Lion's Fur Den

"Oda" was the name of my father's undisputed favorite lioness. I can't say how long Oda lived in the Leipzig Zoo under my father's veterinary care and gave birth to lion cubs, but she must have been some kind of super mother. It's not just that she gave birth to 45 cubs in 13 litters, she was also busy as a fantastic foster mother. If there were any problems with nursing, if there was a lioness giving birth for the first time who was overwhelmed by the whole "cub thing," which wasn't an uncommon occurrence, then you could put the little stranger next to Oda and her children and she would fill it up too.

My father once told me that Oda even had to serve as a wet nurse for a litter of tiger cubs. In addition to the famous Leipzig lions, the Zoo had also been successfully breeding Siberian tigers for decades. The little, hungry Siberian tiger cubs, who weren't fooling anyone with their black stripes in their dense yellow fur, were rubbed with lion urine to at least give the impression that they were lion cubs.

Today I'd like to ask my father how Oda reacted to the striped creatures stinking of lion pee, if she was at least briefly irritated and hesitant before she was able to accept the situation, but I've missed that chance – my father died long ago, and now he's where Oda is too – an unknown place. All I can remember is that he told me the whole thing had gone off without a hitch back then: Oda had nursed the tiger cubs as if they were her own. Today I think she probably must have had an uninterrupted hormone high – a continuous buzz of birthing and nursing – for years on end. But it wasn't only Oda who had had that experience. Generally speaking, this was something all the successful lionesses in the "Leipzig Lion Factory" experienced. And yet, Oda ruled as queen over everyone, the oxytocin queen, because only she could have managed to nurse the striped lion cubs.

I myself never met the fabulous Oda personally, I only knew her since I can remember, from stories and from a black-and-white photograph, but above all as a large, sand-colored, very uniquely scented fur, which initially lay in the living room during my childhood, then in various other apartments in Leipzig, where I spread it out to feel at home. I inherited Oda's fur after my father's death, and my brother inherited the fur of a male lion. But the bequest was not limited to the two lion skins. It was much more expansive, due to the fact that my brother and I grew up in a kind of furry den. There were furs lying around or hanging on the

walls everywhere, especially in the big living room in my childhood home. The patterns on the animal's coat, which stood out among the rough, white wallpaper and the light brown herringbone parquet like dotted, striped and endlessly decorated, flat treasure chests, could have given uninformed visitors the impression of having stumbled across the home of a GDR big game hunter. My father had fought for the lives of every single zoo patient entrusted to him, and in his more than 30 years as a zoo vet in Leipzig had struggled to save the lives of hundreds, if not thousands of animals. He had won many of these fights, but had lost some as well. And when he lost, he sought comfort and remembrances in the skins. Then the people who worked at the GDR zoos – the directors, veterinarians, and animal keepers – sought comfort and memories in the skins. That was also the reason why the den of furs of my childhood became more and more furry over the years – life came and went in the Leipzig Zoo, just as it came and went in normal, non-zoo life, where little brothers and sisters were born, and grandmas and grandpas died.

The highest concentration of furs in my childhood home could perhaps be best described and inventoried as follows: there were two lion skins (one Oda and one male lion with a stately mane, whose name I no longer recall; both lying in front of the television), two skins from full-grown Siberian tigers (hanging over the yellow velvet sofa backrest), one leopard (with taxidermized head, wonderful amber glass eyes and very long whiskers; hanging on the wall), a black bearskin (not large, but a problematic fur: several generations of dogs belonging to the Elze household loved or hated this very fur, and habitually pooped, peed, or barfed on it, a Przewalski's horse skin (in other words, a horse skin from a true wild horse, as I was happy to assure my friends again and again during the house tours I conducted), a zebra skin (from the foal named "Christian," which had been named after me: a Grévy's zebra foal whom I'd loved with all my heart and who had later died of severe diarrhea), an Ocelot fur (small, but beautiful, and particularly valuable, as my father always emphasized), a clouded leopard (perhaps the most beautiful big cat in the world: a mixture of dots, stripes, and tile-like patterns), then goatskins, sheepskins, and much more, because even domestic animals (especially guinea pigs) were taxidermized and stored in the Elze house as a keepsake: either as small, handkerchief-sized skins or as full-sized taxidermy, more or less shriveled, stuffed with wood wool and given glass eyes.

