The Löwe Family

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A chronicle that ends with a German-Japanese love affair

Peter Franken

Author's Note

The Löwe Family is a work of fiction. While some historical figures make appearances within these pages, their interactions with the fictional characters, as well as their dialogue and actions, are purely products of the author's imagination. All other characters, events, and locations are entirely fictitious. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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A century of family history

Main Characters

Stefan Löwe (1900-1952), physicist, husband of Anna Mendelssohn, father of Robert
Marlene Dittmann (1905-1997), girlfriend of Stefan, French literary scholar, UFA film actress
Anna Mendelssohn (1912-2000), biologist, wife of Stefan, mother of Robert
Joachim Löwe (1904-1987), violinist, brother of Stefan, husband of Rachel Kertesz
Rachel Kertesz (1899-1944), seamstress, wife of Joachim Löwe
Eva Mendelssohn (1909-1992), photographer, sister of Anna
Paul Mendelssohn (1870-1962), grain merchant, father of Anna and Eva
Robert Löwe (1940), chemist, holiday romance of Chen Weiss, husband of Gudrun Merkel, father of Kurt
Chen Weiss, (1940- 2020), opera soprano, holiday romance of Robert Löwe
Gudrun Merkel (1947), lawyer, wife of Robert Löwe, mother of Kurt
Kurt Löwe (1972), publicist, historian, opera journalist
Kisaku Murakami (1902-1945), colonel, diplomat, grandfather of Michiko Kawabata
Miya Hoshida (1915-2010), wife of Kisaku Murakami, grandmother of Michiko Kawabata
Hitoshi Yoshida (1885-1970), colonel, father of Miya Murakami, grandfather of Minako
Minako Murakami, (1945), wife of Karuki Kawabata, daughter of Kisaku en Miya, mother of Michiko
Michiko Kawabata (1980), Germanist, theatre scholar

Stefan Löwe

'What happened to your eye?' his mother asked when Stefan Löwe returned home on a cold January day in 1912, after a school day at the König-Wilhelm-Gymnasium in Breslau. 'We were having a snowball fight and suddenly all the balls came my way,' was the short answer. 'The other boys deliberately held onto those snowballs for a long time to knead them, and suddenly I got an ice ball in my left eye.' Mother nodded understandingly. It was typical of a situation in which the Jewish boy in the class had become the target, simply because he happened to be Jewish and therefore a bit different from many of his classmates—enough to always be and remain an outsider.
The Löwe family had emigrated from Stanislav in Galicia to Prussia in 1867. Following the war with Austria the previous year, that kingdom had become the dominant power in the German-speaking region and offered greater economic opportunities. In addition, the degree to which Jews were accepted within society was greater in the more modern Prussia than in the somewhat backward crown-domain of Galicia. Not that Galicia was regularly plagued by pogroms—that was more a feature of the Shtetls and Shtots located in the Russian Empire. But society in Galicia was by no means free of antisemitic traits. By leaving this region, the connection to classical Jewish life was, admittedly, partly lost: assimilating meant, at least in part, wishing to merge into a larger whole. It required something from both sides, not just from the German majority. Nevertheless, within their own circle, the Löwe family had managed to hold on to the most important Hasidic traditions.
Stefan's father Max, who was born shortly after the family had settled in Breslau, was in every respect an orthodox Jewish head of the household. To the outside world, he was a successful businessman who knew well how to thrive in a German society that was modernising at a rapid pace, especially after the unification and founding of the empire. In that respect, his own father had possessed foresight in 1867. Upon arrival in Breslau, Stefan's grandfather had started out as a tailor. He had been one in Stanislav too, typically a profession you could

practise anywhere. Soon he was able to expand his business by hiring staff—inevitably including Jewish newcomers—and in 1883 he moved into shop premises at number 16 Ohlauer Straße. This was an excellent location, in the city centre amidst many shops. By then, ready-to-wear clothing had entered the garment world, and Löwe did not hesitate to take advantage of it. Alongside tailor-made clothes, the shop also offered prêt-à-porter collections for both men and women. Later, a special children's department was added. In this way, the business took on the character of a clothing department store, which had been the precise reason for purchasing such spacious premises.

