

Barsach

Radio play by Mudar Alhaggi

Translated from Arabic by Erik Altorfer
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Production: Deutschlandradio Kultur 2017

Mudar (German and Arabic), Traven

Prologue

Whoever comes in here,
His Name and Being is extinguished.
He is blown away,
Not a breath of him is preserved in the wide, wide world.
He can't go back, can't go forward,
Where he stands, he's spellbound.

Announcement

Barsach
Radio play by Mudar Alhaggi
With quotations from B. Traven's novel "The Death Ship"
Translated from Arabic: Larissa Bender

Traven

Whoever comes in here,
His Name and Being is extinguished.
It is blown away, not a breath of it is preserved in the wide, wide world.
He can't go back, can't go forward,
Where he stands, he's spellbound.
He knows neither God nor hell.
He is not day, he is not night.
He's the nothing, the never, the never.
He is too big for infinity
and too tiny for the grain of sand that has its goals in the universe.
He is the never been and the never thought!

Mudar (German and Arabic)

29.5.2016

Where am I? In front of me is a strange white wall, a window with a rather old wooden frame, a huge, very beautiful plant. I don't know its name. Once again it takes my memory some time to realize that I am in my small apartment in Berlin. A strange phenomenon. Since I left my apartment in Damascus in 2013, I have lived in so many apartments and in so many different places that it is difficult for me to remember where I am in the morning. And why I am there. My phone rings and I am reminded that I am married. I answer it, and my wife tells me that today is my first birthday since I have been in Germany. So that was exactly one year ago. She tells me that I have to go to the Foreigners' Registration Office to ask how things are with family reunion, which hasn't made any progress for four months without us knowing why ... I don't care if I'm late. What I need now Coffee and cigarettes. That's how I did it a year ago and then I went to *LAgeso*, the Foreigners' Registration Office.

Mudar (German and Arabic)

30 May 2015

It's seven in the morning. I'm at *LAgeso*. It's even busier today than yesterday... New refugees have arrived in Germany, and maybe tomorrow there will be more. It's a surprise to me that most of them are not Syrian. It seems to be an old building, and the staff seem to have gotten used to everything here, the refugees, their faces, their way of speaking, their demands. They've created a system to sort everything out. Therefore the asylum system is not provisional and has nothing to do with the war in Syria. It is much older and will not stop with the end of this war. There is not just the Syrian war, even though his cruelty is an exception. Poverty is everywhere, corruption too, racism, violence, religious oppression - all crises that never end, and consequently the asylum system will continue to exist. The queue is getting longer and longer. They are all waiting for a number that will allow them to apply for asylum. Some of them have settled on the ground in the garden, they have been waiting since yesterday. I am lucky, I have many friends in Berlin, so I have rented a

small room to which I can return for the night. I get a number and hand in my documents. I think this way I would officially apply for asylum. But the friendly man who receives my papers says that this is not even the beginning.

Now they would first send me somewhere in Germany, and there I would apply for asylum and there they would decide on my application.

The kind man

- Don't worry, being Syrian your request will most likely be granted.

Mudar

- I'm not worried about that, but I want to stay in Berlin.

The kind man

- Do you have first-degree relatives here?

Mudar

- No. I have friends, very close friends.

The kind man

- I cannot guarantee that you can stay in Berlin. It's a matter of luck. And it has to do with the absorption capacity of the German states.

Mudar

- And what are the criteria?

The kind man

- There are no criteria.

Mudar (German and Arabic)

I'm leaving the office and now I'm really worried. I don't want to be anywhere else in Germany but in Berlin. I do not know why I insist on staying here, the presence of friends is not a sufficient reason for the authorities to allow me to stay here. And in fact it is not a sufficient reason for me to want to stay here at all costs. Every hour a man comes out of the building. He holds up a sign with numbers on it. If your number is there, you go into the building and find out where the German authorities are sending you despite the expressed concern. There's something I like about the situation, it's like

putting your luck to the test. I have always enjoyed challenging my luck, and luck has always resisted me. But although I am convinced that I am not a lucky man, I have not given up hope. It's my turn.

After staring long at his computer screen, the grumpy man says:

"You must go to Thuringia."

Mudar

2. June 2015

They gave me a piece of paper to find my way. It didn't have a word on it. There were only drawings, a bus, and after the bus a train, and after the train another bus, and then a building. I felt like an idiot. In all my life I've never felt so stupid as when I was staring at the paper. Someone had drawn the means of transport for me so I could understand what they meant. The drawings looked just like the ones in my first year reading book. But I liked the page so much that I decided to keep it, even though I know that I always lose everything. The journey was longer and the camp further away than I had expected; a large property surrounded by a metal fence. The Security received me at the gate. I was afraid of them, but they were friendly. I calmed down. After the admission formalities were finished, a nice guard asked me if I had a question.