In addition, there were other zoological objects for the den of furs, which were also admired by visitors: for example, an ear from an African elephant (hanging over the large living room door), the hollowed-out foot of a hippopotamus (which I liked to put on my head as a hat or a hat-like sculpture, and it was a perfect fit, meaning I didn't have to hold it in place), elephant molars and elephant ribs, a stuffed giant lizard, an ostrich egg, cobblestone-sized kidney stones from horses, an unborn, mummified piglet, and much, much more.
As my brother recently assured me, there were even more bones in our coal cellar. He spoke of a bag full of bones. I myself have never seen the sack. My brother says it's because I never had to fetch coal as a child, but that's not true – I did fetch coal while fearing for my life. Instead, I think it was because at some point my father put the bag of bones somewhere safe, safe from my brother. He himself has admitted that for years he used this very bag of bones to swap bones for Smurfs and other coveted toys. My father found out at some point when some of my brother's "business partners" expressed their joy and enthusiasm and thanked my father as well for the beautiful "wild bones." In addition to numerous elephant ribs, my brother had also exchanged a valuable thoracic vertebra from an elephant, which broke the camel's back. The thoracic swap had to be reversed.

Except for Oda, my apartment is free of fur today after being more or less furry following my father's death. I sense I needed a kind of break from fur, but I carefully stored all of the skins. And yet, it has remained a battle: not for the lives of the original fur owners, as my father had waged it, but for the furs themselves, which are attacked by moths all year around. Several square inches have been irretrievably lost already. Oda's coat has also suffered, on her tail and head, especially the ears, but it is still magically beautiful: sandy, with a few brown spots on her slightly lighter flanks – then there is its unmistakable, slightly musty, yet pleasant smell. Although my brother inherited the fur of a magnificent male lion with a mane typical for Leipzig's breeding program, I'm still glad that I got Oda, without a mane, but full of magical hair – like a flying carpet back to my childhood. And meanwhile, it even seems to me as if Oda's fur is also a piece of my father, which I defend against the moths, even if I – or my son, or possible grandson –will probably lose the fight in the end. But who cares: right now, Oda is still here and that means a piece of my father is too, her greatest admirer among humans.

At this point it occurs to me that when I was ten years-old, I once told my father about my plans for what I would do with him when he was dead. I told him that I would have him stuffed so I could set him up in the apartment. It was a kind of declaration of love and he understood it immediately and smiled. Then we got practical: he asked me where exactly I would put him and I thought for a while because I hadn't considered it in detail. I finally gave my answer: In the hallway – so that I could always see him when I came in. That answer obviously satisfied him and made him happy.

When my father suddenly fell over and died on a sunny and warm spring afternoon in May 2001, during the birthday party of a 68-year-old colleague in his former study at the Leipzig Animal Clinic, the same clinic where he had worked his whole life next to the zoo, I was walking or sitting on a bench at the Berlin Zoo, where I was doing an internship, and let the sun shine in my face. After his death, I drove home and everything ended up being quite different from anything once conceived in a 10-year-old's universe. It didn't come to pass that I had my father stuffed, even though Gunther von Hagen's "Body Worlds" already existed at that time and the "master of plastination" or "Joseph Beuys for necrophiliacs" was busy searching for corpses for his exhibitions, which roamed the world like lifeless travelling circuses at the turn of the millennium. But at home in the hallway he would never be able to stand, my father, that became perfectly clear to me at the age of 27. I accepted that he was cremated and buried at Leipzig's Südfriedhof cemetery, and in his place laid Oda's fur in the hallway of my new apartment. It didn't take long and I had the feeling that someone was happy. Someone who wasn't me.

Rhani

My father not only had a favorite lioness at the Leipzig Zoo, he also had a favorite elephant cow. Her name was “Rhani.” She had lived in Leipzig since 1956 and was a real wild animal, which means that she was born in the wild and caught there, not that she was actually wild. As is so often the case, particularly close bonds develop between two people, but it can also happen between a human and an animal when there has been a difficult trial that they have experienced together. In the case of Oda the lioness, it was a dangerous neonatal disease, which my father and Oda defeated together, in the case of Rhani, it was a no less dangerous disease. At the time, my father and the still-young elephant cow were tied to the sickbed, which was located in a red brick building, that had the nickname “the pachyderm house.”