After Stefan had walked around with a red eye for two days, his mother decided that a physician needed to be consulted. He was sent to the family doctor—unsurprisingly someone from the Jewish community—and was told there that it was presumably not a 'black eye' as in the case of a fist to the face, but more serious damage. This turned out to be a correct diagnosis: although the eye looked completely normal again after a month, Stefan's vision on the left side was severely impaired. From that moment on, he wore glasses.
In 1913, Stefan celebrated his Bar Mitzvah and became, according to tradition, a fully-fledged male member of the community. As a thirteen-year-old, he now counted fully when determining whether the minyan was present in the synagogue for a proper prayer service. Especially during afternoon prayers, it could sometimes be difficult to assemble this group of ten, so young boys came in very handy. In 1913, Breslau had a thriving Orthodox Jewish community whose members, just like Stefan's father, conducted themselves towards their fellow German residents as fully-fledged German compatriots. This placed them in a permanent split that geographically corresponded very strikingly with the location of Breslau: between two worlds. In Galicia, Upper Silesia, and the Russian-ruled part of Poland, the Ostjuden were in the majority, and the street scene was occasionally defined by men in distinctive Hasidic attire: long black coats, hats that seemed to balance on their heads, and traditional long beards and sidelocks. You

couldn't really get away with that in Breslau anymore, and further west into Germany it was considered a clear sign that you were an underdeveloped provincial bumpkin. Assimilated Jews in Berlin wanted nothing to do with those Ostjuden; they were regarded as a completely different breed of people.
How much the assimilated Jews felt German, and were also regarded as such by the state, was fully confirmed at the outbreak of the war in August 1914. Conscription applied to all male residents of the German Empire, making no distinction whatsoever between population groups. Although it was Germany that declared war on its two large neighbours, France and Russia, on the 1st of August, it could reasonably be established that they were forced to do so after Paris and Moscow proceeded to general mobilisation. This was de facto equivalent to a declaration of war, and Berlin could not be expected to sit still until the enemy invaded the country from both sides.
Stefan's oldest brother Jonah had been working in his father's business since the age of 14 and was called up for military service shortly after his 18th birthday. That had been in September 1913, and no one in the family had lost any sleep over it. Fulfilling conscription was simply part of normal life, and it was mostly just annoying for father Max, who would have to miss a reliable employee for several years.
The fact that Jonah was under arms suddenly took on a completely different meaning after that 1st of August. His mother worried deeply about him and cursed the day Archduke Franz Ferdinand was shot dead in Sarajevo. That was how it had all started, and because Austria felt the need to assert itself against Serbia, the whole of Europe was suddenly in turmoil. Initially, it had not made too much of an impression on Stefan. He simply could not imagine anything happening to his big brother. Furthermore, everyone assumed it would not last long. By 1915 the conflict would surely be resolved, and perhaps Germany would even be a bit better off because of it. Very little changed at school either; the pupils were too young to be called up and the staff were too old. Those who had access to uncensored news reports had more to worry about. In East Prussia it had been a close shave, but the Russians were pushed back into their own territory after the Battle of

Tannenberg. In the southeast, the fighting took place between Austria and Russia, with the Russian armies initially managing to conquer almost the whole of Galicia. Only later did the Löwes in Breslau hear about this from their family in Stanislav and Lemberg.
When Stefan came home on February 26, 1915, he found his mother in tears. His two sisters, Tamar and Irit, were trying to comfort her, and his younger brother Joachim, who had come home from school a bit earlier, had been sent away immediately to fetch father Max. 'What happened?' Stefan asked, though he could already guess the answer. His oldest sister Tamar put an arm around him and whispered, 'Jonah is dead,' breaking down into heavy sobs. 'A letter arrived saying he was killed in action in Masuria and that he has been posthumously awarded the Iron Cross 2nd class for his heroic actions. The cross was actually enclosed with the letter.'

Shortly afterwards, father Max came hastily walking in. Joachim had already broken the news, but Max wanted to read it with his own eyes. He sat down with his family at the kitchen table and stared ahead for a long time. 'My boy,' he muttered, 'my big boy, my oldest.' Meanwhile, he toyed blankly with the medal as if it could offer comfort. Suddenly, it seemed as though he had made a decision, and he resolutely stuck the cross into his waistcoat pocket. It would remain there until his death. It was the only memory he had of his firstborn son, and that object became all the more important when it emerged that Jonah's body had ended up in a makeshift war grave in Masuria. What his faith demanded of him in terms of rituals, he could not carry out. From that moment on, Max was a broken man. The fact that he still had two sons who could continue the family line did not outweigh the loss of his oldest.
Later, Stefan would look back on this and realise that his youth had come to an end at that very moment. He had never actually considered the possibility that he himself would be conscripted in wartime. Wars rarely lasted longer than a year or two, and this one surely had to belong to the past before August 10, his 18th birthday. It was not meant to be, and after he finished gymnasium with his Abitur, it was not long before he

