish on the counter, filled with adorably small, delightfully coloured packages, and vanished into a private room on the other side of the store. Poor thing. Obviously had to pay a

visit to the little boy's room. Oh, I knew all about high fashion and the habits of perfume salesmen. The girl proffered the dish, from which I was allowed to select one plump little package. With a supreme display of knowledge and experience I picked out a sample of Venüs. Holding my free trophy out in front of me, I solemnly strode out of the fragrant, twinkling shop.

I got married in 1914, right before the Great War broke out. I had just turned seventeen. My husband, a civil servant, had taken up a post at the Sublime Porte. After the revolution, when Sultan Abdülhamit was deposed by Mehmet V and the Empire was led by Enver and his men, he went to work for Talât Bey. Talât Bey was pro-German.

My husband was fourteen years older than I was and of German descent. My family saw the marriage as a stroke of luck. (Senior civil servants were held in high regard at that time.) His German ancestry brought the war into our lives. Not that it would have stayed away otherwise, but now I was given theoretical instruction on the necessity of war and the obvious advantages of an alliance with the German Kaiser. In the evening he would deliver endless monologues to impress me, standing all the while, clutching the back of a chair. What sorts of things did he expound upon? The history of the Ottoman Empire. (Booming voice. Expansive gestures. Pensive silence.) His personal honour as a civil servant. (Index finger held aloft. Eyes wide open.) The superiority of the German language. (Exaggerated emphasis on every syllable.) The German-Turkish alliance. Enver and Talât and the Sultan, who might have been the Shadow of God, but who was also weak and practically invisible. About the British and the French, not idealists, but bourgeois businessmen who wanted to preserve the status quo because it was best for their bank accounts. If everything hadn't ended so tragically, we could have had a good laugh about those comical lectures later in life.

At my young age I was satisfied with my marriage. We lived in a large house with a view of the blue water. The rooms were carpeted with Spanish rugs, and there were chaises longues, and pink and white porcelain stoves for the cold winter days. When my family came to visit, I served *börek*, *köfte* and rosewater sorbet, and I could spend my days practising my needlepoint. The housework was left to the maid.

My husband had a falling out with my family when he asserted that the well-drilled German officers on parade were far more impressive than their Turkish counterparts, who knew little of the art of war. They would do well to fall in behind their German betters. Because he served alcohol, discussions would occasionally flare up into fully-fledged rows, which I usually tried to escape by feigning a migraine. As a woman, I shouldn't have been present for these talks in the first place, but my husband was a confirmed progressive in such matters.

Things really took a turn for the worse when Talât sent my husband off on a tour of inspection to oversee the implementation of the Tehcir Law. As I understood it, the Armenians were again posing a threat to us, having displayed revolutionary tendencies some twenty years earlier. It was thought that they could betray us to the Russians, their Slavic brothers to the north. Even then, my husband knew what was going to happen to the Armenians. Anyone who had any dealings with them found them to be an irritating, arrogant people. The inspection tour took its toll on him: he returned home after a few weeks, tired and sombre. He had lost interest in after-dinner speeches. He no longer spoke about politics. His age group was called up for army service. I accompanied him to the assembly point behind Haydarpaşa Station. After that he came home one last time before heading to the front. He was an officer. He said that he had been assigned to guard a stretch of the Turkish coast, though he wasn't allowed to tell me exactly where. The last night I saw him he made me pregnant.

My husband has become a ghost. I knew him for one summer and one winter, and in that short time he was gone for several weeks to relocate the Armenians. My memories of him are out of focus. I don't want to think about what he went

through during the war, how long he remained alive, whether his German legs gave out during some gruelling march, or whether he was sent off, bloodied and exhausted, to carry out some futile mission. It seems unlikely that he would have been a hero at Gallipoli. If he had been a hero, it would have been an anonymous one; when they know a fallen soldier's name, they send officials to inform the widow, and you're notified officially by post. Nothing was ever sent to me. Nothing official anyway. As far as I'm concerned, my husband is dead. Maybe one day I'll put up a monument to him.

For those who remained behind, the main concern was getting through the rest of the war in one piece. And I was pregnant. I don't know what I lost first, my baby or my house. The house was taken from me because I didn't know how to keep up with the payments. I lost my baby when the British bombed the market. In the mêlée that followed, I fell, was trampled by the crowd, and had a bloody miscarriage.

