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»Curtain, and Hello!«

A Life with Salome, Mariza, Miss Piggy & Co.

With Rainer Simon

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Ein Leben mit Salome, Mariza, Miss Piggy & Co.)

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Mariza Down Under



Photograph signed by Maria Jeritza, 1922, from one of my grandmother's autograph books

She was my first love. She was the first diva in my life. She looked at me from a black-and-white photograph that she had signed and that now stood on my grandmother Magda's dresser. Elegant and refined, with arms as white as alabaster, wearing a silk dress like a Greek goddess: Maria Jeritza, one of the greatest singers of the 20th century. Richard Strauss's first Ariadne and his first empress, the first woman who sang *Turandot* and *Jenůfa* in North America. When I was seven, she had put me under her spell completely, this exotic siren from Brno. Maria Jeritza. My grandmother's idol and my first secret love. To this day, I am transported by to my seven-year-old self and my grandmother's bedroom at the time when I look at the photo, which sits on my bedside table now: bewitched, bothered and bewildered.

My Hungarian grandmother, Magda Löwy, was born at the start of the 20th century and was therefore a member of an exceptional generation – old enough to remember World War I and young enough to not have become one of its victims; a youth spent in the 1920s and early adulthood under the Nazi regime. My grandmother lived through more sea changes in the first third of her life and I have in my entire life. Fortunately, the majority of my extended family survived the Nazi period by fleeing early enough – my Belarusian family emigrated to Australia long before World War II and my Polish family emigrated to London. Unlike the Löwys, my Hungarian family, and my grandmother Magda's family. They believed that they were an exception, as assimilated, bourgeois Jews, and stayed in Budapest. None of them survived the Shoah, except for my grandmother, who had already emigrated to Australia in the early 1930s due to her marriage with my Belarusian grandfather, and her mother, who had found refuge with Catholic family friends, though Magda didn't know that. My grandmother's Jewish friends from Central Europe, whom I met in their Australian exile, shared more or less the same fragile experiences and were characterised by a combination of a will to survive, tenacity, secrecy, nostalgia, melancholia, irony, joy and dissatisfaction.

My grandmother grew up in an upper-class family, who thought of themselves as European bourgeoisie first and foremost, then as Hungarian and last of all as Jewish – as assimilated, that is. They were hobby Jews, celebrated the Shabbat but more as a social event and for the ceremonial ritual than for religious motives. They went to the synagogue maybe three times a year – at Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and Passover. My grandmother was raised by a Catholic nanny, which whom she regularly went to church, where she listened to the Christian liturgical music, spellbound. Her father, my great-grandfather, owned an iron mill and was one of Budapest's large-scale manufacturers. His house was in a prime location in Budapest, on Andrassy út, in a way the Champs-Élysées or the Kurfürstendamm of Budapest, where the Opera House is located.

My great-grandfather was a patron of the Budapest State Opera and had his own family box. From childhood on, my grandmother attended opera performances at the Budapest Opera House once a week with her parents, and once a month she even went to the State Opera in Vienna with her father – until she met my grandfather and emigrated to Australia with him. For my grandmother and her family, the weekly opera visit was like the weekly supermarket shop. Out of the flat, down the street on foot, see the performance and back again. She was an absolute opera fanatic, knew the classical repertoire inside out and had experienced numerous opera stars of the time on stage. She met Richard Strauss in an artists' club in Budapest, saw Bruno Walter conduct and heard great singers like Fjodor Schaljapin, Lotte Lehmann and Maria Jeritza live. “Oh, Lotte. Oh, Jeritza,” she would sigh occasionally. Names I didn't associate with anything at the time. But they have remained in my memory. She collected autographs in several albums, including the signatures of Richard Strauss, Giacomo Puccini, Erich Kleiber and Enrico Caruso, as well as a letter from Béla Bartók. Her father, my great-grandfather that is, had started this trend. She gifted me the albums on my eighteenth birthday.

