

Sample translation from

Shelly Kupferberg

Isidor

Copyright © 2022 by Diogenes Verlag AG, Zurich, Switzerland

translated by Ruth Martin, May 2022

ISIDOR

My great-great-uncle was a dandy. His name was Isidor. Or Innozenz. Or Ignaz. But actually he was called Israel. This name, however, gave too much away. Hence Isidor or Innozenz or Ignaz. He was an upstart, an eccentric, a parvenu, a multi-millionaire, occasionally a con artist, a man of action and of the world, he was headstrong and proud. How else to explain his rise from the furthest impoverished corner of Eastern Galicia all the way to the Imperial and Royal metropolis of Vienna, to become a Councillor of Commerce and economic adviser to the Austrian state? How else could he have clawed his way out of Lokutni – Lokutni near Tlumacz, Tlumacz near Kolomea, Kolomea near Lviv – right to the top? Until the day when people like him were earmarked for eradication.

Isidor. Who was he, where did he get his ambition, what shaped him, who shaped him? Where did his people come from, what shaped them – and what path did they all take?

Isidor's story and the stories of those who surrounded him, pieced together from fragments, family tales, research and documents – these are the stories I will tell here.

Back in Vienna / Correspondence

“Vienna is making a peculiar and rather conflicting impression on me. On the one hand, I was somehow shocked to see that so little had changed, that the apartment buildings and the area were the

Shelly Kupferberg, *Isidor*

same as they had been before all the world-shattering events – and although, of course, one knows this, it’s still rather different to have it right there before one’s eyes. On the other hand, I am without a doubt somewhat estranged from everything after 18 years – a peculiar feeling! I am sitting now in Café Bauernfeldt on Bauernfeldplatz, where I lived for 19 years, and there is a kind of satisfaction in being back in a place from which they hoped to banish me forever.”

I read this letter that my grandfather Walter sent to his wife Alice in Tel Aviv, on his first trip back to his home city of Vienna after the war. He spent two months there, with his close Viennese friend Heinz who, like Walter, had fled to Palestine after Austria was annexed by Hitler’s Germany.

In that spring of 1956, Walter was embarking on an emotional and difficult journey. He wrote a letter home every second day, reporting in detail what he had seen and done. The letters documented not only his stay in Vienna, but also his struggle to make a decision that was both existential and pioneering. Should he – a man who was so at odds with the country that had saved him from the Nazis and given him refuge – return to Vienna, or stay in Israel? He had two children now, both genuine *sabres*, as people born in Israel were called.

His letters tell of how he vacillates in those first days and weeks between deep grief, nostalgia and euphoria. “...Though the strange feeling that lies between wistfulness and dread still won’t subside,” he writes.

Shelly Kupferberg, *Isidor*

But slowly he finds his way back into his old life, and takes increasing pleasure in the atmosphere of Vienna, a cultural metropolis that is finding its feet again. *“Yesterday we went to the Volksoper and saw an excellent production of The Bird Seller, the operetta by Carl Zeller. The old songs warmed my heart. It was an old slice of Europe.”*

Nor does he shy away from the political examination of the injustices perpetrated by the Nazis, asking questions about antisemitism to Viennese Jews who have returned to the city and who meet at the Koralle coffee house on Porzellangasse (where in March 1938, a sign was hung over the door that said “No entry for Jews or dogs”). He also discusses those years into the small hours with old schoolfriends – including some former Nazis. On his conversations with them, he remarks: *“So satisfying is it to be able to say everything to people’s faces for once, that this alone has made the trip worthwhile.”*

For seventy years, these letters slumbered in the loft of my grandparents’ Tel Aviv flat. Now that I have them in my hands, all the stories that were told over and over in my family have come to life. I begin to read the letters, trying to reconstruct the kind of life my ancestors lived, the rapid personal and social changes they went through – and the pain they must have felt as everything they had worked so painstakingly and intrepidly to create was destroyed in seconds. Before they themselves were to be destroyed.

