

Ein Aussteiger
berichtet



Robert Pleyer

DER SATAN SCHLÄFT NIE

Mein Leben bei den *Zwölf Stämmen*

KNAUR 

Robert Pleyer / Axel Wolfsgruber

Satan never sleeps
My life with the Twelve Tribes

About this book

Beaten, humiliated and incapacitated: these were the words used by Focus magazine in May 2012 to describe the living conditions in the Twelve Tribes, a sect that has been in the headlines for years. When Robert Pleyer was accepted into this sect more than twenty years ago, it initially felt like a liberation. However, it soon became clear just how dependent he had become. Because in the Twelve Tribes, only the rules of the sect leaders apply, who base their power on comprehensive control. Three years ago, Robert Pleyer decided to leave the community with his children. Now, for the first time, he describes his life in the Twelve Tribes in detail: the god-like position of the elders, the incapacitation of women, the violence against children. His report reveals the inhumanity of a sect whose members have no private property, receive no pay for their work and are only allowed to see doctors in extreme emergencies.

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Foreword

On 5 September 2013, the Twelve Tribes religious community became the focus of public attention nationwide. On this day, employees of the Youth Welfare Office took forty Twelve Tribes children into their care with the help of the police. It was the largest such operation in the history of the Federal Republic of Germany. The taking into care was well prepared and proceeded peacefully. Although the Twelve Tribes continue to describe the state intervention as "child abduction" and an "arbitrary act", the authorities believe that the danger to the children was so extensive that it could not have been prevented without interfering with the parents' custody rights. Placing the children in foster families and homes is intended to help the girls and boys grow up in love, trust and understanding despite being separated from their parents.

The Twelve Tribes were founded in the USA in 1972 by Elbert Eugene Spriggs (born 1937). Today they have 2500 members worldwide, half of whom are under the age of eighteen. In addition to the USA and Germany, there are other communities in Canada, Brazil, Argentina, Australia, New Zealand, France, England and Spain. The founder is described by his followers as an apostle and provides the teachings for an original Christian life. This is associated with a community of goods and a strict hierarchy within the family. The wife is subordinate to the husband and the children must inevitably obey their parents' authority. This includes corporal punishment with the rod, which is justified on the basis of the Bible. "He who spares his rod hates his son, but he who loves him chastises him in time," it says in Proverbs 13:24, for example.

In the USA, allegations of child abuse were made against the members of the Twelve Tribes as early as 1984, and the state took 112 children into care. However, the US authorities had to return the children to their parents due to a lack of evidence. In Germany, there have long been disputes about compulsory schooling. According to the doctrine, children should be taught at home. Children are not allowed to attend higher education, and attendance at a public school is rejected on grounds of conscience. After several fines and many negotiations, the school authorities finally authorised the community to educate their children in a public school, a so-called supplementary school, in February 2006. When allegations of beatings were made against the parents of the children in the communities in Wörnitz and Klosterzimmern (Bavaria) in 2013, the authorities withdrew their authorisation.

For the members, life in the Twelve Tribes means total control in all areas, which is enforced on the children by force and has a lasting effect on their mental and emotional development.

Members of the faith community also live in a pronounced expectation of the end times. An imminent final judgement is prophesied, in which Jesus will assign people their eternal places. The "unrighteous" will go together with Satan into an "eternal lake of fire and brimstone", the "righteous" into an eternal new world and the "saints" into the "Holy City".

According to this understanding, the members of the Twelve Tribes belong to the "chosen saints" - provided they fulfil all the rules of the religious community. Other religious, especially Christian, communities are devalued by the Twelve Tribes. There is no contact with other communities.

The book "Satan Never Sleeps" is the first and so far only report by an apostate who describes his experiences with the Twelve Tribes comprehensively and in detail. Open and Robert Pleyer is unsparing - also towards himself

gives the public a deep insight into the brutal practices of the self-proclaimed original Christians. The dropout, who lived with the Twelve Tribes for twenty years and in some cases held leading positions, does not gloss over anything and at the same time provides intimate insights into the mechanisms of such religious communities.

This is what makes the book so valuable and at the same time instructive and worth reading. As an educator and head of a sect counselling centre in North Rhine-Westphalia, who has been accompanying people who have left various rigid religious communities for thirty years, I notice many typical parallels with other religious groups that are prone to conflict. For example, the very first contact with the group results in an invitation to the next centre of the community. If the person concerned is lonely or curious and follows this invitation, the group welcomes them in an extremely friendly and emotional way. The newcomer is told that the community has been waiting for him and that he is a particularly important person for the group. Suddenly the seeker is the centre of attention and experiences a feeling of happiness and security because he believes he has finally found the people who care about him. The members of the community seem to take a genuine interest in each other and ask many questions about his life so far.

Gradually, however - and barely perceptible to the person concerned - their previous life is devalued or questioned by the group. At the same time, the new life in the community is praised as the only way to be really successful (Scientology), really happy (esoteric groups) or really true (fundamentalist groups). People who are trying to overcome crisis situations (e.g. feelings of guilt, loss of a loved one) or are generally dissatisfied with life at the time the group addresses them are particularly receptive to these new teachings and attitudes to life. The offer of a radical change of life awakens new hope in them and shows them new perspectives.

Robert Pleyer is in a similar situation. The death of a good friend's dog, for which he feels responsible due to his lack of attention, burdens and preoccupies him. The desire to rethink and reorganise his life flourished within him. Like Robert Pleyer, many other dropouts report that they have repeatedly experienced phases of doubt.

It is typical that such moments are interpreted by the faith community as seduction or weakness on the part of the individual; subtle threats are made that people with persistent doubts must leave the group and are lost without its protection. Singular random events, such as the author's accident with his Vespa, are interpreted and used by the group as a sign that the person absolutely must change their life, because otherwise it would not end well for them.

As the rules in all conflict-prone religious and ideological groups are simple and easily understandable dogmas that cannot be questioned, there are no discussions or disputes. This falsely creates the impression of total harmony. However, this supposed harmony is bought at a high price with the compulsion to think and act in a uniform way, because this kind of uniformity can only be achieved with the help of hierarchical structures and comes at the expense of the personal freedom of the individual. Individual opinions and independent thinking, which could lead to a critical examination of the community's teachings, are not permitted and are fought against.

These encroachments on the personal rights of individuals are also practised by the Twelve Tribes. Robert Pleyer has to wait six years before he receives permission from the elders to marry. Even as a married man, he has no privacy and - like all members - is under constant scrutiny. Confessions of sin, which the individual must make in front of the whole group, ensure that the members control each other and are therefore well informed about each other's weaknesses.

Social pressure is institutionalised to a certain extent. Control is the decisive tool in the Twelve Tribes and similar communities. From the very beginning, the children are trained to lose their own will. The author impressively describes how he realises that he is harming his own children with this educational method. As a teacher, he wants to convey joy and fun to the pupils, especially in sports lessons, but even here he is reprimanded by the elders. Even the elders cannot live in safety and without fear. This is because the leadership personnel are controlled by so-called ambassadors, who are sent to the individual communities by the founder. This method is a common strategy in conflict-prone religious communities and is used by Jehovah's Witnesses as well as the Scientology organisation.

However, the author shows that it is possible to fight back, turn one's back on such a group and lead a life of freedom and personal responsibility. Robert Pleyer, for example, is surprised that he is given a car to leave the community. If a member vigorously and resolutely expresses his own opinion, the conflict-prone religious groups are usually happy when the troublemaker leaves and do not try to stop him by force.

Robert Pleyer's book is a moving account of the experiences of a father of four who has belonged to the Twelve Tribes faith community for two decades - half of his life to date. The author deserves my admiration, because few people who have lived in a rigid religious community for such a long time succeed in openly exposing the shortcomings of such a community and daring to make a new start.

Robert Pleyer's report exposes the danger and hypocrisy of religious fanatics. At the same time, it is a wake-up call that the precious freedom of belief in our Basic Law must not be misused to live out one's own ideas of power without restraint on the backs of defenceless children.

Essen, May 2014
Sabine Riede,
Managing Director Sect Info North Rhine-Westphalia

Introduction

The thoughts come unexpectedly. When I read a story to my children before bedtime, images and sentences suddenly pop into my head. When I'm kneading bread dough in the kitchen or cycling to the grocery shop around the corner, they won't leave me alone. Scraps of conversations from my time with the Twelve Tribes even nestle in my dreams. Twenty years with the fundamental Christians cannot simply be wiped away.

The book is my therapy. I want to understand and process my actions. I can only understand my own actions if I visualise my human development in the Twelve Tribes. In themselves, individual episodes are a mystery to me. The timing for the many hours I'm spending with the book is ideal. I have a new friend who stands by me and a writer who puts my thoughts into apt words. Now my memories are concrete letters. Maybe one day I'll be able to close the book cover. I couldn't have done it alone.

For twenty long years, I worked with the Twelve Tribes to spread their message. I have spoken on their behalf and helped to produce magazines to recruit new members. Now it is important for me to continue to speak and share what I know today - so that people can inform themselves and look behind the façade of the community.

As I revise the chapter about chastising the children, I have to cry again and again. The memory shakes me. I am ashamed of what I destroyed in my own children. Today, when I think about how I always

with the willow rod again, I despair of myself.

The book is also for my four children. They are now between three and ten years old, and if they later have questions about our time with the Twelve Tribes, they can always read about life back then in an unembellished and preserved form. I can't justify my actions back then, but I have to accept myself. Only by accepting myself and not suppressing what I did can I help my children to move on from their time with the Twelve Tribes.

I also regret that I have overburdened or hurt other brothers and sisters. I was no better than other elders in the community. I did things under moral pressure that were not really backed by my spirit. But I bear the responsibility for this myself. I felt that I was spiritually superior, subjugated my fellow brothers and received praise from the elders for it, which was good for me.

For this book, I had to learn again what the terms mean. Words like love, community, partnership, marriage and friendship have a different meaning in the Twelve Tribes. When I joined the Twelve Tribes in 1990, I still thought that my fellow brothers and I spoke the same language. Their words seem to express goals that I also have. I feel comfortable and don't realise what they are really saying. Only in retrospect do I realise that the words in the Twelve Tribes have a different meaning, which I gradually adopt. Over time, I internalise this subtext so much that I really believe that I don't love my children if I don't beat them. Similarly, at this time, "community" does not mean equality to me, but systematic hierarchy. And "Partnership" and "marriage" do not seem to me to be an exchange on an equal footing and intimacy, but a mere construct that the elders of the community are allowed to monitor down to the last detail. The words have the wrong connotations.

Nevertheless, I never reach the total surrender of my self, which according to the teachings of Yoneq, the founding father of the Twelve Tribes,

is the ultimate goal. Inside, I always want to be the final authority for my own actions. I didn't realise this to the same extent back then. I seek God and in the phases of my greatest doubts I have always tried to make a new start in the community instead of turning my back on it. While the elders performed a single baptism on other brothers, they baptised me as a troublemaker and perpetual crisis case four times and washed me clean just as often. I wanted this life with the twelve tribes more than I could actually live it.

It took many years for the thought of leaving the Twelve Tribes forever to become a certainty. When the elders took my wife Shalomah and my four children away from me for the third time in 2011, I knew once and for all that I had been wrong about the community. I was shocked that my brothers and sisters, who constantly talked about love, could destroy my family just like that. They labelled me a bad husband and father and left me alone in pain and grief. How can people inflict such suffering on other people?

Suddenly a disciple!

I am in their hands. I am at their mercy. The two men have led me to a deep spot and push my body into the river until my head disappears under the water. Less and less air fills my lungs. I want nothing more than to breathe. But there is no escape. I feel the firm grip around my shoulders. It's too late to turn back. Panic rises inside me. I feel my heartbeat in my throat and say goodbye to my old life, the middle-class existence I lived in Germany for twenty-one years. It's like a little death. Old Robert Pleyer is about to die. I am a guest at my own funeral.

Standing on the banks of the Gave d'Oloron river, the 200 or so members of the Twelve Tribes applaud and cheer as I shout "Yahshua, save me!" into the southern French sky shortly before my dive. On this day in March 1991, I took off my jacket and shoes and wore jeans and

Dressed in a T-shirt, she climbs into the cold meltwater flowing down from the nearby Pyrenees. The air is less than ten degrees Celsius and the water in the river is just five degrees. Now I am in the grip of these men to whom I entrust my whole life. They push my body into the icy water until I am close to unconsciousness. They could let me perish, simply hand me over to the floods until I turn blue and drown, because God wants it that way. I put myself in their hands of my own free will, surrendered myself to them as a sign of humility before God. If the two blokes let me live at God's command, I will be a new person. Everything will be different. Everything begins anew. If I survive, I think, while I can't feel my body from the cold.

I will never go back to my old life. My old dreams will be extinguished, because when I emerge from the dark waters and my lungs fill with air again, I will have received the Holy Spirit and begin a new life free from all my sins.

When I joined the community of the Twelve Tribes two weeks earlier in Sus in the south of France, the thought of being baptised on the spot was far from my mind. Instead, I was looking for truthfulness and a life in harmony with nature. I want to live my moral principles, which I see realised in this place and which do not seem feasible in my bourgeois life. In Sus, these original Christians give me the support that I have sought in vain in my old life. The Twelve Tribes have an answer to all my questions. To free themselves from greed and hatred, they say, man needs nothing more than this one God. "Yahshua makes you free!" Behind the large natural stone wall that surrounds the compound in Sus, this one answer is enough for the Twelve Tribes.

It is proclaimed in English, because God's message brings together people from all over the world in Sus 200. Americans, Canadians, Australians and Germans live here, but also English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Belgians and Dutch. I decide that I want to be a part of it.

The old château with its living quarters and utility rooms is completely overcrowded. Tents and wooden huts are lined up around the large field in the centre of the estate. There is a central toilet block with showers, a large vegetable garden and stables with animals. An old stone wall runs around the site.

Sus is a wagon castle of faith. The early Christians have created a little paradise for themselves, without the hustle and bustle and stress, and without the evil temptations from outside. In a seemingly perfect world, they keep their followers within their own ranks. In 1972, the American Eugene Spriggs founded the Twelve Tribes out of the Jesus movement. In Europe, the sprout is still tender at the beginning of the 1990s. The seed of the first original Christian congregation from the small town of Island Pond in the US state of Vermont blows to

Stuttgart. From there, a small group of Germans set off on a journey through Spain and Portugal in the early 1980s. The group, who call themselves the little flock, meet a wealthy French woman on this journey in 1984 and are allowed to settle on her property in Sus shortly afterwards. More and more dropouts came down from the nearby Pyrenees to the so-called "Tabitha's Place" and settled with the Twelve Tribes. They were mainly hippies who were rehearsing their departure, but fell out hopelessly and sought refuge with the original Christians. Sus grows into the nucleus of the European Twelve Tribes movement.

Between 1990 and 1992, the community sprouts shoots throughout Europe: The Original Christians set up branches in England, France, Spain and Germany.

Suddenly the men pull me up by the arms. I quickly emerge from the dark meltwater, gasping for air. "He didn't have his hand under water," shouts one from the shore.

"Yes," confirms another. "He needs to go back in the water. Robby wasn't in it with his whole body!" So the two men push me into the depths of the river one more time.

I realise how I'm letting go of my old life inside, how my time in Cologne as an engineering student is being washed out of me, my soul washed away. A short time later, as I climb up the embankment and quickly pull on my old loden jacket, my whole body is shaking. I barely manage to slip my feet into the well-worn camel boots.

Then the original Christians wrap me in heavy woollen blankets. Applause breaks out. The scene is unreal. I hear singing and the sound of guitars as if from afar. 200 people have gathered on the banks of the river and are singing Christian songs, some are laughing and others are nodding encouragingly at me. They run up to me, hug me and place their hands flat on my body.

More and more push towards me, more and more palms cover my body. Warmth rises inside me. I am buried under hands. I feel a great energy. A strange glow flares up inside me, as if the Holy Spirit is entering me. I feel as safe as in my mother's womb, I am a second time

I was born, hug my new brothers and sisters to me, cry, tremble, laugh, cry. I am full of happiness. I have reached the goal of all my dreams. Now the twelve tribes raise their voices in prayer in my honour. I am moved. Goosebumps roll over my body. I'm not sure whether from emotion or cold. Probably both. The feelings overwhelm me. I am intoxicated, swimming in love, in absolute happiness. Today, I'm sure, is the start of my real life.

When I set off from the castle to the river with the large caravan of Original Christians a few hours earlier, the huge effort was for another person being baptised. Little did I realise that I would become the second main character a little later. The actual person being baptised, a Spaniard who wants to live here with his whole family, has climbed into the icy water and is immersed by the men. As the crowd, with the new disciple wrapped in blankets, is about to march back to the château, one of them asks: "Is there anyone else who wants to give their life to the one true God?"

"Yes, me!" I hear myself shout. It's as if someone else is speaking with my voice. The bystanders immediately turn to me. One of the elders shouts to the crowd: "Robby wants to surrender!" They had only been waiting for this, had suspected or at least hoped that I would confess at this moment. Most of them had probably had me in their sights for days. Now it's your turn, it flashes through my mind, and as if in a trance I sign up for the procedure as the next person to be baptised. At that moment, I am certain that God himself has addressed me. Yahshua, whose name in Hebrew means "I am mighty to save", has chosen me. I am his newest instrument.

Less than three months ago, I visited the Twelve Tribes for the first time in Sus - for just three weeks at the time. And now - a whole two weeks after my second visit - I've already been baptised! "It's providence," the members of the Twelve Tribes always explain to me when I wonder about my own pace on God's path. "You belong to God!" To help me realise that

On the very first day of this second visit to Sus, a big welcome party with music and dancing begins. The party is for me and another German. His name is Markus (name changed) and he arrives by chance on the same day as me. The Twelve Tribes approached the engineer at the church congress in Berlin immediately after the fall of the Berlin Wall and persuaded him to visit Sus. It was the first church congress after reunification. The fact that we are coming to Sus on the same day is also coincidence, the Twelve Tribes explain. In a life outside the stone wall, I probably wouldn't have bothered with this East German, indeed I probably wouldn't even have met him. He's a bourgeois as they say in the book. Early fifties, parted hair, own home, Trabbi with caravan. He's one of those guys who did everything right in the East; he was a supervisor for printing presses in a large printing company in the former GDR. In normal life, we would never have got on or even understood each other. But now we are brothers in spirit. "That's coincidence," the disciples rejoice.

We are prodigal sons who have finally returned home, the Twelve Tribes community tells us. One original Christian after another greets us. With tears in their eyes, they embrace me and hug me tightly. "The fact that you made it back to us is the work of God," says a woman in a wide robe. A man called Jehu with tightly tied hair says: "We knew it, we prayed every day that you would resist the temptations out there." Jehu is one of the people I worked with on my first visit to the organic bakery. He tells me that all the bakers have prayed for me every single morning since I've been away. Every morning, before the first dough was kneaded, they would send a prayer to God: "Yahshua, bring Robby back!" They know that on my first visit to Sus, they planted a seed in me that just had to sprout. They are sure that I belong to them. They leave me with the impression that I am important to them and the community.

This incredible feeling works like a drug in me. I'm happy, I trust these men and women more and more. They say it's so great that I made it to Sus.

Life in the circle of the twelve tribes is the most beautiful life of all, it is one in truth. To really gain access to their world, I would now only have to surrender inwardly and dedicate my life to the only God - and this final and true surrender is baptism. Baptism is the end of all ego. So a few days later, down by the river, I fall to my knees before God and cry out: "Here is my life, Yahshua, accept it! I am ready to live only for You!"

Until I actually decide to be baptised on that day in March, I toss and turn in my bed for many nights. I wrestle with myself, spend hours in dialogue. I literally accuse myself of struggling with the decision to live a God-centred life. I can't let go of the old yet. This back and forth almost drives me mad. At the daily meetings of the Twelve Tribes, I now feel like I'm being watched. Can the members of the Twelve Tribes see my insecurity? Surely they must realise how much I am struggling with myself? Will they speak to me publicly in front of everyone because they sense my conflict? Will I perhaps be outed in the great assembly because I can't drive Satan out of me completely and immediately? 200 people fill the meeting room every morning and every evening. They sit on the floor, on steps, on chairs, tables and sofas. It's as stuffy as the overcrowded seminar room back then at Cologne University. One after the other, they talk about their faith, sing Christian songs together or read passages from the Bible to help them understand God better.

On the day I was baptised down by the river, I had the feeling that after two weeks I would soon have to speak in the meeting. I'm already preparing a few words in my head when suddenly the third guest stands up next to me and the East German and declares that he wants to give his life to Yahshua today. I am relieved and think, now

you sit still and listen to the other person first. I have gained time and don't need to make a decision in my indecision. The inner pressure fizzles out.

After the meeting, the twelve tribes set off for the river. It is a huge caravan. Women, men and children carry torches and wave lanterns. They join hands and run leaping towards the river Gave d'Oloron. A chant from hundreds of throats fills the valley. "Take me down to the freedom river, wash my soul." I am one with the crowd, part of it, absorbed in it. "Yes, me!" I say in response to the question of whether anyone else wants to be baptised that day, wants to entrust their life to Yahshua. I emerge from the dark waters, feel the warm blankets and the many hands on my body. Now I am a full member of the Twelve Tribes. Now I am a rising seed of the Creator. A car takes me back to the castle. I take a shower and slip into my new clothes.

Someone has put a pair of wide bloomers and a fresh, home-made shirt on my bed. It is the priestly clothing. It symbolises that I am now consecrated, that I have been chosen to proclaim God's message. Then I have to comb my hair straight back and secure it to my head with a ribbon. There is not enough length to tie it into a true priestly hairstyle, a short fist-length plait. The hair in general.

The first time I travelled to Sus was with dreadlocks. For many years, the long mane has been an expression of freedom for me, a sign of individuality and anarchy, of rebellion against the established. As a twenty-something, my dreadlocks seem to me to be the epitome of otherness. But even on my first visit, the Twelve Tribes criticise the wild look. "This hairstyle," they say, "doesn't work. God wants a tied ponytail for men and not personal freedom!" God wants to hold me down with a strict hairstyle, God wants the subordinate. Although a God of freedom seems more appealing to me, the teachings of the twelve tribes work and influence me, gradually driving out my individuality.

Back in Germany, I finally ask a friend to cut off my brown curls. When he refuses because he doesn't want to violate my sanctuary, after a tough struggle I grab the scissors myself. I cut off strand after strand while tears roll down my face. Until then, this hairstyle had had a tremendous idealistic value for me. Now I'm leaving a piece of my old life behind with my long locks. For the first time, I am bowing to one of the principles of the Twelve Tribes. I am giving up a piece of myself, becoming more and more part of the herd. For the Twelve Tribes, freedom does not mean wearing your hair the way you want. From their point of view, true freedom is to wear your hair as God commands.

The old values begin to change in my mind. Little by little, the words take on a new meaning. With every tuft of hair that falls to the ground, I now triumph over myself, so to speak. The liberation from my own desires has begun with the act of violence on my hair. Only those who no longer have any desires of their own will be free, is an essential rule of the tribes. Only later do I realise that with the extinction of my own will, other people from the community take my place and rule over me.