was called up. By then, the war with Russia had been won and formally ended with the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. In the west, however, fighting was still in full swing, and the end was nowhere in sight. No living soul had any idea how much longer it would take before that trench madness would come to an end. After reporting to a barracks, Stefan received a shortened training course to become a front-line soldier. However, this was cut short after just a few weeks because, on closer inspection, he proved unfit for active service due to his limited vision. That snowball from years before suddenly turned out to be a blessing in disguise. Stefan was sent to Minsk as a member of the temporary German occupation force, where he was drafted into the logistics service. Demobilisation followed in November, and Stefan was just able to enrol in the first academic year at the Schlesische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität zu Breslau to study physics and chemistry.

Stefan was the undisputed man with brains within the Löwe family. His brother Jonah had not been a scholarly type, more someone with a talent for business. The two sisters, Tamar and Irit, had not completed a full school education and had started working with their father in the business from the age of 15: Tamar in purchasing and Irit as a supervisor for a small group of seamstresses. Under no circumstances would their father let them work in sales; that was not good for the family's standing. Little could therefore be said with certainty about the intellectual capacities and development opportunities of either girl. They were destined to marry a Jewish man and start a family, at least in their father's view. Joachim was a different case; he cared little for gathering knowledge, let alone practising science. His talent lay elsewhere: he had played the violin since childhood and wanted to attend a music school as soon as possible.
At school, Stefan had managed to distinguish himself in all the subjects taught, but he had developed a special interest in physics and chemistry. This had been decisive for his choice of study. Yet it soon became apparent that going through the offered curriculum would nevertheless cause him considerable effort. Both disciplines were still in an experimental stage;

theoretical physics as a distinct subject in its own right did not exist. Stefan spent entire days toiling with burners and flasks in the chemistry laboratory, alongside performing the obligatory experiments that had brought physics to its turn-of-the-century level of development. Properly considered, physics as a scientific discipline had hit stagnant water after Newton had, as it were, structured the entire field of work in the 17th century.

The 20th century, however, would herald a new phase, and Niels Bohr had given an important impetus to this in 1913 with his atomic model. By a happy coincidence, Stefan managed to attract the attention of Max Born in 1921, a native of Breslau who had by then made a name for himself in the field of the latest theoretical developments. This eminent physicist gave a guest lecture on the work of Bohr and himself, and Stefan had asked a few questions that appealed to the speaker. In Stefan, Born recognised his younger self, once also toiling in the laboratory of this university. He had escaped that by practising theoretical physics elsewhere, and he was now a professor in Göttingen, holding the chair of wave mechanics—the most common name for the successor to Newtonian physics. Born advised Stefan to continue his studies in Göttingen and thereby make the switch from experiment to theory.

Until then, Stefan had lived in his parental home with his parents, brother, and sisters. A move to Göttingen was almost as profound as his grandfather's emigration from Stanislav to Breslau had once been. In addition, the economic conditions in Germany were extremely miserable, mainly due to the reparations the country was forced to pay and the resulting inflation, which would soon turn into hyperinflation. Fortunately, father Max had learned the wise lessons passed down from generation to generation by Jewish families. These briefly boiled down to the fact that you always had to be prepared to gather your most important possessions and flee in a very short time. Over time this had taken on a somewhat more contemporary character, but the premise remained the same: ensure your capital is not fully tied up and keep sufficient resources on hand for unexpected situations and developments. As the war dragged on, Max Löwe had used a large part of his capital to

purchase gold and silver. His real wealth was, of course, tied up in the shop, but alongside that, he had built up a handsome personal reserve. That precious metal came in very handy now, making it possible, despite the enormous devaluation of money, to fund Stefan's studies and stay in Göttingen.
On Saturday, August 20, 1921, Stefan took the train to Leipzig. From there, he would travel onward to Göttingen where, through Born's mediation, he could move into rooms in a boarding house at 17 Dahlmannstraße, where Born himself had lived before his marriage. In September, his studies in theoretical physics began at the Georg-August-Universität.