At this point it occurs to me that my father had always resisted using the term “pachyderm” – literally “thick skinned” – in relation to elephants. During tours he gave at the zoo, he always emphasized that elephant skin was thin, similar to a cow’s, then would pull a small, square piece of elephant skin out of his pocket and ask bystanders to touch it and hold it between their fingers. When my father didn’t bring it along on a tour in his white coat pocket, this small, square piece of skin was carefully kept in the treasure chest in my childhood bedroom at home. Elephant skin looks like a lunar landscape, with countless small craters and slight hills, which is incidentally also well-suited for massages. As far as I can remember, slowly moving a piece of elephant skin over bare human skin, preferably on the back or arm, always felt great. But back to Rhani. My father described the beginning of his friendship with her in an academic zoological article. Here is a short excerpt:

“It is not uncommon for an elephant to suddenly refuse food, especially in the late-spring months and during the summer. Is there a serious general illness coming on? No. If you observe it calmly, you will see that it has placed his hind and front legs closer together and often pulls a hind leg a little tighter. It is easy to understand this sign language: Abdominal pain, but not yet so severe or, perhaps the animal does not yet want to make it so clear to others. Suspected diagnosis: sand colic! The appropriate treatment is injections or orally administering the medication. Early the following day, deliverance: After a few lumps of

feces, a large quantity of sand is expelled, which the animal – ignorant of the danger – had ingested.

The situation was much worse for 'Rhani', who would later become my favorite elephant cow. I spent five anxious and difficult days at her sickbed, starting on September 15, 1961. She suddenly showed increasing signs of paralysis in her limbs, trunk, cheeks and tongue muscles, in addition to having difficulties chewing and swallowing. I observed that her facial muscles were cramped, that she was salivating heavily and unable to grasp specific things with her trunk. From time to time she was no longer able to stand and let herself fall to the side, causing a heavy thud to ring through in the elephant building. I barely left Rhani's sickbed for more than an hour between September 15 and 19. Around noon on September 17, I start to suspect botulism poisoning. In this case, it took two days to establish a diagnosis of an intimate connection with the animal, no wonder with such a rare disease. During the night of September 17, 2 liters (40 doses of 50 ml) of botulism antitoxin serum, blood type AB, were injected into the muscle or under the skin of the 1,800 kilogram animal. Except for the quiet sounds of resistance coming from Rhani, there was a deathly silence in the elephant building. We hardly dared breathe ourselves. To our knowledge, she was the first elephant in the world to ever receive botulism antitoxin serum. On September 18 Rhani began to show improvements, and today she is the heaviest colossus in our herd. She is and will always be my special 'friend' in the group. She is also a very good-natured, kind animal."

I have done some research. The botulism poisoning mentioned above is caused by a bacterium (*Clostridium botulinum*), which can easily multiply in insufficiently sterilized and airtight packaged canned sausages and fish, but also more rarely in plant material – grass, hay and silage – in other words, elephant feed. It is also conceivable that an animal carcass, a dead mouse for example, had fallen into the feed, was buried under a mountain of green and caused Rhani's poisoning. Botulinum toxin is one of the deadliest toxins in the world and attacks the junctions between nerve and muscle cells, synapses, or neuromuscular junction, to be more precise. It is also known in the cosmetics industry as "Botox". Here it triggers paralysis in the face and is supposed to make wrinkles disappear, which often leads to the disfigurement of facial features that wanted to age gracefully. A sensible medical use of this poison, on the other hand, is the treatment of spasticity, torticollis, migraine, and excessive sweating.