Before my second visit to Sus, I leave my jewellery behind in Germany along with my long hair. The Twelve Tribes have taught me that it is worthless to decorate yourself. From their point of view, my watch, the silver finger ring with a blue stone from Turkey, my earring and my leather band from Africa, which I always wear around my neck, are a uniform for life outside the new society they are building. Now I no longer need all that, they say. Adornment is just a facade, a disdainful costume. Instead, I'm now dressed in baggy trousers and a loose shirt. For me, this is no longer a contradiction, but the opposite of pure outward appearance. After all, I am wearing the priestly garb of the twelve tribes, the clothing of truth, so to speak. True beauty comes from within, say the Twelve Tribes. Another sentence that I will teach my own children many years later.

As I descend the stairs to the meeting room with the other baptised person, freshly showered and dressed in my new clothes, my new family is already waiting for us. Some stand up and cheer, others warmly spread their arms. The room roars with applause. The music plays as we arrive. We sing, celebrate, eat and drink a concoction of honey, apple cider vinegar and water.

Vini is a traditional drink of the Twelve Tribes. It goes on until well after midnight. I fall into bed energised that evening. I am sure that I have done exactly the right thing. I am firmly convinced that I have taken the first step towards a better life with my baptism today.

The next morning, everyday life begins. Every time I speak my mind, my brothers and sisters look at me in amazement and frown. The look is supposed to tell me: "That's the old man talking! You still have a lot to learn." And I learn quickly. In a short time, I understand how I have to behave in this new system. I want to become an important member of the group. I want to understand and make progress. I want to get rid of the old selfish person inside me as quickly as possible. I want to be a good and obedient follower of God. I quickly learn the habitus that I need within the walls of the Twelve Tribes. These are rites and rules that we members can only live by within this community. We are moulded by the Twelve Tribes. Each and every one of us is trained, even conditioned, to think, speak and live in a way that can only be realised in this way within the structures of the community. This newly learnt life is only possible in the environment and format of the Twelve Tribes.

A new spirit is growing inside me and I feel more authentic than ever before in my life, despite the changed circumstances. I'm starting to talk and think like the others.

I adapt to the new circumstances surprisingly quickly. Years later, my mum tells me how alien I became to my family. After just two weeks, I am fully assimilated. But at the time, I had no idea how deep this adjustment would go. My other life seems to me

far away, as if washed away, a fading bad dream of my youth. Only now and then do I have a few conflicts in my new life that result from the old one. "That's the old man," my brothers and sisters tell me when I struggle with the new rules, and I defer to their judgement. For example, when I'm not allowed to travel as much as I want. In the first three years, they only allowed me to leave the community for Germany twice. Once I had to pick up my driving licence from the authorities so that I could drive a tractor in France. Another time, my father celebrated his fiftieth birthday. I was refused permission to travel to my grandparents' funeral. Let the dead bury the dead, I'm told.

I live with the Twelve Tribes for more than twenty years and even become one of their leading members. I help to found a tribal community in Pennigbüttel near Bremen and one in Stödden-Oberbronnen in Baden-Württemberg. I teach the children of the tribes in Deiningen near Nördlingen in Bavaria and for years successfully fight against the authorities who want to close our public school. In 2009, I tried the first breakaway with my family, but the new start failed after just a few months. In 2012, I finally left the increasingly radical Original Christians and took my four children with me. The world behind the walls became unbearable for me.

Old Robert dies

I first met the members of the Twelve Tribes in the summer of 1990, when I hitchhiked to a former military training area in Vienna's Mühlviertel district for the Rainbow Gathering. It was a big alternative hippie gathering that took place in an Austrian national park at the time. I had actually already rejected the idea of going to this festival because I had to look after a two-year-old dog. A friend from my clique asked me to look after the mixed-breed dog Kaschim for a few months. His owner is in prison for a drug deal that was busted. As a hitchhiker with a dog, hardly anyone would have taken me to the south, but then everything turned out quite differently.

A few days before the hippie festival in Vienna, the authorities allow the actual dog owner one day off, and this Michael really wants to see his pet. So my mate Peter, who knows the free-ranger and also found me the dog with the black curls, picks me up early in the morning from my father's house in Hennef an der Sieg in his old 200 Benz. It's a hot summer's day. The wind is blowing through the rolled-down side windows while loud reggae music is playing on the radio. On the journey, we decide to smoke a quick joint. My friend steers the brightly painted car into a sparse forest, and as we open the doors to let in the coolness of the forest, the dog jumps out of the car. Kashim runs through the woods, picks up the scent and disappears. At first I'm worried, then the smoke dulls my senses. Relaxed, we doze in the comfortable seats of the car and smoke. Shots are fired. I immediately jump out of the car as Kashim limps towards me. The animal whimpers, and

Blood runs from his nose. A man dressed in green runs towards us. "Why did you let the dog run free through the forest?" he shouts at us. "The animal has taken a fawn. I had to shoot it." When his anger fizzles out, the man introduces himself as a forester and explains that Kashim bit the fawn's neck in front of him and that's why he had to shoot the dog. But his shot only seriously injured the animal.

I approach Kashim and press the howling animal against my body. I feel so sorry for the dog. The forester says that he has to give Kashim the mercy killing. He is visibly uncomfortable. He points the shotgun at the animal's head and pulls the trigger. Immediately, Kashim collapses and sinks sideways onto the ground. I am overcome by a feeling of guilt. My body trembles and I cry like crazy. I am paralysed, unable to take a single step forward in thought or action. Once I've regained my composure, I pick up the bloodied dog in my arms and carry the carcass a little deeper into the undergrowth. The forester hands me his folding spade and I dig a hole in the soft ground. Again and again I have to interrupt my work because I am shaken by a crying fit.

I cry and ram the spade into the ground at the same time. On the very day that Michi is outside for the first time and wants to see his dog, the animal dies before my eyes. I'm at the end of my tether, put the dog in the pit and kick earth into the hole until Kashim is no longer visible. There is nothing inside me but hopelessness and silent despair.

When I get back in the car, sweat is pouring out of my pores. The heat is intense inside the car. My T-shirt sticks to my body. We decide to stop at a small forest lake.

I need to organise my thoughts. I am confused. The drugged weed, the dead dog, the nagging guilt. And now we have to explain to the dog's owner what happened; why I didn't manage to look after Kashim on the very day he wanted to see the animal on his walk. What should I tell Michael? I stare at the lake and look for a

A sign that gives me an answer. I take off my clothes, walk to the shore and jump into the lake. I dive deep into the green water and see the sun glistening on the surface of the lake from below. The water is refreshing and I dive and dive. I wish that everything is different, that everything is just a bad dream, that when I dive to the bottom, everything that has happened will suddenly be undone, the sorrow and pain will somehow dissolve. I would have loved to have never surfaced again. But at some point the air is gone and I come back up. A state of emergency in my head. I get into the car in a daze and we drive off in silence to tell Michael about the death of his dog.

When Michael opens the door, I can barely look him in the eye. I tell him in a few words what has happened. He just stands there and looks at me questioningly. But I can't give him any real answers as to why. I take him in my arms and awkwardly murmur "Sorry". I feel uncomfortable and urge him to leave this place quickly. Tears run down my face on the journey back. We remain silent. There is nothing to say.

I hurriedly get out of the car in front of my father's house, run round the building and catch sight of my father mowing the lawn. As if he sensed what had happened from the look on my face, he looks at me and shouts: "Where's Kashim?"

I fall around his neck and once again the tears start to flow. 'Dad, I have to go! I have to get out of here, I can't cope,' I explain and press myself against his sweaty body from the gardening work. Then I tell him the story of the dead dog. He gives me 100 marks and I pack my rucksack that same day and set off for Austria.

The Rainbow Gathering is an international festival where people present their alternative living projects. After a few days, I have a whole list of different ways of living together that I want to visit at some point;

alternative forms of housing in Spain, France and Portugal. The projects seem to be answers to my spiritual questions. I also meet two nice people from the Twelve Tribes community in Sus. They introduce themselves as Ben Nabi and Labeshu and tell me that they run an organic bakery in the south of France and live in tipis. We become friends and they hand me a small flyer with the title "How to get to Sus".

The note tells the story of the small flock in the south of France that woke up on the edge of the Pyrenees and wanted to please God with all their heart. One of the men is an old hippy who has lived in the mountains of the Pyrenees for years. And as luck would have it, the man knows the very woman I met together with her family on a previous summer holiday in the area. What's more, I even lived with this hippy family for a while in their tipi by the river. The circle is complete, I think, and gain confidence.

It is only much later that I realise that the two envoys Ben Nabi and Labeshu have nothing at all to do with the alternative life forms I am looking for. On the contrary: the Twelve Tribes are quite distinct from this Easy Living. For me, everything is still somehow one at this point. I also don't realise that the Twelve Tribes see themselves as missionaries and literally send out wanderers to recruit new members.

Ben Nabi and Labeshu must have quickly realised that I'm a real find. During the three days of the Rainbow Festival, they kept trying to talk to me. When the alternative spectacle is finally over and I'm back in Germany, I think about their words almost every day - about God and their world. Then comes the next encounter with the hikers.

One day the following autumn, a friend visits me and tells me that he is planning to go to a concert by the rock band Grateful Dead in Essen. It was a group from San Francisco that had founded a kind of counterculture. My mate had lived in America for a year and had discovered the local

I got to know the alternative Deadhead scene. I then travelled with him to Essen, especially as the Zwölf Stämme had told me at the summer festival in the Mühlviertel that they also wanted to come to the concert on a bus to meet some friends. I thought it would be a good opportunity to see these friendly people again. As we are standing outside the concert hall, I hear from my friend that the Twelve Tribes bus is actually there. At this point, however, I'm too much in a party mood to go straight over to the Original Christians. I'd rather smoke weed, let myself fall into the music and have a good time. I now know that the Twelve Tribes have nothing to do with the weak flesh and are more spiritually orientated. But today I want to have fun first and foremost. I'm thrilled by the many colourful people waiting cheerfully at the entrance to the hall. They are dancing, celebrating and laughing! A young girl with a yellow sunflower in her hand runs past me singing and gives me a big kiss on the cheek. Everyone seems to want just one thing, peace and love.

Hours later, when I am one of the last to leave Essen's Gruga-Halle with deaf ears, I am shocked. Rubbish is piled up everywhere. I wade ankle-deep through paper cups, paper, dirt. For hours, I have been revelling in love, peace and happiness and am part of a crazy party - no question about it. But what remains of it is nothing but rubbish. Rubbish. Filth. Damn, I think, at the end of the evening all these hippie people, like all the other groups, have left nothing but rubbish behind.

Where is the depth, I ask myself. They sing Peace and Love, but you're left with the same rubbish as the superficial people I always criticise. Sunshine? Sunflowers? This hippy stuff is just as shallow as everything else, I think disillusioned. I want to leave more than rubbish behind. I have a different aspiration. Lost in such dreary thoughts, I walk through the main exit and suddenly hear someone shouting.

"Hey, Robby!" a man shouts to me from the car park and waves. It's one of the guys from Vienna. He obviously realises how

depressed I am. "Get on the bus first," he suggests, and I trot along behind him.

It's strange that these twelve tribes are standing in front of me right here and now, I ponder. Is this still a coincidence? As if he could read my mind, he says: "I know one thing, God brought you here." I climb into the old, lovingly restored Setra bus. The other members of the Twelve Tribes obviously already know who I am and greet me with a "Wow, it's a coincidence that we're meeting you here again". "Our God wants this!" says one man. An American admonishes: "Our God needs you. This can't be a coincidence. What's going on? You wanted to visit us in France, didn't you?" "Yes, I'm working at the moment, I'm doing a job in the carpentry workshop to earn money for a trip," I reply with emotion and immediately promise to come to Sus next winter.

The American takes care of me. Sitting next to me are other concert-goers who have also been intercepted by the Twelve Tribes at the exit of the Gruga Hall. All over the bus, small groups are discussing the meaning of life over a cup of tea. My American is very skilful. He doesn't say a word about the religious doctrine of the Twelve Tribes. Instead, he listens to me for hours, motivating me to find my way and break free from my old life. He is understanding. "Come round to Sus soon," he advises. "That's the best thing you can do. Our father loves you, that's why you're sitting here now." God had led me onto the bus to Essen. Everything has a reason.

I am grateful that the American gives me comfort after the insubstantial legacy of the rock concert. For the moment, he gives me hope. As a parting gift, he hands me the German edition of the magazine "Grateful". In it, newcomers to the Twelve Tribes testify to how their lives have changed for the better. I feel good on the way home to Hennef. First this rubbish and the senselessness after the concert - then this cosiness and understanding on the bus. No, that couldn't be a coincidence. God himself is calling me!

I have been searching for an alternative life since I was a teenager. I am always philosophising with my friends about a different society. We want nothing less than to change the world. I wear dreadlocks and am quickly becoming a big supporter of the Rastafarian movement. This denomination emerged from Christianity in Jamaica in the 1930s and is based on the Old Testament. My parents had to learn early on to accept my music and my matted hair. We often talk about my daring plans. My father, with whom I have been living since my mother moved to South America, is very vocal against my fantasies. He regularly tries to convince me to finish my engineering degree properly, earn money and pursue a middle-class career. My mum doesn't argue much. After school, I initially studied civil engineering in Cologne, but then met a group of alternative people and switched to social work. My engineering simply didn't fit in with this clique of carpenters and goldsmiths.

I keep telling my new friends about the teachings of the Twelve Tribes. I tell them that true love and perfect coexistence really do exist there. They are completely surprised by my stories, but to my own astonishment they are also less enthusiastic than I am. "Hey", I say indignantly at their sluggishness, "we all wanted to live together in peace. Now I've found a community like this and you don't want to join?" I wish I could go there with them, but my friends harshly refuse. But my own decision is irrevocable. Almost every day I read the newspaper "Grateful", which the Twelve Tribes gave me at the concert in Essen and which I have been cherishing ever since. The Internet has not yet caught on and the 24 pages are my only source of information. I read every word again and again and am thrilled anew. It says that the Twelve Tribes are about true faith in God and a close-knit community. I think I am already on

His way - and actually set off for Sus at Christmas 1990.

With a train ticket that my mum gives me, I first travel to Paris. From there, I hitchhike to the south of France. As I jump out of the lorry with my rucksack in the village square of Sus, I say goodbye to the driver with a "God loves you". The contents of the magazine, which I have read over and over again, are firmly fixed in my mind. I already feel like a medium of divine love, I'm in a super good mood and determined to change my life. Yes, I can hardly wait and hurry hopefully through the side entrance of the Twelve Tribes mansion.

A resident is about to enter a building when he sees me and comes over to me. "Welcome, I'm the Abbijah," he says in Swabian. He is from Stuttgart. I briefly tell him the stories from Vienna and Essen, and he answers:

"Subr, come roi." I should take a shower first and then come straight to the party. It's a Friday and the Shabbat celebrations are about to begin. Later, they tell me that the offer to take a shower was not purely an expression of hospitality, but rather a result of the fear that I might bring germs into the community with my dirty dreadlocks.

After the shower, I walk down the wooden stairs into the meeting room and see smiling and happy people everywhere. I'm standing in the entrance area, somewhat at a loss, when women, men and children come up to me, greet me warmly and ask me questions: What my name is, where I come from and how I found my way to the Twelve Tribes. I hear beautiful music. The atmosphere is peaceful, drinks and food are organic and wholesome. That's how I wanted it to be.

After the rest day on Saturday, my first working day is Sunday. I'm assigned to the organic bakery. The manager of the bakery is a German called Jehu, also a Swabian. Under his guidance, I bake my first ever

Wholemeal bread. There is nothing better for me. From then on, I no longer drink alcohol or light up a cigarette, let alone a joint. My drug is now the community. I have long conversations about God and love with lots of different people every evening. The children jump around happily between the benches. We dance. Everything seems harmonious. In short: I am happy. All my problems and hardships that I had in Germany are dissolving. My life is simple and organised. They understand me in Sus, I think, satisfied and relieved. They have a solution for me there.

Again and again we talk about selfishness in the world outside the walls of Sus. For the Twelve Tribes, there is a simple cause for all negative phenomena beyond the community. "What you criticise in your old life is so," says not only my foreman in the bakery, "because man has sin and wickedness in him. Only God can free you from these vices."

Yahshua is the answer to all the problems I feel inside me, repeating them time and time again. I've now been in Sus for a month and I'm finding it increasingly difficult to come to terms with this eternal answer. I keep believing that I will stay in Sus for the rest of my life. But I don't feel as at peace inside as I would have liked. I just can't bring myself to stay in Sus for good, so I decide to go back to Hennef once again. The members of the Twelve Tribes look at me dumbfounded when I tell them my decision. I have to say goodbye and assure them that I will be back soon. Then I leave.

I sleep with my father for a few nights, then I look for a room with a nice family just round the corner from my parents' house in Hennef. I couldn't have lived with my father any longer. Whenever we last met, there was always an argument. He doesn't agree at all with the alternative life path I've chosen and is still hoping that I'll resume my studies and leave sooner rather than later.

earn money regularly. I can no longer do anything with my former friends, the carpenters, goldsmiths and a few students, either. We spent many evenings brooding over alternative ways of living, and when I finally found a way to turn our wishes into reality, they were too cowardly to let go of their old lives. I would prefer to talk to my mum, with whom I still get on best. But she lives in South America.

The family with whom I am subletting takes me in in a friendly and helpful manner. However, the landlords Nick and Elah quickly realise that it is no longer possible for me to live the way they do. Whereas in France I took the opposite position in all discussions with the Twelve Tribes and questioned everything about their philosophy, now it's the other way round. Suddenly, in all conversations, including those with my landlords, I am defending the God-centred system of the Twelve Tribes. Sus's message lingers in my mind. "If it's that important to you," more and more of my friends and acquaintances say, exasperated, "then you'll just have to move there."

In the spring of 1991, I begin to wind up my old life. I sell or give away all the things that I have accumulated and that have been important to me up to that point. I declutter. At this point, I already realise that I have to give up most of the things I've grown to love. Above all, selling my motorbike is a radical step that means saying goodbye to my old life. But the gospel proclaimed by the Twelve Tribes wants it that way.

When I was still living with my father in my parents' house, I loved riding my motorbike along the River Sieg. My school friends and I feel like we belong to the group of freaks. We listen to Bob Marley, Genesis, Barclay James Harvest and Pink Floyd. We smoke weed and sell Nicaraguan coffee at the town fair. At school, we love attending the workshops run by the teachers of 1968.

The old hippie teachers give theatre lessons and other creative courses alongside the curriculum. These teachers with worn leather bags, corduroy trousers, washed-out baggy

shirt and neck-length hair are our first role models. We don't want to have anything to do with the so-called "poppers" who sit bored in their Golf GTI and blast themselves with dull disco music, just as we don't want to have anything to do with village folk who park bored in their Opel Manta in front of the ice cream parlour.

On the day of my departure to Hennef, the twelve tribes in Sus give me another warning. They prophesied that the evil Satan would try to prevent my return to the bosom of the church in southern France. "Satan will try to buy you, to offer you a good life. You can become weak. That's dangerous," they explain to me.

In fact, I am now in a constant battle with these prophesied temptations. Every day I endeavour to uphold the moral principles of the Twelve Tribes in this dangerous world. In Hennef, I deny myself alcoholic drinks at parties. I give up smoking and weed anyway. I begin to change completely. The girl I found so adorable before my trip to Sus no longer reaches out to me. For months I've tried in vain to get her attention. Now she suddenly speaks to me and takes an interest in me out of the blue. But I know that Satan has caused this change of heart and I decide not to let myself be seduced. So this is the temptation that the Twelve Tribes are talking about, I think. So this is the bait that Satan is using to lead me astray. I swear to myself not to let myself be blinded by the evil one and his dirty tricks. I am determined to stand firm, to stand up to Satan. But my defensive attitude only makes me more interesting for the girl. She keeps trying to strike up a conversation with me, to get my attention. I make a decision: the next time the girl approaches me, I hurriedly pack my things and flee the party.

Happy to have resisted all temptations, I fire up my Vespa outside and speed off. I feel invincible, having just resisted Satan. Ergo

I find myself on the direct path to God. Proud, almost cocky, I race down the mountain as fast as the Vespa will take me. The chin strap of my helmet flutters loosely in the wind. Suddenly, in a tight right-hand bend, my rear wheel slips off on the gravel. The helmet whirls through the air. With my hands still on the handlebars, I hit the side of the road and smack my nose on the tarmac. The warm blood runs down my chin and further down my neck. As I struggle to my feet, a thought occurs to me: God is going to let me fall on my nose again. At the same time, I am sure that I deserve His painful lesson. The twelve tribes had said that God wanted me to stay in Sus and not go back to my old world. But I didn't want to listen to them. The Twelve Tribes' way of thinking had me in its grip: God wants good, Satan wants evil. It's as simple as that. I have to be on my guard, must not leave His path. Otherwise, I am threatened with His immediate chastisement.

That night, I ring my father's doorbell and he tends to my bloodied nose. With a throbbing tine, I immediately decide to follow God from now on. Yahshua will show me where to go. After three months in Hennef, I return to the Twelve Tribes in Sus.

Fun is forbidden

When the Twelve Tribes baptised me in the French Sus, they gave me the Hebrew name "Yathar Pore", the useful and fruitful one. The name has an effect on me. I am indeed "useful" and set up the community school system in Germany as a teacher in the mid-1990s. I like children. Maybe because I was single at the time and didn't have any children of my own. Maybe also because I miss real family life. It will be a long time before I have a wife and children of my own. For now, I want to inspire the children of the community, make them mature, proud and knowledgeable. I want to teach them to trust themselves and to see life as an adventure. I want to help them experience a wonderful childhood like I did.

As a young boy, I sling my bag into the corner after school and roam the woods on the edge of the Westerwald. Tests of courage await me everywhere, small dangers lurk: dark caves, deep forests, rushing streams. As a young adult, I get on my motorbike, tie my sleeping bag to the luggage rack and thunder through the countryside.

Such tours through the countryside and the nights under the open sky are the best thing for me. I also want to convey this feeling to the children. But I didn't yet know what the Twelve Tribes thought about children's free will.

"We have to impose our will on the children. They must not behave like other children," it says under the title "Child's Will" in a so-called "Teaching" of the Twelve Tribes. "We have to teach our children not to ask for anything, neither food nor things they want to do." Today, I am particularly proud of the fact that the school class in which I taught the

I invest most of my energy and love in the fact that seven boys and one girl no longer live with the Twelve Tribes. The young people have the necessary courage to build a life for themselves on the other side of the wall, and I believe I have played a part in creating a strength in them that enables them to live beyond the closed-off original Christian community.

In 1992, the Sus Council of Elders decided to send me to a farm higher up in the Pyrenees. The Twelve Tribes had recently bought the property, four kilometres from Sus, and settled six families with ten children there. Firstly, I am supposed to help them grow vegetables. Then the community decides to make me a sports teacher.

My job is to keep the children busy twice a week in the afternoon after school while their parents are on duty in the fields and kitchens. As a single brother, I have already proven that I have a good connection with young people. A single brother is a man without a partner who is attached to a family and helps the parents bring up the children. At the same time, the father of the family acts as a spiritual counsellor to the single brother and instructs him in spiritual matters. In Sus, I am initially assigned to the single sister Drorah ("songbird"), whom I support in bringing up her son. I soon took on the role of surrogate father for other large families. Often a whole horde of girls and boys bounce around me while the parents are busy in important conversations or working as carpenters and bakers, i.e. doing jobs where the children get in the way. The children and I plant vegetables, pick wild berries in the forest and talk about God and nature. I feel that I have a certain talent for working with the children in the community. It's fun and satisfying for me. So why not be a teacher?