My grandfather Walter used every second of his far from easy trip in 1956 to inhale Vienna and central-European culture. *“Drink, oh*

eyes, what lashes catch and hold, of the golden abundance of the world!” he says in his letters, quoting Gottfried Keller. His many and various cultural activities are described in minute detail.

He seems eager to resume the intellectual, cultural and social life that was such a natural part of his world as he was growing up. He goes to the theatre or the opera every evening. By day he meets old schoolfriends, though he manages to fit a visit to a museum into his schedule as well. He thirsts for culture, for the German language, for places from his childhood, and he walks in the footsteps of the people who influenced him. He is trying to catch up on the eighteen years he has missed, the eighteen years since he was driven out by the Nazis.

“On Saturday evening we went to the wine tavern in Grinzing, where the Schrammerls were playing, and made brilliant conversation until two in the morning! Heinz sang all the songs from Upper Styria. Weber and Riester provide gratifying proof that it was possible to remain a decent human being even under Hitler. Though I admit that these people are exceptions in Vienna.”

During his stay in Vienna, he regularly questions whether his classical education is still state-of-the-art. Has he managed to maintain it – add to it, even – so far away, in exile, beneath the glaring eastern sun, a long way from that splendid baroque architecture, the institutions shaped by monarchy, the teachers from the imperial age, enough to hold his own in his real homeland, years later?

I remember how my grandfather, who was often away in Europe when I was a child and a teenager, always wore a hat, a tie, a white shirt with a smart V-necked jumper over it, a coat and a leather briefcase. He had exported the culture of his homeland to the Middle East, and took it back with him again years later. He was a scholar from the Levant by then, but his roots were entirely western. Did he move differently in Vienna from how he did in Tel Aviv?

Fleeing Austria made an involuntary hybrid of him; he operated – effortlessly, it seemed to me – in two very different environments and cultures, languages and mentalities. But only old Europe could really touch him. “You can take the man out of Austria, but you can’t take Austria out of the man!” as he never tired of saying. From Vienna, he wrote euphorically: “*Culture, politics, tradition, Europe, surroundings, neutrality – it’s one big joke. ... Austria stopped being as provincial as Israel long ago.*”

In that spring of 1956, as he trod the still-familiar paths he had walked as a child and a young man, he was filled with longing – but did the terrible stories from his final months in Vienna, before he fled to Palestine, catch up with him, too? The humiliations, the persecution, the name-calling, the fear he felt in 1938 as a nineteen-year-old, when the Nazis marched triumphantly into Vienna and were welcomed with open arms? When the large, lively metropolis showed its ugly side and became a petty-bourgeois German city in the blink of an eye, to great applause from its residents?

Walter spent the last month before he emigrated in the summer of 1938 staying with his uncle Isidor. Having been arrested by the Nazis on the day of the annexation, Isidor was a free man once more, but he could no longer bear to be alone in his apartment. This once domineering man had had the rug pulled from under him. He was frightened. And so Walter moved in and helped his uncle get through the days and nights. The young man got to know his uncle all over again, from an entirely different perspective. Isidor, the “self-made man” to whom the rest of the family looked up. Isidor was admired for what he had achieved. Not by everyone, of course: there were envious people everywhere, first and foremost his servants who, when push came to shove, revealed themselves to be antisemites and vile traitors.

On his return to Vienna in 1956, how keenly must Walter have recalled all the stories that had played out in his family before the Nazis caused his world to collapse, before they made him die for the first time, as he would later say? How long were the murky shadows that those earlier days cast over his reunion with his home city? Was it still his home at all? What did he want to see, and not to see?

I am searching for answers, trying to reconstruct this life. Everything that our grandfather told us about growing up in Vienna, escaping from the Nazis, the pain and the anger, how they grieved for those who didn't manage to save themselves – all the anecdotes about relatives, the stories both large and small – I am trying to piece them all together, and embarking on the search for

evidence from that time. And as I search, I keep coming across him: the glittering Uncle Isidor.