Many years after Rhani had recovered and became friends with my father, my brother and I were born and finally got to know Rhani. We could essentially do everything we wanted with her as long as my father, the Rhani rescuer, was next to her. We loved Rhani because she let us pet her and feed her like a big grey dog and we were even allowed to ride on top of her in the sandy outdoor enclosure. It went like this: Rhani looked at my father good-naturedly, lifted her front leg in response to a quiet command, and I could climb onto it. That was the first step for climbing Rhani. When I stood on her raised leg, usually the front left, I could already hold onto her ear and hang safely on the “wall”. Then I was slowly lifted a little bit higher, as with a stair lift, by Rhani bending her leg and pulling it as far as she could toward her belly. But because Rhani didn’t help with her trunk, I had to struggle up the rest of the summit on my own. Sometimes I received a little push on my butt from below, by my father or by the elephant keeper, who would be present at every “riding lesson,” but I basically pulled myself up Rhani’s rough and cratered ear all by myself. Since Rhani was an Indian elephant cow, her ears were only half the size of an African elephant’s, but it was still impossible not to get a grip on them at that size. I also knew it didn’t hurt her. Probably I weighed nothing more on her ear than a flesh-colored earring.
When I had finally made it to the top and sat on the largest land mammal in the world, I felt like a king, or a Saxon Mowgli. I was led around in circles several times in the outdoor enclosure while the zoo was open to the public, and was stared at and sometimes even photographed by the adults and children standing at the railings. If I remember correctly, I was always filled with a mixture of pride and shame up there, because despite all the magnificence of being on Rhani’s back, it was also unpleasant for me to be so admired and envied. But most of the time I concentrated completely on the back of Rhani’s head with its funny, sparse hair, or on her slightly wobbly ears, which I still held on to, causing my hands to wobble slightly as well, or I stared for a while at her pinkish wart, about the size of a child's fist, which she carried on the left side of her head and which enabled people to see even from a distance, even from the railing of the outdoor enclosure, that it was Rhani.

Then there was the thing with the keys. Whenever my father and I climbed the long stairs to the elephant enclosure, he began to rummage in his trouser pockets for his bunch of keys, and as soon as we had reached the top and were standing at the railing, where we would

see Rhani in the distance, often leaning dreamily against the brick wall of the elephant house, he began to jingle this exact bunch of keys like crazy, or made a deafening noise by striking them against the iron railing. I was always terribly embarrassed because people stared at us and thought my father was crazy, but luckily it never took too long for everyone to see what effect the bunch of keys actually had. Rhani awoke from her daydreams, listened, lifted her head and trunk and searched the railing for her rescuer. My father kept jingling and Rhani would see him, puff audibly and finally set herself in motion to pass him the “friendship trunk” over the elephant ditch. The people could not help but be amazed. My father had been rehabilitated, was suddenly no longer a maniac, and was overwhelmed with questions and requests. Most of the children also wanted to touch the friendly trunk and my father passed this wish on to Rhani, who fulfilled it well.
After this welcome ritual my father and I usually went on to the pachyderm house, although Rhani was not thick-skinned, just a very sensitive, thin-skinned Indian elephant cow in her prime.

On November 17, 1980, Rhani had an accident. She fell into the elephant ditch and could only be freed by the Leipzig fire brigade and with the help of a crane. I myself wasn't with my father at the Leipzig Zoo that day and can only look in disbelief at a small photo of Rhani hanging in the air with her back down, being lifted directly out of the elephant ditch. It is a miracle that nothing bad happened to her, because the trench was deep enough to break any elephant leg or neck. Another elephant cow had already fallen into the ditch a year earlier, on September 1, 1979, the African elephant cow “Safari.” There was nothing that could be done for her, and it was her right ear that later hung over the doorway in our living room.
On the small photo you can see that Rhani’s eyes are closed as she is hanging in the air. She looks like a dreaming colossus or like a dreaming rock or planet. Who says elephants can’t float? At least this small picture claims the opposite.

There wasn’t time for a Rhani ride every time I visited the zoo. Those were special moments for me, too, but there was almost always time for feeding Rhani bread and apples. “Elephant bread” was what my brother and I called the countless mixed breads that were stacked on shelves from floor to ceiling in the elephant building. I’ve never since been so convinced of

the exclusive quality of a bread as I was by the old, already-hardened GDR mixed-flour bread in the stalls of the elephant building. We were crazy about that bread! We would either first feed Rhani her elephant bread or pounce on it ourselves, stuffing our faces with it. Unlike when we were at home, we were allowed to behave like wild animals in the elephant stables, violently ripping apart the loaves of bread and hashing into the soft innards with our teeth. It tasted delicious! Never had bread – even if it was fresh and crispy – tasted more delicious than it did here in Leipzig's elephant building. There was only one elephant bread in this world and this unique elephant bread was tough and heavy, and not light and airy, otherwise it could have been called bird bread or butterfly bread. It took elephant power, elephant jaws, to tear it apart and crush it in your mouth. Elephant bread was a challenge and nothing for weaklings, that was clear to us, and Rhani, the leading cow of the Leipzig elephant herd, seemed to share the same perspective as my brother and me. She stuffed her mouth full of half or even whole loaves of bread and went to town. We either held the bread close to her trunk so that she could grab it, which always happened very carefully, or there was a command from the animal keeper, upon which Rhani lifted her trunk fully upward and opened her mouth to show her giant pink tongue. Her teeth were also visible at that moment, but seemed harmless, as with all herbivores. Elephants only have four of them: four molars the size of bricks, grooved on the surface, two on the top and two on the bottom. So when Rhani showed us her tongue, and not so much her teeth, we would not be afraid, but would instead carefully lay an elephant bread or an apple upon it. The not so big elephant mouth closed immediately and Rhani began to chew ecstatically. Her nimble, bright eyes lit up at that very moment and she looked almost as greedy as our red-brown long-haired dachshund at home when he ate a sandwich of country leberwurst sausage.