As a sports teacher, however, I soon realise that there are clear limits to my task. For the Twelve Tribes, physical exercise is essentially a way of exercising the body. No more

and nothing less. The so-called "physical exercises", exercises such as trunk bends and push-ups, are based on the ideas of the Roman poet Juvenal, who believed that a healthy mind only matures in a healthy body. The Twelve Tribes' physical education programme is by no means intended to convey the joy of movement, but rather reminds me of the drill of young soldiers in the barracks. The curriculum of the early Christians defines sport as running and gymnastics. Ball sports such as football or basketball are frowned upon. Competitions and physical contact were to be avoided. The council of elders even abolished football day, when two teams of fathers played against each other, because the uncontrolled emotions that can arise from such sporting activities are a sin. The frustration after defeats and the joy after victories lead astray in the opinion of the Twelve Tribes. All feelings must result from God himself and must relate exclusively to the Most High. Sport, on the other hand, is an idol.

In order to instruct his disciples about the "dangers of sport", the founder of the Twelve Tribes, Elbert Eugene Spriggs, wrote a special paper in January 1995 and sent it to all branches of the Fellowship. "It may seem to us that sport is just a form of exercise. But there is more going on than meets the eye. Many sports fans are so gripped and violent that they commit assaults and even murders." Spriggs urgently warns his Twelve Tribes that sport can take the place of God and plant itself as an evil seed in people's hearts, even though this place is reserved for God alone. "So, be aware of what you are doing when you inspire your young children to compete in sports.

This has certainly meant the downfall of so many who have not made wise decisions about their lives. It gets into their blood and could take possession of them. It is like alcoholism." The instruction ends with an appeal from the apostle John: "Beware of idols."

At the same time, physical education is intended to prepare the children of the Twelve Tribes for a life in nature. It represents a kind of

survival training for the next generation, utilising the content of American scouting. Fundamentalist Christians believe that the Millennial Kingdom will dawn as soon as the Twelve Tribes have spent fifty years on earth as a light to the nations and have lived the Good News of salvation as a testimony. Three years before God actually comes to earth, the Twelve Tribes must leave their homes in the hundreds of branches that have been established worldwide by then. The brothers and sisters set off for Brazil, Canada, Spain, France or Australia and set out into the wilderness. But if you want to get by outdoors, you need answers to a few questions: How do I build a roof over my head from branches? Which berries are edible? How do I determine the direction of the compass based on the growth of moss on tree bark? In addition to practical knowledge, the survival training is also designed to help children overcome their fears of the unknown - using some surprising methods.

"So, you scaredy-cats, let's all touch it," a teacher once orders after leading her group of girls to an electric fence. The children flinch and look in disbelief. None of the girls dares to take a step forwards. "Come on now!", the woman orders the children in the tone of a strict governess. Hesitantly, the first girl stretches her hand towards the cow pasture, pushes her arm through and touches the electric fence with her fingertip. Electricity and shock run through her limbs. Tears flow. The first girl has passed the test. The others must follow.

When I hear this story, I am shocked, but decide to use such encouraging things for my goal of strengthening the children not only physically, but also internally. "Aha", I think, "so methods like that are allowed here, I won't offend anyone with something like that." From now on, my ten pupils have to cross steep embankments along a slippery path or find their own way home from the forest, while I slip away unnoticed and secretly watch them as they walk across the forest.

Debate the route. I want to make the boys more independent. They grow up under the constant care of adults, are home-schooled, insecure and intimidated by the slightest danger, even though our tests of courage are anything but risky.

The forest is new territory for them.

I am also gradually becoming more courageous. More and more ideas from experiential education, which I studied during my social work degree, are being incorporated into my sports lessons. We go on discovery tours into the surrounding countryside, play hide and seek in the spruce grove or lie on the strongly scented forest floor with our eyes closed and guess strange noises.

The children don't know such games. In the presence of their parents, I experience them as serious, quiet and obedient. In nature, however, away from their familiar surroundings and away from the eyes of their parents, they burst with childlike joy. They happily fall backwards into the damp leaves, find it hard to breathe after playing running games or wait excitedly and expectantly for the seeker when playing hide and seek behind their bushes.

I know that the fun I bring to the lessons is a balancing act. I constantly have the feeling that one day the council of elders will summon me and ask me awkward questions. Yathar, what are you doing with our children?

Yathar, do you believe that the joy you teach our children is wanted by God? Yathar, don't you want to recognise that pleasure in sport is a sin? For the Twelve Tribes, there is a difference between joy and fun. For them, pleasure results from a clear conscience towards God, whereas fun is based on useless things. Fun is forbidden. My brothers and sisters much prefer gymnastic exercises to the cross-country runs I initiated, in which we jump wildly over streams and crawl under uprooted trees, or the cops and robbers game in which one group of children has to capture the flag of the other party.

In the Twelve Tribes, physical exercise is part of an overall concept that also includes healthy eating and getting enough exercise.

Sleep is one of them. Nothing more. Sport is not an end in itself and certainly not a source of unbridled cheerfulness. When it's harvest time in France or the children's labour is needed for other reasons, sport is cancelled. "Don't leave your children out until the work is done," is the maxim in Sus and elsewhere. "Everyone has to help bring out the best in the children." Sometimes I clash with the council of elders. "The children need to let off steam in their totally planned daily routine," I emphasise the value of my sports lessons. "They need time to let off steam." "Work out?" Abiram (name changed), the father of four children, looks at me in amazement. "The children get enough exercise working in the fields." Abiram spends most of his time raising young plants instead of encouraging his underdeveloped son. Many years later, a teenager stands before his father, who has a big heart but also has great difficulty formulating a coherent sentence.

I get into a lot of trouble with the mums and dads after a swimming trip with my group of boys. We are splashing around in the water on the shore and the sun is shining on our faces. Some of the children are learning to swim that day. The little ones can now keep their heads above water to some extent and are very proud. In short, we are in high spirits when we get into our little van a few hours later to make our way back. We chug along the forest track in our Citroën Dyane. The soft suspension of the boxy duck means that we bob up and down for a while after every bump, swaying back and forth after every bend. It feels like we're sitting on a Hollywood swing gone wild. The boys giggle and shriek. The fun continues on the country road. I take a liking to the nonsense and jerk the steering wheel violently to the left, then to the right, left, right again. The children take it in turns to clap against the person sitting next to them on one side and the one on the other, bursting out laughing.

The next morning, I'm the talk of the whole community. The boys at home have heard about my exuberant

driving manoeuvres, and I earn the scowls of their parents. An elder pulls me aside. "You've taught our children completely the wrong values. How could you do that?" he rages and tells me that driving is not a pleasure, but a tool to get from A to B. And it's dangerous. It's also dangerous. "We pray," he warns, "that our brothers and sisters will survive every journey in the car unscathed, and you're messing around with the children."

From then on, I am under special observation. They don't say it, but I can feel it, I can interpret their gestures and facial expressions. They are afraid that I will be too relaxed with their children. They don't like activities that are just for fun, activities that don't have a higher, God-centred purpose. The project of the Twelve Tribes is a serious matter, pastime is an abomination in the eyes of God.

The disciples of Yahshua feel chosen. They believe in the Three Eternal Destinies. There are three hundred multi-page stories, allegories and manifestos by the founder Spriggs on this one subject alone. The Three Eternal Destinies are the breeding ground on which the Twelve Tribes grow, on which this unique sociological experiment is to flourish. According to their thinking, those people who deliberately violate their conscience and destroy the lives of other inhabitants of the earth are on one level. This is followed by the righteous of other religions and cultures who do good of their own accord, thereby proving that God has written the knowledge of good and evil into the heart of every human being. The third group consists of those who recognise that they must ask for forgiveness. These are people who were either part of the first group or - despite all their endeavours - cannot draw their own strength from God's grace. They are the members of the Twelve Tribes. Eternal penitents.

The disciples of Yahshua know more than other believers that they have brought guilt upon themselves. They are repentant and teach their children that they are in danger, but that in the community of the Twelve Tribes they have a unique opportunity to escape purgatory.

"You are the daughters and sons of kings, thank God for saving you!" This attitude determines their lives - that of adults and that of children. "Children, obey your parents, as is right in the sight of the Lord," it says in Ephesians. According to the Twelve Tribes, there is no hope for people who have once realised that they need to repent and still turn away from God. Children who do not follow their parents are considered dead. Their parents want to prevent this second death by all means: Without the children, the experiment driven by the adults would be at an end.

* * *

The children and young people of the Twelve Tribes know no sugar, no cigarettes, no alcohol. They do not watch television, read novels or listen to CDs. Their personal possessions are limited to their clothes, their school supplies and perhaps a pocket knife or tape measure, which they use to help their fathers at work. The clothes are simple and modest. The girls wear skirts, dresses, bloomers and loose blouses. The patterns are prescribed by the Twelve Tribes headquarters. Mothers who do not follow these plans correctly get into trouble. The girls have braided their hair into a plait, which is secured at the end with a simple elastic band. The boys wear cargo trousers and wide shirts. Shorts must be at least knee-length. For women and girls, the skirt hem must even reach to the ankles. If their skirts and trousers are not sewn by their mothers or the winter jumpers are not knitted by them, their mums, who call them Imma in Hebrew, must remove all patches from the garments. Funny prints, comic figures or slogans are forbidden. Only cotton, linen, viscose or wool are tolerated as materials. Their mothers also have to paint over the brand symbols because they can promote the pursuit of recognition through branded articles. Once a mum even warns me about the label on a water bottle: "An athlete tears

arms up at the finish line of a marathon. "That's the spirit of the evil world," she warns me.

The offspring of the Twelve Tribes don't watch horror or sex films, but they don't watch the news either. They know nothing about Dieter Bohlen or neo-Nazis. But they also don't know Mozart, Rembrandt or Goethe. The children are not called Tim, Nils or Mandy, but have the Hebrew names Tehora ("pure heart"), Néeman ("faithfulness") and Perach ("bud"). They have never eaten a cheeseburger with fries and drunk Coca-Cola with it. But they do know mate tea, millet and spelt bread. They don't play bloodthirsty computer games, but they also don't play chess or mill. The Twelve Tribes have unpleasant experiences with a game of "Mensch, ärgere dich nicht" (Man, don't be angry) and get rid of it.

The winners are too happy, the losers are angry. The colourful game pieces do not bear good fruit. For the chosen people, this children's stuff is a waste of time and also dangerous, because God does not want children who give free rein to their emotions. Anyone who doesn't believe this need only read a story from the Old Testament. In it, God punishes the Israelites for passing the time with sports and games while Moses climbs Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments from Him.

Sometimes my brothers take me aside and give me advice: "Be careful not to lose our children to your old gods!" They are referring to the hobbyhorses they once rode themselves. Hobbies such as football, modelling or rock music. If you can't discard these gods as teachers, the community quickly assigns you another task. My brothers realise that I am very vulnerable in this respect. Since my childhood, the sound of a Harley-Davidson has been more to me than the mere working noise of a means of transport. The roar of the pots makes my heart beat faster and evokes a feeling of adventure and freedom. Sometimes I tell my students what it feels like to ride towards an endless horizon and feel the drumming of the engine in my body. But now I want to put an end to that! I want to kill these longings inside me, I want to put the memories of my past life behind me once and for all.

and not fill the children with false idols. I wrestle with myself, unsure how to forget something that so suddenly arises in me. As unexpectedly as the smell of freshly mown grass reminds me of the good times of my childhood, the smell of petrol of the pleasure rides on my motorbike. Now my only desire should be to please God and derive my joy from him.

"Imagine, Yathar, that you were teaching a child to play the mandolin," explains a disciple who is obviously further along in his spiritual development than I am. "If you teach this child to be enthusiastic about music, they might enjoy it and even become a very, very good musician at some point. But in the process, the child forgets to pay attention to God because it has become addicted to music. That's not what Yahshua wants." "Then why," I ask in amazement, "should children learn to play the mandolin at all?" "Music serves to praise God and has no purpose of its own," he replies. "Anyone who plays music has to slow down, recognise their task as a servant and not become too technical. A musician must make sure that he brings joy to God when he plays." Genuine enthusiasm for what you do is not part of the system. Quite the opposite.

The Twelve Tribes give me a few sheets with the title "Raising Children II", on which Yoneq set out his views on dealing with children on 23 January 1984. According to the teachings of our founding father Spriggs, it's not about offering children things that are fun, I read there, and further: "They must benefit from everything they do. Our children are not like the ones out there. We have taught our children not to ask. First we have to educate them to know what their parents want, what makes them happy. Because they are fallen children, they will naturally do what is their own will. Children must learn the will of their parents." In this writing, Spriggs makes it clear that the "The most important goal of education is to bring the children under control and to maintain control until the goal is achieved."

I also read that "children remain children until the parents bring them under control. But when parents truly live God's word, they have their children under control. If the children do not, you have not raised them right." In this way, the tribal leadership holds parents accountable for all the actions of their children.

At the beginning of my time with the Twelve Tribes, I wanted to break new ground and convey a zest for life and self-confidence to the children, but now I realise how I am changing more and more, not the children, but myself. The foundations of my life are crumbling. Values such as freedom, independence, joy, creativity and justice are gradually dissolving. The terms take on a new meaning in the "twelve tribes" or disappear completely from my vocabulary. They are replaced by new concepts such as subordination, dependence, self-doubt and control. Again and again I struggle with my new life, but I don't want to give up hope and try to accept as truth what my older brothers tell me.

A little boy runs past me as I'm on my way to the kitchen to get myself a mate tea. The child spreads his arms out like the wings of an eagle and seems to hover above the ground. It also makes noises like a spluttering diesel engine. "What are you doing?" I ask the boy.

"I'm an aeroplane," he explains cheerfully. Suddenly his mum stands in the doorway and shouts: "Stop that right now." She later explains to me that toys and fantasy games are forbidden because they don't lead to God. The children would only escape into a false reality. Neither the "hum-rum-rum" sound of a car nor the "tut-tut" of a locomotive or the "buzz-buzz" of a bee is allowed. I am learning.

Years later, when I find my own daughter Asarah in our room with a homemade doll, I have long known what is expected of me. The little girl sits contentedly on the sofa and holds the bundle of string and old rags in her arms. "What have you got there?" I ask her and add rhetorically: "Can you have that?" She hugs the doll a little tighter and looks at me uncertainly. "You know that's forbidden. It

there are no toys!" Then I snatch the toy from her, pick it apart and stow the fabric and cord in the drawer. Asarah cries, but I'm used to it. I regularly throw the presents my mum brings me on her few visits in the bin - the bag of Lego bricks, the little toy tractor, the herd of wooden animals.

However, I do not like the way the members of the Twelve Tribes treat their children when they fall ill. They delay costly visits to doctors' surgeries and hospitals for as long as possible or discourage sick people from visiting the doctor altogether. Healing herbs, teas and a clear conscience are supposed to be the medicine with which God heals his children! Only if a self-appointed doctor of the Twelve Tribes is unable to do anything with either the medicinal herbs or the cheaply purchased dentist's chair and its few instruments are the boys and girls allowed to go to the doctor. The primitive Christians have no health insurance and - whenever possible - pay the doctor's bill with home-grown vegetables or home-baked bread. The Twelve Tribes stitch and splint small lacerations and fractures themselves. One of my friends even had his finger amputated by an elder.

I realise what this is leading to when a girl called Shoshanna sits down next to me on the bench and stares up at the sky. She holds her hand protectively over her eyes and looks up at the sun. "What are you doing?" I ask. "I'm looking at the two suns." "Two suns? Don't you know there's only one?" I reply in astonishment. "Yes, of course, I know that," the child explains to me. "I've already told my parents that I see two suns, but they say there's no money for doctors."

The girl urgently needed to see a doctor. After weeks of toing and froing, the council of elders authorised treatment by an ophthalmologist after all: otherwise Shoshanna would have gone blind. In similar cases, a boy almost loses his hearing, another almost loses his fertility and a tumour in a child's leg is diagnosed.

only discovered when his weakened thigh bone breaks when he falls down.

After such experiences, I am glad that the Sus Council of Elders has authorised my trip to the community in Brazil. Perhaps my brothers and sisters only agree to the overseas flight because my mother is paying for the ticket. There have long been too many disciples in Sus living on too little money. Apart from selling vegetables and grain at the market, the group only runs a small construction business, which is barely enough to cover the costs. I jet off to Bolivia, stay a few days with my mother, who emigrated there years ago, and then travel on to the community in Brazil. The original plan was to stay for a fortnight. It will be three months.

In the Brazilian community, I am no longer "Yathar", the newcomer, but "Yathar", the leader. I'm a hero to the Brazilians. I simply know a lot of things better than they do. Most of the disciples haven't been in the community for long, for them I'm already the older brother. They admire me for the fact that I can bake bread, plant vegetables, use a hammer and drive a car. They see me as an energetic, charismatic doer who is there to guide and pull them along. I am something special. That flatters me. I am encouraged by the elders of the Naftali tribe, which is the name of the group in Brazil, to realise my full potential and take on more responsibility. "You can become the Johannan Abraham of Brazil," one elder praises me, comparing me to one of the charismatic leaders of the communities in Europe. I could make it big in Brazil. His words do me good. I'm crawling out of my shell more and more. Whereas in Sus I am a well-behaved follower and get the impression that I am not allowed to put forward my ideas and only have to follow instructions, I am now involved in the decision-making processes and even give instructions myself. "Yathar," I think, "you're at the top of the hierarchy now." I feel great and extend my stay in South America week after week. I have always remembered

believed that I was capable of taking on a leadership role. This is the proof.

For weeks, I bask in my elevated position in Brazil until I finally realise that I am part of a hierarchy in the community that I always demonised in my previous life. Yet I want to live a life that doesn't make me thirstier the more I taste of it. It should produce truth and neighbours who are constantly there for each other and care for each other in a covenant of love. But now I have to realise how much flesh I am. Yes, I almost elevate myself above others and indulge in my power. I let myself be admired and feel equal among equals. I even look at the girls again with the baser instincts of a man when I walk past the shower and the door is open. It's a strange feeling. As I motivate my brothers and sisters to virtuously advance in the way of God, I am torn inside. I see my weaknesses and shortcomings and decide that things can't go on like this. I fly back to Europe.

I land in Frankfurt on a rainy spring day and make a spontaneous decision. At the station, I change my ticket for the train that was supposed to take me to the Twelve Tribes in Sus and instead take a train to Hennef to see my father. I stay there for two days and think about my future. I search for answers to the question of whether I am more than a collection of cells that have accidentally joined together to form a body that is now trying to survive somewhere in this universe on a big pile of earth. My head is buzzing. I am in no man's land, feeling as helpless and weak as a newborn baby. Not one clear thought crystallises out of the jumble of possible thoughts.

Two days later, I pack my rucksack again and settle in with my sister in Berlin. The restlessness travels with me. Nobody in Sus has any idea what has happened to me. A few more days later, I find an arts and crafts school on the internet in Plön near Kiel, buy a red VW bus and drive it to the city centre.

to Plön and enrol on a three-year pottery degree programme. I don't really know what to do with myself. All I know is that I need my independence, that I don't want to be told what to do by anyone or anything. Not after my experiences in Sus and Brazil. My search for the beginning of the rainbow is over.

When the congregation of the Twelve Tribes learnt of my departure, the brothers and sisters were horrified. God wants you, they warned, to lay down your life for your neighbour and not just disappear. God wants you to find love and lead a real life in Sus. They don't realise that I'm still too much Robert Pleyer. I drive to the coast in my red Bully and jog for hours on the beach through the rain. Then I throw myself on my knees in the sand. The raindrops splatter on my tear-stained face as I look up at the sky and hope for an answer from God.

I wake up in the morning believing that leaving the Twelve Tribes is the right step. Until the postman drops a letter from Sus in the letterbox, the lines of which drag me back down into a maelstrom of doubt and raise many questions. My brothers and sisters remind me that I have been baptised and have now broken my covenant with God. I grab my old surfboard and glide out to sea. I hang onto the sail, water splashes in my face and I dash across the sea. I feel free and scream with happiness. Suddenly a strong gust grabs me, hurls me into the cold sea and I just manage to pull my head in as the mast flies past me by a hair's breadth. "God is warning you," I say as I paddle back to shore on my board. The mast could have killed you. But God wants you to lead your life in His way. The guests at a beach café look over at me with amusement and sip their cappuccino. "You're just indulging your lust," I taunt them. "I have more important things to do. God needs me to build up his people."

It will be another three months before I give up my arts and crafts degree and live as "Yathar" in Pennigbüttel.

Background I: Religious diversity

"We are God's children, but the whole world around us is under the power of evil."

1 John 5:19

Religious diversity has long been a reality in Germany. Although the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant regional churches in this country each have around 24 million members, the number of Christian groups and organisations, some of which have radical foundations, is growing steadily. In Upper Bavaria alone, the counselling centres of the Protestant and Catholic churches are monitoring 1,200 of these so-called "conflict-prone communities". These include organisations from the fringes of the religious spectrum such as the

"Twelve Tribes", "Universal Life" or the "Jehovah's Witnesses". However, individual evangelical groups should also be viewed critically - although not every evangelical is also a fundamentalist. Many members of fundamentalist groups are convinced that Christian values are increasingly being eroded. In this respect, their religious fundamentalism represents a kind of counter-proposal to the eroding value systems in Western societies. With a literal interpretation of the Bible, clear hierarchies and missionary work, these followers want to prevent Christian principles from losing significance and social processes - such as individualisation - from undermining the claim to absoluteness of the divine word. For them, the Bible is the sole basis for all questions of life and faith.

In order to influence social developments, the "German Evangelical Alliance", for example, an association of Christian groups, including numerous

Evangelical associations, represented by a full-time representative in Berlin since the beginning of 2014. It lobbies representatives of the Bundestag, the federal government and the political parties.

* * *

The ascent

The phone rings. A member of the Twelve Tribes from Pennigbüttel answers at the other end of the line. He wants me to come round. For weeks before that day in spring 1994, I hadn't said a word to my former brothers and sisters. I'm surprised that they don't resent me. The tone is friendly, despite my abrupt exit three months ago. The house where some of my old companions from Sus live in the Osterholz-Scharmbeck neighbourhood belongs to a wealthy woman who has been living in the community in Australia for some time. She has to fight a custody case against her husband over their daughter and has therefore returned to Germany from Down Under. The weekends in Plön are dull, and one Saturday I drive to Pennigbüttel, a small town 25 kilometres north of Bremen. We spend the whole night talking about God and the meaning of life, my plans and my worries, my pottery studies and, of course, my re-entry into the Twelve Tribes.

On the journey back to Plön, I find myself in a dilemma. It feels good to talk to my old companions from Sus. They understand my inner distress and my worries in the world outside the Twelve Tribes. They are close to me spiritually and I like their modest lifestyle. But should I really go back? On the other hand, I am dissatisfied with my current life and still have no real ground under my feet. Plön seems more like the final destination of an escape than the fulfilment of a lifelong dream.

At night, I toss and turn in bed, pondering the pros and cons. While the black sky lies on the land like a heavy iron plate and it just doesn't want to become morning, I keep

I have silent arguments. Sometimes I think I'm too weak for a life outside the Twelve Tribes and too strong for a life in Plön. Then it's the other way round. What do I *want*? Which *life suits* me? I sit on the wall and threaten to fall to one side or the other. Sometimes I don't even know which of my two lives I should call "old" and which I should call "new".

Over the next three days, I forget many a meal because I'm so worried. This can't go on! On the morning of the fourth night, still lying in bed, I make a decision: "If you can't make up your mind, you haven't finished with the Twelve Tribes yet."

