

## The Weisshaus

Short Story by Ludger Hofmann-Engl

The Weisshaus have a son. His name is Mosche and he is my student. They have a daughter too, who is grown up and goes her ways. She is called Rebekah. When I see her I think about the well and Abraham's servant asking for water.

I have been teaching Mosche for a year once a week – on and off. He suffers from a miraculous disease. He loves music. I teach piano.

More than a year ago I moved into this village - a street off the main road. The winters are cold here and men and women alike dig the faces into their collars. There is not much talking as they haste to get some light and warmth.

I am a musicus and travel the world. I have seen many places but I have not seen the world. “One place is as good as another”, my father used to say. I stayed in this village for more than a year. For three years I have been living off main road. If anybody asked why, I would not know. But nobody will ask. I teach piano, even to some distinguished members of the village. It makes a living.

There is a small shul for the few Jews, but there are hardly any. The Weishaus are well respected although they have some assimilated relatives somewhere in other towns and villages.

I will travel again. On my journeys I only take my music and some books. My mother spoke of books as if they all were Torah. I cannot be without books. I doubt I ever will journey again.

“Shameful it is, to be a musicus, without income, without wife and without family. It is not how the Lord wished us to be”. I became a musicus. I have an income, but no wife and family. I have not seen my parent's home for over 15 years. I was a punishment to them.

I light the Shabbath candles myself and I say the blessing over the bread. I do not regret my choice. The few free hours I spent in bed contemplating about the world I have not seen. Sometimes I cry and I think it is for the world but I know it is for me.

Weisshaus are the only Jews who's son I teach. I enjoy teaching and I like children. Children like me. That is why I enjoy teaching.

When I opted for devoting my life to music it felt as if I opted against my parents and Judaism as a whole. I was made to feel that way. It was unusual to be invited around for a Shabbath meal and I

could not think of a reason the Weissshauss should, but Mosche loves music and the Weissshauss asked. In the month of Elul the weather still offers a few sunny spells and I was asked by the Weissshauss to join for a Shabbath meal.

I live with my books and my music. During the week I do not go to Shul. I live my own faith. Sometimes I go on a Friday night. I always go on a Shabbath morning.

I used to teach Mosche on Tuesdays and then on Mondays. Now I teach him on Fridays before night fall. I taught him on the Friday I was asked to come for the Shabbath meal. His father came to collect us and lead the way.

I have never been at the house of the Weissshauss. We went to the main road and up hill till and we turned right, off main road. Their road, just like mine, expands itself from North to South.

I am not used to taking a step over the threshold of any home other than mine. I was welcomed and found my way to the piano. The Weissshauss own a good instrument, which adds the right colour to a Beethoven sonata. The Shabbath table was laid out in splendor; me next to Mosche, Rebeka next to him and opposite to the father, the mother with her back to the kitchen.

As the musician I was given the honour to sing the kiddush. For three years I have not been singing or playing to anyone but the children. The faltering in my voice and the roughness which settled on my throat transformed my singing into floating prayer.

The Weissshauss indulged me with a fine meal and many a compliment as I revealed my past, my meditations on Judaism and music and my inclination towards philosophy.

“The guide of the perplexed” is my treasure. It is an old copy and it seems to me that it must have been handed down from one generation to another in my family. It was given to my mother when her late father died. She never read it, nor could she recall that anyone before her did. “This is not written for us. God knows who for”, I was told when I brought the volume down from the shelf. I knew the book had been there for me.

As I expounded Maimonides's intentions and principles to the Weissshauss, the mother and Rebeka were drawn close to this great philosopher. Given the short time, I tried to create a valid impression on his thought but soon came the moment when I was to leave.

A final “Shabbath shalom” and I headed for the main road, down hill, to the left and I was back home.

I spent a restless night. Half awake, I went over and over our conversations and I was drunk with

thought.

In the morning I said my Shema, but I did not go to Shul. I went to the forest at the hill-side instead. The way up to the top is steep and the rain has washed away the sand. Some of the trees hang on to the slope with half the root-work exposed. But there will be a time when they have to give in. I usually bring my notebook and a pen but today I pondered on the events of last night. There is a bench on the hill, which lays out the village as a whole. My thoughts were all wanting.

Should I give away my copy even if it was for a limited time. I have not read Maimonides for a long time. Every free minute I had spent before I finally turned the last page. Never since I read him again, but his thought had become mine. Should I give away my copy, which had been put into a shelf for generation, awaiting her moment to be taken by me. "Once Shabbath terminates, I make the way and bring my copy to the Weissshauss'."

I went home, had my second meal and laid down contemplating my decision. I skipped the third meal and waited for the heavens to bring forth their stars.

I have the habit to take a little flask on my walks which I fill at home with whiskey. I know it is not modest but it quickens my step. As darkness drew close I concluded Shabbath, took the "Guide" from her place and set out into the night. I did not go straight to the main street but remained sideways to enjoy a few sips from my flask. I joint the main street, turned right and found Weisshauss' house with ease.

To be sure it took the Weissshauss by surprise as I knocked several times at the door already considering to turn back. The father, astonished but not less pleased, answered my call and I handed over my "Guide" in polite manner.

There is a small path close to the house of Weissshauss which I have never tried. I turned into it bearing in mind to keep westwards.

I never get lost, even in new places, only once in Venice. It had been Carnival and I had gone out to witness the spectaculum. Driven by curiosity, I went into a small and to me unknown street. I passed several courts as things became darker and quieter around me. The unpleasant odour of the water threw itself constantly against the walls as I went over bridges along derelict houses. And then, once of a sudden I had been in the middle of the Carnival again. I never have understood how.

The little path close to Weissshauss' house opened itself to a street westwards and all seemed well. Again, I took a few sips from the flask. To my disappointment the street now made a slight turn to the left. I knew I would have to take a right turn to the right as soon as an opportunity was given. A street

to the right appeared and I sized my chance. Confidence settled on my mind but again, a bend to the left worked itself into my way. "Next to the right", I thought, starting to doubt whether it had been a wise decision to leave the main street. I walked along this street expecting to find the familiarity of another street known to me at the next crossing. Nothing the like happened and my doubts grew into worries. I turned right. If I had taken the main street I would have been home by now. This street did not pose any bends but I felt lost already. Another crossing appeared in front of me. On the sign it claimed to be the Weissshauss' street. I could not recognize it as such and my thoughts started being disorganized. I walked across but this was not the village I had been living in for three years. There was nobody on the street, just the houses with their windows gazed at me with animosity. I tried to reason with myself that I could well spend the night in the open and find my way back in the morning. Each turn, each crossing misled me into yet another void and I cried out to the Lord "Bring me home, just bring me home". Nothing happened. The end of the street appeared out of the dark in front of me. There was no obstacle in the street and my step was steady. I turned right and I slipped with my right foot. As I got up I was standing in front of Weissshauss' house.