She had two favourite works that in some way reflected her own character. Emmerich Kálmán's operetta *Countess Mariza*, which she had seen premiere at the Theater an der Wien in 1924, and Béla Bartók's opera *Duke Bluebeard's Castle*. As different as these two works are – I can hardly imagine a more opposite pair – in a way they represent my grandmother's character and dreams. I think that in her mind, my grandmother turned my grandfather into the protagonist of an operetta. He was very handsome, elegant, clever, successful, a rich fur trader from Australia with roots in Belarus who, on a business trip to Budapest, immediately captivated her. He wooed her, proposed – “Come with me not to Folies Bergère, but to Australia” – married her in Paris and sailed to her new future with her. Just like the second act of an operetta. She didn't have a clue about Australia, but had probably dreamed of an exotic new world. A place like Buenos Aires, Rio de Janeiro, the Copacabana. Colonial, exotic, sunny. A place where people were always in a good mood, drank cocktails and danced the samba. She invented her personal operetta story with my grandfather as the prince who took her with him to his faraway land, the Land of Smiles. Emmerich Kálmán, Paul Abraham or Franz Lehár could hardly have written her story better.

But then reality caught up with them. Australia was nothing like the paradise she had dreamed of. She hated it from the start, as made evident by a little anecdote she never tired of telling us: My grandfather was one of the big players in the Australian fur market and thus far from being poor, even though his life had begun in poverty. And yet his wealth was not comparable to the wealth my grandmother had experienced in Budapest, which consisted not

only of financial capital but also of cultural and social capital. So my grandmother, although she had never set foot in a kitchen until then, suddenly had to cook and buy food herself, since she had no cook – like she had had in Budapest. So shortly after her arrival in Melbourne in 1934, she went into a small grocery shop and asked for coffee beans. The shop assistant laughed at her. There were no coffee beans here, only instant coffee, which was much more practical. She burst into tears, stormed out of the shop and ran home. No coffee beans. An impertinence. A disgrace. A terrible omen for her future. A traumatic experience and a bumpy start to her new, promising life. She tried to settle in Australia, gave birth to two children, my father and my aunt, only to see her husband die prematurely, leaving her with the two children – my father was only twelve years old then – in a country she loathed. This was not the operatic dream that she had longed for. Perhaps my grandfather was more like a kind of Bluebeard who seduced her into opening mysterious doors. And behind them: the horror – Australia.

Apart from *Countess Mariza*, she also loved Lehár's *Merry Widow*, although in the end she preferred *Mariza* because of Kálmán, i.e. a Hungarian composer. Both operettas, according to my grandmother, are about women who have lost their husbands and are trying to find great love once again. You don't need a degree in psychology to see the connections here: In the first act of her operetta, my grandmother spends her sheltered youth in the upper middle-class milieu of Budapest. In the second act, she meets my grandfather, the gallant Russian surrogate prince, marries him and follows him to a foreign country. In the third act, after her husband's death, she relives a version of *Mariza* or Hanna Glawari from *The Merry Widow* – but in Australia during a world war. My grandfather's brothers took over the fur trade and took great care of my grandmother. She didn't find much love, but she found a very close friend and companion in my great-uncle Solomon, whose wife had also died. They always appeared together at family celebrations and social events, even though they neither had a love affair nor lived together. They were a semi-official couple. So my grandmother remained a widow until the end of her life – but only somewhat merry.

She was one of the most remarkable people I have ever met. Extremely elegant, distinguished, always well dressed and made up. Photos from her youth in Budapest show how refined and tasteful she was.