Relieved that I'm no longer treading water, I jump out of bed and pack some clothes. I throw my rucksack into my red VW bus and quickly drive past the arts and crafts school to sign out until further notice. My destination is no longer pottery, but Pennigbüttel. I can pick up the rest of my few personal belongings later.

As I walk across the estate in Pennigbüttel to the mighty farmhouse, I immediately feel at home again. Just a few hours later, I'm digging up the beds in the vegetable garden with a couple of children. The Twelve Tribes need every man. They have decided to turn the property of the rich patroness into their first large branch in Germany. When I arrive, three families are already living in Pennigbüttel, and a little later there are sixty of us. Construction trailers are brought in to provide accommodation for the many people.

They observe and test me with questions for a week. They want to find out whether I am spiritually steadfast enough to be suitable for higher tasks. When they are sure that "Yathar" is my old self again, I have to ritually wash myself in front of the congregation. The public washing is a sign that I have repented of my apostasy not only with words, but also with body and soul. The washing is an exclamation to God, me

to cleanse me and give me a white robe again. God should free me from the guilt I have brought upon myself. They are happy with me. When the bread is broken, I sit at their table again. It is the first time that bread has been broken in Pennigbüttel. The rite is only reserved for established branches of the Twelve Tribes. So there are two reasons to celebrate on this day: Pennigbüttel is recognised as a place of Yahshua, and the lost Robert is Yathar again.

According to the laws of the Twelve Tribes, members who doubt the teachings of the community are not allowed to speak at the meetings of the brothers and sisters. They must take off the hairband that identifies them as priests of Yahshua and stay away from the breaking of bread. Doubters are simply excluded. This is the view of Eugene Spriggs, born in 1937 in Chattanooga, Tennessee, who founded the community in the 1970s under the name Northeast Kingdom Community Church of God.

Spriggs is of the opinion that no member of the Twelve Tribes may eat at the same table with an apostate or even speak to him. Talking to apostates is only permitted in order to "rebuke them and try to restore their trust if we believe they are a brother or sister". Anyone who wants to return to the circle of the original Christians must be renewed and washed, Spriggs commands, because they are afflicted with leprosy. Anyone who touches them before they are washed will themselves be infected by their leprosy.

The members of the Twelve Tribes obey Spriggs at his word. It is said that he received his orders directly from God. Perhaps that is why he calls himself Yoneq. His name means "branch" or "offspring" in Hebrew. Spriggs sees himself as part of the prophecy. After all, the Bible says in the book of Hezekiel: "Thus says the Lord Yahweh: 'And I will take a shoot from the top of the tall cedar tree and plant it; from the topmost of its shoots I will break off a tender one and plant it on a high and lofty mountain'."

When I run into Yoneq in Sus 1990, he looks like an unassuming older disciple. I introduce myself to him and we shake hands. "Hey, the father needs you," he greets me in a sonorous voice full of warmth and good humour. He flatters me. I like his sporty, dynamic manner. My first impression is very positive. In the meetings, the founding father of the Twelve Tribes remains politely in the background, lets the others talk, listens. When he takes the floor and speaks with a strong voice, his sentences are well thought out. Without a doubt, the man has energy. One night, when my brothers and sisters have been in bed for a while, I find him sweeping the parlour in the main house alone with a broom in his hand.

Our second meeting took place in Pennigbüttel in autumn 1994. Once a year, Yoneq travelled from America to Europe, always to where the biggest problems were. At this time, there is a lot of chaos in the newest foundation of the Twelve Tribes. One member of the Council of Elders, we'll call him Obadiah, turns out to be self-righteous, bossy and lazy.

While he reads the Bible, he instructs the others to do the work. The hierarchy in the group is not right at all. "I'll do the spiritual work, you can work with your hands," this elder from Stuttgart mocks me in an autocratic manner when I criticise his leadership style. Upset, I seek a dialogue with Yoneq. He understands my problem and asks me: "If you see things going wrong, stand up on the table and make a fuss. Then healing will come." I like that. Yoneq knows how to comfort and reassure.

But Yoneq is also a cautious man. There are just a handful of Twelve Tribes congregations worldwide, and our chief apostle does not want to make a mistake when selecting his leadership team in this crucial phase of growth.

He only has genuine trust in his closest co-workers from the early days of the Jesus movement. These are three or four men from the small group that met in the 1970s in the community centre "The Vine House" in Yoneq's hometown in

Chattanooga, Tennessee, to receive its first sermons. Yoneq relies on people who have proven themselves in the spirit of the community, who are industrious and at the same time remain humble. He fears nothing more than the strength inherent in people, because it is a force that can develop a momentum of its own that can hardly be controlled. Inner strength makes people self-confident and possibly enables them to make their own decisions and use them to distance themselves from the words of God.

Yoneq's world view is based on a simple principle. He divides humanity into a spiritual and a carnal type. The carnal man tends to lose control of his spirit, to place himself at the centre and to fall prey to hubris. The spiritual man, on the other hand, works himself up for the group and remains subservient to God and the church. So Yoneq gathers a handful of male followers around him as recipients of orders, whom he can trust absolutely. He fears nothing more than losing control over his chosen people and relies on clear authority structures. He fears the momentum that can develop in the church when carnal disciples get their hands on the sceptre of the twelve tribes.

Over the years, Yoneq changes visibly. He fights against the forces of evil with increasing fanaticism, restless and driven. When things don't go according to plan, I now see him beside himself with rage. Sometimes he is so out of his skin that I am afraid of him. At the Glastonberry Festival 200 kilometres west of London, the Twelve Tribes ran a restaurant serving organic food and drink in the 1990s. Yoneq sweeps around the tables, scrutinising even the smallest details. Is the music too loud? Are the chairs comfortable? Are his disciples friendly enough to the customers? "When God runs a restaurant, everything has to be right," he tells us. We work twenty hours a day. I could fall asleep standing up. Yoneq is under a lot of pressure. "God is always there for people - always and at all times," he warns. "That's why we

I can't run out of any dish on the menu." During the night shift, the cream machine suddenly breaks down. Nothing works any more. Yoneq is desperate. While we can barely keep our eyes open because we're so tired, his aggression is boiling over. Rested from nights spent in his own separee, Yoneq pours his negative energy out on us.

"God always shows his love," he shouts at us. "This must not happen to you - what kind of disciples of God are you?" We brothers and sisters are shocked. We work like animals, and a broken cream machine caused our spiritual leader to become so enraged. Later, an elder who witnessed the incident explained Yoneq's behaviour to me as follows: "Yoneq didn't lose his self-control at all. He just wanted to express God's anger."

Yoneq appears in a similar condition after a baptism in Island Ponds/USA. As the congregation walks back from the water to the meeting room with the newly baptised member, the thorn of a small bush almost stabs a sister in the eye. Yoneq goes over to the withered plant and kicks it angrily.

"How dare you hurt a creature of God," he hisses and stomps on the bush until it lies shredded on the ground. More and more often, Yoneq gets upset about such trivialities, reacts impulsively, behaves narcissistically. The person I met in Sus many years ago has changed - and so has the community. The atmosphere becomes fanatical. More and more laws and rules are being passed. Perhaps Yoneq is troubled by the fear of not having conquered the evil in the world by the Day of Judgement. Perhaps he fears that we are treading water and will roast in eternal purgatory despite all our efforts.

"The judgement before the Last Judgement depends on the being, actions and willingness, good and evil of each individual person," it says unequivocally in a letter dated 22 November 1988: The paper is the essence of a speech given by Yoneq to his disciples in Island Pond and is of a commanding nature. "Most people follow the devil, who leads them to the second death, eternal damnation. The being of every

Individuals will endure forever, the good as well as the bad. That is true. Eternal damnation with purgatory and sulphur is by no means just an image in language. It is a real thing and burns as it is written. We will be judged according to whether we have obeyed or disobeyed our Master. The world will be judged according to good and evil. We will be judged according to the wisdom of Yahshua."

According to the Twelve Tribes, we humans must repent because we have been depraved since Adam's fall into sin. That is our first death. But we can escape the eternal second death by following Yahshua in word and deed. We must live according to Yahshua's teachings for three generations and also bring up our children and grandchildren in God's way. Boys and girls are the most important thing we have. As good fruit, they are our salvation.

In Pennigbüttel, my brothers and sisters now trust me again to guide their children in Yahshua's spirit. I am once again the faithful single brother and stand by the mums as a second dad if the biological father is busy elsewhere. There's a lot to do in Pennigbüttel. The working days are up to eighteen hours long. We have registered a business so that we can sell vegetables, home-grown candles and home-sewn natural clothing at the local markets. Some of us also work in the gardens of private individuals or help with clean-up work. Our community urgently needs money. The women are in the kitchen from morning to night. They wash loads of dishes by hand, chop cabbage and peel carrots. There are only a few household appliances. The washing machines and tumble dryers are outdated. The women hang the wet clothes in baskets on the lines in the courtyard. Backbreaking labour. While the women and men toil away, the group in Pennigbüttel employs me as a child carer. Soon I was working as a sports instructor again - and rising even higher in the hierarchy.

A few weeks later, I was able to attend a meeting of the Council of Elders in Pennigbüttel for the first time. The council consists of a handful of men who are not elected by the other brothers and sisters, but who surpass them as role models and thought leaders. The councillors themselves decide who these leaders are. So far, the decisions from this body have been law for me. When the councillors announce: "Our father has spoken, we are growing strawberries", I stand in the ground and plant strawberries at the next opportunity. There always seemed to be something higher inherent in such instructions. Now, however, I experience unspeakable chatter in the council meetings, and I realise how little knowledge and spirit the decisions are actually based on. Instead of expertise, the board members demonstrate a penchant for vanity and excel in endless chatter.

In the meantime, the head office in the USA also has doubts about the spiritual leadership of Pennigbüttel and sends one of its leading figures to northern Germany. The German Werner Klinger (name changed) was to help the ailing tribe to flourish. He becomes the driving force in Europe and moulds the European tribes to Yoneq's way of thinking, with whom he is one of the few who is always in direct contact.

Werner recognises my qualities as a teacher and also my inner turmoil, which grows with every day in Pennigbüttel. "This is supposed to be the chosen people of God?" I ask myself sceptically and give myself the answer. "No, vanity and instincts are by no means overcome in this community." But Werner wants to keep me in line and transports me to Stöttlen-Oberbronnen in the Ostalbkreis district, where a new household has sprung up alongside the community in Pennigbüttel. The house belongs to a young family who recently joined the community.

Initially, I help the Franco-German couple on behalf of the Twelve Tribes to boost their small business.

After the couple's baptism in Sus, the Twelve Tribes not only took over their home, but also the sale of the natural textiles at markets in Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg.

The small community thrives. All the families of German descent still remaining in France come to Germany at the behest of the elders and are distributed between the communities in the north and south. Together there are over a hundred people, including forty children. Although I am successfully canvassing the grocers' markets in southern Germany as a salesman, Werner urges me to switch to the ailing school service. He provides me with a computer running Windows and appoints me as the teacher responsible for setting up the community's school in Germany.

When I start my work, there are still no textbooks for the needs of the German children of the Twelve Tribes. The only thing we have are the materials used in the community in the USA. In Sus and Pennigbüttel, the teachers have so far cut out pictures and texts from the American material with scissors, glued the pieces onto paper and copied the whole thing for the pupils. Now I teach in the morning and design the worksheets for the next day on the computer in the afternoon. I work very effectively. My brothers and sisters often praise me for my commitment, and although the Council of Elders repeatedly removes me from my teaching position for spiritual reasons and demotes me in the meantime, I remain the leading teacher in the community for many years. As the computer expert of the German branch, I soon not only designed the school books, but was also responsible for the design of the German missionary newspapers; with my profound knowledge of layout programmes such as Photoshop and Illustrator, I was almost irreplaceable. The leadership of the church allows me to take online computer courses alongside my work, so that I can deepen and expand my knowledge. As a "Ich-AG", I form my own department, so to speak, in which I am responsible for print preparation, layouts, text editing and photo procurement. These skills make me the link between the management and the other members. I am needed and am even allowed to travel to the head office in the USA so that I can benefit from the now twenty years of school operations at the germ cell in Vermont. In Germany, I sometimes live in Pennigbüttel and sometimes in Oberbronnen,

to network and promote the schools of both communities.

As early as the late 1970s, the Twelve Tribes were criticised in the USA. Anti-cult movements criticised the upbringing and schooling of the children. Eugene Spriggs, who by then had gathered a group of young hippie families around him in his house in Chattanooga, Tennessee, moved the community's headquarters to Island Pond, Vermont. The Twelve Tribes grew into a strong community there, which now inhabited several houses in the village. In 1984, the US police march onto the site and take one hundred and twelve children with them to place them under state guardianship. Just one day later, the children return to Island Pond. A court rules that the raid was unlawful.

Home schooling in Germany also becomes a bone of contention between the state and the Twelve Tribes. The school authorities in Baden-Württemberg want to enforce compulsory schooling for the children of Oberbronn. We refuse and refer to the freedom of faith. After all, our lives are strictly based on the Old Testament, where it is written that fathers and mothers must teach their children. Caleb David, the father of a child, has to be temporarily detained. We remain steadfast and negotiate a compromise with the authorities: A member of staff from the education authority is allowed to visit our classrooms regularly to see what is going on. We are increasingly being targeted by the state.

A one-and-a-half-month-old baby dies in the municipality of Sus. When he died, the boy weighed less than five kilograms. The parents did not have their son's congenital heart defect treated by a specialist. Instead, the father of one of our brothers, who is a doctor in private practice, looked after the child in Sus. After the child was born in Oberbronn in 1995 with blue heart disease, only the two medical examinations prescribed in Germany take place in the first year of life. During the autopsy, the French investigators also discovered acute rickets.

A French court revokes the parents' custody of their other two children.

This has no impact on the community in Oberbronn. On the contrary: the responsible youth welfare office certifies that we "happy, lively children" and calls the death of the boy from Sus an "unfortunate incident". The parents of the dead boy have since been considered martyrs by the Twelve Tribes because they spent many years in prison for our gospel.

Details about children who have died at birth rarely reach the inside of the community. The elders are secretive, and those who are not directly involved in the birth as midwives do not receive any information about particular incidents or complications. The Twelve Tribes are afraid of gossip because they give birth at home rather than in hospitals and take a high risk in doing so. "God gives life and God takes life," explains Nahum, one of the German elders whose baby dies at birth. I often only hear years later that a child has not survived its revival. I only hear about the death of a German child and that of a German-Spanish couple in Sus through many different channels. There is also a disabled child living in the community who was not given enough oxygen at birth. For years, the father tries to accept this stroke of fate as God's will, until he can no longer silence the inner voice of his conscience and leaves the group in Sus.

As in Oberbronn, the authorities now also want to enforce the enrolment of our children in public schools in Pennigbüttel. Naturally, we refuse. The dispute over compulsory schooling reaches the highest political level of the federal state of Lower Saxony, the Ministry of Education and Cultural Affairs in Hanover, via the Lüneburg district government. The education authority imposes conditions on us. We decide to align our lessons more closely with the state curriculum. At the same time, we found out that one of our teachers had groped a pupil in the municipality of Pennigbüttel. I had worked closely with this man for many years as the lead teacher. I didn't notice anything. The apparently

homosexual man denies everything, but has to leave the church two weeks later, and I get even more to do.

In Baden-Württemberg, there are now two primary school classes and two classes with older children. More than fifteen pupils in total. There are also a dozen school-age children in Lower Saxony. I teach all subjects. Biology, geography, religion, maths, reading and writing. I am constantly expanding the school system of the Twelve Tribes in Germany.

The school topics are set by the Council of Elders. A manager oversees their implementation. We translate the American textbooks one-to-one into German and only change a few of the contents. American moose become German deer. We strictly follow the tried and tested manuals for teachers from the head office in Vermont. In subjects such as maths and German, we copy the content of German textbooks, retain the didactics and only change the reading stories. The children in our books don't go to the funfair and ride on the merry-go-round, but work in the garden and harvest carrots. I rework the small pictures with the help of photo programmes, paint beards around the mouths of all the men, lengthen the skirts of the women and retouch toys such as teddy bears and small dragons from the pages.

Sexuality, the Big Bang theory and current social issues, for example, are not on the curriculum. I particularly struggle with religious education, a three-quarter lesson that starts every school morning for the children of the Twelve Tribes. I don't believe in the story of Noah and his ark and otherwise try to find a middle ground between the doctrine of the Twelve Tribes and my moral convictions. I really muddle my way through. Sometimes I skip teaching topics or focus on other things. I am least comfortable with racial studies, which is covered in the latest textbooks from America.

The Twelve Tribes believe that the biblical figure of Ham is the origin of the original sin of the black race, which continues to this day. Father Noah curses his youngest son Ham,

when he accidentally finds his father naked and drunk. According to the Genesis table of peoples, all humans are descended from the eight occupants of Noah's ark who survive the Flood, whereby fundamental Christians trace the black race back to Ham and the yellow and white to his brothers Shem and Japheth, who were blessed by Noah. Ham has to serve his two siblings for the rest of his life.

"In the natural order of all things in the world, there is a difference between the three races," reads a Twelve Tribes paper dated 22 November 1988. "There is nothing wrong with Ham having to serve Shem and Japheth." Slavery is the only way for some people to be helpful to society. Without being driven, these people would do nothing productive. "That's what Ham is in the world for - like black nannies - that's the kind of tasks they have to do. It's a natural thing." The letter, which comes directly from the headquarters in Island Pond, is primarily intended to highlight the difference between Ham and his brothers.

"Ham's heart was evil and dark. His deed was the worst thing ever done. Ham was not in the dark about what he was doing. He knew of good and evil. He went so far as to report to his brothers how he discredited their father. He knew better. Ham knew what was right and didn't do it. Shem and Japheth also knew and chose the good." Based on these Bible-based considerations, the Twelve Tribes develop a world view that places any person who wants to overturn the supposedly divine order of the races in the wrong.

"Martin Luther King came in the name of the Lord to free black people from their curse of inequality. He is an antichrist, a communist. There is no way to free Ham from his curse, no matter what he tries, because it is against God's word. Martin Luther King's statements promise a freedom that can only be achieved through the body of the Messiah," it continues under the heading "Ham and the Civil Rights Movement". "Martin Luther King failed because he was a liberal and combined Eastern religions with his own philosophy.

mixed together. For no man and no revolution can break the curse except Yahshua and one of his messengers who truly brings the good news of freedom." The Twelve Tribes demonise the African-American civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. This had "opened the door for black rights, later for homosexuals and the women's movement, to the point of moral collapse at the heart of families and their structures." Disciples who, in the face of this reactionary and crude logic, still do not want to understand that "the races are to be separated", learn the following: "Human nature does not allow for equality. There are differences between beauty, intelligence and ability.

Egalitarianism is destined to destroy humanity, men and women. Egalitarians destroy the structures of the family, and generalised equality damages reality."

* * *

In the Pennigbüttel community, a brother of Arab origin takes me aside and wants to talk to me about his daughters. I am his children's teacher. After a while, he comes out with the words: "I don't want my girls to be intelligent." Determination is reflected in his eyes. He means it. "What's wrong with your daughters being better at maths and reading than other children?" I ask him. "Intelligent women only cause problems," the man replies, pointing out that "in Islam, family structures still work because the woman is subordinate to the man". He doesn't want to change that. I have already noticed that his wife always walks many metres behind him. This type of partnership corresponds in principle to the biblical view of the twelve tribes. According to the Bible, the woman is subject to the man and is therefore excluded from all leadership roles in the community.

When I realise that we are not only doing good things for the children in the community, I fall into emotional holes again and again. At the same time, I'm under constant scrutiny from the brothers and sisters.

Sisters. "You have the wrong view of justice," I am told in the meetings where I have to justify my visible doubts about the educational concept. "Our father thinks differently from you!" The children of the community should not come to their convictions through their own mistakes, but by trusting the adults. They should not have independent experiences, but rather be led by others. This principle applies to the boys and girls of the Twelve Tribes: "Forget what you want and trust in God!" Our children must not advance to their own realisations through trial and error, but must remain on the one path laid out by our church. The wrong paths and dead ends on which they could get lost for God's cause are barricaded. Only one direction is open to them: the faultless path to God. They must therefore keep themselves pure and find their joy and fulfilment in serving. When I ask the children about their highs and lows of the day from time to time in the evening, they answer in unison: "Nothing special, it was just a day ..."

Time and time again, my brothers and sisters don't agree with my way of thinking. Sometimes the rules in the community seem to me to be pure madness. In my life as Robert Pleyer, I can get round many a restriction, but in the Twelve Tribes, all prohibitions must be observed to the letter.

The others are constantly correcting me. They baptise me several times because, in their opinion, I haven't really received the Holy Spirit after all. At the same time, I serve them as a teacher in the very profession that continues to fuel my doubts. I find it difficult to teach the children the "Three Eternal Destinies". The racial studies and demonisation of Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi and the African freedom fighter Nelson Mandela that I am supposed to teach the teenagers are intolerable to me. All three of them are supposed to be possessed by demons? I also can't cope with the fact that our children at the illegal schools in Pennigbüttel and Oberbronnen can't get school-leaving qualifications that would give them prospects of a job outside the Twelve Tribes.

Rather, I believe in a Creator who created the vast number of butterflies and who does not blame me for His sacrifice. I believe in His justice and love. But are the Twelve Tribes the right place for this?

Background II: The origin of the world

"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth; but the earth was desolate and empty, darkness lay over the waves, and God's Spirit hovered over the waters."

Genesis 1:1

In evangelical circles there is a textbook with the title "Evolution. A critical reader". It is said to have sold around 50,000 copies in several editions. The book takes issue with Charles Darwin's allegedly flawed theory of evolution and argues in favour of the creation story as an alternative.

It is said that schools of the Association of Protestant Denominational Schools (VEBS) used the "Lesebuch" as a textbook in biology.

The rejection of the theory of evolution by the "Twelve Tribes" and other groups is by no means new. It goes back to so-called creationism, which developed from Protestant fundamentalism in the USA at the beginning of the 20th century. The basis of this school of thought is the biblical story of creation in the first book of Moses. Explanatory approaches such as the Big Bang theory and biochemical processes are not mentioned.

A survey of 10,000 Americans at the beginning of 2014 came to the conclusion that nine out of ten respondents had doubts about the theory of evolution. According to the survey, only 9.5 per cent are convinced that neither God nor any other higher power has any influence on the creation of the universe and life on earth.

Among the evangelicals surveyed, as many as 97 per cent believe that a God created all life and the earth itself. Half of them believe in creationism - or that God created the earth in six days - and 40 per cent are in favour of creationism.

in favour of teaching creationism instead of the theory of evolution in schools. German experts say that the number of those who deny evolution and believe the creation myth is also increasing in this country.

* * *

I play the son of God

On the most beautiful day of my community life, I stand next to Shalomah Simchah ("peace", "joy") under a canopy, and she makes me her head in front of three hundred witnesses:

"I want to cut off my head. From now on, you shall be my head. I will do everything you command. You are my master now! What you say is law. I want to be the mother of your children!" Shalomah is twenty-two years old. She is wearing a white wedding dress with a white veil and a crown of flowers on her head. The women of the Twelve Tribes have knotted a crocheted ribbon with bells around her ankle. So that I can hear her everywhere and always know where my wife is. I myself am wearing white linen trousers and a white linen shirt and have a sash around my waist with embroidered letters on it:

"King of kings, ruler of hosts". Shalomah is beaming. I am endlessly excited, overwhelmed. My heartbeat is out of sync.

