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For Seka

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Sample translation by Alexander Booth

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When the graves around Omarska were excavated and you could read about the first trials in the papers, south of the Jura Mountains Seka learned how to swim in a pool with a large slide that curved out into the cold before snaking back in to the warmth, though what that really meant is that she leapt into the water with a loud cry, staying under until someone behind her threatened to jump into her back. She learned how to open her eyes underwater and to hold her breath and, soon enough, watching her legs beneath the surface, that she moved her left leg a little oddly so that, as a result, she expended considerable effort to overcome the habitual way she'd learned to swim. Afraid that someone would notice, she swam slowly, concentratedly, and was quickly out of breath. In the end, all the chlorine-fortified water she would swallow after it streamed into her mouth and nose caused her stomach to hurt, and her reddened eyes would only calm down when, all alone, she closed her eyes for a moment in the locker room.

What you wore and who you were had become of no concern. Incorporated into the body, into the hair, its ends, the tips, into the next generation and their gestures was that which, over the years, had been guarded within it and, together with the movements that occupied the body,

had been stilled: likely some kind of pain. Seka saw it in her family. Throughout all the years the women had never changed their clothes or their fashions. They just went on wearing them or stored them in boxes before bringing them out again, changed the colour of their hair, stopped dyeing their roots, and lost any sense of vanity. They didn't call it liberation, they said it was just the way it was, said that in life they'd learned to bear pain, to endure what could not be endured, what was unbearable, said that in the evenings you just hid in the garage or stood by the shed and cried.

Doing a search for "Omarska" on the internet brought up entries on the concentration camp, eventually a link from TripAdvisor for the best hotels near the train station.

On the internet, rooms were being advertised for the summer, for returnees.

For those who were living in Switzerland, in Australia, in the USA, in Austria, who, after the war, built summer houses with their incomes, for the family, for the children, so that they would know, the parents said, where they came from, so that they would get to know their origins, their place in the world.

The world: the pool in Kozarac, the chlorine in your hair, the first Louis Vuitton fakes on the black market, and the lines stretching out in front of the Western Union counter.

Omarska disappeared as if the camp had never existed. Barred from people's minds and from history, it crumbled into all the tabs Seka had opened in her browser. Today, just a few loose memories of summers in the yard, the many beetles across the front of the house, formed the basis from which she worked out the object that was her life.

As if he had made them disappear, each and every one of them, mother and daughter, sunk behind the curtains, sunglasses, and darkened windows. It was, Seka thought, watching her mother speak, as if, after all these years, all that remained was the image of the bedspread that her father had torn back to keep her awake before the paramedics carried her mother out of the apartment. As if the only thing that remained was the promise Seka had made to her father not to tell anyone. And the flowers she brought to her mother in the emergency room as a child.

Still guarded when at the Lausanne railroad station she maintained that she should never have been sent back after her stomach was pumped yet another time, not to her children, not to her husband, Seka's father.

At best: the domesticity of the lies, the threat, this towel in her hands, a wall shot full of darts.

Two more attempts followed, events of that kind which no one knew a thing about. And then the fourth and final wake-up call, Amir's death.

First mother went.

Razed to the ground.

And the children with her.

There were the jawbones lying in the dirt, the question who had died and when, already tired of carrying water bottles.

The forest cleared for the Trans-Amazonian Highway on a Brazilian postage stamp from the 1970s.

The painting of Cerro Rico Mountain near Potosi, Bolivia, from the early 16th century, the silver ores, the Casa de la Moneda with the smelting furnaces and crucibles.

The pens, the bags, and the task of giving names to objects, arranging them by shape and size and weight, and the *Wardian cases* which were used to transport and protect plants shipped from overseas back to Europe by recreating the previous environment (temperature, humidity) and which reproduced the initial colonial environment by bringing them into the living rooms of the 19th century in the form of terrariums.

The repeated movement or use of natural, economic, or social resources (loosely based on Jochen Oltmer).

The question of which survivals preceded today's explorations.