During the first few years, Stefan earned some extra money as a private tutor, being paid in kind. Potatoes, sausage, and wine were particularly popular. What he did not eat himself, he used to pay others, including his landlady. The fact that pork might be used in that sausage was no longer an objection to him by then. In a strict Jewish family, that would have been anathema, but after Jonah's death, Stefan had gained a different outlook on life. By reading extensively, he had begun to think increasingly rationally, with the result that the value of the Jewish faith and everything that went with it grew smaller and smaller in his eyes, until nothing was left of it but participating out of habit—mainly to spare his family members. Now that he was liberated from this religious environment, he could be godless without any issues. Eight years after his Bar Mitzvah, Stefan had become a convinced atheist.
The hyperinflation that reached its peak in 1923, with one-billion-mark notes that were barely worth more than a pre-war Pfennig, led to a disruption of society that also affected values and standards: bourgeois morality disappears first as soon as people starve. Women and girls from the bourgeoisie prostituted themselves to provide for the simplest basic necessities. For the working class, this had not been unusual in difficult times, but informal brothels featuring daughters of state officials had never been seen before. Stefan had not always been able to resist the temptation to respond to the advances of junior female students who were in need of a new dress or something similar. After all, he had some stable assets at his

disposal brought from home, and marriage was out of the question for the time being anyway. For that, he would at least need a permanent lectureship at the university.
With this behaviour, Stefan was by no means out of place. Compared to the strict morality of before the war, complete licence reigned in Germany. Yet some of those loose contacts led to real friendships. With Marlene, he even had a long-term relationship after the inflation crisis was averted and the world normalised again. Marlene was what would later be called a 'model Aryan girl' and actually found intimacy with a circumcised man quite exciting, even when the novelty wore off. In Stefan's boarding house, few rules applied. As long as no excessive noise was made or laws broken, every resident was free to do as they pleased. Consequently, Marlene was able to stay over with him a lot in what was effectively a LAT relationship.
They also went on holiday together to the Baltic Sea, to Prora on the island of Rügen. They travelled there by train and took their bicycles with them. Prora itself had no accommodation, so they stayed in a summer boarding house in Binz, a little further away. Those bicycles came in handy for the few kilometres to the beach, and sometimes they took somewhat larger trips across the island. After the turmoil and misery of the post-war period, a holiday at the beach was the ideal way to leave that behind, and the first time they did this together had been so enjoyable that they returned to the beach at Prora Bucht every year. Furthermore, it was the only holiday Stefan could afford, and Marlene had nothing to contribute anyway except her presence, which was more than enough.
Marlene had a distinct preference for the FKK holiday feeling and thus the nudist beach. The Freikörperkultur was in its heyday in those years, and for many, walking around naked was the most natural thing in the world. Stefan had initially been somewhat reluctant, which led to incomprehension from his liberated blonde girlfriend. ‘What's your problem, mate?’ she had asked. ‘Everyone just walks around naked on a beach like this, you really won't stand out.’ ‘I'm not so sure about that,’ Stefan contradicted her, pointing to his circumcised penis. ‘Ever since the arrival of Hellenic Greek culture in

Palestine, Jews have struggled with that problem. People exercised naked in those days and circumcised men were afraid of being ridiculed.' 'There's something in that, actually I find that self-mutilation rather nonsensical too. But it wasn't your own choice, and actually, it barely stands out. Surely there must be more men walking around with an exposed glans, right? And when I'm near you, nobody looks at you anyway,' Marlene noted confidently. With that, the matter was settled, and both plunged into the FKK scene during their beach holidays.
In the summer of 1928, they were there together for the last time. Marlene had decided to move to Berlin, and as far as she was concerned, that inevitably meant the end of their casual and yet long-standing relationship. She was now 23 and had just completed her studies in French language and literature. Instead of looking for work in teaching, she had decided to take a different tack and make a career in the theatre world. She had been thinking about it for a while but did not want to spoil their last holiday in Prora by telling him earlier.

When Stefan woke up the morning after they returned to his boarding house, Marlene was already up and busy preparing breakfast. 'You're up early today,' he mumbled in surprise. Normally she was never such a morning lark, finding it difficult to get out of bed, especially when she had a lecture to attend. 'I couldn't sleep well.' She looked a bit nervous, as if something was bothering her. *'Surely she isn't pregnant,'* flashed through Stefan's mind. Although they had been a couple for over four years, the thought that this would become a relationship for human eternity had never occurred to him. Nor had it to her, it seemed. A pregnancy would mean a complication, simply because everything until now had been unspoken casual. During the inflation period, Marlene had clearly wanted to benefit from him. According to his housemates, she was a 'gold-digger', and not just because of her blonde hair and because Stefan happened to possess a little bit of genuine precious metal. However, when she no longer needed him, she had simply stayed, and their interaction had become equal in every respect. 'I have something to tell you,' she said, as she came to sit on the edge of the bed beside him with a cup of tea. 'I

decided to leave you, a while ago already, but I didn't want to say it any sooner so that we could still just go on holiday together. We always had a wonderful time there, and here at home too, for that matter. But I've finished my studies now, and you'll be getting your doctorate soon. After that, they'll probably offer you a professorship and you'll stay here forever. I can only become a French teacher at a school here in this small town. I sound a bit heartless, I know, but I want to think of myself too. Neither of us ever intended to get married; we've never even spoken about it. Now that my student days are over, I have to move on with my life. And for that, I have to relocate. I'm going to Berlin.'