My brothers and sisters spent a whole week planning our wedding, distributing tasks in endless meetings, rehearsing dances, songs and plays and getting the bride ready in the morning. For a week, the atmosphere in the community was like that of an American wedding preparation. The women have designed a bridal bag for Shalomah and crocheted a bracelet with wonderful ornaments. Adorning the bride is an honourable task for the members of the community. I have not been allowed to see my bride since last Saturday. The brothers and sisters are preparing the bride and groom separately. We only have contact by means of a small booklet in which we write encouragement to each other and which a messenger passes back and forth.

wears. Full of longing, I have written Shalomah a song and rehearsed a groom's dance that I want to perform for her later. It is one of the hottest days of the year. At midday, the heat is so intense between the houses on the estate that you feel like you're in a sauna after a steam bath. Drops of sweat run down my back. I am nervous.

The small tent, which is held up by four poles and under which we make our wedding vows, symbolises the establishment of our own household. Strengthened by the feast, our brothers and sisters and many guests, including my sister and my parents, are gathered around us. In a moment, an elder will officially marry us to each other for all eternity. It is time: I am thirty-three years old and have had to wait six years for this moment. I am gripped by belated happiness. The stimuli flood my senses. For a brief moment, I'm sure I'm going to faint. I could explode with happiness on the spot. Instead, I explain to my Shalomah:

"I love you. I will take care of you and always be there for you. I will take care of your needs all my life!" From this hour of 30 August 2003, Shalomah is my helper and I am her leader. The congregation affirms our marriage covenant with such a vehement "Amen!" that the floor vibrates as if it were instantly rising beneath our feet. Then the wedding party lines up in two rows, holding hands overhead and forming a human tunnel through which we leave our celebration. As we walk past, I can vaguely recognise my sister, my mother, my brother-in-law and my father, who are happy and want to hug us. But Shalomah and I have other things to do, our path leads directly to our wedding room.

The wedding is by far the most important and biggest celebration among the Twelve Tribes. Especially as celebrations on birthdays, Easter or Christmas are not permitted there. In the community, a wedding represents the return of the Son of God. The wedding is modelled on the Book of Revelation, which describes in detail in the last book of the Bible how the Son of God came to earth.

returns to take his bride. This event anticipates the marriage of man and woman in the Twelve Tribes in a kind of theatre play. The bridegroom takes on the role of the Son of God, while the bride stands for the community itself, the Twelve Tribes. A wedding therefore means nothing less than the agreement of the Twelve Tribes with the Most High and thus the fulfilment of all the aspirations of the original Christians. My wedding to Shalomah is also a showcase wedding and the greatest glimmer of hope we have at this time: Satan has been making life difficult for us for some time now.

In 2001, I leave the congregations in Oberbronn and Pennigbüttel with around one hundred brothers and sisters. We move to the former Cistercian monastery in Deinigen in the Nördlinger Ries. The 1.8 million euros for the Bavarian estate come from the sale of our farm in Pennigbüttel and the private assets of a rich farmer's daughter who joins the Twelve Tribes in Australia and decides to donate her millions to the community. The estate called Klosterzimmern is our new fortress. Two-storey houses with red tiled roofs and geranium boxes under the windows are lined up next to mighty barns and machine sheds. To the north, east and south, the new German headquarters of the Twelve Tribes is fortified by a man-high stone wall. A mill, a bakery and a wide stream protect the western side.

We cultivate twelve hectares of land on the site, right next to the place where a meteorite struck 15 million years ago and created a huge crater. Potatoes, carrots, apples, aubergines, heads of lettuce and beetroot are stored in the vaults under the former abbess's house. We keep goats and sheep, cows and chickens. Pictures of deer and butterflies hang on the walls of the classrooms. There are a few books about plants and animals on the shelves. I am one of six teachers. We teach the three dozen or so pupils separately for girls and boys and at primary and secondary school level. In August 2001, we write a letter to the Bavarian Ministry of Education and ask the authorities for help,

to officially authorise our home schooling, as we are unable to comply with compulsory schooling for reasons of conscience. The ministry referred to a ruling by the Administrative Court in 1992, which curtailed parental rights in favour of compulsory schooling, and did not comply with our request. An unprecedented bickering ensues.

In October 2001, the Donau-Ries district demands 2000 euros in fines for every child who does not fulfil compulsory schooling. We remain steadfast because we cannot sell our conscience. Instead, we ask the government of Swabia for a dialogue in which we want to find an amicable solution. The government refuses and refers to the clear legal situation, which allegedly results from the judgement of 1992. We write several letters in which we emphasise the special situation of our children. The children of the Twelve Tribes, we explain, are not generally absent from school, but only from state schools. The letters to the Ministry of Education remained unanswered.

In February 2002, the tax office starts so-called attachment proceedings. We lodge an objection, but lose two cases in May and June, one in Augsburg and one in Nördlingen. As we still do not register our children for lessons at public schools, a fine is imposed. We pay the fine and officially register our children for school, but have no intention of actually sending our children to state schools. One early morning in October 2002, plainclothes policewomen arrive at our Klosterzimmern estate, take the children and deliver them to the district schools against our resistance. After school, the parents collect their children from school but do not bring them back the next morning. Representatives of the school authorities then pay us a visit. They look into the classrooms and talk to the parents. In March 2003, new fines arrive. This time we don't pay. Instead, we announce on our website that we will
"are fundamentally and naturally prepared to pay fines such as

For example, paying for parking offences", but that we will not make any further payments in relation to this dispute about compulsory education because this is not an offence, but a conviction of conscience. We explain that we cannot act against our conscience and feel innocent: "We believe we have committed no wrongdoing."

In December 2003, we write another letter to the Bavarian Ministry of Education - which also goes unanswered. In January 2004, thirty brothers and sisters travelled to Munich to press for a hearing. The authorities turned us down. In the summer of 2004, a request is made for the Twelve Tribes to be held in custody for eight to sixteen days in order to enforce payment of the fines. In July 2004, the Donau-Ries district office examines the withdrawal of custody and wants to check the performance of our pupils on site. We refuse to allow the authorities to visit us, arguing that an inspection is unreasonable as long as the mothers and fathers are in custody. In August 2004, a district court judge in Nördlingen finally ordered the detention of eighteen parents. In fact, on the 18th October, seven fathers are sent to prison. Three days later, we demonstrate against the prison sentences in front of the district administration office.

On 5 November 2004, the district administrator of the Donau-Ries district applies to the public prosecutor's office in Augsburg to suspend the enforced detention of the mothers. He says he wants to create a "window of opportunity" to hold further talks with the twelve tribes. The district administrator obviously wants to avoid images of children being escorted to school by police force. The court hearing regarding the fines, which is scheduled for 11 November, has been postponed by the Nördlingen district court until further notice.

On 17 and 20 January 2005, representatives of the State Education Authority will be looking at our lessons and school materials. The visit is announced and we only present teaching material that they cannot find offensive. The officials learn nothing about our teachings on coloured people, homosexuals and other ungodly people. Not even about the

We still talk about the "Three Eternal Destinies" in our religion lessons, otherwise "3ES" is the start of every school morning. After a year of negotiations, the Ministry of Education surprisingly authorises home schooling for us in February 2006. As the Ministry's staff are obviously not so keen on our lessons, they labelled our school not as a public school, as is generally the case for this status, but as a supplementary school. This legal form exists only once in Germany - in Klosterzimmern.

On the morning of 30 August 2003, the wedding guests gather in Klosterzimmern in front of an empty throne. It is the throne of heaven that belongs to me as the bridegroom, who symbolises the Son of God. Ambassadors come before me who, as the Son of God, tell me about the apocalypse on earth and the reign of the Antichrist. "I will wait for my bride until she is ready," I call out to the company, "then I will come back!" Now my brothers and sisters take on the roles of ancient prophets and report on the end times on earth, where selfishness and greed rage. Finally the signal sounds that my bride is ready. The crowd cheers and I announce that I am ready for battle and that I am returning to earth. I climb a pedestal on which a large cloud has been erected and plead:

"Shalomah, come to me!" Shalomah rushes towards me from a forest and jumps out from between the bushes.

Shalomah's scene is modelled on the Book of Revelation. It says that the Twelve Tribes will have to hide in the wilderness for three years before God's Son comes to earth. "Come to me!" I call out, and Shalomah climbs up to me in the heavenly cloud.

"Oh, my king, today is the day, I've been waiting for you," she says. Together we descend to earth.

Once on earth, the battle against the enemies of God ensues. On a rack hang cloths on which the sins of mankind are written. Greed, jealousy, grief, pain, lying, disrespect, promiscuity. A prophet steps forward and explains to the wedding guests that greed is a sin that will destroy the earth. For greed, he says threateningly,

a few super-rich people own as much wealth as the entire poorer half of the world's population. There is a prophet for every sin. A wedding serves the Twelve Tribes as an evangelistic event at which their children and - in the best case - the guests are to be made receptive to God's gift. Then dancers enter the scene with wild leaps and warlike roars and fight the "enemies" until the cloths with the sins lie on the ground and the blood of the enemies spills down to the necks of the victors. The brothers and sisters wave red flags at eye level.

The battle is won and the Son of God, that is me, and his people, that is my wife and the wedding party, enter Jerusalem, the city of peace, that is the banqueting hall one door away.

At the entrance gate, I cut the seal that, according to the Bible, only God's Son can break, and march into the banqueting hall with my people. Everything is decorated with flowers and paper garlands, the music is playing and the women are serving snacks. Now it's time for the gifts. The gifts are performances. Around sixty of my schoolchildren perform a huge dance choreography. Two groups twist into each other like two oversized spirals and wave flags. Shalomah stages a bridal dance with a tambourine for me. Together with her friends, she performs a whole musical play with songs sung in several voices. Finally it's my turn. I sing the song I wrote myself about my love for my bride and then dance the groom's dance with my friends. Compared to the romantic, delicate and cheerful bridal dance of the women, we men are much more masculine. Our movements are characterised by strength, determination and power. Then the time has come: Shalomah and I are allowed to disappear into our wedding room after the vows - and we are quite astonished.

To our surprise, there is a caravan especially for us on an island in the river just behind the old mill. Our brothers have built a wooden terrace in front of it, and our

The nurses have put the dessert from the feast on the table. The bed has been made up. For the first time since I joined the Twelve Tribes, I have my own room, a blanket and my own tea maker. As a single person, I have to sleep in shared rooms, which are often very busy because the many visitors to the monastery rooms are always accommodated in this room. I am never alone. Suddenly I have something like privacy, but I also have a mission to fulfil.

During the preparation days, the men explained to me emphatically what needed to be done. The wedding night marks the beginning of a family with many well-behaved children and a happy wife. A good ruler is revealed in the number of children.

In fact, half of the 2500 members of the Twelve Tribes worldwide are children. The older women calculate the wedding date precisely so that it falls on the bride's fertile days. If the woman is expecting her period on the scheduled day of the celebration, the wedding is postponed without further ado. According to the teachings of the Twelve Tribes, the bleeding makes the woman unclean for a week from the first day of her period. During this time, the man is not allowed to lie next to his wife in bed, but must find a place on the floor or - if available - move to the sofa or another bed. Men who have sex with their wives during these seven days fall out of favour with God. On the other hand, a woman may peel carrots, wash clothes and sweep the rooms despite her impurity. However, this ambiguous law is by no means the only rule of the Twelve Tribes that makes no sense to me. Even asking questions often doesn't make me any wiser.

When I found a dead rhinoceros beetle in my early days in Sus in the company of one of my brothers and held it triumphantly in front of his nose, he cried out in panic: "Wow, get rid of it. You've been unclean for three days!" "Oh, man, crap," I react in surprise and struggle to ask a question due to my ignorance: "Why is that?" "I don't know either, but you're unclean for three days." I also learn that no elder is allowed to attend an elders' meeting if he has an ejaculation on the day of the meeting. Since the day in the Twelve Tribes begins at sunset

an elder must remain abstinent from sunset the day before until the start of the meeting the next day.

My brothers and I often find it difficult to interpret the laws that come from the founder and apostle Elbert Eugene Spriggs. We are content to believe that God will one day reveal the wisdom of His laws to us. Even for this remedial way of thinking, we have a law: Obey God's law, even if you don't understand it. We have learnt that obedience comes before revelation, and revelation means understanding. With this in mind, I am now on my guard against dead rhinoceros beetles. That seems to me to be the lesser of two evils compared to other powers and rights that the members of the Twelve Tribes renounce.

The disciples of the Twelve Tribes are not allowed to decide for themselves when and where they travel, where they live and when they see their families. They do not own private property and are not paid for their labour. They are forbidden to speak out at any time and say what they think. They are not free to choose their leaders, decide when and whom to marry or whether to start a diet. In the Twelve Tribes there are no free elections, no legal certainty, no independent court-like procedures for "law" offences, no religious freedom - and ultimately no freedom of thought. The brothers and sisters who want to express their displeasure with certain conditions in the community are taken to task by founding father Spriggs, alias Yoneq, with a single sentence: "Whoever is against the Holy Father becomes a brother of Satan, the rebellious leader of the world system."

There are no legal instructions for my wedding night, but there is a kind of preparation course. Until my wedding day, I have no idea what the Twelve Tribes think about sexuality. All I know until then is that it's a taboo subject for singles. Any form of pornography, even if it only takes place in the mind, is a sin. "A person's largest sexual organ is their head," explains Yoneq. Fortunately

I come across elders who can explain sexuality to me in the spirit of God and take a lot of time to ensure that I am well prepared. A beginner like me can have really bad luck with the Twelve Tribes. At the beginning of the movement, Yoneq made so many, sometimes contradictory statements on the subject of sexual life that the doctrine on sexual intercourse is confusing.

If an unsuspecting person falls for the wrong expert, it can quickly end in disaster. Parents of girls in particular often fail to prepare their daughters for the night of nights. In theory, the Twelve Tribes assume that mother and daughter are best friends at the time of marriage preparation and also talk about sex. In practice, however, such conversations are rather meagre. I myself am impressed when I, as a future groom, am invited to a round of married men.

They chat about sexuality and marriage to make my ears prick up. In view of their profound knowledge, the morning after the first time, I respond to their wordlessly winking enquiry with a proud "It's fine!". Other brothers and sisters are less successful.

When a young groom comes out of the shower naked on his wedding night and is already visibly looking forward to seeing his bride, his wife looks between his legs in horror, gets scared and crawls under her bed in panic. In Sus, the wedding party organises a secluded hut in the mountains for a young bride and groom and gives the man a mobile phone in case of an emergency. After three days, the husband gets in touch and asks: "What do we have to do now?" Nobody has informed the brother and sister about the act of love.

In view of such misunderstandings, papers have existed since May 1999 that are intended to inform men and women about the first night of love. For female sex education, for example, it states that terms such as "down there" and "get together" are by no means sufficient to "tell the bride what exactly she has to expect". The woman is also told that she must "clean herself under cold running water afterwards", that she "totally belongs to the man" and that she "does not need to hold back when kissing". A

Another piece of advice is: "Be sensitive and respond to him quickly." The instructions for men state that your own parents are the best teachers in matters of love. Because "children often learn the wrong way". They learn "everything about sex from older people or boys from the neighbourhood". But this is how the "homosexual spirit is passed on". The masters of creation should also "keep the marriage bed pure" because adulterers don't go to heaven; they learn that "a man's impotence comes from a woman who doesn't enjoy sex" and that they should be wary of kinky practices. "Anal sex is absolutely forbidden, and during oral sex, the man's semen must not enter the woman's mouth. That is a false invention."

The Twelve Tribes are not a prudish people. On the contrary: founding father Yoneq attaches great importance to women and men finding time for their sexuality. The community values sex as a natural thing that is fun and beautiful. Yoneq also believes that it is an important task for a man to satisfy his wife.

"If you were quicker than your wife," he says once, "then look after her afterwards. Don't be such a selfish bloke who turns on his side, sleeps and leaves his wife lying there." Another appeal is accordingly: "Cut and file your fingernails so that you don't hurt your wife." It's only his own wife that Yoneq's message doesn't quite land. While Marsha is initially a fervent admirer of her husband when he finds her in a hippie village in the Californian mountains in the 1970s after two failed marriages and gives her the Hebrew name Ha-emeq ("of the valley"), she later follows her own laws and is anything but subservient to her husband.

One day, Marsha "of the valley" even has to justify herself to the assembled elders in Hiddenite, now the centre of the Twelve Tribes, for having extramarital sexual relations. Her lovers are said to have been an elder from the Sus community and an elder from the community in Brazil. The wife of the founding father likes to gather a handful of elders around her, whom she calls "my boys" in public. Marsha also behaves towards me for a while

unusually friendly when I'm visiting the USA. I dismiss her because I don't have a mother complex, but I sense that she ignores me from then on, which in turn doesn't help my career in the Twelve Tribes at all, because Marsha has more authority than any other woman in the community: for one thing, she is the only female allowed to sit on the Council of Elders. Secondly, she determines how women and girls should behave in the Twelve Tribes. She dictates the music and clothing - and is the least likely to abide by her own rules.

Marsha is a California girl. The mother of the company always behaves in an over-excited, somewhat cloying and over-candid manner. She loves decorations in the pompous doll's house style and allows herself to be worshipped with a kind of personality cult that seems downright grotesque within the community. At a wedding in Sus, she is struck by one of her typical, slightly twisted visions. "I absolutely need", she explains as eccentrically as an avant-garde fashion designer, "a blue cloth to decorate the throne; it won't work without a blue cloth." Her young men almost fall over themselves to organise the required piece of cloth. She's playing games, I think, and I'm reminded of a jousting tournament where the winner gets an audience with the queen. Her word is God's will.

In view of the sexual escapades of the founder's wife, some elders in the congregation demand consequences and call for equal rights for all. They criticise the fact that young disciples are banished from the community because they kissed a girl before marriage, while the wife of the founding father has extramarital affairs. Marsha plays the repentant sinner. Yoneq says: "All I have in my heart for her is forgiveness. God forgives her." The protest comes to nothing. Instead, the protesters gradually disappear from the congregation. Some seem to leave voluntarily, others are sent away by Yoneq himself. Right is always on Yoneq's side. He alone is accountable to God - and God apparently gives Yoneq freedoms that the founding father denies his own people. Yoneq says: "We are the only true work of God on earth since the apostles."

Yoneq's attitude is characterised by an almost inhuman self-discipline. He adheres rigidly to the rules of the Twelve Tribes and expects this loyal allegiance from all the disciples of the community. Perhaps it is precisely this consistent attitude that makes him so fanatical. He sees himself as the only person who can hear directly from God.

If he thinks he and his idea are under attack, he hurls out sentences like thunder, so that his people may tremble: "Those who lie and those who listen to these lies will end up in eternal purgatory." We should stay away from unbelievers, from all those who are not truly members of the Twelve Tribes, because they only want to poison us. For Yoneq, unbelievers are all those who doubt his judgement.

My family takes a critical view of my wedding. On the one hand, the sermon and this religious hoopla really get on my relatives' nerves. Secondly, they believe that my marriage means that I am even more lost to life outside the Twelve Tribes. They decide to take part in the wedding theatre as extras because they want to maintain contact with me and try to build trust with the Twelve Tribes. They understand that they must never confront my brothers and sisters directly with their views, because the members of the community are instructed to turn away immediately in this case. The community responds to any criticism of the Twelve Tribes from old friends or family with bans and contact bans imposed for years by the Council of Elders. My sister and my mum are clever. They are allowed to visit me. I myself am repeatedly encouraged by the community to cultivate more than mere friendship with them. If I really love them, is the message of the Twelve Tribes, I cannot stand by and watch them run to their doom, but must do everything in my power to ensure that my family hears the good news of salvation from my mouth and ultimately joins the community. With this mission, I always manage to combine my duties with the Twelve Tribes with an overnight stay with my one-and-a-half-year family.

older sister in Berlin. Once we even spent the night in her flat with some brothers and sisters when we travelled to Berlin with a group for an evangelistic event. Without my mum and my sister, I would never have managed to break out of the community.

My sister's help almost costs her her marriage. She is a therapist, has hours of tiring conversations with me and later with my wife Shalomah and tries again and again to free me from the clutches of the community. She often takes me and sometimes my children and my wife into her home in Berlin.

The topic of the twelve tribes puts a strain on their relationship. She tells her husband: "That's my brother. We can't leave him hanging."

"I understand you, but I can hardly stand these lunatics," her husband replies and withdraws more and more from the relationship. The intolerance of the Twelve Tribes is making things difficult for him. His brother is homosexual, has been married to a man for years and is in a happy relationship. Apparently the members of the Twelve Tribes have got wind of this. When my brother-in-law first visits the community in Klosterzimmern, the original Christians discuss the sin of same-sex love at length almost every time. That can't be a coincidence. For the Twelve Tribes, gay and lesbian partnerships are a disease that Satan has brought into the world to destroy God's work. After evenings like this, my brother-in-law boils with rage. It is unbearable for him to endure these homophobic remarks while he sits quietly in the chair and is not allowed to say anything so as not to damage the climate between my family and the members of the Twelve Tribes. The situation is humiliating and hurtful for him.

As newlyweds, we feel like we're in a star hotel in our caravan by the river. While our brothers and sisters step outside the door at seven in the morning for the first service after blowing the shofar, the gazelle horn, we are allowed to stay in bed. They spoil us, bring us breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Dinner in our love nest. For a week, we don't need to do anything other than think about ourselves. We cuddle a lot and sometimes go on short trips in a vehicle provided by the community. We are travelling on the special track. I'm happy, but I also realise that I miss my old life. It's as if I'm entering the dark attic of my past, and in the beam of the torch, fragments of memories of long-forgotten pleasures suddenly emerge.

Excursions. Holidays. Togetherness. Your own decisions. Feeling yourself. Enjoyment. I am overwhelmed.

As newlyweds, Shalomah and I have seven long days to do whatever we like. Apart from that, there are only a few occasions when we have two or three days off. For example, if a woman gives birth to a child, the young mother is considered unclean and is not allowed to take part in the gatherings and celebrations for eighty days in the case of a girl and forty days in the case of a boy.

"They are not forbidden to do so," says the community newspaper "The Communicator" from January 2002, but the young mothers "should already be sitting on the sidelines". In other words, they are exempt from all obligations and responsibilities in the community, so there is a chance that the parents will be granted a short break of two or three days. The downside, however, is that the husband is also not allowed to approach his wife during the unclean period after the birth.

When our baby girl Asarah was born in 2004, I visualised Shalomah and I lying in bed together with our baby. The baby is sleeping on my naked chest, my wife's head nestled on my shoulder. But my ideas of warm family happiness end in horror. The elders warn me that I must not get close to Shalomah for two months, and so I sleep alone and frustrated on the sofa. With the second child, I ignore the hard-hearted measure and slip under the covers with Shalomah. A few days later, an elder promptly reprimands me for my immoral behaviour. It's a mystery to me how he found out. Later, I hear the story of a couple from Island Ponds/USA, who had been married in front of a

elders because the woman wears provocative underwear when initiating lovemaking. The Twelve Tribes' control does not end at the bedroom door.

I explain to my wife that from now on we no longer want to interpret the laws of the Twelve Tribes word for word, but in the spirit of them. Shalomah is of a different opinion.