What happened after that? Poverty happened. First the luxury goods disappeared: wine, chocolate, delicacies from the *bakkal* and the *sütçü*. Then the eggplant vendors vanished, and with them, the lemon peddlers, the grape sellers. It was as if they had eaten their own donkeys: overnight, the animals and the wicker baskets they carried vanished completely from the urban landscape. The coal started to run out. Fights broke out over bread. The bread that was available was black and dry and tasted vile, but you got used to it. Sometimes you could make cabbage soup, and on the outskirts of town you could find radishes and sorrel growing wild.

Then one day I discovered paradise: the Beyoğlu quarter, a neighbourhood that seemed to be inhabited solely by Jews and Christians, who had grown rich on the goods that were now being sold off for a pittance by the city's desperate residents. They dressed in silk. I discovered the world of haute couture. At that time in Istanbul the height of fashion was grey moiré silk, while in other parts of

the city entire neighbourhoods could not scrape together enough to eat. I knew there was only room for one goal in my life: a life in Beyoğlu.

My chances improved with the arrival of the high-strung, haughty British, French and Italian officers in their dull khaki uniforms. This was during the intervening period when Damat Ferit Paşa was grand vizier, before the great and glorious war of the nationalists versus the Greeks. I was hired to do the dirty work, as a scullery maid, a nanny. I was shouted at; sometimes I was even beaten. But I had enough to eat, and I could wander around Beyoğlu, where life was so different from the poor neighbourhoods of Istanbul.

I was the former wife of a high-ranking official; now I was being forced to scour pans until late at night or serve tea in the salon or keep spoiled children quiet. I had to do too much at once, and as a result I was often as red as a tomato, my skin full of problem zones. But there were also days that my employers were away. Because they were convinced that I had nowhere to go, they left me alone in their big houses with all their valuables. And let me tell you: I did not let the opportunity pass me by. First a game of dressing-up in the bedroom; then a stroll through town in my mistress's clothes. Later I was able to steal a dress from one lady who was so careless with her clothes that she never even noticed it was missing. Eventually I managed to steal a whole new wardrobe for myself.

And so I was able to lead a double life, which made me remarkably happy for a time. When I was no longer fully employed, I lived at my brother's house. There I had a corner with a bed in it and a room of my own on the cluttered ground floor. [...] It was a house which was religious enough not to turn away a needy relative. It was occupied by my brother, his wife and their three children, a cousin and an elderly couple, who my brother claimed were family of his wife's, though I never figured out exactly what the relationship was. The house had rules, and my brother made sure they were strictly enforced: no wine at mealtimes, heavy wooden grates in front of the windows, no women present when the men were talking amongst themselves. Prayers were said at the appointed times. During the holy month, the fast was kept until the lights between

the minarets of the mosque announced that the month had come to an end: Elveda Ramazan, farewell Ramadan.

I owned dresses and jewellery that had belonged to a Greek lady who met a tragic end (here today, gone tomorrow), and I supplemented those items with stuff I stole from previous and subsequent employers. I wanted to keep up with the latest fashions. I couldn't wear the same Greek clothes year after year. I didn't want to become an object of veiled scorn.

I learned how to insinuate myself into groups. Gentlemen in white Oxford shirts, black suits and bowties. They all smoked, to appear at ease. And surrounding them were the women, arranged according to some obscure ranking system. You didn't understand how it worked, but you had to adhere to it. Always dripping with jewels. Always wearing outrageous hats. Always outnumbering the men. I would crowd my way into the cluster of party goers before they made their way inside. The doorman had no way of knowing that I didn't belong there. I just gave the big goon one of my looks as I passed. We were led to the tables, and everyone took their place. The men sat together. There were always some new women there. I managed to find the perfect remark that would elicit a grateful smile from the two or three beet-red latecomers. I could see that people were asking who I was, but one woman would always just shrug indifferently. Within half an hour everyone simply accepted me as one of the group. I memorised as many names as I could, and felt completely at home using them. In the meantime, glasses of sparkling wine and serving plates filled with mouth-watering dishes were set on the table. Sometimes I had to dance, and there were moments that I felt so far removed from my lost life in the old neighbourhood that I would gladly have murdered one of the popular girls to take her place. I let the men touch me. In moderation, of course, just enough to get them excited. Enough to make them wonder why they didn't invite this funny, sociable Dünya to their parties more often. If it turned out that one benefactor had paid for the entire evening, it was customary to thank him at the end of the festivities. I was generous in my

gratitude. If the evening's sponsor was so inclined, I would sit on his lap, dance with him, kiss him and let him run his hands over my body as I squealed in delight.