A bon vivant who, according to family legend, never married and had no children. Little remains of him now. Only a large case of silver cutlery, enough sets for 24 people. Who might once have held that lavishly decorated, heavy cutlery in their hands? Uncle Isidor's regular banquets were a Viennese institution. The cutlery is a silent witness to the upper-class aspirations of a man who was convinced that no harm could come to him in the midst of good Viennese society.

The more I look into my great-great-uncle, the more fragments and scraps of information I find about him in all kinds of archives, the clearer my image becomes of an unusual personality and his seemingly unstoppable rise to power. I assemble one piece of the puzzle after another: my grandfather's stories, files, photos, old documents and family letters from the 1910s, 20s, 30s and 40s. I go in search of his estate, and in the archives, at least on paper, I find: art, a sprawling library, sumptuous interior décor, valuables, many things looted by the Nazis – and two wedding rings. So did Uncle Isidor marry, after all, or could these rings have been family heirlooms? In the course of my research, a few small objects contain larger surprises for me. And stories. A whole wealth of stories.

But back to Walter and Vienna in 1956. After a few weeks, he plucks up the courage to visit the apartment on Bauernfeldtplatz where he spent the first 19 years of his life. Seeing his old apartment building again will open his eyes and set a course for his future. First, he

reads the names by the doorbells, and sees that none of his former neighbours – almost all Jewish families – are still living there. But the caretaker and his wife haven't changed since before the war. Their lodgings are on the third floor now though, not the first. That puzzles him.

When he goes upstairs and rings the couple's bell, the caretaker's wife opens the door and recognises Walter at once. White as a sheet, she calls into the flat: "Ere, the Jew's back!" To which her husband barks: "Don't go telling him anything!" In the few seconds before she slams the door in Walter's face, he glimpses furniture that once belonged to his parents and former neighbours.

Walter's visit to Vienna is at an end. His decision is made.

Canova

1935. As on every other Sunday, he went to lunch at his uncle's house. Uncle Isidor occupied one floor of Baron Eugène de Rothschild's mansion on the stately Canovagasse in Vienna's first district, just behind the Vienna Musikverein and not far from Karlsplatz. Ten magnificent rooms with stuccoed walls and ceiling frescoes. Persian rugs lay on the parquet floors. The door handles were decorated with seven-pointed crowns. Isidor lived there all alone – with his art treasures.

On every visit, Walter, who was just sixteen years old, marvelled at Isidor's exquisite furniture. And [at](#) all the books in the specially-furnished reading room, including leather-bound one-off printings

in Latin, the whole of world literature, first editions of French and German classics. There was the ten-volume deluxe illustrated edition of the *Thousand and One Nights*, housed in a baroque, glass-fronted bookcase. When Uncle Isidor was in the mood, he would take it out and read aloud from it, skipping over any passages that were suggestive or even risqué and might give his nephew ideas. Uncle Isidor displayed an actorly verve, and he enjoyed commenting on what he had read, showing off his education. The reading room also contained volumes about statecraft and economics, jurisprudence, philosophy, the humanities, splendid folios, lexicons, books about art, music, architecture, world history, the ancient world, and in a rather less prominent bookcase, a whole series of guides for daily use, manuals for elegant conversation. No matter what the occasion: with a spouse, in society, with business partners, friends and adversaries; sophisticated topics for the dinner table, over cigars, or etiquette for political debates. In French, English and German.

Uncle Isidor had carefully selected his furniture over many years. The bureau, with its mother-of-pearl inlay, came from the time of Maria Theresia. There were the antique Chinese terracotta figures – Isidor was growing increasingly fond of far-eastern shapes and faces, but hadn't yet been able to decide if he wanted to start a serious collection of Asiatica. So far, he had concentrated principally on classical sculptures, and had a particular love for the works of Canova. What a marvellous twist of fate that his address was named after that self-same Italian sculptor!