'What do you hope to achieve there?' Stefan exclaimed once he had recovered from his initial surprise.

'Oh, I have nice legs and a pretty face,' was the breezy answer. 'And I can dance quite well and sing well enough. That gets you a long way in a revue, especially in Berlin. And once I'm settled in there, I might manage to get into the UFA. Just a small role. And now that they're only making films with sound, my language skills will surely come in handy: two legs and a voice. I'm not leaving right away, mind you; I'll just stay for a few more weeks if you're alright with that, at least. And now you know exactly where things stand as far as I'm concerned.'

'You can stay as long as you like, what else did you think?' was Stefan's reaction, already beginning to compose himself again.

'I hoped you'd say that,' Marlene reacted with relief, as she crawled back into bed with him. 'Let's benefit from each other's presence for a while longer while we still can.' Stefan could do little else but resign himself to the situation. He had expected something like this—that she would make her own plans now that she had graduated. A revue career, however, had never crossed his mind.

Marlene's gamble paid off well. After a few difficult years in the revue ensemble of the Kit Kat Club, she started working at the Metropol Theater through the intervention of a 'patron'. And that led to contacts with the UFA. Initially, she was seen in small supporting roles, but from 1933 onwards she would get more and more opportunities. Blonde women with an 'Aryan' appearance were suddenly in high demand, and there was less

competition from women who did not fit that preferred image. Marlene became a familiar face to the German cinema audience, and Stefan could later boast that he had had an affair with a real movie star. He had initially missed her terribly, having grown accustomed to her and her erotic preferences. Fortunately, he was not without a partner for too long, even though the tide regarding sexual morality was already beginning to turn.

Gradually, under the supervision of Max Born, Stefan developed into a qualified theorist who could compete with the best. And those who visited Göttingen in the 1920s were by no means minor figures: Werner Heisenberg, Wolfgang Pauli, Paul Dirac, Enrico Fermi, and Edward Teller. His doctorate, however, was slow in coming; the chosen topic presented him with greater problems than expected, and eventually he received help from an unexpected quarter. In 1926, the American student Robert Oppenheimer made his entrance into the university. He arrived from Cambridge and did not yet speak any German, but within a few weeks that little problem was resolved. With this chaotic, brilliant man, everything seemed to move faster than anyone thought possible. Like Stefan, Robert came from a Jewish family but had completely detached himself from this environment. On that point, these two Jewish physicists clicked immediately. It also helped that they did not differ too much in age: Robert was 22 and Stefan was 26.
'What kind of research did you do in Cambridge?' Stefan asked once they had gotten to know each other a bit better.
'Not much more than a basic laboratory course in chemistry,' Robert answered. 'In addition, I attended physics lectures, but those weren't really up to date. That lab work was a disaster; I was far too clumsy for it. Fortunately, I managed to catch Niels Bohr's attention by asking a question when he came to give a guest lecture. That had been the only relevant question, he told my professor the next day in my presence, and he advised sending me to Göttingen because the new physics was born there and was beginning to develop at a breakneck pace.'
'Very relatable,' Stefan remarked. 'Almost the exact same thing happened to me with Max Born in Breslau. I wasn't very happy

in that chemistry laboratory either, and experimental physics seemed like a dead end to me.' With that, both men had a point of similarity in their careers, and during the short time Oppenheimer stayed in Göttingen, they became lifelong friends. Robert Oppenheimer thought quickly and spoke that way too, preferably out of turn. This caused growing irritation during discussion seminars with Born because Oppenheimer began to, as it were, take them over. Maria Göppert, the later Nobel Prize winner, had at one point handed Born a petition in which she and the other signatories threatened a boycott if Oppenheimer were not reined in. Born spoke to Stefan about it because he had a lot of contact with Robert.

'What do you think, Stefan?' he asked. 'Should we let him read this and speak to him, or is there a less conspicuous way to make him understand that my students are threatening to walk out because of his behaviour?'

'Perhaps it would work if you just leave that paper inconspicuously on your desk. He often comes there to talk to you, so he'll see it immediately. I think Robert is more sensitive to a quiet hint than to a reprimand.' And that was how it went, and peace returned once more.