In GDR times large hippopotamuses and pygmy hippopotami could also be seen in the Leipzig pachyderm building. And if my brother and I were ever feeding elephants, then Rhani's neighbors shouldn't go completely empty-handed either. Hippos were fed apples, not elephant bread. And as far as feeding apples was concerned, it was even more exciting with the big hippos than with Rhani. They poked their heads out of the murky, dark green water of their enclosure and as they opened wide their huge, tusk-armored mouths. It was great fun to throw apple after apple into those gaping barn gates of mucous membrane that just made clapping and smacking noises as they ate. Sometimes the apples would sink

completely into the soft mucous carpet for a fraction of a second before popping up again, rolling green and round between the unbrushed, brownish teeth. Or maybe I'm just imagining all of this in retrospect. No, I think the mucous membrane actually sank slightly and made a cool noise. There's nothing more I can shake from this memory. It also involved points! The goal was – with a handful of apples – to land more hits in the hippopotamus mouth than my brother. It was like a computer game at a time when we didn't have computers. If someone missed, the game interrupted itself in the sense that the hippopotamus went on a dive to find and eat the lost apple at the bottom of the pool, which could take a while. Then it came up again, exhaling loudly what air it had left, opened its mouth again, and, if we were lucky, demonstrated one of its spectacular fecal discharges. The tail suddenly moved like a propeller in the water, and with a big, long bang distributed the discharged shit slurry in all directions, so that immediately afterwards you could see lots of undigested stalks floating around in the pool. Then we laughed and diligently continued feeding and throwing.

All this and much more could be experienced in the old Leipzig elephant building, which unfortunately no longer exists in its former layout (with hippopotamus neighbors). What's more, there are no big hippos in the new Leipzig Zoo. You shouldn't do without them, Mr. Director, all children want to see big hippos with their spectacular feces!

Guinea Pig Cellar

Even if they are not exotic zoo animals, I still want to reminisce about the guinea pigs of the old Leipzig Zoo. They lived together with rat and mouse families in one of administrative buildings beyond the view of the public and were waiting to be fed to snakes and birds of prey, as well as Leipzig's famous big cats. The word "waiting" is used so frivolously, as if they consciously expected their death, but fortunately this was not the case: these curious little rodents did not seem to have to think at every moment that a huge naked hand could reach for them and carry them away forever. Instead, they seemed quite happy and lived together in a large community that would not have been possible if they been kept as pets, unless someone decided to surrender their entire living room to a horde of guinea pigs.

For me, the "guinea pig cellar" of the Leipzig Zoo was one of my favorite places, as I could literally bathe in skins there. But wouldn't I have been able to do that at home, in our "fur den"? Basically yes, but there was one key difference: The skins in the guinea pig cellar were still alive. Every single one of these small warm "springs" was more suitable for bathing than every big-but-cold "sea of fur" on Focke Strasse, where the fur den was located and seemed to want to spread out further and further, as if it desired to cover the neighboring Fockeberg hill with skins as well.

But what exactly did this "bathing spot" in the guinea pig cellar look like? First, we went down a few steps from the administrative building to a cellar, where there was no more daylight, but numerous neon lights and infrared lamps. One immediately felt a change in climate. It suddenly became hot, just as if you were in an African country after descending the gangway of an Interflug aircraft, for example, a sharp-nose Tupolev 154. At least that's the idea I had as an airplane-obsessed child who most definitely wanted to become an East German Interflug pilot or cosmonaut. In addition, an exceedingly strong, sharp rodent smell hit you, which was not everyone's cup of tea. My mother, for instance, got sick of it. But I myself liked this smell and sucked the rodent air deep into my lungs.