Uncle Isidor paid regular visits to his friend Siegfried Lämmle at his famous antique dealership in Munich. Lämmle gave him advice and informed him about new acquisitions, in the knowledge that Isidor wouldn't leave his cabinet of curiosities without some new find. Which did not escape the attention of his three servants on his return to Canovagasse. "Champagne all round!" the otherwise strict master of the house would cry after each new purchase, handing a sparkling glass to everyone present.

Every Sunday, Uncle Isidor would invite people to lunch, and every Sunday half of Vienna would gather in Canovagasse. They chatted, debated, drank, philosophised, exchanged gossip, dropped names, gave their verdicts on the latest theatre and opera premieres. And from time to time some bit of business or other would be done in this informal setting.

The childless Councillor of Commerce was a lavish host; he loved luxury and knew what he wanted. And above all, what he did not want. He was proud of the path he had taken: from very humble beginnings in an East Galician backwater, all the way to high society in Vienna. He had taken his fate into his own hands, and there were always moments when he would nod to himself, inwardly: Yes! He had made it! People paid court to him, and followed his advice in legal and financial matters – even in the highest offices of state. Isidor was the first port of call when someone in Vienna needed an investment consultant. He himself lived off the generous interest that his capital accrued. He would never again know the financial hardships that had been so familiar to him in his youth, he was certain of that.

There was one thing he knew his parents would never have understood. A man in the prime of his life – without a family? His first attempt to enter into the bond of marriage had failed after just a short time. And his second marriage had been a mistake, too. Councillor of Commerce Dr Isidor Geller preferred not to have any ties, and certainly no children. Children only interested him when you could have a sensible conversation with them and they didn't make a fuss. Like his nephew Walter. Walter was an excellent student, he knew how to behave at table and carry on a cultivated conversation, and he was interested in history and literature. And all at just sixteen, an age when most people's heads were full of nonsense.

Isidor was proud of the talented Walter, before whom, on this Sunday in 1935, the great double doors to the drawing room opened once again.

At the Blüthner grand piano sat the woman who had recently become the lady of the house, Ilona von Hajmassy, his uncle's lover. Swathed in a long, champagne-coloured silk dress, her legs crossed, she was tinkling away on the keys and singing, trilling and humming the latest operetta tunes. The Hungarian had been a fixture in Dr Geller's house for a good six months now. She presented herself as worldly and innocent by turns, and she loved to have Walter's uncle take her out and whisper compliments in her ear. She had quite turned Isidor's head, and he believed he had made a great artistic discovery in this tall, beautiful blonde with the strong accent and the supposedly aristocratic name – and more than

just an artistic discovery. Isidor, tongue-in-cheek, referred to her as his “Hungarian princess”.

When they met, Ilona had only recently arrived in Vienna from Budapest. She seemed ambitious and determined. She had set her sights on becoming an opera star. And Isidor was doing everything in his power to help her realise that dream. All the same: she was not to live in Canovagasse. Too much intimacy would spoil the magic between the two lovers. Everyday life was not conducive to eroticism – that was something Isidor knew from bitter experience. And in any case: he didn’t want to tie himself down, though he liked to be seen in public with a woman who made men stare. And so they came to an agreement: Frau von Hajmassy rented a room at the upmarket Hotel Kummer at Isidor’s expense. He also provided her with a lady’s maid. And financed her singing lessons, with the best teachers in the city, of course.

As a regular visitor to the Operntheater, as the Vienna Opera called itself at that time, Uncle Isidor would dearly have loved to see her on its stage. She certainly had the presence for it! She had already sung Tosca at the Volksoper, and even if she might not yet be entrusted with the really big roles at the Operntheater, one always grew – this was Isidor’s credo – to fill the shoes one was given.

Uncle Isidor’s efforts had not yet borne any real fruit, however. It was a great shame. The public didn’t know what they were missing, thought Isidor, brooding over how to smooth his lover’s path through her chosen profession. He had no shortage of good contacts, after all. Ilona had already proven herself on the stages of

Budapest – though admittedly in more minor roles. So why shouldn't things work out for her in Vienna?