After a time I began to behave more ladylikely at these affairs. I could hold my own with the men in discussions of domestic and international politics. Not that I had suddenly acquired a wealth of knowledge on the subject, but I learned how to listen, how to acknowledge the superiority of someone else's position, how to express agreement and how to qualify or round out what another had said, so that he was left feeling that his argument had prevailed, while simultaneously marvelling at this young woman's quick wit. I heard about Mustafa Kemal. I came to understand that the people who moved in these circles admired his reforms, while mistrusting the man himself. I learned about the composer who was my namesake. Dropping the word 'unfinished' into conversations worked wonders. Or so I thought, until someone pointed out that I was mistaken and that the laughter was not meant as I had taken it. For months after that I was afraid to introduce myself with my husband's name. I also learned how to eat unfamiliar dishes and drink unfamiliar drinks. I learned that if you took too big a gulp of those drinks, your throat would close up and you'd be overcome by a fit of coughing. This was regarded as a dreadful faux pas. I learned never to eat with my fingers at these evenings.

It was as if the new Turkish Republic was taking shape inside me. One part of it lived a modern, free, Western, and decidedly relaxed existence, while the other spoke in horror of such an amoral, dissolute lifestyle and yearned for the restoration of the sultanate, so that the Shadow of God could take care of us again. I can tell you one thing: the Shadow of God never took care of me. All that wistful talk about the beloved Shadow was of course what I heard at my brother's house. The modern side was what I cherished when I rubbed shoulders with Istanbul's beau monde.

Naturally I realised that these profligates and fortune seekers were the exception rather than the rule in an incredibly impoverished country. Everywhere else, people were wondering how to compete with carefree Europe, how to emerge from the trials and tribulations of a hopeless war on the side of a megalomaniac German emperor who seemed to have vanished into thin air. Dragged down to hell, more than likely. And then the ordeal of another war to defend the freedom and territory to which Turkey was entitled. We were the happy exceptions in a country that seemed to have been forsaken by God himself: there were even killer rats in the toilets of the mosques.

But eventually the new republic was born, in a series of shocks, decreed from on high. Wise decrees said one; sacrilege, said another, in trembling tones. And behind all those decisions sat Mustafa Kemal. The Turkish people submitted blow by blow to the unequivocal message that we should no longer bow down facing Mecca, but rather stand tall facing Europe, the cradle of modernity.

What went wrong? I got a little older. Not uglier. But I wasn't seventeen anymore, and it started to show. They shoved me aside when they went to sit down. I was no longer one of them. My heavy figure became a disadvantage. My indulgences tended more towards eggplant canapés and baklava than cucumber extracts and eucalyptus aroma. I began to concentrate more and more on my shopping expeditions, but I became too well known. I should have taken the warnings to heart. For a long time all went well. I felt at home. So many casual acquaintance with whom I had spent an afternoon or an evening. But I heard them whispering behind my back. 'Who is she again?' 'What's her name?' 'She's certainly put on a lot of weight.'

It must have been one of the first pleasant spring days after the long cold winter of 1930. Everyone was out, promenading down İstiklal Avenue. I studied the passers-by and the shop windows, and I decided to go into Necib Cemil. As I sat there, next to the glittering counter, my attention was drawn to an exquisite box lined with gently rippling silk, the colour of Parma violets. All sorts of jars

and tubes and bottles lay inside, like babies in a luxurious crib: Poudre de Riz, savon de toilette, creams, lotions, essences, brilliantine, even a toothbrush and toothpaste, the labels in French and Arabic, and underneath the words ‘Nédjib Bey, Constantinople’. It was such a touching sight, those little bottles sleeping in their cradle, that I couldn’t resist. It was love at first sight, like a surge of Gulf Stream seawater. I waited for a suitable moment. There was nobody around. Not pausing to consider, I opened my bag and tossed the box inside. It landed right on target. The lid snapped shut before it disappeared into my bag. The bottles and jars remained in place.

