

Grig

**Friedensdorf**

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Grig

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What is war, does peace really exist and, most importantly, where do we go from here? Friedensdorf is an autobiographical, documentary, political, mystic novel. Narratives that develop in parallel to each other all focus on war in general, and the Four-Day and 44-Day Wars in particular. At their point of intersection lies the narrator, someone who did not go to the battlefield, who uses other people's shoelaces to see their dreams.

This is a novel about the quest for peace, the visible and invisible consequences of war, and about great tragedies and tiny exultations.

Translated by Nazareth Seferian

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This novel uses segments from official statements, the press, interviews, social network posts, pieces written by Armenian and foreign authors, and so on, as a part of the general text, without the use of quotation marks or underlining.

Twisted and incomplete like our bodies, unending like the nightmare of war, this novel is dedicated to Kamil, Hayk, and all the children in Peace Village, hoping that this book finds them...

This novel is dedicated to two dear souls  
**Amalia and Werner van Gents...**

## A place that is peaceful

As part of a program by an international charity called Friedensdorf International, hundreds of children with injuries or disabilities go to Germany to receive free medical care every year, arriving mainly from corners of the world that are war zones or disaster areas, including the countries of the former Soviet Union.

The state is North Rhine-Westphalia and the location is the outskirts of the town of Oberhausen. This is where Friedensdorf is located, which is German for Peace Village. The pretty, white, two-story houses contain children's bedrooms, the rehabilitation center, and cafeteria, with a playground a short distance away where five boys – two on crutches, one in a wheelchair – are playing. They leave a little while later for their latest round of checkups, which will be followed by lunch. Waiting for his little guests today is Mr. A. K., a surgeon and physician in the past, but now just someone in retirement who dedicates his free time to the children at Friedensdorf. A. K. knows that the children need special care – without any family members around them and with zero knowledge of the language, they often find it difficult to voice their concerns.

The idea to support children with health issues came to the residents of Oberhausen in 1967, after the Six-Day War in the Middle East. One could say that Friedensdorf was built through the efforts of the whole world – some helped construct the buildings, some supplied the material, some took care of financial administration, and so on. The first children to undergo treatment there arrived because of the Vietnam War, shortly after which Friedensdorf took on the appearance it currently has today. Friedensdorf operates exclusively due to charitable donations with a considerable number of staff members working as volunteers.

It's lunchtime and the children have gathered in front of the cafeteria entrance, playing about, requesting me to photograph them and then asking to see the photo. One of the children shouts out the word "peace" in her language – a beautiful tradition before each meal. After lunch, the staff read out the names of the children who will be going home the next day, soon to be replaced by 88 new children, each with a condition that cannot be treated in their home country, but with the good fortune to get better here.

The children rush to their rooms, while some go to play football. A five- or six-year-old girl looks at us from a window, smiling, waving goodbye. You grow warm inside and your heart swells at the thought that this island of peace and kindness exists...

*Extract from a news article*

## Entry

*"How do you know that the earth isn't some other planet's hell?"*

- Aldous Huxley

*"But God whispered, 'Close your eyes,' and I feel asleep once again.*

- Joseph Brodsky

Now, at the moment of awakening, I can't decide whether it has been a day, a month, or a year, now the sense of time is fluid, now I open my eyes and my jaw cannot move, it's frozen in place, don't worry, this will pass, I tell myself, I open my eyes to see that my body is covered with burn scars, and I feel pain, ignore it, this is not the first time, I say, I open my eyes and the scars have really disappeared, my jaw works like before, but I'm missing a leg, they could have at least kept my knee, I say sadly, take a deep breath, I open my eyes, my leg is back and my knee bends as before, but I have a broken arm now, take ten slow breaths, I repeat, and it will vanish, I open my eyes, and my other arm is gone too, I'm terrified, my tears wet my cheeks... Now, when I am awake, from where I lie in my bed, I look out the window so that I don't see myself, there are some light-colored hills far away, a sad procession of electricity poles in the distance, and the red roof of my house can be seen from the height at which the station is located, the roof of my hiding place, which looks like spilled blood to anyone looking, I know, so, so red, I know, red, and I look at the cracks in the ceiling now so that I don't see myself and listen to how the tree branch scratches against the glass, a sound, the branch, sound, what matters is to never give in and never look at the walls, you're done for as soon as you look, sound, you swear every time not to look, but you always fail, your eyes slip away despite your efforts, and it starts, red, extremely red, a secret poster covering the walls, and it's starting, your eyes are fixated on the old, Soviet poster, its patterns seize you and inexplicably impact your willpower, no, soon images float before your eyes that you thought you had left behind in the depths of your childhood, you were certain you had dropped them somewhere thousands of kilometers away, you thought you had actually made up, they had never happened... Now you look at the wall, it's starting, the patterns grow denser and denser, no, the room crinkling up like a useless piece of paper, turning into a ball the size of your fist, it's starting, everything is too real now to be a hallucination, it feels like you'll reach it if you extend your hand, it's starting, you'll touch it, it's starting, now, no, the images are absorbing, no, your body, no...