The wife as subject

Since I got married, I have felt closer to the Twelve Tribes than ever before. I have had to wait thirteen long years for the day of my marriage. Most of the brothers who join the Twelve Tribes after me were given their wives by the Council of Elders a little eternity before me. I have to watch longingly as they are happily married and start families. In the end, I often sit in my communal room for single brothers and struggle with my fate while hordes of girls and boys of all ages walk past outside the window. "God," I exclaim, "why can't I get a woman?" The answer is obvious: if the elders won't allow a man to have a wife, the man in the Twelve Tribes is out of luck. It's as simple as that: "God gives you a wife," the elders explain to me, "as a sign of recognition and trust in you." Apparently, I didn't deserve such trust for more than a decade. But now I am married and, with the approval of the council of elders, I am allowed to father children. I have finally arrived in the circle of my brothers and sisters. I am one of them. My father-in-law Ephraim, the "double fruitful", a long-time elder and father of seven children, puts it more soberly: "I give you my daughter so that you will recognise God's love for you and manage to persevere with us!"

I meet Shalomah for the first time in Sus. I am twenty-one years old and a very reserved newcomer. She is just eight. As her teacher, I teach her and the other children gymnastic exercises. From then on, our paths cross again and again. I teach Shalomah in Pennigbüttel and later live with her in the Oberbronnen community before we

both in leading positions to build up the group in Klosterzimmern. She manages the kitchen, I manage the school. When Shalomah is sixteen years old, I realise that I feel more for her than the love between brother and sister. I like her cheerful nature and admire the faith she expresses. Perhaps I also hope that she will help me to strengthen my own trust in God. What man really knows why he loves one woman and not the other?

One day I pluck up my courage, stand with wet hands in front of the elder who was looking after Shalomah's family in Pennigbüttel at the time and say awkwardly: "Wow, I like them!" - "Who do you like?" - "Well, Shalomah!" - "Forget it!" Like a stone in the water of a well, all my energy suddenly disappears. That was probably it. I'm supposed to forget all the hope and feelings I have. I've heard that according to the vision of our spiritual leader Yoneq, the children of the Twelve Tribes are supposed to be married at the age of fourteen or fifteen. I'm bloody late. But parents - especially those of daughters - consider marriage at such a young age to be premature. What's more, the brothers and sisters at the time are still unsure whether a person born and raised outside the community is even worthy of marriage to a member born in the Twelve Tribes. I fight the desire to be close to Shalomah and seek advice from my elder again and again. He says, "Cut off your feelings. If it's from God, He won't take it away from you." Two years later, when Shalomah is eighteen years old, the elders finally allow me to ask her father Ephraim to agree to the so-called probationary period with his daughter. During the trial period, couples are supposed to find out whether they are destined for marriage.

In the summer of 2002, a large group from Klosterzimmern travelled to Görlitz to perform Israeli circle dances at a folk festival. Shalomah is a dancer and chef, I am the bus driver and co-organiser of the trip. She seems to like me. She has no idea of my fantasies and I keep my distance. Instead, I follow the prescribed

I make an appointment to talk to her father in private. Ephraim is not at all surprised by my request for a trial period. He himself sits in the elders' meetings where such things are discussed. The conversation goes well and Ephraim explains to me the seriousness of such a time and that he has great confidence in me. When we return from our walk in the nearby forest, Shalomah notices my joy, but has no idea what it means.

A few days later, Ephraim asks his daughter if she could imagine a trial period with me. Shalomah is surprised, but willing to consider the question. Before she agrees, however, my eldest Werner Klinger, who is looking after me at the time, arranges with her father Ephraim for me to go for a walk with her in the afternoon.

Throughout the day, I struggle to concentrate on my work in the office. Time stands still. I can do little else but wait for Ephraim to bring his daughter round for a walk. The door finally opens. I drop the pen and Shalomah stands in the room, pale with excitement. My heart is pounding in my throat as we leave the house in embarrassed and awkward silence. We talk about the Twelve Tribes and our love for God. The conversation falters. I feel disorganised. For the first time, we are travelling without her parents and other members of the congregation. Unobserved. Although we talk to each other from time to time, this situation is so completely different from all the others before that we are at a loss for words. After the long time in which I have had to suppress my feelings, I find it difficult to find sensible words to express my affection for her. We walk silently side by side.

I would like to take her in my arms, touch her face, but that is strictly forbidden. When the half hour is almost up, she confesses that she likes me. Then we have to part. The time is up.

Until this moment, marriage is not an issue for Shalomah. "I knew that my father would come one day," she explains to me later, "and lets me know." Finally, she agrees to our trial period

to. And once again, a few days pass in which we have to keep quiet about our request until Father Ephraim officially announces on Friday's preparation day that his daughter and I are going on probation. In the evening, I sit at the banqueting table with Shalomah, her six siblings and her parents Ephraim and Baruchah ("blessing"). The looks on my parents' faces make me feel insecure; I would actually prefer to be alone with Shalomah to get to know her better. But I'll have to get used to it; it's a long road, because the trial period will last a year. I want to give in. I love Shalomah.

Shalomah is not the first woman in my life. But my first relationship was more than ten years ago and had long since ended when I moved into the community at the age of twenty-one. If needs arise in me and my abdomen over these many years, I learn to suppress them. As a disciple of the Twelve Tribes, it is my duty to block my urges. Before marriage, as a man of God, I am not allowed to even see a naked woman - not in her real form, but also not in my imagination and dreams. If a disciple masturbates, he must never imagine a naked woman during this act. If he dreams of a woman's bum at night, he will have to repent the next morning before an elder. "I'm sorry," says the guilty man with his head bowed. "I had some sinful fantasies again that I couldn't control."

From the very beginning, I want to have an equal partnership with my wife Shalomah. I want to decide all things concerning our lives together with her. But the twelve tribes - and to my surprise, my wife too herself - have a different plan for a godly existence. When her health deteriorates one morning after our honeymoon, we decide that she will stay in her room that day and not go to work in the kitchen. The rebuke is huge.

"What do you think you're doing, telling your wife what to do?" an elderly kitchen woman says to me after I tell her the news about Shalomah's time out. "Get her in here right away, she has to wash potatoes."

The man, I learn, is the head of the family in the Twelve Tribes, but as far as the women's work is concerned, the older women call the shots. If I finish early at the bakery or at school to go to the river with my wife, I have to ask the older women if Shalomah can take a little break from washing the dishes. I usually have no luck. "No," they say. "She still has to wash and then prepare food in the kitchen, she doesn't have time for you." Shalomah complies. She urges me to follow the word of the older women and not cause any trouble.

According to the laws of the Twelve Tribes, my wife and I have a strange relationship. As her husband, I have to give her spiritual direction and behave towards her in a friendly but distant manner. But above all, I want to be emotionally close to Shalomah and authentic at the same time. I want to share my worries and hardships with her. I want to show her how I am - and not how I should be according to the instructions of the Twelve Tribes. The next rebuke is inevitable.

"Don't talk so much about your problems with your wife," an elder tells me. "You're too honest with her." If I have worries, I should talk to the elders and keep my wife out of it. The elders are convinced that this is how things should be between me and my wife: I come home, ask for God's help in a quick prayer at the door ("Dear God, help me to be a good husband"), then enter, hug my wife and read to her from the Bible. "Learn," the elder advises me, "to be filled with the divine spirit, then there will be no problems." In other words: I should pretend the world is perfect at home and be full of faith.

Shalomah is of the same opinion. She expects me to always respond perfectly to her, to be the strong disciple of the Lord at her side at all times. She knows this kind of interaction between husband and wife from her parents. My father-in-law Ephraim and my mother-in-law Baruchah converse just as abstractly and formally in their own four walls as they do in the

public. They are exclusively filled with divine love for one another - a role model for the younger brothers and sisters.

When Shalomah and I lie in bed at night, we don't talk about feelings such as doubts and fears, but about organisational problems in the community; we discuss solutions. Our relationship is soulless. "This is more of a social meeting for two than a real partnership," I often think and stare sadly at the ceiling. When I talk to her about my worries, she becomes insecure. She has no doubts about the decisions of her elders.

Three types of meetings exist in the Twelve Tribes. There is the elders' meeting, where the elders, a little more than a handful of men, make all the decisions of the community. There is also the women's meeting, where the women discuss household issues, and finally the social meeting, where men and women discuss solutions together. In practice, it works like this: the women's meeting agrees that goat goulash should be cooked for a wedding and brings this request to the social meeting. In the social meeting, the men and women discuss together whether there are enough goats in the barn and which of the men should slaughter the animal. The council of elders then discusses the proposals from the social meeting and votes.

My wife knows from her own family how to spend hours talking about organisational issues in the Klosterzimmern community. Her parents Ephraim and Baruchah have set an example for her of constantly talking about other members and looking for solutions to their problems. But I want to talk to Shalomah about what is on my mind. Our shared room serves as a place of retreat for me, where my soul can rest; here I can have emotional and intimate conversations with my wife. After many years as a single brother, I finally have a space for privacy and I want to use it. But my wife is not interested in discussing my problems at all. "Yathar, a man must not be a doubter

He is his wife's encourager," an elder explains my wife's way of thinking. "He should go out of the room and leave his wife happy. The husband gives his wife strength, vision and courage and leads her to Yahshua." In the Twelve Tribes, a brother is supposed to be the wife's strengthening Abraham and has things under control. Then the elder says: "And under no circumstances should you talk to your wife about the problems from the elders' meeting. No man does that!"

Shalomah's mother is extremely sceptical of me. From the day we first met, her reaction to me was reserved, and my numerous crises of faith over the past few years did nothing to improve our strained relationship. It takes six years before my mother-in-law agrees to marry her daughter. She wants to test my steadfastness in God's word and delays her consent. "The evil outside world is trying to twist you," is her message. "Evil is gnawing at your faith." My mother-in-law is made of particularly tough stuff and is nothing less than a heroine in the circle of the Twelve Tribes.

For thirty years, my mother-in-law's experiences as a young girl have served as an example to the Twelve Tribes that a person can resist Satan's temptations if they only believe firmly enough in the precepts of the original Christians and act accordingly. In the eyes of my brothers and sisters, the life story of my mother-in-law parallels the life and suffering of Yahshua. Like the Most High, Rebecca Westbrooks, her maiden name, resists the devil's attacks that seek to ruin her faith and destroy her life. But Rebecca remains firm in God. "We learn from this," the Twelve Tribes draw a powerful conclusion on their website, "that we will be treated just as He was treated if we walk in His way."

On 17 January 1980, police officers enter the small Twelve Tribes restaurant in Chattanooga, handcuff Rebecca and arrest her for illegal possession and sale of marijuana. They take her to the police station, take her fingerprints and

explain that she is about to be presented to the magistrate. She is asked to sign a paper stating the amount of bail and realises that the paper already bears the signature of her father, who is a detective in this town. Rebecca senses a conspiracy and her father actually intercepts her at the door as she leaves the police station. He takes her in the patrol car to the house of a couple he knows in Alabama and locks her in a room with the blinds down. Rebecca is not allowed to go to the toilet alone, and at night in bed she is flanked by two former members of the Twelve Tribes, Naomi and Melinda, to prevent her from escaping.

Melinda and Naomi managed to leave the community a few years earlier with the help of Ted Patrick, a so-called deprogrammer. This refers to a therapist who tries to "erase" the thoughts that are implanted in those affected by cults through long conversations. You can hire people like Ted Patrick. "My family lied to me," Rebecca notes in her report on the so-called "kidnapping of Rebecca Westbrooks". "I no longer trust them and want to close myself off from them." Instead of talking, Rebecca cries and begs God to help her get through her situation.

On the twelfth day, Ted Patrick enters her room. Patrick has already treated four members of the Twelve Tribes with his methods.

Three of these patients then stay away from the community in Chattanooga. Patrick sets up a video camera and places two chairs in the beam of the spotlights. When Rebecca takes a seat opposite him, he explains to her that her brain has atrophied to the level of a two-year-old. She is a zombie and the founding father of the community, Eugene Spriggs, is a pawn catcher.

"I was fighting for my life," Rebecca writes, "mentally, emotionally and spiritually." Patrick says she has to learn to think about herself again, and if this process takes four months, it will take four months. "I reject that," counters Rebecca. "I don't want to undergo hypnosis or brainwashing."

Patrick talks to Rebecca for many hours. Rebecca tries to remain calm and unresponsive to his words. On the thirteenth day, Rebecca collapses after a torrent of accusations against the community comes crashing down on her. Rebecca drums her fists against her bed and screams, "You're trying to make me crazy, but I'm not, I'm not, I'm not." Rebecca believes that Patrick and her family want to fill her heart with lies. She vows to remain steadfast because God has led her to people whose hearts are filled with His love and who give their lives for His will. She wants that too.

After two weeks, Ted Patrick takes Rebecca to San Diego and places her in a rehab centre. He wants to put Rebecca under hypnosis so that she can overcome her feelings of guilt and fear towards the community. "I didn't feel guilty and scared until you kidnapped me," she counters. Patrick tells her how much her family suffers from her life with the community, that her father has had heart problems ever since and lies in bed crying at night. "That was a tactic to make me feel guilty. They didn't want me to feel good because I had caused my family so much suffering since I joined the community," Rebecca recalls. She resisted for a fortnight in San Diego, then the family shipped her off to her sister's house in Houston. When her sister was at work, Rebecca fled and returned to the community. "The only thing that got me through those four weeks," Rebecca explains, "was my hope in His grace and my conviction that God would let me return to the community. My deepest desire was to continue life with my convictions."

The Twelve Tribes interpret Rebecca's story as a classic version of Jesus. They judge the father's trickery as "dangerous alliance between church and state". In their view, Rebecca's experiences are an expression of the "eternal pattern of Satan". On their homepage, they turn it into a religious legend: "Rebecca is dissatisfied with the established religion. She joins a group that is radically different, follows her

heart and finds fulfilment in a life of love and charity. She wants to serve according to the words of God. Her Christian parents are beside themselves at her choice. This is typical of Christian counsellors. They convince the government functionaries to go along with their deprogramming plans. Anti-cult activists like Ted Patrick trigger the fear of cultism. They are accelerators." That people like Patrick would go about their godless work, however, was already prophesied in the Bible. It says that the men of lawlessness will become stronger.

However, the men of the Twelve Tribes know how to defend themselves and take Rebecca, who has returned home to Chattanooga, abroad. Her place of refuge is the small Stuttgart community, which soon after travelled through Spain and Portugal and finally founded the first large European branch of the Twelve Tribes in Sus in the south of France in the mid-1980s. Rebecca meets her husband Ephraim on this journey. She is soon pregnant and gives birth to the baby girl at the Twelve Tribes' headquarters in Island Ponds/USA. It is Shalomah.

Shalomah and I are under constant observation during our one-year trial period. Many of our fellow believers in Klosterzimmern invite us to their parlour, want to sound us out over tea and test our attitudes - especially mine.

The brothers and sisters want to judge whether my marriage to Shalomah can work. Some of the elders even tell my future wife about alleged misdemeanours from days gone by. These include very personal things that I once revealed to brother friends in private. If Shalomah still wants to marry her Yathar with this knowledge, they probably think she really loves him. Every Saturday at the breaking of bread, when all the baptised members sit together, we have to report on how our probationary period is going. An elder regularly crosses us in the crossfire.

It's humiliating. There is a story circulating in the community about me with a seventeen-year-old schoolgirl. Many years ago, the young girl makes eyes at me, and I am too inexperienced to

immediately realise that she likes to cuckold men. Nothing happened, but rumours are persistent.

There are two large houses in Klosterzimmern. The residents of both houses must agree to the marriage. If the household in which the couple lives approves the marriage, the consent of the second household is considered a formality. Not so with us. With the approval of our house in our pockets, Shalomah and I sit confidently in the meeting of the second household. Suddenly, an elderly woman stands up and says: "No, I have no peace about it!" She refuses to give us her amen because she has this trivial story about the seventeen-year-old in her head. The decision is postponed for three days. Then we finally get permission.

Sometimes I feel at the mercy of the laws of the Twelve Tribes. There's always a new rule to follow that I've never heard of before. I'm never sure whether our marriage plans will fail. It's Kafkaesque. Like Franz Kafka's legend of the gatekeeper, in which a man can't get past a gatekeeper because he doesn't know the laws of entry. When the wedding date is finalised, we are informed that we have to travel to Washington DC for an evangelistic event shortly after the planned weekend of our wedding. The date is cancelled. We can read the reason for this in the Bible. It says that a newly married man is not allowed to go to war for a year. In the interpretation of the Twelve Tribes, an evangelistic event is therefore a "war", I realise in amazement and wonder why they don't use a rule in our favour. According to another rule, the wedding has to take place within eighty-three days of the engagement. We have months in between. No wonder we're getting uncomfortably close with such a long wait.

After a long day on the square in front of the White House in Washington, we sit on the bus on the way back to the campsite - unfortunately in the same row of benches - and can no longer restrain ourselves. I put my arm around Shalomah and stroke her with my hand.

my hand lightly over her back. Tired, Shalomah rests her head on my shoulder. Up to now, I've thought the girls growing up among the Twelve Tribes were prudish. Now, to my surprise, I can feel Shalomah's lust. No one is really paying attention to us, everyone is exhausted, and we enjoy the togetherness in the middle of the group.

Never before have we been so close. But our actions have consequences.

When we get back to Klosterzimmern, my wife is plagued by a guilty conscience and confesses our misbehaviour to her mother. A huge argument ensues, at the end of which Shalomah's parents are given the right to break off our engagement. But we are lucky. The elders "only" decide that I'm not allowed to see Shalomah for six weeks. Until then, Shalomah's worst fear is that the official wedding celebration will be cancelled. In the Twelve Tribes, weddings are cancelled if a man and woman have sex outside of marriage.

Shalomah's mother is also far from satisfied with separating us for a while. She is unhappy with the decision her husband and the other elders have made, but she complies. After a quick farewell to my bride, I have to move to the small branch of the Twelve Tribes in Wörnitz - sixty kilometres away from Shalomah in Klosterzimmern.

Sometimes I have to travel from Wörnitz to Klosterzimmern for meetings. When I drive up to the estate by car, Shalomah has to go to her room and hide. I suffer like a dog: I know she's in there somewhere, but I'm not allowed to see her. Contact with my wife is not allowed. The instruction that Shalomah has to go to the room when I arrive comes from her parents, of all people. I still have regular nightmares today. In my sleep, I feel an insatiable longing for a person, I desperately want to see them, and someone forbids me to do so.

Fatally, Father Ephraim is assigned to Shalomah and me as the eldest. He is our shepherd, and Shalomah wants me to be like her dad. But I want to be my own person and not a copy. My brothers and sisters say: "If you want to be a

spiritual man, you would have no problem following in Ephraim's footsteps." According to the Twelve Tribes, the father raises the daughter and hands her over to her husband, who continues to raise her exactly where his father-in-law left off. The bonds between brothers and sisters are closely knit in the Twelve Tribes. The situation is different when it comes to outside relationships with worldly families.

My mother-in-law only saw her two biological sisters and her mother again in the southern French community of Sus a decade and a half after fleeing the house in Houston. Her father had already died by this time. Baruchah, alias Rebecca Westbrooks, writes the following about the reunion on the Twelve Tribes website: "My mother and sister clearly saw that my husband loved and cared for me, that the children were happy, healthy and loved, that everyone in the community was normal people and not brainwashed, hypnotised zombies. My mum said, now I realise what you've been trying to tell me for fourteen years. She realised the result of all the lies she had heard and believed about us that had destroyed our relationship." Rebecca's sentences convey the image that the community likes to present of itself in public. Her text is propaganda.

Hand in hand with their children, parents step outside their homes every Friday morning. It is seven o'clock and preparation day in the Klosterzimmern community. Girls and boys, mums and dads are singing. It is the day on which the disciples of the Twelve Tribes prepare for the Sabbath on Saturday. They are cleaning and cooking. A little girl helps her mum with the broom. Another tries her hand at peeling potatoes. The meadows are steaming. Somewhere a cow is mooing. A green tiled stove roars in the meeting house. Later, three musicians play simple tunes on the guitar, accompanied by a clarinet. The congregation dances Israeli folklore dances together. They stretch their arms into the

air as if they wanted to climb to heaven. One of them makes an intercession:

"Lord, I ask you to protect our children."

The idyll is deceptive. Most of these people have forgotten how to exist on their own two feet outside the Twelve Tribes. With their Hebrew names, not only have their civil names disappeared, but also their worldly identity and their own opinions. "Dead people", an elder in Boston/USA explains to me, "have no opinion". But the worst thing is that they beat their children with willow sticks and make them mentally and emotionally incapable of ever making their own decisions in life.

Breeding and order

I close the door behind me and cry. Without restraint. Shocked at myself, the tears run down my cheeks, my sweaty T-shirt sticks to my body. My own hardness surprises me. I am a ghost, a soulless figure.

After the ordeal I inflict on her, my daughter Asarah lies exhausted and distraught next to her mother, breastfeeding, while I stand outside the house shaken by crying fits, hating myself. My little girl is just eight months old. I have beaten Asarah down, broken her inside.

For an hour and a half, I hold both her hands as if they were vices and order her to "Be quiet and sit still!"

Asarah sits on my lap and looks at me, startled. Five minutes. Ten minutes. Then she starts to stir, fidgets a little. "No, sit still," I remind her again in a calm voice. Asarah looks at me questioningly. Five minutes. Ten minutes. Then she struggles again, trying to free herself from my grip. I tighten my grip on her wrists. The child screams and bends backwards. She stretches her back and stiffens up. I press her head onto her chest with the flat of my hand. Asarah rebels. She roars. Her face is as red as a beetroot. Sweat drips from her forehead. Small veins burst on her cheeks.

Asarah's struggle lasts for what feels like an eternity. She finally capitulates and drops her head into my hand, completely exhausted. Her will breaks. At this moment, I realise that something is wrong with the upbringing of the Twelve Tribes. Completely and utterly wrong. I hand Asarah over to my wife Shalomah. "You're a great father," she praises me for my brutality. "You've done well. I'm proud of you for sticking to the

rules from our God!" From my wife's point of view, everything is fine. But I'm horrified at myself. What have I done to Asarah?

As I'm standing outside the house trying to catch my breath and struggling with myself, an elder comes by. "What's wrong with you?" he asks.

"Have you been crying?"

I explain to him what I've just done for an hour and a half and add: "I'll never do that again!"

"Hey," he replies. "That's quite normal. We're all like that. It's the feelings. You have to learn that." I should just think about how good it is for Asarah that I've broken her will. "If your daughter ever runs out into the street, you

If you shout "Stop!" and she stops immediately, then you know you've done the right thing," he explains. "If the lorry hasn't caught her, then you'll realise that it's necessary to train your child to be absolutely obedient."

"Parents must use their God-given powers. The powers of their parental authority are chastisement and discipline against rebellion and refusal on the part of the children," explains a teaching on raising children from the Twelve Tribes from 1997.

The instructions are merciless. "As history teaches us, chastisement with physical pain is the normal method of bringing children under control. It is a natural law.

Being a son means having a father who loves you enough to chastise you - and whip you when necessary. It is not surprising that children who have not been chastised feel rejected and unwanted. So a child must be chastised to show him love; only then will he become acceptable to the community again." For a child to become "acceptable", their will must be bent. "That doesn't mean offering them things that are fun. They must benefit from everything they do," it says in the teaching "Having a Will" from 23.

January 1984: "Our children are not like the ones out there. They don't behave like other children. We have taught our children not to ask for food or anything else they want to do. Since they are fallen children, they will

naturally do what they want to do. They want to eat what they want to eat. Children have to learn the will of their parents."