Something completely unexpected happened. The manager came into the store and asked sweetly if he could get me a cup of coffee. The warmth drained from my body. I had seen a thing or two in my day, but this friendly gesture, after I had just stolen his precious box, left me dazed. Necib Bey stationed himself between me and the door. The store’s errand boy went for a policeman. I was already prepared to hand over my bag. A vanquished officer surrendering his sword. Neither Necib Bey or the officer showed any interest in it. The policeman politely asked me to accompany him. On top of the glass case, which sparkled with the reflected light of thousands of little bottles, there was a yawning gap between the octagonal glass stand and the stacked boxes with their batiste cloths.

The police station where the officer took me was located at the bend in İstiklal Avenue. Would the people stare at me? Call me names? But there was little interest, since the policeman was courteous enough to let me walk on ahead. At the station I was put in a room (not a cell, though there was no handle on the door), and after a time two plainclothes officers came in. They wanted to know everything. Name, age, employment status, address, parents, housemates. All in that clinical tone. They wrote down everything I told them. Then came the accusations. I was suspected of fraud, of various thefts. They named names. Some didn’t ring a bell; others I recognised. They knew a lot. Not everything they knew was right, but if they could prove even a fraction of it, I was in deep trouble. I kept my cool. I can’t imagine how, how I managed to stay silent, not to fall apart,

not to confess, not to beg for mercy. I kept a stiff upper lip. I remained the lady I had been when I'd sauntered down İstiklal Avenue, a century ago.

One of them seized my bag and emptied it. The stolen box, the clothes I had been wearing when I left my brother's house that morning, the mirror and the make-up. All the evidence of my double life. I had no idea how much they knew. Undoubtedly they knew part of the story and made up the rest. It was an uncomfortable thought. I remember that at the time I just sat there not speaking, staring straight ahead, ice cold with humiliation, in the full knowledge that I had lost everything. The feeling that I was balancing on a precipice in my chic Charleston shoes. A gentle nudge in the right place would have sent me over the edge. But that gentle nudge never came. The officers interpreted my silence and my icy stare as signs of contempt and superior Western certainty and, as I later came to understand, began to feel unsure of themselves. They didn't know what to do about the clothes and the perfumes or how to explain it all. They didn't even know that I had just stolen that valuable box. I don't remember how long I sat there, but suddenly it was all over. I was allowed to go, with all my things. No prison term for fraud. No severed hand for theft. All they did was mumble: we'll be in touch. Indifferently, yet menacingly.

The uncertainty lasted two weeks. Then one of the two men came to my brother's house and asked if I would go there the next day. He was the sort that made people feel they had to watch their step. The thought that he would come to my brother's door and ask me to go there the next day. It wasn't an order; that would have been tantamount to an anonymous accusation. A politely formulated request. It made me dangerous and undesirable. And at the same time it made me the kind of person you didn't want to mess around with. My brother was afraid to ask anything. The children and the elderly couple did not understand what was going on. For the first time in his life the cousin looked scared. He stared at me for a while, sitting in his normal, lazy pose, and then slowly rose to his feet and

walked out of the room, not saying a word. At mealtime things were tense. No one dared ask anything. I said nothing.

Next day I went to the police station. I was offered coffee and water. They launched into their speech. First telling me about all the trouble they could make for me, with what they knew about my criminal activities. Then flattering me and trying to win my confidence. They said they appreciated my daring in flitting between social milieus. They said they had a job for me.

Shocked and indignant, I said that I didn't need a job. They gestured for me to be quiet and to listen to what they had to say first.

They told me about a village. In Asia Minor, an eternity from Istanbul. Far beyond the Sakarya River. They asked if I wanted to go there. Or rather, they *told* me I was going there. Not for a short stay; I would be moving there. For good. I had no choice.

After all that had sunk in, my insides froze. Stomach, intestines, liver, pancreas: I felt myself crystallise, bit by bit. I sat there on that wicker stool at that wooden table and stared at the grain of the wood where someone had scratched a pattern. I could even hear it: scratch scratch scratch scratch.

The sudden chill must have damaged my memory because after that point I recall nothing about the conversation. Nothing about a refusal or a protest. Nothing about realizing glumly that banishment was commonplace in Turkish politics, a perfectly routine method for the military, the police and political bigwigs to deal with undesirables. Anyone who made trouble was banished. God knows, there was plenty of room. The vastness of Anatolia, impoverished and depopulated by the senseless wars that had been fought there, could be filled with nosy parkers. Critics. Political adversaries. Immature, anti-social types who stole other people's property. Like me.