- Do you have wifi here?
- This is not hotel.

Mudar (German and Arabic)

4. June 2015

I stand in the breakfast queue, and like every day I ask myself why I actually come for breakfast when I normally don't eat anything in the morning. Maybe it has something to do with the fact that there is no coffee here. So I have to have breakfast first to be able to smoke. Suddenly the nice security guard comes.

- Are you ok?
- Yes.
- But you seem very tired.

- No, I am fine
- Sure?
- Yes, but I have no coffee.
- No coffee!!! Ok, that's why ... Sorry, no coffee.

Decision maker

5. June 2015

Dear applicant,

You've requested asylum. The application will be examined by the branch office of the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees. While the asylum application is being examined, you are obliged to stay for a maximum of three months in a reception facility at the branch office. During this time you are not allowed to work. Please indicate whether family members live in Germany and where they live and whether they are in an ongoing asylum procedure in Germany or have previously applied for asylum. You generally need a preliminary permit in case you want to leave your place of residence for a short time. You will also be given an appointment for an interview at the Federal Office. You are obliged to make the appointment in person. You will first be asked for your personal identity papers. If you have a passport or other identity documents, you must present them. They will take photos of you and take your fingerprints.

Mudar (German and Arabic)

7 June 2015

Here in Eisenberg there are seven in a room. Suspiciously we get acquainted with each other. The others are nice, and so am I, but for some reason I don't manage to make friends with any of them. This is not new to me. I know that I am not a sociable person and that I am not interested in many people. But the situation here is different, you don't have much choice. I realize now how closed off I was in Damascus. I have dealt with a few friends and a few acquaintances from the art world. Now I am forced to live outside these circles and unable to make contact with anyone. I deliberately try to keep my distance from the others. I need to be alone and I think it's safer that way. After a few days I divide my time between sleeping, eating, reading. And in the evening hours I sit alone in the garden

of the camp and observe the mechanisms man has invented to pass the time. I, for example, look for the answer to the question:

- Why am I alone?
- Is that my fault?
- Is there something I need to do?
- Is this what I really wanted?
- To be alone?

I protest, I cry silently: No, no, I don't want to be alone... I am alone now. I am interrupted by the voice of a little boy who can hardly speak:

- "Hi, I'm Teim."

This child is the answer to my question. It's very simple. You walk up to someone, introduce yourself, and you're no longer alone. I'm not one of those people who likes to talk to children, but this kid makes me curious.

- "Hello, Teim... My name is Mudar."

Teim and his nice little family will be my friends.

Mudar (German and Arabic)

29.5.2016

Berlin - one year later

I walked around the buildings of the German authorities for a year. I walked between the Foreigners' Registration Office and the Job Center. In the beginning I thought it was only a matter of time before I had the most important papers ready, then I would have the administrative procedures behind me. But nothing ends here. More and more papers are demanded of me, the whole thing becomes my daily occupation, but most of the time I don't get anywhere, there is always something wrong, a document is missing or an employee doesn't understand me or I can't make him understand what I want. What happens in the job centre is a different story again. As soon as I leave the office of the employee in

charge, I will automatically become work-shy swindler who never misses a trick to keep from working. Of course I am not like that, but how can I convince this employee that I am a professional artist, and that I cannot or do not want to pursue any other profession? When I go home, I'm exhausted and I think I deserve a reward: a kebab ... I love kebabs, they are the German equivalent of the Syrian shawarma. Shawarma is a part of my memory and my identity.

Mudar (German)

15 June 2015

I read my name on the list of those who were to be brought to a new camp in Suhl. There was no guarantee that the new camp would be better, but all those who were to move to Suhl had this hope, and it made them happy. The hope that there would be fewer people in one room, or that each room would have its own bathroom. Maybe there was also the hope that there would be internet or the possibility to make coffee in the morning. The camp in Suhl consisted of two buildings, each so large that it could accommodate more than a thousand people. The newcomers had to find a room on the fifth floor, but this floor was completely empty and deserted. The rooms had neither windows nor doors. We thought we could choose the rooms we liked. Now we were looking for a room, but first we had to find a door that we could use. Immediately the arrivals divided into groups and immediately I was alone. I had not been able to join one of the groups. A nice young man noticed my loss and invited me to move into his room, which he shared with his brother.

Mudar (German and Arabic)

19. July 2015

I got used to the place and to sharing a room with two people. We soon learned that Suhl would not be our last stop. But we would not be able to leave here very soon. The room consisted of three metal beds, a metal table, two chairs and three people: the nice young man, his depressed brother and me. The brother never left his bed, not even to go out to dinner. So I lost the last spark of hope to be alone even for only ten minutes. I had avoided sharing my apartment with anyone for the last fifteen years of my life, and now I had to get used to living in a room with two other people. Instead of introducing rules

for living together, I wanted to ignore everything that bothered me about my roommates, and so I soon submerged myself in my bed and spent the time between the pathetic attempts to write and to call my wife. The depressed roommate was on the phone the whole time. He paid for the internet as I did. He was not aware that you can also speak quietly, so I had to listen to everything.