Oppenheimer received his doctorate in March 1927 with a dissertation on the quantum theory of continuous spectra. The defence took place before his supervisor Max Born and 'external examiner' James Franck. Afterwards, Born told Stefan how it had gone. 'Oppenheimer gradually began to behave the way we've grown accustomed to. Afterwards, Franck said he was glad it was over because he kept getting the feeling that Oppenheimer wanted to start questioning him.' It illustrated the confidentiality that had developed between both physicists, despite their 18-year age difference. Oppenheimer's dissertation provided insight into a new direction that Stefan could follow to continue his own more or less stalled research. In 1928, the time came, and he received his doctorate under Born with a dissertation on the theory of resonance fluorescence. With that, ten years after commencing his studies, he had obtained his doctorate, crossing the threshold that had prevented an appointment as an assistant professor all this time.

In 1930, he met Anna Mendelssohn, a first-year biology student from Göttingen. Just like her older sister Eva, she had modern views on interacting with men but had not yet been able to put them into practise. Immediately after leaving school, Eva had plunged into student life on the Bauhaus campus in Dessau, but that was out of reach for Anna for the time being. Her parents felt she simply had to keep living at home. After all, if you studied in your own hometown, there was no compelling reason to leave the parental home. When Anna entered the university, her gaze quite quickly fell upon Stefan in passing. He had a reputation as a physicist and was an assistant professor. However, it was mostly the gossip about his love life that made him interesting. The story that he had had a relationship for years with someone who now performed in the revue of the Metropol Theater in Berlin gave him an aura of mystery. Thanks to Marlene, he was retroactively a man with a past that especially intrigued first-year students.
In addition, at 30, Stefan Löwe was undoubtedly an attractive man: slender, average height, dark hair combed back, a moustache, and somewhat deep-set eyes. He did not look recognisably Jewish due to his thin lips and a not overly large nose. For many years now, nothing of the environment he came from could be heard in his speech, and socially and religiously he had not been a member of the Jewish community for a long time. Apart from his small glasses with a thin frame, he closely resembled his mentor Max Born when he was the same age. Anna decided to cross paths with him regularly, simply by coincidentally walking in the corridor where he was usually on his way to his office or a lecture hall. The fact that she had no business being there as a biology student didn't matter; surely he had to notice her after a while?
Indeed, that didn't take long. 'Are you looking for the lecture hall? Or just a bit lost? That happens quite often with newcomers here,' Stefan stopped her when he saw that nice girl walking in the corridor for the third time within a week. He noticed that she was trying to catch his attention and played along with the familiar game.
'Yes, I keep getting disoriented here, all these departments seem to blend together,' Anna lied with the natural ease of

someone who had already conducted this conversation several times in her head. 'How do I get to the biology laboratory from here?'
'I'll walk with you for a bit, you clearly still need to get familiar with the place, so you could use some help,' was the practised answer.
Along the way, Stefan took a slight detour so they could talk a little longer. And just before he delivered her to the first-year biology practical, Stefan suggested taking a short walk in the park on the university grounds during the lunch break. His interest was piqued, and Anna's appearance had certainly contributed to that. At 18 she was a fully-grown young woman with a good figure, but what caught the attention immediately were her blue eyes. She had a beautifully shaped face and long black hair, which gave that striking eye colour roughly the same signalling effect as a searchlight.
Although Anna, as mentioned, had adopted the modern views on men from her sister Eva, she behaved cautiously towards Stefan. By now she knew his reputation, and he himself had told her plenty about his past, so she knew who she was dealing with. She was determined not to just become the next in his line of conquests. Anna was the daughter of a fairly prosperous Jewish grain merchant who, in his pursuit of assimilation, had converted to Christianity with his entire family—at least to the outside world. His two oldest children had been baptised, he himself had not found it necessary, and his wife wanted nothing to do with it anyway. By way of compromise, the twin boys born in 1914 had remained undefined secular, though their father had had them circumcised after much insistence from his wife. It illustrated the struggle within the family to hold their own in a world with overt antisemitic sentiments. They had bid farewell to Jewish life with one small exception: the Christmas celebration was combined with Hanukkah. This was done by so many 'Jewish Christians' that a term had even been coined for it: *Weihnukka*. With a man like Stefan, Anna could therefore comfortably come home.
The other way around was a lot more difficult. His mother would have a fit if Stefan turned up with a baptised Jewish woman, though that was a concern for later. Since he had left