I must have sat there like a statue, like a neurotic searching for a name, the name of one of my super posh friends, but to them I was just a passing acquaintance. Why would they take risks on my behalf and contradict the police,

who had evidence of my untrustworthiness? I was condemned to a swampy, brackish village, inhabited by suspicious, inbred yokels, compared to whom my backwards brother was a wonder of toleration and libertinism.

Worst of all, I had to leave behind my beautiful, unforgettable Beyoğlu, my enchanting, beloved Istanbul.

Simon Krisztián

We were arrested in 1917. The moron who picked us up that wet autumn day was plainly convinced that he had just captured two major enemy infiltrators, and once we realised that he had no intention of letting us go, there was nothing to do but prepare ourselves mentally for the difficult days that lay ahead. We not only had to look after ourselves, we also had to take care of Julia, whom I would not have abandoned for all the gold on the banks of the Tigris and the Euphrates combined. The cretinous commandant bellowed at us, repeatedly asking for our papers, which of course we didn't have, and pointing accusingly at the baby, though he took care not to touch her since she cried and she stank. Couldn't he take us to the British? There was no way of telling if he understood the word 'British' or not, but at that point, he became even more vociferous, and we understood that, for the time being, we were no longer free men. Otto remarked that if we kept this up, before long we'd be able to give Baron von Münchhausen a run for his money.

We were especially surprised by an incident that took place a few hours later. We were taken to the headquarters of the local warlord, where we were met by an enormous woman. The commandant motioned to us to lay Julia on a table. I flatly refused, but four soldiers were holding onto us. The woman took the child away and disappeared through a door. I began to yell: I wasn't going to take this, this was a war crime. At that point the senior officer walked up and barked so vehemently into my face that I clammed up in sheer surprise. Then he made conciliatory gestures. Otto and I were pushed down onto wooden chairs, and were made to wait.

The next hour lasted years. Winters passed with howling, ice-blue ghosts; summers passed with sweet sprites which led me to a meadow by a stream where Julia frolicked naked on a hillside among foals; springs passed with silent cloud formations which were probably created by the cigar in the mouth of the commandant, who was making sure no one broke the silence; autumn winds

drove away all the phantoms, and the door blew open and a soldier kicked it shut again, setting off a string of curses. Then, as the hour drew to a close, the same woman returned with Julia in her arms: bathed, freshened up, with a clean nappy, warm Turkish clothes of brightly coloured wool, a smile on her face. I interpreted the jerky movement of her little arm as a wave and a greeting, as the woman handed her over to me. I could have kissed the woman's wrinkled, hairy skin which for a moment I saw close to; in that same instant I noticed how beautiful her eyes were. I looked at Julia, and I could tell from the kicking of her little, tightly wrapped feet that she recognised me. Then I began to weep.

The laughing commandant moved around in the haze of my tears, which didn't even embarrass me, and exhaled an extra big cloud of smoke to entertain little Julia.

We were transferred to another village as prisoners of war. They wanted to get rid of us, to pass the buck, only too happy to send two foreigners and a baby into the cold.

The frost had set in early that year, freezing the fruit on the trees. Persistently damp weather made the crops rot in the fields, and in that dank ground the trampled grain turned into a lake of gruel that froze into an inedible crust. Two of the four soldiers escorting us sat in the front of the wagon, wrapped in a sort of leather sack, while the other two remained in the back with us. They seemed unconcerned and pointed at the sky. They had on long army coats with leather bands that crossed at the chest. Three of them carried rifles. Their uniforms were grey, which gave the impression from a distance of rags. In the snow it was almost impossible to see the road; the hills were white, and the road was white, an endlessly undulating world of ghosts.

Otto nudged me every time he thought I was falling asleep.

'Don't sleep. It's dangerous. You have to keep an eye on Julia.'

The child looked yellow and lifeless, so cautiously I began to rub her. After a while Otto took over, and we took turns trying to keep her warm. It was as if we were raising the child from the dead, but I realised that the trick would only work

so many times; Julia was growing weaker by the hour. Then the axle broke. The soldiers did not seem the least bit surprised by this unfortunate turn of events. They split up: two walked with us; the other two rode ahead on the horse.

A short time later Otto walked on ahead of me, bundled up against the cold, the child against his shoulder like a little package. In this snowy, hilly region, on this winding road that led nowhere, under a wintry sky streaked with white that seemed to spread an icy white vapour over the earth, this biblical image of Otto carrying my child was dramatic. But shouldn't I be carrying her until I could go no further? Wasn't that my job? To march on until I collapsed? And what then? Was Otto supposed to carry both of us?