The annotated 1928 galley proof of *Orlando* by Virginia Woolf with several crossed-out dedications and corrected commas. Leonard, the former colonial civil service member, who became her friend and later husband, of whom she writes in her diaries that he would be able to give her companionship, children, and a busy life, before adding that she loved him, but was not physically attracted to him.

The irreversible articulation of a "system" of guest-workers for the Swiss nation state.

Japanese *picture brides*.

The words written in chalk on the blackboard, Only globalization creates a sense of home, only what's foreign the sense of one's own.

The marriage of Japanese women in Hawaii, the selection of young women from photographs, offered for marriage to day laborers (*coolies*) working on plantations. An emergence of early transnational communities, the first hopes for a different, future life, captured by cameras and catalogued in archives today.

The images of love as a brow, a trouser leg, a way of moving, or a fine mist of deodorant.

Grandfather's obituary on Facebook with three-hundred comments.

The photographs of a mass grave surrounded by American scientists, dated 1927, in Liberia, *forest clearing* and *road construction* written underneath them, during the expansion of what was then the largest rubber plantation in the world.

Biting into powdered-sugar-dusted pastry and solid chocolate.

The trans-shipment centre for enslaved women and men from the Balkans, in the Venice of the 13th to 15th centuries, whereby women from the Caucasus who were brought to the port cities fetched the highest prices.

The Croatian bay where someone appeared, someone they watched and who'd appeal to her.

Summoned by the sound of the cicadas, already sluggish from the heat. The boy walking up and down the beach calling out *Krofne!*

Whether blonde-haired or brown. In the mind's eye a random pair of cheeks, hairy or still smooth. Dreams and thoughts of how to start a conversation, still young, a kid actually.

The hand stretched out of the window near Milan during the drive.

The weather-beaten rope on the tree just before arrival, from which someone, it is assumed, once hung.

The cracked plaster of the monastery in Dajla among the red, iron-stained earth, and the surf that would wash the red sand off your feet again.

There were the restaurant kitchens, the vineyards, the tunnels and roadsides, the greenhouses, the watch factories, the employees with names like Vesna and Meho, magnifying glasses clamped in front of their eyes to set the watches with stones.

Her son Haris who, on his birthday, ran after her through the thigh-high grass in La Chaux-de-Fonds, his arms outstretched, so that she screamed.

The simultaneous falling in love with a substitute teacher whose slightly banded legs formed a barely perceptible “O” when he walked, who wore expensive clothes and who, when speaking, sometimes put his hand on his chest as a sign that he had finished.
And that lawnmower in the garden of some wealthy parents, an automatic one which, to everyone’s surprise, never fell into the pool.

Other sketches like: Industrial plants in the foothills of the Alps, the dining halls of Swiss universities as places of the late industrial transformation of Switzerland.

The entries were, essentially, meagre.

The *Čuvaj se* one Sunday morning at the baker’s on Helvetiaplatz in response to the rolls he’d given you, “Take care of yourself”. The later walk up the Uetliberg.

The questioning of things for possible or invented connections.

What remained was a father’s letter to his daughter, a handful of photographs inside of it, essentially shabby and without any further meaning. On the envelope the words *Za Seku*, “For Seka”, intended for the girl, the daughter, who in actual name was only a variable and, over the years of no contact, a figure without any particular signs.

In the photograph Seka as a child, a little girl with brown hair.

How she’d hold her younger brother in her lap in the bathtub.

How as a child she'd wait up on the roof terrace of the Grosse Schanze to jump into her mother's arms after her lecture.

The whiskers on her cheeks, drawn in black makeup, dressed as a cat for carnival.

Twenty years later the relationship is reversed, the mother is the one waiting for her daughter and meeting her for lunch up on the Grosse Schanze after her lecture.

Some of the men had died, some had been imprisoned, some had survived, just by a hair, after months of torture and were freed on a warm summer day in August. Some had found refuge and settled down in the French-speaking part of Switzerland, in Geneva, had survived Omarska and Trnopolje, had kept up their sense of humour, their wits and an eye for being "down".

Others were lost.