Breslau, Stefan had known no family life. Once a year, in August, he would visit his family for a week, and that was it. For the first few years, even that hadn't happened, to avoid spending money on the train journey.
Now that he had met Anna, Stefan was a regular guest at the Mendelssohns'. Besides Anna, her two younger brothers, the twins Karl and Jürgen, also lived there. Eva usually came to Göttingen for a few days during the school holidays. Dessau was not far away, and you could get there in a couple of hours. Thus Stefan got to know the whole family and was, as it were, absorbed into the household. After that, it wasn't long before he was treated as the future son-in-law.
When they had been dating for a while, Anna decided it was time to follow in Eva's footsteps and began making a habit of treating Stefan's rooms as a love nest. She had tested his patience considerably, and his persistence had been proof to her that this was a serious relationship for Stefan too, with expectations for the future. Caution was advised, because towards her parents she absolutely wanted to maintain the appearance of marrying as a virgin. Although in hindsight with more luck than wisdom, she managed not to get pregnant. That event would be delayed for another ten years or so. Although they both came from a Jewish background, their histories were quite different, and in the beginning, that formed the subject of many a conversation. In fact, they were both searching for their identity, a situation characteristic of people caught between two worlds.

'Did you already become a secular Jew before you left home, or had that happened earlier?' Anna wanted to know. Stefan had told her about his childhood years, his Bar Mitzvah, the onset of doubts as he acquired more and more knowledge, and, to crown it all, Jonah's death.
'After my oldest brother was killed, everything suddenly changed for me,' he spoke emotionally. 'Even more than before I began to think about the relativity of life, the meaning of existence, and the role of religion in general. From that moment on, I began to experience the strict Jewish morals and customs not just as suffocating., but above all as meaningless—a kind

of religious folklore. Ultimately, I only participated out of habit and mainly to avoid burdening my parents and the other family members with my apostasy.'
'For me, it was a lot easier,' Anna said. 'My parents had already made that choice for us. In fact, that's always how it goes. Your religion is determined by the place where you are born. And coincidentally, that is always exactly where the prevailing faith is the only true faith,' she added sarcastically. 'My father consciously dropped his faith and converted to Christianity. That was mainly to get out of the corner where the first antisemitic blows fall. My mother went along with it, but not out of conviction. That's why my two younger brothers were circumcised as usual, so that they could later become fully-fledged Jewish men. To date, they haven't shown any desires in that direction,' she chuckled. 'I was baptised Christian but have absolutely nothing to do with religion anymore; I'm completely an atheist, and despite our different childhoods, we at least have that in common.'
'Something else—do you ever go to the theatre, I mean to the opera?' Until then, that hadn't really been within Stefan's area of interest. He went to the cinema regularly, but that wasn't the kind of theatre Anna meant.
'My parents took us to the opera in Kassel every now and then. If we attended a matinee, we could go back and forth by train on the same day. My father is a Wagnerian, by his own account. He has already seen most of Wagner's operas and also went to the Bayreuth Festival once with my mother for *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. That was in 1911, before I was born. Eva stayed with our grandparents then. Everyone always claims that Bayreuth is a hotbed of antisemitism, but my father thinks that this wrongly clings to Richard Wagner himself. Furthermore, he believes you should be able to separate the operas from the person who wrote them. Be that as it may, we were raised with opera visits as children, and I would like to go there with you every now and then.'
Stefan had no objection whatsoever to that; it could never be bad for his cultural development, and it seemed like a nice outing. So it happened that they went to Kassel about six times per season, with a few Wagner operas on the programme as

well. Stefan quite liked *The Flying Dutchman*, as well as *Lohengrin*. *Tristan und Isolde*, however, he found downright tedious: too much singing without action.

In June 1932, the time came: Stefan and Anna were married, shortly after her 20th birthday. Because Stefan no longer adhered to any faith and Anna had been baptised as a Christian, after some deliberation, they decided on a ceremony at the registry office and a party for family, friends, and business relations of Anna's father. A difficult conversation between Stefan and his parents had preceded it. His mother wanted nothing to do with it—a marriage of her son to an apostate Jewess, even now when he explicitly indicated that he had not practised the Jewish faith for more than ten years. Max was mostly disappointed but understood his son's choice to fully pursue assimilation into society. After all, you had to be blind not to see that a large part of the antisemitism that clung to the tribe of Judah was caused by the way they had turned away from their neighbours in earlier times. Staying together as a closed community might be in line with tradition and, according to many, absolutely the only way of life, but in the current political climate, it mostly caused problems.
Ultimately, it meant a rupture with his family because his mother did not want to see him anymore, and certainly not his young bride. For father Max, it was as if he were losing a son for the second time; now only the youngest was left. Joachim was by now 27 years old and attached to the Breslau opera as a violinist. He still lived at home and from now on was pampered by his mother even more than before. Through the 'loss' of Stefan, Max lost the last bit of vitality, leaving him at 64 barely able to run his business properly. Fortunately, Irit and Tamar were by now married to reliable, business-minded Jewish men, and they took the work off his hands. Max was boss in name only. Those marriages had been performed in accordance with Hasidic traditions, complete with a ceremony under a chuppah. For their parents, that had been a plaster on the wound now that Stefan had completely withdrawn to Göttingen. Incidentally, he had come over to Breslau to take part in the festivities. That had been in 1924 and 1925, when the