The test

By and by, the guests began trickling into Canovagasse, and were welcomed by Resi, the housekeeper, with a glass of champagne. This Sunday, as usual, she had asked the master of the house if she could bring her younger sister Mizzi in to help her.

The ladies and gentlemen took their glasses from Resi's tray, Viennese businessmen with their wives, figures from the city's cultural scene, Uncle Isidor's business partners and clients, and acquaintances who were currying favour with him and wanted a share in his wealth. Isidor greeted each of them, enjoying the attention they paid to him and his beautiful lover. Soon a little bell rang from the direction of the dining room – the table was beautifully laid and the meal was ready. Walter waited until the guests, chatting away to one another, began to move. His uncle always saw to the seating arrangements himself – these arrangements were well-considered and strategic. Or could it have been mere coincidence that Ilona was seated beside the divo of Vienna's greatest opera house, Hans Duhan?

Uncle Isidor told an introductory anecdote about each of the guests before seating them, and even if nothing personal sprang to mind, he always managed an elegant verbal flourish or a bon mot, to give

each and every person there the feeling that they were in exactly the right place.

Walter listened to his uncle with admiration, but when it came to his own seat that Sunday in 1935, he was out of luck: he ended up next to a colleague of his uncle's from his time in the Austrian state trade commission. Adolf Fürst, heavy, wheezing, and perspiring heavily, kept trying to attract the attention of Ilona, who was sitting diagonally opposite him – with only moderate success. Undeterred, however, he mentioned numerous times that as a member of the advisory board of Leopold Landeis A.G., an underwear and girdle factory, he had excellent contacts in some very high-class underwear boutiques. During the meal, Walter observed Herr Fürst's wife and her embarrassment. With every glass of wine her husband drank, his remarks on girdles and underclothes grew more detailed.

The lunch comprised several courses, and that Sunday it was a long, drawn-out affair. As people discussed the stock exchange and securities, Walter had to make an effort to stay awake. A former client of his uncle's expostulated on his new passion for horse racing and Cuban cigars; Ilona listened intently to the opera divo Duhan, who was explaining how to take proper care of a singing voice with the aid of elaborate egg-yolk recipes, and telling them about new productions at the Vienna Opera; and Uncle Isidor laughed a little too loudly at his own jokes, all of which Walter had heard before.

The young man's attention wandered, and he thought about the reading notebook he had begun some time ago. He used it to keep a record of every book he read, and had noted down more than fifty titles there in under a year. Just the day before he had added Tolstoy's *Master and Man*. And now he wanted to get his teeth into Theodor Herzl's *The Old New Land*.

This time, Walter was almost glad when lunch was over, and he was jolted out of his thoughts. After dessert, before the guests were offered strong black coffee and an assortment of liqueurs and vintage brandies, his uncle shot him a stern look that said: *Now!* Isidor loved to present his sister's son to his lunch guests. His clever nephew's knowledge was also his own, and it showed the assembled guests what educated people they were dining with.

As he did every Sunday, Isidor tapped his wine glass with a little silver coffee spoon.

“Walter – stand up, dear boy! Where does the maxim *Roma locuta, causa finita* come from – and what does it mean?”

Walter got up obediently and replied: “Rome has spoken, the matter is settled – it's a legal principle that comes from canon law. The decision of the highest authority, originally the Pope, is always legally binding, so there can be no appeal – and therefore no room for further discussion.” He was assured of the guests' applause. And of the double schilling his uncle would give him. Walter had passed the test with flying colours once more.

After he had taken his seat again, the wife of the girdle-and-underwear mogul turned to him and asked what school he attended. The BG9 – Bundesgymnasium number nine, in Wasagasse, Walter replied. Frau Fürst seemed pleased with this. She evidently knew of the school's good reputation and the classical education it offered. "Isn't that where Stefan Zweig went?" she asked, and, when Walter nodded: "Well, what do you intend to do with your life, young man?" Walter looked over at his uncle, who was in his element. As squire to his Ilona, as generous host, instructing his servants (not quite discreetly enough to go unnoticed), attentively ensuring that no one lacked for anything, and at the same time entertaining his guests. Never be boring! Walter knew that this was one of his uncle's maxims.