They were discussing how the rest of the family would get here. Overland, through Bulgaria, that was very dangerous, said the nice man. The journey across the sea was even more dangerous, said the depressed man. Besides, the three thousand euros were not enough for the whole family. So they had to make a decision. The depressed man wanted to send his wife and children on the trip, because the family reunion would take too long. But the nice one wanted the parents to come first. This discussion ended in a brawl, and I finally had to free the nice one from the hands of the sad brother and save him from being strangled.

Mudar (German and Arabic)

20. July 2015

The fight ended mildly, but the room was half devastated. It was the last night of the two brothers in this camp. The next morning they were taken to another place. I thought I would be alone for a long time before new roommates arrived, but not an hour passed when the social worker brought two new ones. They took a look at the traces of destruction and asked the social worker to assign them another room. I liked that. I decided not to clean the room and not to clean up the devastation of the two brothers. So I managed to stay alone for a whole week.

24 July 2015

1)

Decider: Your name?

Mudar: Mudar Alhaggi.

Decider: Mr. Mudar, you have the right not to answer my questions. But if You answer, I expect you to tell the truth. Every word you say now will influence the decision regarding your application for asylum in Germany.

Mudar: All right.

Decider: Nationality?

Mudar: Syrian.

Decider: Date and place of your birth?

Mudar: Syria, Idlib, May 29, 1981. Actually, I was born in Aleppo, but my father wanted to enroll me in Idlib because we are originally from Idlib. When I was four years old, we moved there. But I can still remember our house in Aleppo. I loved that house. It was in the Saif Al-Daula district. It was bombed several times...

Decider: Should I enter Idlib or Aleppo now?

Mudar: No, let's leave it at Idlib, as my father wanted - God rest his soul.

Decider: Yes, all right ... and please answer only the questions.

Mudar: All right.

Decider: Religion?

Mudar: Muslim.

Decider: Religious community?

Mudar: Must you?

Decider: Yes, it has to be. This is of course secret. Don't worry, it won't get out.

Mudar: No, that's not what I mean. But I don't believe in religious communities and I don't recognize them.

Decider: But what are your parents?

Mudar: Sunni.

Decider: Profession?

Mudar: Playwright. I have also worked in social projects and at the Department of Culture.

Decider: Give me a profession.

Mudar: There is no profession... I do everything that is possible in these fields, theatre, development, culture ..., simply everything in these areas.

Decider: Should I write artists?

Mudar: Right, very good.

Decider: Do you like it?

Mudar: Yeah, you're great.

Decider: What was your financial situation before you left Syria?

Mudar: Good.

Decider: Do you have any personal documents, passport, identity card, birth certificate, any papers?

Mudar: Yeah, a passport.

Decider: Give it to me.

Mudar: He should be with you... I turned it in when I applied for asylum in Berlin.

Decider: No, we don't have it ... but that's no problem. I'll write down that you don't have any personal documents, and as soon as the passport turns up, we'll change that.

Mudar: Why no personal documents? I gave you my passport.

Decider: You say that you handed in your passport in Berlin.

Mudar: Yeah, in Berlin... By "you" I mean the German government.

Decider: This happens again and again. But don't worry, it has no influence on the decision.

Mudar: What now? It doesn't matter, but I'm now registered as if I don't have any documents?

Decider: That doesn't take long ... and besides, there are many Syrians who don't have a passport at all, and everything is going well ... Don't worry...

Mudar: But...

Decider: Do you have documents that prove that you are personally in danger?

Mudar: The Syrian passport.

Decider: What was your last official address in your home country?

Mudar: Damascus, Djaramana, Al-Homsi, at the corner of the Suwaida grocery store, opposite the bicycle repair shop, whose vicious owner watched me even more than I watched him, second floor, left, where a big rubber tree is standing on the balcony. I am most annoyed about the loss of the big rubber tree.

Decider: Was this your address before you came to Germany?

Mudar: Before I left Damascus for Lebanon. In Lebanon I had no address anymore, I lived there in

several apartments. And I lived in Germany for a while and in Switzerland for a few months.

Decider: What was your last address before you came to Germany?

Mudar: Rihaniyya in Turkey.

Decider: How long were you there you there?

Mudar: Two months.

Decider: Did you live there or did you visit?

Mudar: Visiting.

Decider: I asked where you lived.

Mudar: Like I told you: After I left Damascus in 2013, I had no permanent address and I haven't lived anywhere for more than four months.