Already when descending into the cellar, one would hear a friendly quiet squealing in the distance, but now, having reached the bottom of the stairs, this squealing rapidly became louder and swelled to a short orgiastic greeting. But the guinea pigs were still nowhere to be seen. I walked along a narrow corridor and passed countless rat and mouse cages, which for their part were very quiet. In the nurseries, cages padded with wood chips, lay white and

piebald rodent mothers with their babies, which were mostly still completely naked and blind. The little ones were silently kicking against their motherly teats, and when I stopped and pressed my face against the bars, I could see that their reddish skin was almost transparent. All over you could see small, meandering blood vessels beneath the surface, and behind the closed eyelids shimmering round and dark, were tiny eyeballs that had never encountered a ray of light before.

As I remember, I always entered the passage as if it were a quiet forest path I had to follow to the end in order to come upon a squeaking "guinea pig lake." The greatest variety of waves, the greatest variety of colors and structures were playing on the surface of this lake. I saw guinea pigs that were smooth or rippled, white or brown, red-eyed or dark-eyed, small or large, eating or sleeping, looking at or ignoring me. There were certainly well over a hundred guinea pigs, well over four hundred legs and two hundred ears, which merged into a single picture in an oversized wooden box filled with straw. There were groupings – fur clouds of various sizes squatting in one corner or the other or even in the middle – but you never had the feeling that certain races or nations were segregating. The fur clouds were always pushed together colorfully and consisted of albinos and non-albinos, long-headed and blunt-headed, short-haired and long-haired, Abyssinians and non-Abyssinians...

Most of the time I immediately climbed into the box and the squeaking would get louder again. It was the usual initial panic that spread – a buzzing of legs in the straw – but by then I knew how to behave: I sat down and stopped moving. Usually it didn't take long before it got quieter again and the first guinea pigs slowly and curiously squealed at me to see what kind of "Gulliver" had landed on their coast this time. Sometimes I stretched out lengthwise in the straw and let the fur gnomes come from all sides and nibble and pull at me. They should just take me prisoner! I closed my eyes and swam in the fur. In such moments I always forgot that all the islanders would sooner or later end up in snake and predator stomachs – with a few exceptions.

The guinea pigs we had kept and worshipped at home during my childhood had all been carried out of the guinea pig cellar of the Leipzig Zoo and rescued. They had looked very similar to each other. All the "Lissis" of my childhood – Lissi 1, Lissi 2, Lissi 3 and Lissi 4 – had smooth hair, dark eyes and a silky shiny fur in gold Agouti. Agouti is the name for the wild colored ones and for the wild color itself, as it also appears on other domestic animals, such

as rabbits, rats and mice. This wild color looks simple and rustic, although it is composed in a complex way. In addition to the coarser awn hair, which is always monochrome black, the majority of the shorter and finer hair is triple banded. With the gold agouti, a longer black band at the hairline is followed by a narrower red band and finally a narrow black band at the tip of the hair. An unbelievable, dazzling, wonderful shimmer can be observed. Only on the belly, on the chin and around the eyes do the gold agoutis look monochrome red. Here the hair has only a narrow black band at the hairline, followed by a broad red band reaching to the tip of the hair. In short, my family specialized in keeping Agouti guinea pigs. My father had convinced us that wild-colored guinea pigs were not only the most beautiful, but also the best and most resilient, which also proved to be the case insofar as our Lissis easily tolerated certain types of play where perhaps an Abyssinian guinea pig would have lost its nerves. Some Lissis were really put to good use, stuck for hours in Western saloons and looking through tiny windows, or squatted in the artificial grass tunnel of our model railway, having to stop freight trains. But a real Lissi didn't quit on us, maybe she scolded us from time to time, but otherwise she was in a good mood. Every summer day we diligently collected dandelions in the unkempt backyards between Focke Strasse and Brandvorwerk Strasse, and watched as every single leaf entered and disappeared, as if on a conveyor belt, into the small mouth encircled by gray lips, in order to be transformed inside the "wonder pig" into the always similar form of elongated dark droppings. Our Lissis were insatiable and we loved them. My father couldn't get enough of them either. Although he entertained a lot of exotic animal friendships in the zoo, he loved guinea pigs and their sociable cries and greetings in a special way. Already as a child he had bred guinea pigs and rabbits (especially "Dutch rabbits"), had grown up with them and now insisted that we always had guinea pigs at home and no "guinea pig breaks". He himself once described his love for guinea pigs as follows: "If it is somehow possible within my schedule and I come near the guinea pig stables during my veterinary tour, the 'zoo visit', then the keepers, inspector, director and colleagues are already smiling, because they know that for a few minutes I am drawn to these wonderful little rodents like other men to the toy trains of their children."