"My uncle has advised me to follow in his footsteps – to study law, I mean, and become a lawyer."

Frau Fürst smiled indulgently. "Such a degree would not be the worst idea, and certainly not with a mentor like Dr Isidor Geller behind you."

Walter gave her a slightly pained smile. If it were up to him, he would choose to study literature. A notion of which Uncle Isidor thoroughly disapproved. He usually smiled in amusement at the poems Walter wrote. Even though he fully recognised his nephew's talent. But as a profession... "Literary history?!" he had cried in horror a few weeks previously, as they sat around the table with the rest of the family. "You can't make a career in that – the subject is

full of antisemites. You will study law and eventually take over my practice!”

And so Walter’s fate was sealed. That wasn’t all; Uncle Isidor had thereupon insisted on taking the boy to visit his doctoral supervisor, under whom he had studied more than twenty years previously, before the Great War.

The chauffeur, Herr Pinter, brought Uncle Isidor’s car round, and drove nephew and uncle off to see Professor Wlassak, who was now an old man. The few words he had for young Walter sounded like a blessing. He laid one bony hand on the young man’s head and said: “Become like your uncle.” And that was all the advice he had to give. But Isidor looked contented.

Jurisprudence was far from being Walter’s first choice, but he knew as well as all his relatives did that if he really should inherit Isidor’s practice one day, he would be made for life – unless he behaved like an idiot.

The Sunday banquet was drawing to a close. It was now late afternoon, and Frau Fürst was eager to get her now thoroughly tipsy husband away from polite company. One by one the guests got up, and Resi and Mizzi were standing ready with their coats in the large vestibule. Isidor bade each visitor farewell with a hearty handshake, and a kiss on the hand for the ladies. Walter was the last to leave; every Sunday, Isidor would quiz his nephew about precisely what he was doing, and what he had learned at school. Walter had started to give an account of his Latin lessons – they were currently translating the *Aeneid* – when Ilona came rushing

Shelly Kupferberg, *Isidor*

over and interrupted them, wanting to know what else his uncle was planning to do with her that day. Isidor suggested going to the Grabencafé that evening to drink champagne and listen to the dance band. Ilona, well pleased with this, whispered something into his ear and withdrew into the depths of the apartment for some beauty sleep, as she called it. Walter stood there uncertainly for a while, before plucking up his courage.

“Uncle Isidor, I’ve written a new poem, do you want to hear it?”

“My boy, as long as it isn’t too sad – fire away.”

Walter took a deep breath.

“Come to us in BG9!

Nowhere else is quite as fine.

But only if you are a Jew,

For, truth to tell, we are too few.

At one time we were ten a penny

But lately there are not so many.

Jews have begun to move away

And Nazi rowdies take their place;

Every one a German swine,

And now you often hear the line:

“You Shylocks, run and save your lives,

Or face your own night of long knives!”

One third to two, we take no action,

Outnumbered by their vulgar fraction.

All the Israelites complain

Uttering the same refrain:

“Come and join us, all you Jews,
We are in dire need of you!”

Isidor listened with folded arms and a grave expression. He hesitated for a moment before breaking the silence in the room: “Well, it isn’t exactly funny, my boy. And just let them talk, those people. Don’t even ignore them, that’s my motto.” He evidently didn’t want to go into the subject.

Walter’s uncle soon excused himself as well; he was leaving for Prague and Bucharest on business the following day, and needed to prepare for the trip. When Resi came to bring Walter his coat, Isidor reminded her which suits she was to pack. The trunk was standing ready in the dressing room. And he asked her to reserve a booth at the Grabencafé, one of his favourite haunts, for that evening.

Walter received a hug from his uncle, and an instruction to pass on greetings to his mother – “Kiss my little sister for me!” – and soon the young man was hurrying down the marble staircase, feeling mildly relieved.