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## Chapter 1

With the other Russian-speaking boys, we would say *Guten Morgen* when we saw each other in the morning, trying to reproduce that phrase we heard from the people in the medical masks in as funny as accent as possible. The Afghan kids enjoyed this game as well, they liked how it went, and soon we would all say the same thing, in unison, *Guten Morgen*. It's not hard to guess who was the best at it, *Guten Morgen*, he would say in his hoarse voice, *Guten Morgen*, that throat-scratching voice would ring out in the corridors, *Guten Morgen*, can you hear me? *Guten Morgen*, I say! I know, Kamil's attempts would always cause hilarity, you would see them and be unable to hold back, I know, you would laugh, I know...

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"What a rough language. They're saying 'good morning' but the sound of it makes you regret waking up!" Hayk continues the topic.

"Well, I like it," Kamil says between chews, "It's a cool language!"

"You like everything about this place. It's like you're in heaven!" Hayk says condescendingly.

"But this *is* heaven, no lie!"

"Well then, tell me one thing you *don't* like here."

"Lots of things."

"Like what?"

"Will you let me eat in peace?"

"Don't change the subject!" Hayk retorts sharply.

"What's wrong with you? You were fine a moment ago," Kamil says, now serious.

"I'm always fine, but a man should not go back on his word!"

"Oh really?" his face instantly twists into a scowl, it's starting again, Kamil's face is scowling, "You want an example, I'll give you one. What I hate the most here is your whiny attitude."

"My attitude is none of your business!" Hayk raises his voice.

"Then other people's language is none of *your* business!" Kamil responds in kind.

"I said it's rough, it's a rough-sounding language. Why do you care? Are you German?"

“The Germans have brought you here for free treatment, and yet you’re saying bad things about them.”

“When I say something bad about *your* language, that’s when you can object.”

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You go to the corridor, you do the same thing, always the same thing, prosthetic limbs are hanging from the walls, and one wall is covered completely in photographs of people smiling, all adults, everyone smiling, you look at them, they say that they had all been here at some point, they say they had been here just like you had, the attractiveness of being an adult, it’s a lie, the body of an adult, it’s a lie, a perfect body, well it’s a lie, you do the same thing, always the same thing, but the people in the photographs are smiling, giving off a warm feeling that rushes to console you – you’re not alone, a feeling that would engrave itself into your memory as a twelve-year-old boy, that would search, you’re not alone, in photographs, on people’s faces, everywhere, you’re not alone, the boy would search for it in books, in the movements of the slim hand caressing him, everywhere, you’re not alone, he would search for it in dreams, in the sounds that filled his ear, everywhere, you’re not alone, he would search for it throughout his life, but he would find it only in the eyes that have seen war, no, charge, fire, he shouts, and the artillery shakes the ground, no, fire, the voice orders, and the ground beneath his feet moves in waves, no, eyes, and fear is no longer a sacred tremor, where life is an ever-deepening emptiness, no, it’s not in those eyes, no, God, no, the adversary has fired more than 2700 rounds of various calibers at the Armenian border guards, he says, the Azerbaijani armed forces fired mortars and grenade launchers along almost the entire line of contact, he says, frontline positions located in the northeastern direction of Martakert were shelled most intensively, with 52 mortars of 60 and 82 mm caliber fired, he says, the frontline units of the Defense Army have taken punitive measures to suppress the movements of the Azerbaijani armed forces, obliging them to refrain from attempts, he says, to escalate the situation, he says...

“Are you looking at that negro’s photo?” Lasha is standing next to me, his face is unexpectedly calm, this is Lasha the hunchback, Lasha with no arms, his eyes are surprisingly calm.

“I’m looking at all of them. They’ve been cured, they’re home,” you reply.

“But look at the prosthetic legs!” he continues, “They’re made for sports, you can run in them...”