In many conversations, the elders manage to build me up again and bring me to the point where I see a purpose in my brutal behaviour. Gradually, chastising my Asarah becomes a habit. Every two or three days I devote myself to the procedure, holding my daughter's hands until she gives up her resistance and her little head falls into the palm of my hand. This procedure lasted six months. By the time Asarah is a little over a year old, she has reached the point where she is ready to "voluntarily" submit to my will. When I give her the command to sit still, she now follows without much resistance. Asarah has thus reached the submissive state in which the children of the Twelve Tribes are to be kept until their baptism. Until they stand in the water as adolescents at around twelve years of age and cry out to heaven: "Yahshua, I surrender to you. Of my own free will and of my own free will." In the meetings, I see small children who sit on their father's lap like little dolls for hours without moving. Their parents claim they are at complete peace because they submit to them. It's bizarre.

The first educational measure used to bend children's will begins immediately after birth. Parents wrap their babies so tightly in cloths and fasten them with safety pins that the offspring can no longer move. They lie there like a tied-up parcel. At first I found the so-called restraint quite sensible, as I have read that the indigenous peoples once also wrapped their babies tightly. The tightness of the cloths, which simulates the security of a mother's womb, is intended to give children a sense of security. At the same time, the swaddle strengthens their muscles - especially in the back, as the little ones are constantly working against their "packaging". However, the restraint of the Twelve Tribes has little in common with this old-fashioned swaddling technique, commonly known as swaddling. On the one hand, the children of the original Christians are virtually permanently swaddled for the first few months.

much tighter. On the other hand, the main purpose of this method is to get the children to rest. My daughter Asarah finds it difficult to get used to this predicament and struggles to get free every night. When my wife finds the uncovered child in the morning, she immediately puts the sheets back on. Shalomah is consistent. We often argue.

"Parents need to understand the different phases of child rearing: 1. control; 2. education. When parents truly live according to God's Word, they have control over their children. If the children do not obey, you have not raised them right," according to the 1997 standard on "The Responsibility of Parents". "Psychologists are stupid and bad people. Society has created the concept of children's rights. The philosophy is that children must be treated equally by every member of society, at school and in the family. There are also people who claim that physical discipline is against the best interests of the child. This leads parents to question whether they are allowed to punish their own children. This produces uncontrollable teenagers and adolescents. Harsh parenting is not a trial and error method."

At around seven months, children's own minds become visible for the first time. Until then, they lay quietly on the changing table during nappy changes and put up with the new nappy without resistance, but now they start to stir in the air with their arms and legs. They kick around and struggle. When feeding, children turn their heads to the side or swat the spoon away with their hand. The self awakens in the child. For the Twelve Tribes, this is the decisive moment. According to their conviction, this is the moment when the child's own will awakens, which must be defeated by the parents by any means necessary. Different methods are used at each of the developmental stages, known as milestones, to defeat the will of each Twelve Tribes child. The parenting plan begins with restraint for the youngest children; this is followed by limb restraint and the

The only goal is the unconditional submission of the child. The sole aim is the unconditional submission of the child.

When disciplining, the members of the Twelve Tribes punish any kind of disobedience. In the first stage - up to the age of about six - the child is not told why he or she is not allowed to do this or that. The elders tell us parents that "pure" obedience is independent of reasons.

Only when the children get older are the parents allowed to explain their acts of punishment, because corporal punishment is considered an inevitable measure in the community. It is the quick purification of the children's hearts. According to the logic of the early Christians, any disobedience gives the child a guilty conscience because it is a sin against God. By chastising the body, the soul is cleansed of sin. In the second stage of education, chastisement of the heart comes to the fore and corporal punishment becomes less important. Now the children are able to recognise their misbehaviour without being beaten. If the upbringing of the children according to the spirit of the Twelve Tribes has been successful, from the age of twelve they have attained a state of heart that enables the boys and girls to recognise their own sins themselves and show public repentance. An oversized guilty conscience is installed in them.

"Most behavioural patterns must be internalised in childhood", is how the chapter "The Nature of the Child" describes the educational goal of the Twelve Tribes. "The term youth is used for the ages 13 to 20. This is the time when parents have the greatest influence on the child's thinking. The adolescent who has not been brought under control will rebel harder and harder against any curtailment of his freedom.

Such young people must leave the community in accordance with the judgement of the council of elders regarding parental misconduct. Parents lose their authority over the child from the age of marriage or 21.

age." The "Conflicts" section adds: "The most important goal of parenting is to bring children under control and to maintain control until the goal is achieved. Parents should

Welcome conflict as an opportunity to bring about the necessary change. The turning point is reached when the children recognise their parents' rule. The child wants to know whether the love for him is great enough to entrust his life to them."

Time and again I see children who grow up in the community but do not achieve the goal of free will desired by the Twelve Tribes. The chastisement with the rod no longer bears fruit. After thousands of beatings they have received in their lives, their hearts are hardened. They have learnt to block out the pain and no longer feel anything. For children who have reached this stage, the council of elders has a draconian catalogue of measures at the ready. The elders impose contact bans with other children, even with their own siblings. Outside the homes, they are placed under the strict supervision of designated adults.

They are hardly allowed to take part in community life, are banned from dancing, playing music and are grounded for many days, sometimes even weeks.

On my first visit to Sus in the south of France in 1990, I was confronted with the harsh methods of the Twelve Tribes. Sitting opposite me at dinner was a man who, as a former hippie, had found his way to the Twelve Tribes. A ten-month-old boy babbles on his lap. The child grumbles and pinches his mouth shut while his father tries to feed him. Dad is visibly annoyed, suddenly pulls out a long rod and hits his son on the palms of both hands. The child howls. The people sitting round show no reaction, but I am beside myself and immediately confront him. "God wants it this way," he explains calmly. "This is love." Nine months later, when I am a member of the Twelve Tribes, I still hope that I can shape a new style of education among my brothers and sisters. "The group is only just beginning. I'm sure it will stabilise," I say with conviction. "I can certainly make a difference with my pedagogical knowledge." The only thing that will change is me.

In 1991, I attended the child education meetings in Sus every Friday morning. At these meetings

the elders present us with educational teachings that come directly from the American centre. I begin to understand the concept behind the beatings, but I am also glad that I have nothing to do with the children's education at this point.

This only changed when I became the community's sports teacher a year later. My future father-in-law Ephraim, who was responsible for the education of the younger children at the time, taught me how to discipline the children. Free of aggression, calm and almost peaceful, he takes the cane in his hand and hits a child's bare bottom in a targeted and controlled manner. A father then demonstrates the chastisement of the older offspring using his own child. Fanatical and out of his mind, he hits the boy's back and bottom with a wooden stick. The twelve-year-old screams with every blow that hits his body. I watch in horror.

In the evening, I try to talk to my eldest Arel (name changed). He is regarded in the community as a lax and rather soft educator. Arel is the father of four boys and two girls, and I know that he also struggles with the harsh methods. He explains to me that there are two types of people in the community - the hard, very structured, rather military type and the softer, more understanding type. In his family, the wife usually does the chastising. She is tough, uncompromising and can keep her feelings to herself. At the time, Arel and his wife often argue about the right parenting methods. Somehow that reassures me. Years later, Arel gets the receipt for his alleged laxity. One of his sons has to leave the community at the behest of the council of elders, and Arel has to accompany him until he comes of age. For years, he lives separately from his wife and other children, whom he is only allowed to visit every few weeks. Arel goes through a painful and humiliating time. For him, being an outcast is a punishment from God that he has to serve because of his lax upbringing.

His renegade son is hit even harder: since then, he has been forbidden to have any contact with his siblings.

"The only way parents can regain their authority is by using the rod. Remembering the pain will help him to obey in the future and to remember the parents' words in all cases of rebellion and disobedience," advises the 1997 educational teaching on "chastisement". "The rod represents the right of domination of parents and countries. The rod is most suitable because it can be distinguished as an object from the hand. It is known from dog training that the use of the hand is counterproductive. This also applies to children. Only stupid parents use their hands. Parents should explain to their children that God created the rod as a symbol of power. The rod can cause stripes, marks like those of a whip, but it is narrow enough not to cause permanent damage if the rod is used properly. The size of the rod must be adapted to the size and age of the dog.

After a sufficient number of strokes, parents must stop and ask the child if it will follow instructions in the future. The rod is used for the bum."

* * *

As a teacher, I try to show understanding for the children's weaknesses, which is why my brothers and sisters repeatedly admonish me to show more firmness towards their offspring. When it comes to chastising them with the rod, however, I am sober and consistent. I repeatedly beat the pupils during my time as a teacher. Some children several times a day. My logic at the time was: if I have to beat the pupils, then at least I chastise them in such a way that my actions are predictable for them. The boys and girls should recognise a clear line in my actions that they can follow in order to avoid further beatings. "To be fair to the children," I tell myself, "I have to stick to the community's programme." Despite a bitter

Because these chastisements always have a certain aftertaste for me, I develop a certain automatism. It's also a form of self-protection.

In the Twelve Tribes, there are countless forms of disobedience that result in chastisement. I have to beat the children with the willow rod if they talk or laugh in the classroom or don't want to line up for sports. I reach for the cane every day. "I'm so sorry I laughed," pleads a little girl, looking at me with wide eyes. My feelings are duelling. I feel miserable, but it has to be done - I take out the rod. According to the principle of the Twelve Tribes, there are two different characters: the naturally obedient and the naturally disobedient child. The disobedient one shows himself openly to the educator, so that he gets a clue to the child's problems. The obedient child, on the other hand, keeps a low profile, even though there may be something bubbling under the surface. Such children are difficult to reach with words.

I often have to chastise the children for pettiness. Unlike many fathers, I am present on the farm in Klosterzimmern all day and, as a teacher, I am also responsible for the children's education. My job is to support the mothers while their husbands are away working on building sites.

At lunchtime, I'm constantly getting looks of support from overburdened mums. Once I take a seat at a table where a mother with five children is sitting. As soon as one of her children makes a sound, her mother looks at me with a silent demand. She expects me to punish her children.

The pressure is enormous. At some point, I take one of her children down to the boiler room where the willow rods are, slap his bottom and take him back to the table. The boy stands in front of his mother, apologises for his disobedience, is given a quick squeeze by his mother and then told to sit down again.

In the meantime, hitting with the willow rod is as much a part of my everyday life as eating my meals. It is normality. For

me and for all the other brothers and sisters. The children are chastised in their private rooms and in public so-called discipline rooms. The two public rooms are located downstairs in the school building and in the boiler room of the large assembly room. In the past, such a discipline room also existed in the vaulted cellar of a residential building. If the children rebelled and did not take their punishments patiently, they often had to wait for a long time in the damp and musty smelling cellar between wooden crates of carrots and lettuce until the punishments were finally carried out. Sometimes a small traffic jam forms on the landing to the cellar because the room is not yet free. Anaesthetised and routine, the children listen to the cries of their predecessors and count the number of lashes their friends receive.

"Everyone must help to awaken the best in children", states a paper from the Twelve Tribes dated 19 August 1990. The means by which this can best be achieved are described in the "Raising Children" from 1997: "Discipline and control are God's natural solutions to rebellion. Chastisement is the expression of truer love and shows fatherhood and belonging to the family. Chastisement is not a verbal apology, not a discussion. The rebellious child needs to learn a lesson, and that is who is boss. With a small child, maximum control is necessary. A well-behaved child has developed inner control, which now replaces the outer control of the parents." In another chapter it says: "The administration of justice is not based on the question of why someone is guilty, but that someone is guilty. The child must learn that his reasons are not a justification for his wrong actions."

When my three children Asarah, Shimshon and Naarai were born in 2004, 2006 and 2008 and I was supposed to chastise them, my world collapsed. The repression crumbles. Suddenly new feelings start to germinate inside me. I realise how much easier it is for me to adopt an authoritarian attitude towards other people's children than towards my own. Until then, I imagined that the educational concept of the Twelve Tribes justified the means to a certain extent and that the blows within this system definitely had an effect.

make sense. But now I look into the hearts of my own three offspring. I sympathise with their little transgressions, partly because they are like me. This is the end of my routine, my hitherto rather abstract handling of the rod. I feel compassion. A conflict of conscience grows within me: on the one hand, I take sides with my sons and my daughter. On the other hand, I have to punish consistently according to the rules of the twelve tribes.

Bedtime is particularly nerve-wracking for my children and me. As children are, they want to stay awake even longer every night, another glass of water here, another bedtime story there. Sometimes it takes an hour and a half and countless strokes of the rod before the children give up and want to sleep. After a while, they are so used to being spanked that they hardly react to the strokes. They seem to accept the pain in return for some attention before bedtime. In any case, their discipline makes little difference to my children's behaviour. At night in bed, I am tormented by the question of why I can't put my children to bed in a nice way, with an understanding that gives them confidence and peace for the night. The children's tears won't let me go. What is right? What is wrong? But I don't have a solid reason for answering these questions.

Like children, adults are also subject to a huge apparatus of punishment. In the community, confession of sins followed by chastisement is a matter of course. Every member, whether man, woman or child, who does not abide by the rules and laws is subject to immediate sanctions. This is an automatism that is as unsurprising as the sunrise in the morning. Anyone who commits misbehaviour in the eyes of the elders has to justify themselves to the entire group at meetings, is marginalised and loses their position within the community. A responsible baker or teacher suddenly finds himself in the field, plucking heads of lettuce for weeks on end under the guidance of a much younger brother. Many of my brothers remove the elders from their positions and leave them to do the lowest jobs.

Complete tasks. The demoted submit. The sense of guilt instilled in us by the elders does a great job. Those affected vacillate between rebellion and remorse. Only when they have "reached the bottom" and honestly confess their sins and their motives, they experience forgiveness and restoration. Only then are they allowed to return to their former positions.

I often see children who drive their fathers and mothers to white heat with their stubborn behaviour. At the same time, parents are supposed to chastise their children according to the Twelve Tribes until they accept correction. As a result, the adults sometimes lash out uncontrollably at their offspring to the point of irascibility. My daughter Asarah is such a stubborn child.

According to the teachings of the community, she is "openly rebellious". Sometimes I chastise her for hours until her bottom is sore. When a child goes through a rebellious phase, the elders release their parents from all tasks - from work as well as from enjoyable activities. In this case, the parents have to focus exclusively on bringing up the child. When I realise that Asarah is getting me worked up and I'm about to lose control of myself, I now throw the rod away in a wide arc more and more often. I want to protect myself from myself. If you chastise your child, you quickly fall into a cycle of reaction and counter-reaction that is difficult to break out of. But anger is not a good teacher. I keep hearing the screams of other children from the next room. These are excesses that are often ignored in the twelve tribes. The parents argue that they want to be consistent in order to receive God's grace for their educational behaviour. It's a twisted concept: my brothers and sisters actually believe that they are proving their love to the children by spanking them.

The Twelve Tribes believe that the father is responsible for bringing up the children. However, as the woman is at home more than the father, she also carries out most of the chastisements. She is the executive. In everyday life, it works like this: if the father is reading the Bible and a child won't be quiet, he instructs his wife to chastise the child. She takes it, goes into the next room and fetches the

willow rod. My wife Shalomah is different. She expects me to do all the chastising of our children myself as soon as I get home. It's often too much for me because with three children, one of them is always making a fuss. Shalomah then looks over at me and tells me to do what needs to be done. Sometimes it's downright chaos - the children are wild, I'm annoyed and my wife is frustrated because her husband doesn't rule. In general, Shalomah is of the opinion that every time I come home, laissez-faire breaks out. She is much more consistent than I am and tries to compensate for my softness towards the children.

Strange feelings also creep over me when other members of the Twelve Tribes beat my children. I do accept "fair" punishments from "fair" people, because I myself carry out such measures hundreds of times on other pupils. I also find it "normal" for another teacher to disappear into the basement with one of my own children after they have misbehaved, hit them and then reappear in the classroom with them. However, I can hardly control myself when it comes to "unjust" beatings. In public, I pretend to swallow all of this, but inside I am at odds with many parenting methods. Restraint in particular, where I have to hold my children's arms for hours on end, triggers bitter feelings in me. I am acting against my nature. A feeling of deep shame and despair runs through me every time my child slumps down and his will weakens. At that moment, I sense that something is breaking inside the little person. My wife doesn't give me much room for manoeuvre on this subject. She demands that I carry out this method conscientiously and consistently. Even when we are spending a night with my sister in Berlin and I want to do without the restraint without community control, she demands that I do what is "necessary". If I refuse, she takes action herself.

"Your word is law. If your children do not obey your words, they break the law you have given them," the Twelve Tribes note in the paper "Control and Education"

"If a child does not obey the parents, then a higher authority must speak justice to support the parents. Parents have the authority, whether right or wrong. They alone decide, not the children. If a child ignores the first command, it will try to ignore the subsequent commands as well. A child must internalise that they must always follow their parents' instructions, without explanations. They do not need to know why their parents are asking them to do something. Controlling a child means exerting pressure. Some parents are afraid of losing their child's love if they try to control the child with strong force. If an infant wants to crawl away while its nappy is being changed, it should be hit lightly. The shocked look and tears in his eyes are the sign that the parents now have all the attention. Screaming and squirming are an expression of a strong-willed child who needs to be put in his place with greater intensity and frequency."

I am increasingly letting the reins slip when it comes to raising my own children. I remember how rebellious I was myself as a little boy. My parents didn't have it easy with me. My youth was also a permanent rebellion. My children obviously also have this spirit. At the same time, public pressure is growing. My brothers and sisters admonish me to be more aware of the chastisement of my children. At events, they ask me to punish my offspring because one of my children makes faces or does other nonsense. In any case, there is constant unrest at gatherings and parties. Time and again, a child disappears from the room with their father or mother to be reprimanded with the rod in the disciplinary cellar. It's a coming and going. Out, in, the child wipes its tears. Then the next one. Out. In. Once with the dad. Out. In. Sometimes with mum. Tears. My sister, who attends some Twelve Tribes celebrations, initially thinks that parents go to the toilet with their children. When I ask her

she is horrified. My mum, a state-certified nursery school teacher, is no different.

When mum visits me in Sus in the south of France during my first year with the Twelve Tribes, she decides one lunchtime to retire to the guest room on the second floor for a little nap. The kindergarten is located on the ground floor. The facility is reminiscent of similar institutions from the GDR era. The children have to go to the potty together and lie next to each other in their cots during the siesta. But the little ones don't want to sleep that day. So one of the single sisters gets them out from under the blankets one by one and gives each child a few strokes of the cane. The screaming is tremendous. My mum wakes up. That evening she confronts me. Spanking is the absolute last thing on her mind. A taboo. The children my mum looks after in the home have often been beaten up severely by their parents. She criticises them severely and I can't find a real argument for something that causes me problems myself.

In addition to tangible educational measures such as caning, house arrest and a ban on speaking, the Twelve Tribes also organise public events that have a massive impact on the psyche of children and young people. For example, when children between the ages of twelve and fourteen go into the river to be baptised and express their wickedness, their parents have achieved their predetermined goal. In the teachings of the Twelve Tribes, baptism is the spiritual anchor that is supposed to fix boys and girls firmly in their faith during their difficult adolescence. On this day, the offspring throw themselves into the water, wailing loudly. These are confessions that tear at my heart and whose hope leads to nothing more than God. Girls as young as twelve are so desperate about their spiritual state that their "only refuge" is in Yahshua. The negative view sits under the young people's skin. They feel endless guilt. In everyday life, these teenagers hardly radiate any joie de vivre.

Over many years, the community teaches them a stooped attitude. The gloom is learnt - for example at a gathering that is cynically called a victory celebration.

Every Saturday of the week, my brothers and sisters fill a chalice with wine and pass it around at the so-called victory celebration. All baptised members of the community stand in a large circle and pass the vessel to each other - from father to daughter, from mother to son, from husband to wife. From what age the children take part in this celebration is decided by their parents. As a rule, six-year-olds and sometimes three-year-olds also take part. Whoever holds the chalice in their hands has to explain why they are allowed to take a sip from it as the "winner of the week" - or why not.

"I can drink from the cup of victory today," explains a boy proudly, "because I received my dad's chastisement without grumbling." "I'm not allowed to drink from the cup of victory today," confesses a little girl quietly and haltingly, "because I wasn't honest today." Another girl presses on: "I'm not allowed to drink from the victory cup today because I took a biscuit from my mummy." "I didn't make it easy for my mum." - "I peed in my trousers." - "I didn't do my homework." - "I made myself a doll." The victory celebration is a kind of public trial in which the perpetrator has to confess all misdemeanours without legal representation. This has an almost shocking effect on the children, as they are pilloried in front of the whole community. Their confessions are about dishonesty, backtalk or mistaken beliefs. "Dad," a girl asks her father, "can I drink from the cup of victory?" - "No, not today. But I want you to say something!" - "What do you want me to say?" - "Were you honest? No, you weren't!" Finally, the child gets hold of the victory goblet and explains: "I want to say I wasn't honest with my mum!" Then the child passes the cup on.

"Never give your child what they ask for. Some parents are so naive and believe that children will receive their instructions with a joyful heart and a smile on their face," the community rebukes parents in "Control and Education". "The earlier and the harder the conflicts are, the easier it is to bring the child under control. The final battle is in a

War is usually the hardest. Children must be chastised at the dawn of their lives. If a child rebels, physical pain is the only means of pressure to make it accept parental control and instructions. There is a serious problem for parents when a strong-willed child can resist the rod without being broken. There can be various reasons for this: The rod is too narrow, the child is too old to be brought under control using a rod, or the child is in the process of imposing their own will on their parents. Corporal punishment is the use of the rod to cause pain. It is used to quell rebellion and make the child submit to authority."

When my wife Shalomah later received medical treatment for psychological problems, I realised the full extent of the guilt that had been implanted in her by the Twelve Tribes. The demon that haunts her mind at this time, this boundless dark fear within her, cannot be described. The forces within her are at war and her reactions are so violent that I sometimes feel creeped out by her. As a child of the Twelve Tribes, she has lost all touch with reality. The Twelve Tribes in Klosterzimmern once aspired to a community in which *joie de vivre* found its place. But now I realise that the brothers and sisters are stooping and slouching.

Instead of brothers and sisters freeing themselves through faith, I now experience them as slaves to their own doctrine and countless laws.

"A king without a rod has no authority. Wives receive their authority from the husband, the husband from the Messiah," it says in "Raising Children" of 6 June 1990. "The formula is: discipline + rod + instruction = education. Don't misunderstand compromise and grace."

One day, two grandparents visit their grandchildren in the community of Klosterzimmern. It's a sunny day and grandma and grandad decide to take the two boys and two girls to the river. On the riverbank, the grandfather has the idea of fishing. Of course, he doesn't have any real fishing tackle with him, so he at least wants to pretend that he has caught fish for the small group.

Fishing tackle in his luggage. Grandad steps up to a willow, looks for a suitable long branch and breaks it off the tree as an imaginary fishing rod. The children look at him in horror and freeze. A girl screams. Grandad no longer understands the world. For him it's just a game - for the children it's a cruel reality. Rods cause pain.

Background III: Is punishment necessary?

"For whom the Lord loves he chastises; he strikes everyone he loves ... Every chastisement does not bring joy for the moment, but pain; but later it gives peace and justice to those who have been treated in this way."