Decider: Where did you live the longest?

Mudar: In Beirut.

Decider: And the address?

Mudar: There is no address.

Decider: Give me something, goddamn it.

Mudar: Aschrafiyya, Saasin Square, building number 17..., or 22, or... no, leave 17.

Decider: When did you leave your home country? And through which countries did you pass before you arrived in Germany? Please answer only the question.

Mudar: I left Syria for Germany on May 29, 2013. Then I returned to Lebanon, then to Switzerland, then back to Lebanon, then to Turkey, then back to Lebanon and finally from Lebanon to Turkey and from Turkey via Copenhagen to Sweden, and from there to Switzerland and from Switzerland to here.

Decider: What means of transport did you use on your way here?

Mudar: The plane.

Decider: And the visa?

Mudar: Schengen.

Decider: Really?

Mudar: Yeah, it was issued by the German Embassy in Beirut.

Decider: Do you have it with you?

Mudar: It's in the passport.

Decider: How did you get it?

Mudar: I got an invitation from a German cultural institution to participate in a theatre festival because I am a playwright. This is my third visa, so this is my third time coming to Germany.

Decider: When did you arrive in Germany?

Mudar: On May 25, 2015.

Decider: What are your parents' names and where do they live?

Mudar: My father died. His name was Riad Alhaggi. My mother is called Nima Alhaggi; she lives in Turkey. My parents are cousins. In our country there are very often marriages between relatives. I don't know why. Maybe because people are a bit isolated here, me too. I also live a bit isolated.

Decider: Do you still have relatives in your home country?

Mudar: My younger sister... she's still in Idlib. She has two small children. She is not leaving the country because her husband wants to stay. Her husband wants to stay because his parents are old, and they want to die in their village. I love my sister very much, she is the person I played and fought with most when I was little... But now I don't often ask about her, I don't know why. Sometimes we communicate through WhatsApp... but nothing important... "How are you?" "I'm fine." "How are you?" "I'm fine. "Is there any news?" "No, all the same. " Sometimes she tells me that they're bombing the neighborhood. Then I don't say anything... I'll just play the pious man and say: "No power, no strength, except to God".

Decider: Why don't you talk to her?

Mudar: Honestly, it's hard for me. I don't want to write the same pointless stuff over and over again. And we can only write about WhatsApp, we can't talk on the phone.

Decider: At which university or college did you study?

Mudar: I have a degree from the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts in Damascus.

Decider: Did you do your military service?

Mudar: Yeah.

Decider: Were you a member of a non-governmental armed group or other political organization?

Mudar: No.

Decider: Were you an eyewitness of or victim of crimes or did you commit crimes such as mass

murder or war crimes or attacks against the civilian population, executions, mass funerals, chemical weapons attacks?

Mudar: No.

Mudar (German and Arabic)

28 July 2015

This morning I was woken by a terrible noise. I was told that the camp was being searched. No one knew what was being searched. Some said they were looking for drugs, some said money, some said alcohol. It was all forbidden. I was really scared because I had alcohol. It was one of those moments when my confidence in my mind returned. I put the alcohol into a water bottle and it really looked like water. When the policeman entered he didn't search my room at all. But he saw my laptop and said in surprise, "Aah, you have laptop ..." and went out.

Mudar (German and Arabic)

August 1, 2015

There are refugees everywhere and everyone wants to tell his story. And everybody tries to make it more exciting and interesting. But nobody exaggerates when they tell what happened on the way from their home country to Europe. There is no need to exaggerate. The horror they have experienced is enough to astonish the listeners. But sometimes they are not able to tell the terrible things that have happened to them. One spent several days outdoors in the snow; another saw with his own eyes how a whole family drowned in the sea; one told that the smuggler was about to shoot at him when he refused to get into the boat; one was on the run three hours from the Hungarian police; another was beaten by the police in Hungary because he refused to give his fingerprints in order not to apply for asylum in Hungary, because that would make his application for asylum in Germany more difficult. This fingerprinting in Hungary was a reason for discrimination among refugees. Those who were lucky or had been smarter had made it to Germany without giving their fingerprints in Hungary or

Macedonia. In the midst of all this confusion, I wanted to prevent anyone from asking me how I got to Germany. I didn't want them to know that the worst thing I had experienced was that my plane was less than an hour late... A Schengen visa was an exception, and those who had such a visa were better to be quiet and not to brag, so as not to hurt the feelings of others.

Mudar (German and Arabic)

29.5.2016

Berlin, one year later Was my decision to come to Germany right? I had placed great hopes in this decision. A whole year has now passed, and I remember I think about these hopes and ask myself about the difference between hope and illusion. When I came to Germany, I thought I could devote myself to writing here without being forced to take on work that neither belongs to my field of expertise nor suits me, just to earn enough money to live on. Here in Berlin, I realized that my hope had been an illusion, and that the hope of devoting myself exclusively to writing was the dream of every unknown writer in the world. In Berlin, you understand exactly what being unknown means and are ready to accept the idea that you will remain an unknown all your life.