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The person standing near the Statue of Liberty keeps smiling, his legs are prosthetic from the knee down, and you're sure that you don't have those in your country, none of the boys have those in their country, they can't have them, this is in America and it's for Americans, he probably runs every day, he says, only in America, he runs every day for sure, it's in America, the black man is sweating, his muscular arms are shiny, there are prosthetic limbs in America that are no different from a real arm, he says, you can even move your fingers, he says, and you try to imagine it, but you can't, Lasha has no arms, this is Lasha from Georgia, you want to look close and study the absence of his arms, and that inexplicable feeling of guilt grows denser, you want to keep looking, and the sudden onset of that feeling of guilt makes you hesitate, you don't know yet whether finding the desire to live consists of the unmentionable joy you feel at seeing someone more miserable than you, no, not yet, no, you don't know, no...

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He comes closer, after Lasha leaves Hayk immediately comes closer to you.

"Was he telling you about the prosthetic limbs?" he asks.

"How did you know?" you're surprised.

"That's all he talks about as soon as he grabs hold of me. I've learned it by heart now."

"This was the first time he was telling me."

"Well, you're in for it now. He'll stick to you like a leech from now on," he laughs and raises a hand to his mouth, I know, he's from Tbilisi, his Armenian grandmother raised him, but he considers himself a Georgian, but, I know, he's a Georgian, I know, half his upper lip is missing, he has two rows of teeth, triangular and sharp, probably very sharp...

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I like the mountain climber's photo the most, Hayk says as he approaches the wall, wearing all that climbing equipment, the person whose face is mostly covered by goggles looks at you, every year around five hundred climbers try to conquer Mount Everest, and most of them fail, because the more you climb, the less oxygen you have, only the healthiest of people make it to the top, he says, the man in the photo smiles mildly through his frozen beard, and there are low clouds behind him and snowy peaks, all the records related to Mount Everest belong to the Sherpas, he says, they have all the records, he says, Sherpas are a nation, they live at the foot of Mount Everest, they are the healthiest people in the world, he says, few mountain climbers have confessed, but everyone knows, that it is



often the Sherpas that carry their backpacks, not them, he says, Sherpa kids are often ready to deliver beer or any other minor items to the camp on the mountain, and there was one Sherpa who spent a whole night on the summit, sleeping there, can you imagine, the *whole* night, while an ordinary person would not last longer than ten minutes there...

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“If only we’d been born Sherpas, right?” Hayk laughs, quickly raising his hand to cover his mouth.

“I wonder if there are any Sherpas here” you ask.

“Are you crazy? I said they’re the healthiest people in the world! Why would they be here?”

“I’m sure there’s at least one.”

“Impossible!”

“Says who?”

“Says me!”

“They never fall sick?”

“Never!”

“Well, they could have suffered from war, then.”

“They’re the kindest people in the world!”

“They could have bad neighbors.”

“No, they have good neighbors. There are no wars there, basically.”

“That’s impossible.”

“It’s possible.”

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“You’re making fun of them because you have no idea how healthy they are,” Hayk says.

“I’m just kidding,” you reply.

“Well, I’m serious,” he continues, “If we were in their place, we wouldn’t last a minute, and it would definitely end with two more dead bodies on Mount Everest.”

“There are dead bodies on Mount Everest?”

“Lots of them!”

“Now?”

“Right now!”

“How come?”

“What do you mean how come? There are bodies lying on the ice.”

“Why don’t they bury them?”

“They have to bring them down to bury them.”

“So why don’t they bring them down?”

“Easier said than done.”

“They can’t?”

“No.”

“Not even by helicopter?”

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The best place to die in the world is on top of a mountain, Hayk continues, these are not his words, not his, especially if that mountain is the Everest, he continues, it’s his voice, but the words are someone else’s, you don’t know yet that there are always people within words, people live in your words, and their dreams will become yours, and their fears will become yours, it’s his voice, but someone else’s words, you don’t know yet that someone else’s words will turn into walls around you, not someone else, he’s not someone else, words, like breadcrumbs, are what you’ve collected in the palm of your hand, that brief memory, like breadcrumbs, are what you’ve gathered in the palm of your hand, give it to me, you repeat and you don’t take it, I’m ready, you confirm and you hesitate, look at me, you exclaim and you fail to materialize, and the soil bleeds your awakening, the soil persuades you that there are greater things than conscience, he’s not someone else, open your fist in the air, luck will rub its tail against your leg like a cat, open your fist and empty its contents, luck will rub against your legs at once, he’s not someone else, leave it open, no, you’re not him, no, on April 1, at around 12:20 pm, in one of the defense posts at a Defense Army military base located in the north, Defense Army soldier V. A. M., born in 1996, was dealt a fatal injury because of a round of fire from the adversary, an investigation is being conducted to study the details of the incident, he says, the

Ministry of Defense of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic shares the heavy burden of sorrow at the loss of the serviceman and offers condolences to the members of the family and other relatives of V. M., he says, and to his fellow servicemen, he says...