She wore Chanel dresses, went to the hairdresser every three days, had a huge arsenal of rings, necklaces, earrings, silk scarves and perfumes. In my childhood, I stayed over at her place about once or twice a month. She would pick me up from school in the afternoon, we would have dinner together at her place, go to an opera performance or a concert, I would sleep at hers and she would take me back to school the next day. When she was waiting for me in

front of the school, I noticed the huge difference between her and the parents and grandparents of my classmates. She didn't look like anybody else, perfectly and poshly dressed, made up and smelling wonderful – a central European phantom in this Anglo-Saxon middle-class desert. As soon as we arrived at her house and she began to prepare dinner, I would slip into her bedroom. A wonderful little world of exquisite treasures. She had a large black lacquered drawer just for rings, of which I put as many as I could on my fingers. Since she only needed fifteen to twenty minutes for dinner, there was too little time to put on her clothes. But there were numerous scarves and shawls hanging from her mirror, and I would throw them on quickly. Last but not least, I would take a bottle from her dressing table and out on a little of her perfume. Then I would strut around her bedroom in pubescent half-drag – my blue school uniform barely noticeable under the black minks, glittering jewellery and Chanel scarves. When my grandmother called me for dinner, I would have to get rid of the masquerade quickly. The smell of the perfume, however, clung to me. She must have smelt it, but never mentioned it. Sneaking into her bedroom and dressing up there was one of the most beautiful, mysterious and sacrilegious rituals.



My grandmother Magda Löwy, Budapest 1930

My grandmother was a terrible cook and in her old age had a domestic helper who, among other things, took over the preparation of meals. By the evening, however, the domestic helper had left, so she had to pre-cook the dinner in the morning and put it into the warming compartments of a serving trolley. In the evening, the food was only lukewarm and completely dry. All freshness, all juiciness, all life had been drained out of the food while it had been waiting to be eaten in the warming compartment for half an eternity. I have never eaten such a crummy, bone-dry chicken breast since. My grandmother couldn't even boil an egg for breakfast. She always took the eggs out of the boiling water too early, so that not only the yolk but also the egg white was still liquid. The egg was accompanied by pumpernickel, not the unusual Australian breakfast at all. My school lunch also consisted of pumpernickel – with leftover meat from the day before, mustard and pickles. While my classmates brought classic white sandwich bread with peanut butter or ham, I unwrapped some dark bread that was completely soaked by the liquid off the pickles and immediately fell apart.

In my grandmother's dining room stood a very long, old table. I took a seat at one end and she at the other, with twenty empty seats between us. The focus of the dinner was not so much the food – how could it be – but on our conversation about the work that we would soon see performed at the opera house. As a rule, my grandmother would give me a recording of the opera in question weeks before and ask me to listen to it and study the libretto. That was my homework, which I was then quizzed about during dinner. I had to tell her about the plot, the different characters and my listening impressions. The conversation quickly turned to stories about the opera experiences of her youth – which productions of this opera she had seen, which singers on stage and which conductors in the orchestra pit she had already experienced in Budapest or Vienna, whether she liked the work or not. That's when my grandmother, who was usually rather serious, blossomed. When she talked about opera or left the opera house after a performance, she was a different person all of a sudden, exuding *joie de vivre*. She loved opera, and she loved to watch and accompany me as I developed the same love.

From the age of seven until I was eighteen, I attended opera performances with her. For me, this was not a bourgeois compulsion at all, but the purest pleasure and the best education in the world. My grandmother was my teacher. And I was her pupil. Her only one. She could not convince my siblings to like the art forms she had brought from Europe. She tried ballet with my sister until she revealed after two years that she couldn't stand ballet. My brother did not even show a hint of interest, so my grandmother in turn did not develop any interest in him. Sometimes my father accompanied us to the opera, but only sometimes, as he was away on business a lot. At the age of seven, I became a mixture of apprentice, prince regent and surrogate

husband, in a child's suit and tie. She herself dressed in long evening gowns for opera visits, with a fur stole, elaborate jewellery and her hair pinned up. This was still the custom in Australia in the 1970s. My grandmother had a huge collection of fur coats and stoles made from seals, foxes, and minks due to my grandfather's work in the fur trade, work that was carried on by his brothers and my father. I was fascinated and horrified in equal measure when she swung them around her neck, tail down and head on her shoulder, fastened with a diamond buckle, facing backwards. Fearing that the stoles might be stolen, she never handed them in at the cloakroom. Throughout the entire performance, the poor opera-goers seated in the box behind her were stared at by a dead fox's head with a diamond brooch between its eyes. Oy.