The only disadvantage of our having guinea pigs as pets was that their deaths came much faster than with a dog or a cat, usually after just a few years. In other words, "Lissi losses." Even if my father made a great effort, Lissis who had once fallen ill could rarely be saved.

Then a new Lissi had to come. The old one was laid out and mourned for one or two days, then wrapped in cloths and taken to the taxidermist. If it wasn't laid out for too long, the chances were usually quite good that the small corpse could be transformed into a full-body taxidermy that at least looked similar to our real Lissi. But if too many hours had passed since the death of the guinea pig or if it had been too hot, then more severe internal decomposition processes would have already begun, which led to my father coming home with a wood wool-filled wrinkled animal, a failed preparation that frightened and disappointed me, but which I still habitually put on the shelf above my childhood desk. All the Lissis were lined up there, without exception, and stood nailed to a small green or brown painted log. Some of them looked as if they were still moving, had a little leg in the air or stretched their heads upwards as if they were about to call to me. I liked this: as it indicated the work of a good taxidermist. All in all, it can be said that I was always looking forward with great joy to the moment when the door of the apartment opened and I knew that my father had come from the taxidermist. Despite all the grief, it was always a gift in a sense, a ritualized resurrection that took place when the stuffed guinea pig was unwrapped. In fact, the taxidermy helped me to cope better with each loss, just as it had helped my father to spread out some of the skins of his former zoo darlings at home. The stuffed Lissis calmed me down, even when they were shriveled. I often took them off the shelves, stroked them, patted the dust out of their fur, and sometimes, with their little logs on their feet, I placed them in the box with a new, living Lissi; to see if all Lissis got along well.

But before a new Lissi could sit in the wooden box, she first had to be selected in the Leipzig Zoo guinea pig cellar. Or should I say: be recognized. It was a bit like looking for the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama shortly after the old one had died. Every time I sat paralyzed in the "sea of guinea pigs." My father had gone off on his rounds and I knew I had about an hour to find our new Lissi. The seriousness of the situation and the imagined consequences of my choice made me sick. I was only allowed to save one of these guinea pigs and it was supposed to be a girl, and a wild-colored, dark-eyed one at that – these were the immutable Dalai Lissi criteria that my father had drilled into me. I could understand him well, I wanted a Lissi again, an Agouti, and yet, in my love for the Agoutis, I suddenly felt like a racist god. Because at that moment, I really was a demigod, a decision maker about life and death. And every time I was hopelessly overwhelmed. On the one hand there were dozens of Agoutis in

the guinea pig stable from which I had to choose, on the other hand, I felt more clearly than usual that all the other guinea pigs – each white and spotted, long-haired and red-eyed, curly and rose-shaped patterns – were to be lost forever.

I took a closer look at all the Agoutis, tried to catch each one to hold it in my hand for a while and stroke it, and basically waited for a sign that I had found the true Lissi successor. But the sign failed to appear. It always failed to appear. After an hour my father came back, squatted next to the huge wooden box and wanted to know which one was the chosen one.
Sometimes I just shook my head, but other times I started to cry softly. When my father found me so miserable and weak in my decisions, he asked me which of the Agoutis was the calmest, the tamest. I had tried to remember the particularly tame ones, because there had been several that had been easily caught and held by me, but now I could not find them again in this mass of guinea pigs and my heart pounded ever more violently.
“Catch a few,” my father said and got into the wooden box with me. He didn’t give me the feeling that we were suddenly in a hurry after a whole hour had gone by without a decision, he just said calmly: “Catch a few and I’ll watch.”
That’s exactly what I did and my father said nothing for a while, just watching. But finally he began to make suggestions: “How about that one, that one’s sitting quite calmly on your lap” or: “That one’s very cute, it’s eating out of your hand” or: “Turn that one around, I want to see if it’s a female,” and so on. At some point it became clear to me that my father only put those on the short list who were calm and fearless right from the start. The first impression was crucial, like in a job interview. With the difference, however, that all rejected candidates could never apply anywhere else again.
I have to admit that in the end, in my overwhelmed state I always submitted to the selection criteria of my father. I didn’t take any rowdy guinea pigs or guinea pig cowards home with me with the aim of first taming and calming them. Basically, I never pressed my luck. Maybe at some point I will have to answer for my lack of courage in guinea pig heaven. On the other hand, when I sat with the new guinea pig on my lap in the Wartburg sedan and we drove home, where the empty wooden box stood that I had already filled with fresh, fragrant hay, I was always overcome by a great, unbridled joy. I had a new Lissi in my arms who looked very much like the old one and was already very calm; just as if we had known each other for years.