I was also hoping to gain a sense of "security". I had hoped not to be attacked because of my identity, my religious or ethnic affiliation or my views. I can say that this hope was not an illusion, although I felt the same uneasiness here as in Damascus and Beirut, perhaps even more so, especially during the first months in Germany, when I was in various refugee camps. During that time I felt an inexplicable unease. But the external circumstances of life were not a sufficient reason for this feeling. It was a feeling of insecurity, although I am really safe in Germany and I am not threatened! A friend of mine has a surprising explanation that makes me think: The problem is that by fleeing to Germany and applying for asylum I was forced to leave the Syrian middle class and now find myself in Germany in the lowest social class. However hard I try to change this and develop myself, I will not succeed. It is very simple: I am and I will remain a foreign refugee.

Mudar (German)

August 5, 2015

After the long waiting time I moved from Suhl to Sömmerda, a small, clean town. Also the new camp

was small and clean. There were ten of us and obviously the first ones who lived here. In each room lived two people. I shared my room with the sixty-year-old Abu Kamal. He was friendly, but he talked non-stop on the phone with his wife and children, who were in Syria waiting for family reunion. Abu Kamal told me that I should be happy to share the room with him because he was an excellent cook and would take on the task of preparing the food every day. He cooked really well, spaghetti with tomato sauce, but only that. During the time with him I ate nothing else but spaghetti with tomato sauce.

Mudar (German)

August 10, 2015

There was a young Afghan who came to the camp every few days drunk and stoned. As soon as he entered the security room, he freaked out and started screaming and fighting. Today it was even worse, he behaved like a wild bull. The security guard tried to overpower him and asked me to help him. Together we managed to throw him to the ground and fix him, and when the guard wanted to call the police, he ordered me to hold him tight. Because the boy was very strong, I didn't know how to help myself but to lay all my weight on him. I guess he thought I was hugging him because he started kissing me and cried and kept saying, "Syria good, Afghanistan good." And before the police got there, he was asleep.

Mudar (German and Arabic)

August 22, 2015

Everyone who was with me in Sömmerda received their residence permit, except me. I remembered at what time the mail arrived and was at the mailbox before the head of the camp - but nothing. The only sentence the director always said when he saw me was

- "No mail."

Mudar (German and Arabic)

That was also the first sentence I knew in German. He said this sentence with regret and I believed him. I never spoke to this man, because he could not speak English and I could not speak German.

But for some reason I had the impression that he had sympathy for me and would understand my situation. He even got me a room by myself, even though I hadn't asked for it. I was infinitely grateful to him for that. However, the room I had dreamed of since my arrival in Germany three months ago became a grave over time. It was a small room with kitchen and bathroom, but it was so small that one could hardly move in it. I only left the room to buy cigarettes, food and beer. I was isolated from the outside world and was content to write and to watch a movie from time to time. The room was eating me up. It was small and warm and dark. No one tried to cross the border and enter. I was almost happy there. I was almost ready never to come out. Still I kept waiting for my residence permit. I listened carefully to the footsteps outside and could identify the footsteps of the director of the camp, who came every afternoon at two o'clock, knocked on the door of my neighbours and handed out the mail.

He never came near my door. But today there was a knock. I opened the door in fear, he handed me the mail. But it wasn't the residence permit, it was a novel a friend had sent me. *The Death Ship*.

Mudar (German and Arabic)

September 5, 2015

I read the novel, I empathize with Gale, the protagonist. Gale is a sailor who lost his passport and his papers and then found no place in the world where he was tolerated, except for the Yorrike, an old ship with all those on board who are dead, so to speak, because they have lost their passports, those who are not recognized by their home countries and cannot find a new home. On the Yorrike, those who have no identity papers are accepted. The Yorrike accepts all those who do not actually exist legally. On this ship weapons are transported to War zones. Gale works as a stoker in the ship's coal-burning furnace, he burns with the embers, so that the Yorrike can drive, so that the wars continue. Only then the world will accept those without papers...

Traven, Mudar (German and Arabic)

The Death Ship

He didn't ask for a sailor's card, hiring book, passport or anything else like that. He knew that people

who come to the Yorikke must not be asked for such things. They might say: "I have no papers." What then? Then he would not be allowed to mark them, and the Yorikke would not have a crew. At the next consul, the list had to be officially confirmed. But then there was nothing more to be changed, the man had already signed on, had already driven, and it was no longer possible to refuse him the consular confirmation. The consul officially knows no death ships, and unofficially he does not believe in them. Being a consul requires talents. Consuls also do not believe in people being born, unless the birth certificate certifies birth in black and white.

