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On Past, Present and Calamity. Review of *Madonnas letzter Traum* (Madonna's Last Dream) by Doğan Akhanlı

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Review:

Doğan Akhanlı: *Madonnas letzter Traum* (Madonna's Last Dream).

Novel, translated from Turkish by Recai Hallaç.

472 pp. Bremen: Sujet, 2019. 24,80 €. ISBN 978 3 96202 042 2.

On Past, Present and Calamity

“This is not how Maria Puder died.” – It is this sober observation that opens Dogan Akhanlı's Novel *Madonna's Last Dream*, originally published in Turkey in 2005 and now translated into German by Recai Hallaç at Sujet Verlag in Bremen.

Who is, or who was, Maria Puder? She was a Jewish woman, a resident of Berlin in the 1930s and the great love of Raif Efendi, who left Istanbul for the German capital after his father forced him to sign up for job training in Germany. Both Raif Efendi and Maria Puder are the protagonists of Sabahattin Ali's groundbreaking novel *Madonna in a Fur Coat*, originally published in 1943 and only rediscovered in the course of the last twenty years. Today, *Madonna* is considered to be one of the defining works of modern Turkish literature. Ali, who was murdered in 1948 at the Turkish-Bulgarian border while attempting to escape the country after he was threatened with arrest on account of his political attitudes, also deals with his own experiences in this work. The obvious references to his own biography, to his time in Berlin and Potsdam from 1928 to 1930 and to a great unrequited love (who in reality lived in Istanbul and received Ali's handwritten poems by mail) cannot be overlooked. In the end, Maria Puder dies without Raif Efendi ever seeing her again as a result of his return to Anatolia.

Dogan Akhanlı revisits the earlier work of Sabahattin Ali. *Madonna's Last Dream* can be read as a continuation, a variation of and an homage to the original. However, Akhanlı's narrative is more comprehensive than Ali's story was. The work attempts to consider the entire 20th century and establishes connections between the genocides of Armenians and Jews with the right-wing extremist assassination attempts of Solingen all the way up to the present-day experiences of refugees. These are Akhanlı's central themes: his novel *Judges of the Last Judgment* was the first work of Turkish prose to openly address the Armenian genocide – still a taboo topic in Turkey, where even the mention of

this crime is a punishable offence. The Holocaust, the mass murders of repressive regimes, the suppression of free speech, the persecution of minorities: Doğan Akhanlı is an author who does not want to simply accept the past but instead wants to remind us of it, to show us that history repeats itself. This interest is informed by own experiences. Over the last forty years he has been imprisoned several times in Turkey, wrongly accused of murder, tortured and finally expatriated. Since the end of the nineties he has been living in Germany, mainly in Cologne and Berlin. When he returned to Turkey in 2010 to visit his terminally ill father, he was once again brought to trial. When his father died, he was held in prison. And finally, in 2017 the Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan had him arrested in Andalusia with an Interpol warrant. The Turkish request for extradition only failed because of enormous international pressure. Akhanlı was able to return to Cologne and finally came to terms with his own story in his book *Detention in Granada*. In light of his background, its often forgotten that Akhanlı is first and foremost an author of popular literature and not a 'full-time persecutee' of various Turkish regimes.

Madonna's Last Dream begins with the murder of Sabahattin Ali – and with a secret he takes to his grave: Maria Puder did not actually die in puerperium. She was killed while travelling on the refugee ship *Struma*, which was sunk by Soviet torpedoes in the Bosphorus in February 1942. As the ship was sailing for Palestine, Turkish authorities had not allowed the *Struma* to dock in Istanbul. 760 people died.

Akhanlı's novel, whose cover is adorned with a *Stolperstein* (tripping stone), refuses to forget, not only in terms of content but also in terms of design. The names of the 760 refugees killed accompany the reader on every page, each one placed at the bottom of the page next to the page number. Thus, the book itself becomes a literary *Stolperstein*.

Ultimately it is the protagonist and narrator of the story who traces Maria Puder's tale and falls for her at least as obsessively as Raif Efendi once did – and this narrator is a Cologne-based author with Turkish roots. As Sabahattin Ali did before him, Akhanlı also plays with his own biography. He sends out a supposedly real person to search for a fictitious one that is considered real – and therefore on a journey that leads from Germany via Turkey, through Poland and the Czech Republic, along the fault lines of the bloodiest conflicts of the past century and into the present. He visits Villa Marlier, where the Wannsee Conference once took place. Today, this building where the 'Final Solution' was decided upon is a memorial, and the narrator collapses feeling the power of history and the horrific reality. The fact that Akhanlı actually succeeds in juxtaposing this horror with passages of light humor surely is one of the many strengths of this novel. These passages serve as a proposition to a certain kind

of attitude towards life, one that is not willing to surrender to the horror but instead strives to carry on.

And then there are such unintentional winking elements, in which reality and fiction converge, even mix with each other: in Berlin's Motzstraße, where Raif Efendi and Maria Puder once met, where the fictional Akhanli follows their footsteps, today one can find the headquarters of the Binooki publishing house, which exclusively publishes German translations of Turkish literature. This publishing house was founded in 2011 – six years after the first publication of Akhanli's novel.

If the boundaries between fiction and reality are still clearly drawn in the first half of the novel, they blur completely towards the end – what is fiction and what is reality becomes indistinguishable. The lone exception is the story of the *Struma* and the fate of its passengers, which hovers above every word, above every syllable like a memorial.

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