But the best thing by far that could happen to me and the guinea pigs in Leipzig's guinea pig cellar was my childhood birthday parties. They had become legendary thanks to my father. All the children from my kindergarten group – and later, from my school class – wanted to be invited, which in terms of organization was impossible. There could only be the chosen ones. Each time my father came up with something special, starting with a wagon ride in the wildlife park, to the carnival, to a tour of the zoo, which always ended at the guinea pig cellar. There, each child was allowed to choose a guinea pig to take home, without it being agreed to beforehand with their parents. But I didn't care: All my friends rescued guinea pigs, every single one of them, and that was all that mattered!

We had blissful looks on our faces when at the end of the day we drove back from the zoo to the south side of Leipzig, where we all lived. For some of my friends it was their first pet ever. We must have been in the guinea pig cellar for an hour or two before everyone had chosen their ideal guinea pig. I had to restrain myself because we already had Lissi at home, but I was always itching to join in. And yet, in the end, I was satisfied to find that not only Agoutis had been rescued this time, but also white, red-eyed and Abyssinian guinea pigs were riding with us in the tram.

Then came the moment of truth: coming home to unsuspecting parents. I was never there because my friends went home alone with their guinea pigs, but as far as I remember, not even one of the rescued guinea pigs ever came back to the guinea pig cellar, or was returned to us. The parents of my friends had more or less silently accepted the rescue plan and all my father's rodent gifts. It was quite possible that there were still isolated, half-desperate telephone calls in the following few days, telephone calls during which my father reassured the new guinea pig owners and instructed them in the keeping and care of the animals, while assuring them of every type of veterinary support, should they ever need it, though I never heard of any such cases. In the end, everything was a great success. And it was a great success for me too. Because of all the guinea pigs given as presents, I became a VIP guest at many other children's birthday parties.

Finally, one last guinea pig memory. Even if it doesn't really fit in with my mental torments in the guinea pig cellar, I don't want to keep a secret either. In my defense I could say that I never wished for a guinea pig fur vest, and neither did my brother, we just happened to

receive them! The only thing we might have to blame ourselves for is that we were crazy about carnival and wanted to wear a different, and ideally an unusual costume every year. In the previous two years I had been very successful as a pig and as a wolf, all tailor-made by my aunt Lilo. But at some point, I also wanted to be a cowboy. And my brother wanted to be a cowboy, too. We had already received the necessary weapons and ammunition for Christmas: silver plastic revolvers and green percussion caps. What was missing was the real cowboy outfits. Without our knowledge, my father had two guinea pig fur vests made for us, which were ceremoniously presented to us shortly before carnival. We didn't ask where the skins came from, but today the only explanation for me is that they all came from the Leipzig Zoo's guinea pig cellar. My father had probably taken a dozen guinea pigs, which had been culled to be fed to other zoo animals, had their fur removed and brought them to Aunt Lilo. I am 4 ½ years younger than my brother and we got the vests when we were about six and ten years old. There were at least four guinea pig skins in my cowboy vest, twice as many in my brother's. The waistcoats were colorful: smooth and with rose-shaped patterns, light and dark haired, brown and white, but not a single Agouti was there. My father apparently hadn't been able to bring himself to do that. My brother and I were more than astonished, horrified for a while when we received the vests, but joy prevailed in the end. And our reputation increased considerably. We became the coolest guinea pig cowboys in the entire German Democratic Republic. For two years we proudly wore our vests in wind and weather, not just during the carnival season. Then we finally outgrew them. After that they just hung in the wardrobe like small striped skins. From time to time we looked inside and tried not to cry. Never again would we wear guinea pig fur vests. The Wild East lay behind us.

aus: Carl-Christian Elze: *Oda und der ausgestopfte Vater*. Zoogeschichten. kreuzerbooks, Leipzig 2018.

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