After some distance, we switched. I took the child, wrapped her in my coat and began walking down the road, behind the two soldiers, who occasionally turned around and yelled at us to hurry up. They pointed towards the horizon, but it was unclear what awaited us there.

In the heavens, time appeared to stand still. The milky white sky showed no signs of changing colour, seemed not to be preparing for the arrival of nightfall. I shifted Julia to the other arm and trudged on. Otto offered to carry her again, but in an absurd outburst of heroism I said that she was my daughter and that I would carry her all day and night, but after a short distance I had to change hands again. My arms felt like lead, and I could hardly lift them to support her. Without a word Otto took her from me, and we headed up the hill. There we came to a village.

It was really no more than an outbuilding next to a crumbling brick house. The shop was made of mud and wood, and its wares were displayed behind a partly steamed-up window that was covered in frost. There were six items, nothing more. But by some good fortune they were all tins of milks. Otto had stopped in front of the window and said softly, 'Will you take a look at that.' I read the label: American Carnation Milk, *importiert von Gruber & Skopnik, Elberfelderstrasse 5, Berlin*. I suddenly felt as if I was back home: a shop window with tins of milk; of course there were tins of milk in the shop window;

you could find more than that in the shop windows at home. This was good milk from Berlin: it must have been high-quality milk, heavily sweetened, condensed milk with a long shelf-life, blessed with miraculous powers, enough for at least two harsh winters. For a moment it seemed perfectly normal that those six tins of milk should be there. But the longer I stared at them, the bigger they seemed to get. At first, I thought they were small, but now they looked like something you might get at a wholesalers. The next moment I realised they were unattainable. How were we supposed to buy tins of milk here?

The soldiers had stopped walking and came closer, curious. Otto sprang into action; he strode up to one of our escorts, grabbed his rifle, and before the slow, frostbitten soldier could recover from his surprise, Otto marched towards the shop, rifle in his outstretched right hand, the child supported on his left, a living symbol of our plight. Though he couldn't have fired the gun in that position, it still looked menacing. He kicked down the door and shouted orders at the man inside in his earthiest Dutch: 'Hey, shit kicker, six tins of milk for the baby.' His words rang out in the freezing cold, and although I was the only one who could have possibly understood them, their meaning was clear. We saw movement in the dark shop, and not long after that a hand appeared in the window, picking out the tins one by one. Then Otto came back outside, a big smile on his face. Julia was no longer sitting upright on his shoulder, but lying in his arms, and piled on top of her were the six huge tins of milk. His right hand still held the rifle. The shopkeeper followed him, protesting. Otto turned around, and as I looked on in surprise, he made an expansive gesture with his right hand, blessing the shopkeeper. That is to say, he raised the rifle and used it to make the sign of the cross, which acquired a slightly exotic form due to the swaying barrel. At the sight of this the man fell silent. He held up his hands, palms facing out, bowed a few times and dashed back into his shop as fast as his legs could carry him. I took the six tins from Otto, and he returned the rifle to its owner with a grateful smile.

The winter of 1917-18 was the longest of my life. The tinned milk saved Julia's life; there's no doubt in my mind about that. Otto's parting benediction was certainly no idle gesture, he had earned his spurs as a miracle worker. Without his bold action, the child would have slipped into the cold night, and we would have had to abandon her on a hillside, exposed to the elements: the ground was frozen too hard to dig a grave. We would have had to pry stones from the ice to pile on top of her tender face. But where would we have found a cross? And how would we have carved the text on the crossbeam?

Finally we reached the salt lakes, a deserted plain where nothing seemed to grow. There was a solitary tree and a few scattered clumps of reeds. That was it. Occasionally a duck would fly by or a flock of squabbling seagulls.

Once we witnessed the wondrous sight of thousands upon thousands of flamingos passing by overhead. At first we thought that they weren't real, that it was some ingenious trick devised by the air force that we could not understand. The beating of the wings and the squawking and all that pink charm and those elegant necks and those frivolous feet gesturing in a way that seemed to say, 'Let me fly in front for a change, darling' – nature in its purest form. The flying pink carpet seemed to stretch on forever, and I saw Julia look up, entranced by this miraculous display. I heard her cry of delight, and at that moment I knew why life was worth living.