Mudar (German and Arabic)

16 September 2015

The ID I still carry with me says:

Decision-maker "Has no documents to confirm his identity."

Mudar (German and Arabic)

This is not true, I have documents confirming my identity, I handed them over to the German authorities, but for some reason unrelated to me, they were lost or arrived late at the court in Thuringia. I can't stop thinking about it. And supposing I really had no identity papers, I finally have my memory, but my memory is all mine. An eye print, a fingerprint or a voice print can be recognized, but nobody can see the memory, and therefore it cannot be recognized as a personal identity document. Since 2009 I have a Facebook account, and on it you can see my picture. Why don't they recognize my Facebook account as a personal identification document? All this just because I come from a country whose government doesn't care at all whether I have papers or not; a government that only cares whether I agree with everything it wants to do with me; a government that only cares that I am part of the herd; that I am willing to destroy the country and burn the people to keep the regime in power. If I do all that, I won't be asked to prove my identity. Then I am in a position to distrust others and to condemn those who do not want to go with the herd. Is Syria in my story the death ship? But I left Syria. Gale, too, was able to escape from the death ship, and he ended up on another ship. The Empress of Madagascar. It made a noble and luxurious impression. Gale compared her to the young woman who had smiled boldly at him and flirted with him from afar. She

appeared to him like the expected paradise, like the Garden of Eden. But the paradise that Gale received on board was on the way to suicide. It was the last voyage of the ship that was destined to sink.

Traven, Mudar (German and Arabic)

The Death Ship

It was weird. I, who was the victim, didn't feel the slightest agitation. When the officer told me that I had to be shot within twenty-four hours, I didn't feel any more, as if he had said: "Get out of here as soon as possible. It left me cold as a cobblestone. In fact, I had been dead for a long time. I wasn't born, didn't have a seaman's card, I could never in my life get a passport, and everyone could do what they wanted with me, because I was nobody, wasn't officially born at all, and therefore couldn't be missed. If someone killed me, no murder had been committed. Because I wasn't missing anywhere. A dead man can be defiled, robbed, but not murdered.

Mudar (German and Arabic)

October 26, 2015

The book was getting to me. This strange similarity between what happened to me and what happened to the protagonist sometimes depressed me so much that I didn't want to read on. But often I also believed that this similarity was not just a coincidence. It was worth thinking about. Maybe I would write about it and make it the theme of my new play... *The Death Ship*. What had prompted Traven to write this novel nearly a hundred years ago? What did he mean by that?

Traven, Mudar (German and Arabic)

Traven: Humanity is bad.

Mudar: What's new about it?

Traven: There is nothing new about it, but we have to keep saying it over and over again.

Mudar: Why?

Traven: So we don't get used to it.

Mudar: And what good is it if we don't get used to it?

Traven: That leaves a small room for dreamers. And if there are dreamers, it means that there are dreams, and if there are dreams, there is a reason to go on. And if you're asking me now why keep going, then...

Mudar: Why go on?

Traven: Get away!

Mudar: Why? When I read your novel, I felt that nothing happens today that hasn't happened before. Humanity is still as vile as it was when you wrote the novel. If we go back in history, we can see that vileness is developing parallel to the development of human civilization. Of course, today it is a different form of infamy and it is expressed and dealt with differently. But there it is only logical that I ask: "Why continue?"

Traven: Why are you writing?

Mudar: This is what I can do. Or what I want to do. Or, say, I want to do something to express my attitude.

Traven: Your attitude to what?

Mudar: To everything.

Traven: Why?

Mudar: Because I go crazy if I don't express myself. I don't talk much, so I write.

Traven: So you write to stay clear in your head? Why do you want to stay clear in your head?

Mudar: To move on.

Traven: The crazy man keeps going.

Mudar: Sure?

Traven: Of course! He is alive, and most of the time he is even better off than me and you.

Mudar: You cannot speak for a madman. Perhaps a madman would prefer sanity.

Traven: But he has no mind, so he can't want to have a mind.

Mudar: You really are crazy.

Traven: You're right. Maybe that's why I came to you... I heard you say that in your new work you want to write about the death ship, or about the similarity of your story to the death ship.

Mudar: Right.

Traven: I won't allow it.

Mudar: Why?

Traven: Because you're going to destroy the novel.

Mudar: How do you know that? Maybe I don't!

Traven: But the probability that you destroy it is quite high. Because you are an Arab writer, and because you Arab writers have no artistic competences.

Mudar: This xenophobia is contrary to the tenets of your novel.

Traven: Bullshit! I'm just guessing. And it's simple because I've never heard an Arab author who works at a high level, that is very rare.

Mudar: Maybe I'm one of those rare cases.