Once we had finished dinner, her friend Renata would come to pick us up in her Rolls-Royce and take us to the New Princess Theatre, Melbourne's opera house. "The Princess" is the most beautiful theatre in Australia, and it also has a history of great performances: many extremely famous opera singers performed there in both the 19th and 20th centuries: Nellie Melba, Luciano Pavarotti, Joan Sutherland. In the mid-19th century, Melbourne was one of the largest colonial cities in the world, next to cities like Buenos Aires or Calcutta. And, accordingly, the city needed a proper theatre. All kinds of different European architectural styles went into the construction. Basically, the theatre was built as a kind of reminder of Europe, as a place that reminded the audience, with its predominantly British roots, where it had come from.

Today, the ride in Renata's luxury car alone seems like an operatic fantasy to me. Renata was one of the many Jewish widows from Europe with whom my grandmother surrounded herself. Not emigrated ghetto or shtetl Jews like my Polish grandmother Lea, but educated, wealthy, middle-class, even assimilated Jews. My grandmother met some of these widows for bridge. There is the famous scene in *Sunset Boulevard* in which Gloria Swanson in the role of Norma Desmond meets former colleagues from the silent film era for bridge. The stars – like Buster Keaton or H. B. Warner – play themselves. The whole setting, the furnishings, the old furniture, the out-of-fashion game show that their time is over, and yet the small company makes an effort to keep their composure, all dressed up for the get-together. My grandmother's bridge séances took place in a similar atmosphere. And I felt like the young screenwriter, Joe Gillis, who visits Norma Desmond and wants to get to know her. Like him, I was a silent observer who, instead of emptying the ashtray, was left to tend to the drinks with whiskey, soda and cocktail berries. My grandmother presided over the bridge round with a Norma Desmond-like calm and composure. She was always ready for her close-up.

My grandmother's house was the exact opposite of my parents' house, a new building with modern, colourful furniture, a constantly running TV or radio, a swimming pool and simply everything else a middle-class family in 1970s Australia needed. Her house, on the other hand, breathed pure nostalgia. The tranquillity, the old furniture she had had shipped in from Hungary in the 1930s and which occupied every corner of the house, and the smell of old perfume created a surreal atmosphere, a little world of its own, half real, half fiction. I loved it. Bluebeard's castle for children, the widow's not particularly merry winter home, quite dark, the blinds almost always down so that hardly any daylight filtered in. There was something mysterious, alluring, cryptic about the house, radiating an enigmatic attraction to me and all my senses. The special atmosphere was not only created by the fact that my grandmother lived in the house alone, surrounded by all these antiques, but rather by the way she dealt with them and directed the routines. It was her personal realm in which she directed and I took on the roles she assigned me. Always the same sequence: dinner, opera or a concert, then a Grimm fairy tale that she read to me in her Hungarian accent, and finally a night's sleep in her parents' duck down bed that she had also brought to Melbourne from Budapest. So I slumbered for numerous nights, snuggled up in my great-grandparents' down bed.

My grandmother never spoke of the fate of her Hungarian family. I tried many times to get something out of her. But I got nothing. I think she felt guilty because she was the only one – besides her mother, whose survival she only found out about later – who had escaped the Nazis. Her brother, uncles, aunts, and cousins fell victim to the Nazis. While many other people with a similar family history cannot stop talking about it, my grandmother simply kept silent. She didn't talk about her family and rarely mouthed a word of Hungarian. She banished her family history as well as her mother tongue from her life. Which is rather unusual for an immigrant. My father only came into contact with the Hungarian language through his grandmother, my great-grandmother, when she finally came to Australia. And I only heard my grandmother speak Hungarian with her Hungarian exile friends when she met them in the lobby of the opera, for example. But she would quickly switch back to English with a strong Hungarian accent or to German. For her, German was the more important language, the language of art and culture, which is why she urged me to learn German.

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