You cried behind the counter of a mountain restaurant, in the laundry room of a hotel, in the privacy of your own home, on the freeway with the Airolo exit before your eyes, in the Gotthard tunnel in a traffic jam, in the midst of news broadcasts coming from the radio as you learned that planes had crashed into two towers in New York, the cause still unknown, the death toll high. People wept often, silently, barely audibly, taking part in the world, so insubstantial, and, so it was said, succumbing to it.

The final judgment on Omarska was pronounced after Seka had walked to school, holding the pen tightly in her hand and moving her legs beneath the table. During the trial, which lasted for several years, approximately sixty mass graves were discovered in the area around Omarska.

In the meanwhile, Seka had long since learned to walk and talk, and her grandmother had started a garden near the excavated graves. Whether you'd return or stay, whether you'd go somewhere else, was never under consideration.
What showed her the direction today lay before her like a trail, a breath of fresh air with the distant panorama of the Alps in view.

Geneva became a home, two rooms, with a kitchen, an elevator, a bedroom, conjugal and children's beds, a courtyard of the UN. You practiced rustling the groceries when unpacking them and putting them on the table and were pleased when the children went to school, said that you were glad that your own children were able to translate the conversation with their teachers, they would quickly pick up the language, any language that was put in front of them, whether German or French. Said that you were glad that, after the negative decision in Germany, you now had a temporary place to stay in Switzerland.

The pictures of the camps were moving, they were in colour, the footage of a team of British journalists who'd made their visit to Omarska and Trnopolje and interviewed detainees about their condition, was available on the internet. It was there, undeniable. The document, a twenty-four-minute film, showed a large number of people, men mostly, in a state of waiting, uncertain of what was in store for them. You could see the reporter engaging the prisoners in conversation over the fence and talking to the armed guards as well, asking them whether this was a concentration camp, which they answered in the negative.

The prisoners were sitting in groups on the lawn, talking, their faces were gaunt, as were their bodies, they answered the journalists' question as to whether they all came from Prijedor and

were soldiers in English or Russian, they were all from the surrounding area, rounded up from the villages, civilian population, as one would later read in the papers, they weren't soldiers:

"I have never fought."

"Can you tell me anything about the conditions in which you are being kept – or is that difficult?"

"I am not sure that I am allowed to talk about that, you know."

They had just been brought from another camp to Omarska that very day.

That "today" is from 1992, a warm day in August.

When asked if they'd been beaten, they said, Not here, but they would rather not talk about it, and their glances indicated it was time to change the subject. The reporter thanked them and said he was from British television, and that it was the first time they had been able to enter the camps and film. When he passed a banknote over the fence, unrest broke out.

How they didn't know that they would only get to see those in the best condition.

The journalists were accompanied by a translator who spoke Bosnian, English, and Russian.

As far as she could remember, Seka's father had said that he'd opted for Russian over German at school. He was the one who taught her to swim south of the Jura Mountains and helped her

to kick out her legs properly, to stretch out her arms and pull them back in a wide arc. At school he was prevented from writing with his left hand. He had learned to write with his right.

*

On certain days it was as if she was swimming through a heavy patch of oil.

With great effort, Seka learned to swim faster, to breathe more rigorously.

When there were too many people in the pool she'd lay along the edge, half-naked, with a book whose pages had got wet and then dried again. She'd close her eyes and listen to how the people who'd come together for the evening class moved in the water.

What did it mean to bury?

To carry the name of the one you'd called *Babo* and you'd remember later as a monster.

As she swam, she thought she could hear her father calling out to her, watching her from the edge of the pool, checking her every move.

Sometimes it seemed to her that, in the evening, you got caught up in the reflection of the windows with all the arsenal you had acquired over the years, pen, paper, time and laptop, search request after search request.

It was as if all you had to do was search for records, to understand that your own history had no archives. The libraries had been burnt in the course of the war. This realization came

quickly, having seen the videos of Mostar, of Sarajevo, the lonely cello player in the ruins of the National Library who, for every casualty who'd stood in line for bread and died in a mortar attack, would play twenty-two days in a row. Moving through the spaces of high culture today—as someone said narrow-mindedly on the way to the colloquium—studying history, familiarizing yourself with relics and interpretations of people who never even considered you, who only paid attention to their own inclinations, who were bothered when you said you weren't interested in their research, that actually you wanted to do your own, all that was like getting lost in the German reading room.