Traven: You don't look like that. and besides, you're still young.

Mudar: No, I'm not young... I'm thirty-six... And besides, I am Syrian, which means that you have to multiply the last five years by five, so twenty-five plus thirty-one, which is fifty-six years... I am fifty-six years old.

Traven: You're getting on my nerves. You can't write this story.

Mudar: You're a liar.

Traven: Shut up!

Mudar: No, I'm not going to shut up... Whoever reads your novel will see that the one who wrote it is a romantic, a fighter, a hero, someone who has a dream he believes in... And now you forbid me to write. So you're stopping me from resisting just like you.

Traven: What am I supposed to do with such a chatterbox? I'm worried about the novel... I can't guarantee that you won't destroy it.

Mudar: What kind of guarantee do you want?

Traven: I don't know.

Mudar: My resume.

Traven: Why do you want to use the novel?

Mudar: You criticized the idea of the passport, that's very brave. I don't know how courageous it was a hundred years ago, but I think it was courageous, because borders and passports are taken for

granted nowadays. And when I make a connection between this courageous idea and the simple and sometimes naive protagonist Gale and the craziness of criticizing borders and passports, then I feel how badly the world needs crazy people and wants to be as crazy as you are ... Or let's say I must be as crazy as you... I can still remember how shocked we Syrians were when we had to mourn the first death of the Syrian revolution... We were so shocked ... we thought that this has happened now and it won't happen again. Then there were two more deaths, and again we were shocked and understood that the first death was no exception ... The next day, 10 died... and we were shocked... and faced the fear... As time went by, the number increased and we were less shocked... Until we reached a point where we would breathe again in the evening, when the number of deaths that day had not exceeded fifty. At the end of 2013, Bashar al-Assad killed more than one thousand people in a single village with chemical weapons. We were shocked... and the whole world was shocked and started to take action to show Assad the red line... And suddenly they made a deal with him and agreed that he had to hand over the chemical weapons... And everybody was satisfied... Now, Assad can't kill a thousand people in a single day, but he can kill over ten days... Since then, we have not been shocked and gradually we have stopped trying to count the dead ... How to deal with a world like this? The madness I'm talking about is not the madness of despair, the madness of someone who has stopped thinking about how bad the world is and who is becoming happy ... No, I'm talking about the madness that is the only way to bear the world ... If you want the world to understand you, you must be crazy, you must be radical. That is the language of the time.

Traven: But all this doesn't answer my question, why of all things you want this novel.

Mudar: I don't have a clear answer for that.

Traven: Get out, and don't come back until you have a clear answer.

Mudar: When you wrote the novel, did you have any idea why you were writing it?

Traven: You are impertinent... I don't have to answer you, I don't want anything from you but you want something from me, so you have to answer me.

Mudar: I just wanted to say that you don't necessarily have to have a clear idea when you start an artistic work.

Traven: This way you fail ... Maybe you're right. But in your situation you must prove that you deserve that I grant you permission. I'm not going to take the risk of giving one of my most important

novels to a show-off like you ...*The Death Ship* is for me an exception. When I wrote the novel, I challenged the power of simplicity, I wanted to say the most complicated things in simple words, and I passed the challenge... Even when I said in public that it was a simple novel, written in a simple language and just for fun. My words were not well received, the critics insisted on seeing something extraordinary in the structure of the novel. They are allowed to do that, of course, but I am also allowed to describe my novel the way I want to. This contradiction between the simple and the complex in *The Death Ship* is what gives the novel that special something. And you just come along and want to use the novel, and if I ask you why, you say you have no clear reason.

Mudar: It's an ingenious novel... ingenious because of this contradiction you speak of. And why is there this contradiction...? Because you are quite simply a mystery... You pretend to write simply, even though your literature is very profound... do you want to convince me that the similarity between *The Death Ship* and Dante's *Divine Comedy* is a coincidence? Of course, literary criticism says that this similarity is a coincidence that makes you a genius. If you would publicly admit that you were based on the structure of *The Divine Comedy*, you would suddenly be insignificant. You would stand as someone who relied on something that was already created, because you are limited and because your creative energy does not go beyond the naivety you call simplicity... this is why you fled from the journalists and covered the traces of your identity. And nobody knows for sure what name is behind the pseudonym Traven. I must admit it's very clever...

You have a knack for making things seem more important than they actually are...

Traven: Right! Everything you said is right... And you're still not allowed to use the novel.

Mudar: I don't need your permission anymore... I wanted to be polite and show you respect, but you seem to be a person who doesn't understand this language. I will use the novel... You can't hurt me, firstly because you're dead and secondly because you are intangible. There is not even proof that you wrote the novel.

Traven: You are going to regret this.

Mudar: I would regret making my work contingent upon your permission.

