



After leaving the sect: no roots and no wings to fly

She was born into a sect and whipped from an early age, several times a day. At age 16, Amitsa exited the Twelve Tribes.

An encounter with a young woman who broke away to find life.

As a child, she thought whippings were just a part of life; switch whippings on the bare buttocks or over underwear. As a teen she instinctively felt that those torments were wrong. In spite of it all, she never fought back. Today, nobody whips her anymore, except in her nightmares.

Amitsa was born into a sect: for 16 years she, her parents and five siblings lived in the Twelve Tribes: first in France, then in Pennigbüttel near Bremen, and most recently in the Bavarian town of Wörnitz. For twenty years there have been allegations of child abuse against the sect which cites the Old Testament: 'For whom the LORD loves He chastens'. Its members grow their hair and wear loose fitting robes; they believe that the world will end in 2026, and that everyone is possessed of Satan - apart from them.

In the world according to the Twelve Tribes, Amitsa is possessed, too. She left the sect about four years ago. The devil comes in handy when explaining what went wrong in Amitsa's life since her exit: her stomach aches, her broken marriage, her dropping out of school. That way, Twelve Tribes members do not need to ask themselves: what has my part been in this?

What do I want, when no one tells me what to want?

Amitsa is 19 years old now, she is interested, polite, and pretty; she laughs often, but her laugh is short, high pitched, self-conscious. She speaks German with an American accent, since many inside the sect only communicate in English. The Tribes can be found in a number of countries: USA, Brazil, Spain, Czech Republic.

When Amitsa tells of the old days, you can see her picking the varnish off her fingernails, wringing her hands, rolling her eyes, struggling for words. She says that if you step into wet concrete, you will leave an imprint. "This life has left its mark on me which will not fade any time soon".

Lash by lash, the adults moulded Amitsa, she was to submit to the Community. Like a robot, says Amitsa, and the leaders were pushing the buttons. Now Amitsa has to learn to function

without them. She is trying to find out who she is and what it is she wants when no one tells her what to want.

She is used to abuse. She has not learnt what friendship is – nor love. About a year after she left she met an American soldier over the internet; they got married last summer. When he texted that he was cheating on her and actually married with children, Amitsa did not react. Yes, it hurt. But isn't that normal?

"It's not like I hate my parents"

Amitsa no longer remembers how often she was whipped while inside. Whippings usually started right after getting out of bed and ended after getting into bed. The adults applied the rod when she got into a muddle while reading, when she was laughing, when she refused to admit a supposed error, when she did admit it after all. This is what she tells me. Amitsa does not want to talk about her parents: they have blamed themselves for failing their children. She only says: "It's not like I hate my parents, but it is difficult to understand why we had to suffer".

Inside, Amitsa was eager to please and avoid making mistakes. Being alert at all time is exhausting. Like living on a minefield, says Amitsa, any minute there could be an explosion. "You learn not to trust anyone."

Amitsa grew more and more desperate. She asked her brother and her mother if they were truly happy. Her brother cut his hair, they no longer showed for prayer, asked questions – and became disruptive to the cult's routine. It pollutes the others, said the Elders. One brother and one sister have stayed inside. Amitsa, her parents, two brothers and one sister had to leave. That sister now is in a psychiatric hospital undergoing therapy.

When the Bavarian authorities raided the communities in Klosterzimmern and Wörnitz last September to take 40 children into state custody, the children of Amitsa's brother and sister were among them. There has been "new evidence of considerable and ongoing child abuse by their members", the District Office of Donau-Ries informed the public.

The Youth Welfare Office placed the children with foster families and homes. Shortly thereafter, the first court proceedings began in Ansbach and Nördlingen – Amitsa testified. It will take time before the judges decide whether or not the parents will lose custody of their children permanently. A few children were allowed back to their parents, temporarily. According to the judges they were out of danger, as they were – by the standards of the sect - either too young to be switched or too old. The children say they want to return. They love their parents, all children do. The Tribes celebrate the returnees. "We are so grateful that humaneness has conquered all.", write some members in their blog.

Amitsa says, it makes her angry. Angry, because the members are lying and downplaying what they have done. Angry, because the members in turn claim that Amitsa and the other defectors are lying and exaggerating what they have been through. Their internet page reads that correction always is for the child's benefit. They decline any further comment.



When Amitsa thinks of the cult, and she frequently does, she smokes, she listens to music, to hard, angry rap music, or she paints watercolours. One painting shows a tree, which is uprooted by a hand and forced to bend towards the sun. Amitsa says: "I have no roots and no strength to fly".

But she would love to. After leaving, she tried and enjoyed everything she was forbidden inside. She ate chocolate, cut her hair, bought a bikini, surfed the net, watched porns, because she did not get any sex education. She dated a young man online, slept with him. Her entire desk is a provocation: a coffeemaker, packs of cigarettes, a laptop, hairspray and a palette of 120 eye shadows. She uploads many photos of herself on facebook, wearing high heels, a tight skirt, a mini skirt. She hungers for attention and approval; for anything that would numb her self-doubt.

After leaving Amitsa managed to complete middle school successfully as well as an apprenticeship. She now holds a state diploma as a housekeeping assistant, but she would have preferred to become a dental assistant. Later she enrolled in grammar school - and scored zero on her first German test. In December she had to leave the school for failing to meet the standards. Now she has set her hopes on a job through a temporary employment agency.

She has taken all her transcripts and her CV to the job interview. "Have you got experience?" the man asks. Amitsa nods. He looks at her CV. "Oh, holiday jobs, I see..." The CV is a bit confusing, he says, her handwriting could be more legible, no picture, and well, no need to keep those spelling mistakes, is there? "But it is just a suggestion, I don't mean to criticise, it could happen to me too", he says gently. Wants to know if she is German. Amitsa says that she grew up with English and lived outside Germany for some time, but that, yes, she is German. If she can read, he asks. Yes, she says, she can read.

After the interview Amitsa's smokes a cigarette, she trembles; everyday life is exhausting. And yet, she says, she is happier than before, much happier.

One day she wants to immigrate to the USA, she has relatives living there and a few friends, ex-members like her. But for now, the sect still keeps her grounded in Germany: She wants to wait until the main proceedings are over and testify when she is needed, she would like to talk with a lawyer and find out what else she can do. She wants to help the children, so they can grow up normal, in families who love them without hitting them. Life goes on, she says.

Transl: LittleProf.

*Leben nach der Sekte: "Ich habe keine Wurzeln und keine Kraft zu fliegen"
Von Frauke Lüpke-Narberhaus*

<http://www.spiegel.de/schulspiegel/leben/zwolf-staemme-wie-eine-aussteigerin-versucht-ins-leben-zu-finden-a-944962.html>