general situation in the country was beginning to stabilise again. After his marriage, Stefan only maintained contact with his father and his youngest brother by letter. In this way, he at least stayed informed of their well-being—or the lack thereof. The latter soon became the dominant theme.

Anna's father had business relations all over Europe, and one of them was the Jewish banker Finzi Contini. He was very willing to let the young couple stay as guests in his house in Rome in case they decided to go there on their honeymoon. That was an offer no one could refuse, especially not Stefan, who could hardly afford such a trip on his regular salary. Anna's father gave them the travel expenses as a wedding gift, on top of a complete furnishing and trousseau. June was a very suitable month for a stay in Rome, though it could rain heavily every now and then. But everyone took that in stride, including the Romans themselves.

They travelled by train via Austria to Italy and were met at the station in Rome by Giancarlo Finzi Contini, the banker's son. He was the same age as Stefan and still lived at home with his parents. By taxi, they went to the family residence in the Via Cola di Rienzo in the newly built Prati district, within striking distance of the Vatican. The Finzi Contini family was Jewish by origin and had converted to Catholicism in the previous century; it simply made life easier. Giancarlo's father greeted the newlywed couple very warmly but left the hosting duties to his wife and son. They only saw him at dinner.

Stefan had only been abroad twice before, the first time when he was taken by Max Born to Brussels where the fifth Solvay Conference for Physics was held in October 1927. He himself did not have an invitation to participate in the congress, but Born had been of the opinion that outside the formal sessions there would be plenty of opportunity for Stefan to get into conversation with his famous colleagues. And that was indeed how it went. In October 1930, he participated in the sixth Solvay Conference. Anna had never been abroad before; she hadn't gotten further than family holidays on the Baltic coast. This journey was therefore a very special experience, and Anna in particular reacted delightfully to everything she experienced in the city.

Giancarlo took them past the main sights, especially those from antiquity. Although the fascist regime had been in the saddle for almost ten years, Mussolini's building plans were largely still in the development stage. The brand-new avenue connecting the monument for Vittorio Emanuele II with the Colosseum had already been inaugurated in April, though. This Via dell' Impero cut through the ancient fora in the heart of Rome, and simultaneously with the construction, a lot of archaeological work had been carried out in the strip that would later no longer be accessible. Furthermore, work was being carried out feverishly on other projects that ideally had to be ready for the tenth anniversary of the fascist revolution, which fell on October 29 of that year.

After taking them in tow for two days to get to know the city, Giancarlo left the newlywed couple alone. This allowed them to hang around the favourite tourist spots at their leisure without a third wheel. Inevitably, they threw a few coins into the Trevi Fountain and ate a gelato on the Spanish Steps. Giancarlo had pointed out the Via dei Condotti to them, which led from the Steps to the Via del Corso. If you walked down it, you passed Caffè Greco, the oldest café in the city with a beautiful interior. That turned out to be a golden tip, and after a first short visit, they returned there every day. For lunch, they preferred a ristorante on Piazza Navona or a trattoria near the Pantheon. Anna, of course, also wanted to visit many shops, but Stefan's financial resources were unfortunately not sufficient to buy much for her. Mussolini had succeeded in propping up the exchange rate of the Lira again, and that meant a less favourable exchange rate for foreigners.

The Prati district where they stayed was designed in such a way that nowhere could you have a direct view of St. Peter's. This dated back to the time when the Pope, as a 'prisoner of the Vatican', had completely isolated himself from the Italian state. That animosity was now resolved after Mussolini had reached an agreement with the Vatican the previous year. The so-called Concordat regulated relations between the Italian state and Vatican City, which was from then on recognised as a sovereign state. Foreign tourists had had nothing to do with that feud anyway, and a visit to St. Peter's and the Vatican