Traven: I am dead, and my curse will be on you... You will fail... You'll be a laughingstock... You will become depressed and then you will kill yourself.

Mudar: And why is that? What makes you different from the owner of the Yorikke that was used for weapon smuggling? What distinguishes you from an arms dealer anyway, from one who spreads fear and death? What distinguishes you from the consul of the people without papers?

Traven: Nothing... Nothing at all... I'm just like them and worse... And if you want to end up in the coal oven, challenge me.

Mudar: I'm in the coal oven anyway... Since the Syrian revolution began... Since I left Damascus, I've been in the coal oven. Every move I make, I burn. I got used to the burns. Whoever reads your novel knows exactly what it means to be in a coal oven. What it means when your body gets used to the fire and lives on the embers.

... Nothing causes him pain anymore ... And once he feels no more pain, he has no fear... And once he feels no fear, he's strong.

Mudar (German and Arabic)

26. October 2015

A knock at the door woke me up from a strange dream. It was a special knock, it had to be something important. It was the warden. This time he had put on a cheerful face and he began to explain to me in German something I did not understand, but it was obviously good news. He gave me an envelope and asked me to open it immediately.

Decision maker

Dear Mr. Mudar Alhaggi, your application for asylum has been granted in accordance with paragraph 3, section 1 of the Asylum Act. The Federal Office will inform you of your rights and obligations. For this purpose we send you the regulations concerning your new rights and obligations.

With kind regards

Mudar (German and Arabic)

27. October 2015

I'm on my way to Berlin... I am proud... I have a residence permit and identity papers... I feel

free... I have the feeling that a new life is beginning... I didn't say goodbye to anybody, I didn't pack my bag, I only took the most important things with me and went to Berlin ...

At night on the bus I try to remember my last night in Damascus. I can only recall a few images, but the strongest and clearest is exactly the last thing I remember about Damascus: A soldier looks me in the face at the last military checkpoint before the Lebanese border. Then he searches my bag and finally looks at me examiningly, for a long time. Then he says:

- "The arak liquor in your bag is not good, I cannot recommend it."

I'm biting my tongue. Yeah, I used to do that to hide my tension at Syrian checkpoints. I say "my tension" not to say "my fear"... I was scared, but that was the last time I bit my tongue. Then I crossed the border to Lebanon. Berlin, I am coming, and I will drink a lot of beer.

Mudar (German and Arabic)

29.5.2016

Berlin, one year later

All I see in the sky is the moon. I am lying late at night on the shore of a lake in Berlin and am happy about a very special birthday. This is one of the advantages of Berlin in summer: the lakes and small forests belong to everyone. These things are very important for me in the new city, especially in summer. I get sleepy and do not fight against sleeping under the open sky. This pleasant breeze, the lonely moon in the sky, the peace, these are moments when I feel like the little boy on the roof of the room in our little country house in Idlib. Where I enjoyed sleeping in the summer so much, surrounded by my family and surrounded by conversations and stories. Today my thirty-sixth year of life begins. I see the same sky, the same moon, I perceive the same silence, I feel the same security, I wish here in Berlin what I wished as a child in Idlib: that this moment never ends. But it did stop. The room in the country is no longer there. It was bombed, and nobody knows whether it was a Syrian, Iranian, Russian or American plane that dropped the bombs. The moon I see now, as a refugee in Berlin, is the same moon I saw as a boy in Idlib and as a young man in Damascus. The moon I see now is the same moon that Traven saw when he wrote his novel *The Death Ship*. And it is the same one Gale saw, the sailor without papers, when he took one last look at the world. Maybe the answer is the moon, Traven. We

forget we're walking on the same earth, but we can't forget we're seeing the same moon. Traven, I've decided to use your novel for my new play, and I'm going to start it with the poem written above the crew quarters on the Yorikke:

Mudar (German and Arabic)

Whoever comes in here,
his Name and Being is extinguished.
He is blown away,
Not a breath of him is preserved in the wide, wide world.
He can't go back, can't go forward,
Where he stands, he's spellbound.
He knows neither God nor hell.
He is not day, he is not night.
He's the nothing, the never, the never.
He is too big for infinity and too tiny
for the grain of sand that has its goals
in the universe.
He is the never been and the never thought!

Barsach

Radio play by Mudar Alhaggi

With quotations from B. Traven's novel "The Death Ship"

Translated from Arabic: Larissa Bender

With: Mudar Alhaggi, Tilo Nest, Steffi Kühnert, Ulrich Voß and Max Urlacher

Guest Najwana Al Serawan

Composition: Martin Schütz

Sound engineering and technology: Thomas Monnerjahn and Sonja Rebel

Assistant Director: Esther Schelander

Adaptation and direction: Erik Altorfer

Production: Deutschlandradio Kultur 2017