Dubravka Ugrešić, a Croatian writer who went into exile, wrote in 1994: "The dead are the only ones who don't lie, but no one believes them." Primo Levi, a survivor of IG Farben's Buna works factory in the Monowitz subcamp of Auschwitz, wrote something similar: the true witnesses of the camps were those who were murdered. The survivors are unsuitable for giving information on a systematic process of mass extermination. Where death is the rule, only the dead are capable of such.

Over the years you'd become your own archivist.

What connected Auschwitz with Omarska were the graves, the substances and their insistent capital value. A multitude of stories of extraction (the transpacific transfer of *coolies*, the clearing of forests, the construction of roads, later tunnels, shafts, steam).

Necessary tools for the exploitation of materials of the desirable kind.

Since German automobiles needed their tires, operating theatres their gloves, a replacement had to be found. A chemical equivalent to the natural rubber which had been grown by the British in Malaysia and the Americans in Liberia on plantations (*rubber trees*). Since the Germans' supply routes had been cut off by the Americans, synthetic rubber was produced on site at Auschwitz-Monowitz for IG Farben. Chemists were needed, ones who in German laboratories would call a substance based on the constituents butadiene and sodium "Bu-na", ones like Primo Levi, an Italian chemist and later writer, who did forced labour at the camp and the Buna works and survived.

Int the meanwhile: Ford, Reagan, the Americans, and the Firestone Natural Rubber Company in Liberia with their *rubber trees*. Researchers from Harvard who, being scientists, were always in the forefront when it came to what was known as opening up new territory.

These tropical huts during the cartographic exploration of the interior of the country in 1926 on the Harvard Medical African expedition.

Sciences of exploration: the production of countless encyclopaedias, the construction of botanical gardens, and the invention of the tropics and their medicines in response to the diseases of those who came ashore.

So too: the production of countless missionary memoirs such as *The Congo for Christ: The Story of the Congo Mission* by John Brown Myers in 1895, and their entry into public libraries, *travel literature*.

As if the substances and goods moved our present traffic networks, antennas, even the sour smell of petrol at rest stops into a different light, the glass of orange juice in the refrigerator, the coffee and tea in their cups, as well as the graphite in the pencil Seka learned to write with.

The deep digging of the spades in the earth, the shaking of the lumps through sieves, the search for silver, iron, and ore and the transport of goods resulted in the construction of a railroad network in 1916. The mining of minerals deep in the earth, the search for shiny, phosphorescent stones using water, lamps, and spades, the stench and soot on people's hands when they entered the mine at Ljubija and Omarska meant, for those who were born in the area of Omarska, the standardization of time, an alignment of the numerals with those in Berlin and the villages' slow connection to *one* world.

What Seka would consult during the course of her work: the blue folder at her mother's with the markings, deletions in the text, and her own innumerable comments and notes of the following kind:

What in ancient Greek is *dia* (diá-, prefix indicating a movement across or in all directions) and *spora* (speirō, "saen"), became in German, transferred to their situation, an expression for that which is without fixed ground and is always on the move, would be this self-same open pit, a depression, unscarred geological soil, and would bear the name "Omarska".

As if a moment of brief contemplation were needed, one in which you could become aware of your own hands and of your own activities, one which a philosopher once interpreted as "alienated labour".

Questions remained.

As if seeing what it was like to get acquainted with the soil, to plant a garden, to push tomato seedlings into the furrows and cover them with soil.

As if you were seeing the pick and the torch in the silver mine of Potosi, a mountain that, due to all the deaths, people in the 16th century said ate people.

What did it mean to hear the water as it flowed along the edge of the large basin in the drainage shaft, or the coughing as soon as someone swallowed water? To dig in the ground for ore or bones?

To find a letter?

"*My dear Minka, I am writing you this letter even though I am not at all sure whether you will get it*."