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You go inside, there is an unprecedented commotion in the room when you and Hayk go inside, everyone's making a noise, excitedly shouting instructions to each other, you go inside, and everyone tries to grab the insect that has sheltered itself under the bed, seriously, Hayk is honestly surprised, so there are cockroaches here too, *tarakan*, it never crossed your mind, but you were sure like Hayk, *tarakanishe*, it never crossed your mind, but like Hayk you also thought that there were none in Germany, there couldn't be, *tarakan*, caught it, he shouts, his hair is sweaty and sticks together, like wet husks, I caught it guys, Kamil shouts, his hair is wet and looks like husks of wheat, he's thrown his shirt on the insect and caught it, you've gathered around him, looking close, gathered around him.

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“You shouldn't have caught it,” Shahzodbek says, looking at the insect, “One of its whiskers is shorter than the other.”

“So what if it's shorter?” Kamil asks at once.

“That's bad luck,” the Uzbek boy explained.

“You mean it's sick? What bad luck, I wanted to keep it,” he says and laughs, and we all laugh.

“That's not what I mean.”

“So it's healthy? Thank God, then I'll definitely keep it.” He laughs, we laugh.

“I'm not joking, something bad will happen to you.”

“Stop saying stupid things.”

“It's true!”

“What's true?”

“That’s how it is,” Shahzodbek shrugs his shoulders, “When one whisker is shorter than the other, then it’s a sign of bad luck.”

“So when they’re equal, they bring good luck?” Kamil responds in the same spirit and laughs, we laugh.

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The lights in the room have long been switched off, I know, most of the boys are already asleep, I know, but Kamil is still talking, he always plays football in his sleep, or rides a bike, he says, football dreams are the most fun – the soft, pretty grass, lights, everything is so real, it’s like I’m really in a big stadium, I could even smell the grass once, he says, I was running, I was running very fast, nobody could reach me, he says, the most disgusting dreams are the ones with snails in them, it’s the only animal that makes me sick, I even got goosebumps now just by thinking about them, he says, we had an aquarium at home when I was little, and there will snails in it too besides the fish, one day I decided to grab the biggest snail, but the second I touched it, my whole body burst out into a rash like measles, he says, so I won’t come near a snail since that day even if it’s a matter of life or death, he says, anytime I catch a cold or say I’m about to come down with something, I see them in a dream, they could suddenly appear on the road, for example, or on my clothes, yuck, or worst yet, in my pockets...

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“Kamil, do you ever dream of home or your family?” you ask.

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I’ve been having the same dream for the past two days, you say, seeing the same thing for two days, the exact same thing, you say, first my paternal aunt’s husband waves at me in the distance, there are churches with tall domes around me, there are no such churches in Armenia, I’ve never seen any, you say, I look and they don’t surprise me, but they don’t surprise me when I see them, you say, then my aunt’s husband beckons to me once again with his hand, I run over to his blue *Zhiguli* without

wasting time, parked in the square surrounded by the churches, it's the two of us, there's nobody else there, then he opens the back door of the car and smiles, suggesting that there's a surprise for me inside, he doesn't make a sound, but I understand, and I'm in the car where I see our wallpaper from home, the inside of the car is completely covered in our wallpaper from home, the wallpaper from our house walls, I say, I touch it, and my aunt's husband smiles, he's dead, he smiles, he was also one of those who died on the night from April 1 to 2, he's dead isn't he, on the southern, southeastern, and northeastern fronts of the line of contact, the adversary has launched clearly aggressive operations using artillery, armored weaponry, and air assaults, along with other weapons, he says, besides the battles that have ensued on the frontline, the adversary has launched artillery strikes on the civilian population and on the permanent locations of some army bases, he says, fierce clashes are taking place at this moment throughout the line of contact of Karabakh-Azerbaijan armed forces, he says, the frontline Defense Army units have accepted the adversary's challenge and are waging reliable defense campaigns, he says, and we will have more details, he says, on the situation and its developments, he says, in our next...

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You wake up late, everyone's already up, noisy.

"*Guten morgen*," you say to Kamil.

"*Guten morgen*," he mutters, sitting up in bed.

"Is something wrong? You're not like yourself," you ask.

"Hm-m," he responds.

"Why so sad?"

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"My tooth is killing me. It's been hurting ever since I woke up," Kamil is angry, "I should never have caught that stupid cockroach..."

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