Hebrews 12:6,11

With the reform of German parenting law in 1998, the fundamental right of the child to a non-violent upbringing was enshrined in the German Civil Code (BGB). The judges summarised this principle more precisely two years later in Section 1631 Paragraph 2 of the BGB: "Children have a right to a non-violent upbringing. Physical punishments, emotional injuries, psychological impairment and other degrading measures are inadmissible." This means that even light slaps on the face and pats on the bum are relevant under criminal law. At the same time, Section 1685 of the German Civil Code stipulates that it can be assumed that a child's welfare is at risk if minors are denied social contact - particularly with a parent, grandparent or sibling. In sharp contrast to legislation, the belief that chastisement with the rod is covered by the Bible has become established in communities such as the "Twelve Tribes", but also in groups such as the "Jehovah's Witnesses" and some evangelical free churches. Dropouts from the organisation, which has around 160,000 members in Germany "Jehovah's Witnesses" report on the biblical obligation to physically chastise children. A few years ago it also became known that in evangelical circles, parenting guides are doing the rounds in which American authors give practical tips on the use of the rod as a parenting tool.

call it. The fundamentalists refer to relevant biblical passages and derive from them that beatings with the rod must be applied to any child who breaks God's law. Michael and Debi Pearl, the authors of the book "How to Train a Boy", write: "Choose your instrument according to the size of the child. For the under-one-year-old, a small branch 20 to 30 cm long and half an inch in diameter will do. Sometimes you have to look for alternatives. A 30 cm long ruler would be one such alternative.

For an older child, a belt or a larger branch is effective." A 2010 study by the Criminological Research Institute of Lower Saxony came to the conclusion that the risk of pupils being severely abused at least once as a child is highest if their parents place a "very important" value on religion and they are members of a free church. As many as one in five pupils in this group are affected by this, according to the survey of 45,000 ninth-graders between the ages of fourteen and sixteen. Psychologists also believe that systematic beatings have a lasting effect on children. Their will is broken so that they adopt the beliefs of their parents.

* * *

Excursus: The martyrdom of a pupil

Aaron (name changed at the boy's request) was born into the Twelve Tribes community in the early 1990s. He lives there with his family for a decade and a half until he decides to leave the community in Klosterzimmern. His teacher at the time was Robert Pleyer. Aaron has four sisters and brothers. His siblings and parents continue to live in the congregation despite Aaron's decision to leave. In a letter, he describes his childhood as a martyrdom:

It is difficult for me to write about this topic. I was born in the sect and experience everything there that you can only experience in child rearing and chastisement. The Twelve Tribes use the Bible to defend their child-rearing policies. This upbringing begins when the baby is born. A few weeks after the birth, the parents start with the so-called "restraint". This means that they wrap the baby very tightly in cloths and pin them in place with safety pins so that the child cannot free itself. It can no longer move at all. If it cries, it has to stay in this position even longer. The parents' aim is to break the child's will as early as possible. If this form of "restraint" does not take place, the parents hold the child's arms and legs until the kicking child no longer has the strength to move or cry. It gives up exhausted.

When the child is about two years old, the parents start to hit it with the rod, for example when it doesn't want to eat something or when it whines, as small children do. The parents interpret such situations as rebellion against themselves. The rods

are made of willow wood, about one to one and a half metres long and eight centimetres thick. They are stored in a container with oil so that they stay fresh and pliable for as long as possible and do not break when they are beaten. The container is accessible to all parents. They can always get new willow rods from there. The adults call the process of beating discipline. They beat the children on their bare buttocks, legs, arms, hands, back and feet. Up to the age of twelve, the adults also put the children over their knees. They are beaten until they stop screaming because they no longer have the strength.

This discipline comes from their own parents, teachers and any members of the Twelve Tribes who think a child is being rebellious or disrespectful or has made fun of something - sometimes it's just a laugh that the adults interpret as mockery. As a child, it's always a mystery to me

What is rebellious and what is not? There are writings in the community that are intended to educate parents about this, when a child rebels. These so-called "teachings" divide rebellion into active and passive. The community defines active rebellion as a child who talks back and displays bad behaviour. Passive rebellion includes disobedience

and carelessness, for example when a child forgets to do certain things despite instructions from their parents. In such cases, the parents, teachers or other supervisors assume that the child has deliberately not followed the instructions. In both passive and active rebellion, it is irrelevant what the child has to say in his or her defence. On the contrary, any justification merely serves as evidence that the child is rebellious.

Rebellion results in the child being placed over the knee of the adult and beaten. As children between the ages of four and twelve do not yet realise that they have to suppress their own will, they are much more likely to receive a spanking.

Beating than the youngsters. The beatings with the rod can last up to four hours. The Twelve Tribes teach that the

parents should not be surprised by the green and blue welts on their children's bodies. This is normal and exactly what God asks of parents. Parents who worry about their children, fear that they will be harmed or do not hit them hard enough are not filled with the Holy Spirit or God, it is said. Children are not allowed to have a mind of their own, never contradict or argue against anything. The adults always keep them under control by means of discipline. The children must always obey the first command. If a child receives an instruction - even if it is only in passing, so that it does not really realise it - it must obey immediately. Otherwise, it is automatically considered rebellious, disobedient or disrespectful because the child has supposedly ignored the person giving the order. If guests from outside the Twelve Tribes visit the farm in the monastery rooms or in the rooms, the adults hide the rods behind the radiator or under the bed. The community tries to maintain a peaceful public image, a façade of happy coexistence and perfect children.

I myself was beaten very often - sometimes more than ten times a day. Sometimes I was grounded for one or more days in a row. I sat in my room and had to think about my sins. At the end of the house arrest, I had to make a confession of my repentance and explain what I had done wrong. My longest house arrest lasted four weeks - in a row, mind you. Personally, I only ever admitted my alleged sins so that I could finally get out of the room and also so that I could eat something. According to the Twelve Tribes, a rebellious child does not deserve regular food either. Parents who believe that their children confess their sins for reasons other than hunger and a desire for freedom are very much mistaken. For many children, however, the brainwashing by their parents and other members of the sect has progressed so far that they believe what their parents are doing to them is normal.

After all, they don't know life outside the sect either.

In the community, members are taught that the whole world and all things in the world are from Satan. Rock 'n' roll music, for example, is from Satan. Children, they warn, who listen to this music in secret are filled with Satan and have developed a love for the world. This means that their parents have not disciplined and chastised or beaten them enough. If this so-called love of the world comes to light, the children concerned are immediately isolated and are no longer allowed to participate in the life of the community.

They are not allowed to

They don't get anything to eat most of the time, but sit in their rooms and think about their sins. From time to time, the "sinners" have to appear before a handful of elders in a meeting. While the elders eat biscuits and drink tea, the children and their parents have to unpack their sins in front of them for several hours. Often the elders then threaten to banish the child from the community. I once saw a fourteen-year-old girl who came out of such a meeting crying and completely distraught. She no longer knew what was going on. I felt so sorry for the girl and for a moment I wished that the elders who had done this to her would suffocate.

Every Friday morning, the elders taught the members the so-called teachings on child rearing. All residents had to attend, except guests and children and young people who had not yet been baptised. My parents often came home after these lessons and were even stricter with us than they already were. The elders had told them there that they were still not strict enough with us and didn't have their children under control. Or my parents tried out new parenting methods on us, which the elders had supposedly heard directly from God. I cursed the people who wrote these teachings.

I had to watch my parents get crazier and crazier. I was often beaten by my parents and very often put over their knee and shouted at. I was often beaten black and blue by the teachers and other people I had to work with.

It was also common to hit the children on the hands with the rods. In class, I had to hold out the back of my hand and was beaten sore on it. It was one of the greatest humiliations for me. If children cried or stood uneasily while being beaten, they received even more blows because this was seen as a sign that they had not received their discipline in full. On one occasion, I heard a couple in the next room beating their five-year-old daughter over a period of four hours. The child screamed like a banshee. My helplessness at having to listen to this, not being able to do anything and at the same time experiencing that the parents still seemed to find this treatment of their daughter amusing, made my heart ache.

My own parents once gave me to a so-called single sister for a fortnight because they obviously couldn't cope with me. I was seven years old and sometimes wet the bed during that time. When I spent the night with the tough governess, it happened to me again. She beat me for a whole hour for it. After that, I wet my bed every night for those two weeks and received a spanking from her every night until my bottom was bloody and sore.

I still have nightmares about the Twelve Tribes, and when I think about what I had to go through, it sends a shiver down my spine. I still haven't calmed down inside. I wish I had never had to experience that. The principle of education is that children are worth nothing and are not allowed to have any will of their own. Most children are so hardened inside from the age of twelve that they no longer feel when they are being beaten. That is simply sad.

I experienced that myself. When I was older, I often shouted at my parents when they tried to hit me or slammed the door in their faces. It was the only way out. I didn't want to do it, but I couldn't help it. That's why I was one of the few children who still hadn't been baptised at the age of fourteen. The members of the Twelve Tribes began to say things about me during this time that I had not been baptised.

and I often had to attend a kind of judgement. The elders told me that I had to confess my sins, otherwise I would have to leave the community. This is the tactic they use to control young people. As small children, we have already learnt that the way out of the community leads straight to hell. Since we know the truth, but would trample it underfoot if we left the community, they said, the second death awaits us outside the walls. We would burn in fire and brimstone and suffer eternal torment. We had to read that in countless Bible verses.

Today I ask myself who actually made the members of the Twelve Tribes the judge of the people. I am also of the opinion that if God is really as good as the people in the sect say he is, he will not condemn anyone for it because he does not want to take part in the hypocrisy in the sect. In the phone conversations I have with my mum from time to time, she agrees with me that a lot of the community is pure hypocrisy. She says that many of her brothers and sisters certainly don't live what they say they do. But, she says, I need to see God bring salvation into my life and not look to other people.

In view of the brutal educational methods and the constantly repeated tactical threats that I would have to leave the community if I didn't change my behaviour, I built an inner wall around myself. The more the brothers and sisters talked at me, the more I realised how false and corrupt the cult is and how the cult leaders manipulate the minds of the parents and all the members until they actually believe all the lies they tell people on the outside. The cult has built up a perfect façade. Yet so much behind the walls is not true. For example, I had heard at the time that the founder of the sect buys a new car every few months for 30000 to 60000 euros, which only he is allowed to drive, while some children in the community don't even have decent shoes or clothes to wear. It simply does not correspond to

I don't see the reality when they say we share everything and nobody has personal possessions. I don't understand why the parents don't see this or don't want to see it. I just can't get my head round the fact that the parents of the Twelve Tribes treat their "naughty" children so brutally and hand them over to other members so that they can support an inhumane upbringing.

Eighty days after the birth of the child, it is consecrated. The child receives a Hebrew name and is placed under the responsibility of all members of the community. In a sense, the parents place their children in the hands of all members, and the children must now receive everything as if it came directly from God. The parents thus renounce any objection if, for example, their child is beaten by the teacher for disobedience at school. Otherwise, the parents would be in breach of the oath they made when their child was consecrated. They would lose their connection to God and the Holy Spirit.

The sons are circumcised on the eighth day after birth. There are no purity regulations or sufficient disinfection. A father performs the circumcision on his sons himself. These fathers often have no knowledge of what they are doing. The risk of a child bleeding to death or suffering other damage is high. There is also a self-appointed doctor in Klosterzimmern, who handles narcotics without sufficient knowledge and without qualification.

The worst thing for me is the parenting methods. They really are beyond good and evil. After everything I had to go through there, I feel a great hatred inside me. When I tell my new friends today about the conditions in Klosterzimmern, they think that something like that can no longer exist in our society. But it does exist - in our midst! My greatest wish is that no child I don't have to go through what I went through. And that people wake up and stop tolerating this community.

The Twelve Tribes' school lessons are based on the community's conviction that the whole world is infested by Satan. is. But they don't want to teach their children what Satan is. When the school dispute with the authorities began to boil over in 2002, our teachers in the community started to teach us a few simple things about the nature of democracy, for example. They want to fool the authorities, who now visit from time to time to scrutinise our lessons, into believing that our learning content has anything in common with the state curriculum. However, these lessons only exist for a short time - to be more precise: we hear about them for an hour three days in a row and then the topic is off the table again. The result is that the children and young people can answer absolutely nothing to the simplest questions about politics, government and Germany.

The aim of the Twelve Tribes is to keep children and young people as stupid as possible. The more knowledge we children have about the outside world, the higher the risk, from the sect's point of view, that we will be able to cope well on our own outside the wall in the other world. This is why the Twelve Tribes have tried everything in their power to prevent their children from obtaining state-recognised school-leaving qualifications. In the meantime, under pressure from the authorities, certificates have been available for a few years, but I am sure that they have been retained by the parents at the Twelve Tribes and the young people are not given them. As long as I still live in the community, there are no school-leaving certificates at all.

When I left the Twelve Tribes community four years ago, I first had to study hard for school in order to get my secondary school leaving certificate. In the end, however, I passed the school-leaving examination for the Hauptschulabschluss in Baden-Württemberg. I had to learn the subjects of social studies and economics from scratch. I don't have any information on these subjects from my time in the sect. I only remember a few basic terms from back then, such as Bundestag, MP or minister.

known. I taught myself what these words meant, but not what tasks the respective institutions have. Even today, I still have major deficits on such topics.

Another big issue for me was that I was not allowed to choose my friends. According to the teachings of the Twelve Tribes, a child is not allowed to have friends of the same age if they are not baptised. And I wasn't yet baptised at the age of fourteen. As my best mate was a bad influence on me in the opinion of my parents and the other members of the community, I was forbidden to talk to him. They were of the opinion that unbaptised children could talk about bad things outside the walls and thus exert a bad influence on each other. They said it would not bear good fruit! I was then no longer allowed to walk around the courtyard on my own and later also not allowed to talk to other children and young people. That was one of the main reasons why I left the community.

have. I didn't want to be told who I could and couldn't talk to. There were two teenage sisters there who weren't allowed to speak to each other for a whole year as a punishment, for example. Yet they saw each other every day and even worked together in the kitchen. You have to imagine that! Children and young people don't have a free second in the community; they have no opportunity, to do what they want to do. They are constantly supervised by their own parents or other members of the Twelve Tribes. Under no circumstances are they allowed to have contact with children and young people outside the sect, but they also have no relationships with children and young people from other Twelve Tribes communities. The sect believes that boys and girls up to the age of twenty to twenty-five should only be under the influence of adults. Only the parents could give their children what they need at this age. I have also heard that the

The oldest members of the community are said to have followed girls. In such cases, the adults concerned are then sent to another community.

The clothes that the young people and children wear are sometimes obtained from the Red Cross. They must not have a fashionable look and must not have any prints or labelling. If a shirt has a small inscription on it, this is cut out or painted over. This is to prevent children with such lettering on their clothing from receiving recognition from other children. The children should only receive recognition from their parents. I find this absolutely stupid, but these are the rules of the sect, with which they want to prevent the children from developing their own sense of worth. Children are not allowed to talk to each other about material things, but only about so-called spiritual things - about Yahshua, salvation and their sins. They are not allowed to choose what they want to eat, and when my grandparents brought toys and other worldly things, they were immediately thrown in the rubbish. But if my grandma and grandpa brought a bar of chocolate, which is forbidden in the community, my parents put it in the rubbish bin.

the kitchen cupboard and claimed it was for guests. Sometimes one of the elders would come round and eat the chocolate. We children were fed a pretty unhealthy diet. When I combed my hair in the morning, I always had a whole tuft of hair in the comb.

This hasn't happened since I left the Twelve Tribes. I think that shows that the diet in the community is very unbalanced.

Once, when my grandparents were visiting Klosterzimmern, I told them that I wanted to leave the community with them. By chance, my father overheard this, put me over his knee and beat me up for saying that. The elders say that these beatings are disciplinary measures to purify the children. Such a process is supposed to cleanse the children's hearts of all the evil and sins they have indulged in, so that they have a clear conscience again. It is a curious way of thinking, on the one hand beating the children for wishing to leave the community and, on the other hand, claiming that all the children want to live there voluntarily - especially since the beating is the

break the children's own will and they have never seen the outside world.

When I left the Twelve Tribes together with my father, I completed an apprenticeship as a farmer after passing my secondary school exams. It wasn't possible to go back to school because I couldn't afford the three years without money. Anyone who leaves the Twelve Tribes receives no financial support from the community. The elders are of the opinion that the brothers and sisters must either submit to the community or see to it that they don't end up in the gutter and die there. In the beginning I struggled in

very difficult in the unfamiliar surroundings. Due to my upbringing in the Twelve Tribes, I am a very withdrawn type. I find it difficult to socialise with other people. Even today

I still have to learn how to build relationships with strangers. In my first year, I hardly got on at school and with my teenage classmates. Later, I had problems with the manager of my teaching company in the Black Forest. The man quickly became loud. He was under constant stress. I took his displeasure on myself and adopted a defensive stance.

Eventually, I moved to another company. At the time, I lived with my father in a fairly remote flat. He went to work during the week and travelled to Klosterzimmern every weekend. I really liked these weekends alone in the flat, as I just wanted to forget anyway. I didn't have any contact with other young people during this time - neither those from the Twelve Tribes nor those from my new world. My next career goal is to retrain as an IT specialist in the field of application development. This is a very demanding training programme - especially as I have very little prior knowledge. I never got the chance to work on this in the Twelve Tribes.

Today I am often depressed, sometimes I even have suicidal thoughts. I can't sleep at night because of all the nightmares. But the longer I am away from the Twelve Tribes, the more I realise how wrong I am.

everything is going well there. When I think that my siblings still live in Klosterzimmern, it seems like I'm living in a horror film. I haven't had any contact with them for years now. The community believes that I could influence my siblings with worldly things and contaminate them. I hope that one day my siblings will make the step out of the sect and that things will get better and better for me too. I want to do my part to ensure that the Twelve Tribes are banned in Klosterzimmern, but also worldwide. I would like to educate people about what really goes on behind the walls. After everything I went through in the sect and then out here, I often question the meaning of life. My father went back to Klosterzimmern at the time. He couldn't stand life out here. But I will never go back to the Twelve Tribes - I'd rather die.

Everyone controls everyone

In the summer of 2005, the elders of Klosterzimmern decide that a group of twenty brothers and sisters should travel to a wedding in Sus in the south of France. As I have a class 2 driving licence, they appoint me as their driver. This is of course a great privilege: getting out of the daily routine, meeting old friends from Sus, simply being on the road. Officially, only nine people are allowed on the twelve-metre-long coach. I'm worried that I'll lose my driving licence if the police check me with twenty people in the vehicle. We also have no insurance cover. When I explain my concerns to the elder Werner Klinger, he looks deep into my eyes and says: "The driving licence doesn't belong to you, it belongs to the elders. Just like you and your life. If you are not prepared to serve and trust what we say, you are useless to us. True disciples have no opinion, they simply support." If the Council of Elders takes the risk of a disciple losing their driving licence, then this is the will of the community and not of the individual. "There is no individual ownership," warns the elder. "If you're citing personal reasons, you don't know what serving means - then you're in the wrong place. You don't need to worry any more, we'll find another driver." I'm disappointed and annoyed at the same time. Maybe I really was too selfish, I mused, maybe I put the possession of a driving licence above the joy that comes from obedience. However, my resignation doesn't last long. When the replacement driver falls ill a few days later shortly before departure, I apologise to the council of elders for my selfishness and am allowed behind the wheel after all. My gesture of humility is already recognised by the elders

organisational need: The number of brothers and sisters with a driving licence is manageable.

We disciples of the Twelve Tribes have no rights. We have no right to a wife and no right to children. If the elders come to the conclusion that I am a bad father, they will take my children away from me and place them in another family. The only certainty we members of the Twelve Tribes can rely on is the duty to confess sins and receive punishment. Our objections are futile because the elders see themselves as proclaimers of divine doctrine. Anyone who contradicts them has not understood the divine word: I contradict God when I contradict the elders. The council of elders always wants me to believe that they only want the best for me with their decisions and that it is only up to me to comply with their decisions in order to lead a life pleasing to God. It is perfidious. On the one hand, the elders judge people and their actions on the basis of their own personal standards. On the other hand, however, they invoke the higher power in all decisions and are thus relieved of their own responsibility and liability as decision-makers. On the contrary: the consequences of their decisions are borne by the individual disciple.

If we had actually been stopped on the way to Sus and the police had taken away my driving licence in view of the dozen and a half passengers, I would have been held responsible for this misdeed as the driver by the elders.

At the very next meeting, the elders would have dissected my life down to the smallest detail in order to crystallise my personal weakness, which would inevitably have led to the withdrawal of my driving licence. The Twelve Tribes believe that God's grace is always inherent in a unanimous decision by the Council of Elders. For this reason, the brothers and sisters must trust the decision of the council without contradiction - regardless of how wrong it appears to be. If a mishap happens to a person, they themselves are responsible for it because they have not received God. In other words: If a non-swimmer, at the behest of the

When a member of the Council of Elders enters the water and drowns, it is not because he cannot swim, but because he committed a sin in his previous life. Drowning is God's punishment. All that remains to be said is that the Council of Elders always holds discussions until every decision is unanimous.

God's Son Yahshua rules the world from heaven. He is the head and leader of the Twelve Tribes and is untouchable. Yahshua's only true apostle is Elbert Eugene Spriggs, the founder of the Twelve Tribes. Spriggs, who calls himself Yoneq, receives his revelation directly from the Son of God, he claims. Yoneq's word is law. Anyone who contradicts him contradicts God. Although Yoneq declares that he wants to set up a system in which several apostles are allowed to proclaim God's word alongside him, nothing has happened yet. Yoneq has not yet anointed an elder who would be equal to him. The founding father likes to compare his work to a bunch of grapes - each bunch is independent, but at the same time connected to the whole. The regions are grouped together in a tribe of the Twelve Tribes, the clans in the regions, the communities in the clans and the individual households in the communities. In principle, each branch is sovereign and manages its own affairs. In reality, however, it is part of a control network with the other branches, which in turn are supervised from the top down - with Yoneq at the top. The vertical and horizontal monitoring structure also means that, under the leadership of the founding father, every member and all the money generated can be moved between the branches or to the head office in the USA.

In this close-meshed network with an almost military character, the congregations and each individual member organise themselves out of fear or, if you like, out of love for Yahshua "voluntarily" to the overall organisation. The spiritual direction of the movement is set by the elders from the centre in so-called international meetings. Each congregation must send an emissary to these one- to two-week meetings, who is responsible for the new

revelations of the founding father Yoneq to the local community. The members of the congregation implement these instructions without ifs and buts. Disciples who do not follow Yoneq's instructions are marginalised or excluded from the congregation. Even long-serving elders can lose their position if they do not follow Yoneq's teachings to the letter in the eyes of other elders. There is a climate of chronic mistrust.

The Twelve Tribes denomination has 2,500 members worldwide, including around 1,500 children. Elderly people are rare in the sect. While the Americans bury their elderly in a plot of land near the US headquarters, the German branch does not (yet) have to deal with such issues. For one thing, the few old disciples who have grown up with the Twelve Tribes are no more than sixty years old, and for another, only a few people feel called to move in with the community in their old age. Although the Council of Elders allows members to bring their parents into the community at an advanced age, the elderly prefer to stay in their retirement homes, where there is cake, coffee and television. When young brothers and sisters die in the community, the German Council of Elders returns their bodies to their worldly families. The original Christians are happy that they don't have to deal with the legal process.

Two-thirds of all Disciples of the Twelve Tribes live in the United States. The American tribe owns a dozen and a half communities and farms in Massachusetts, New York, Vermont, Colorado, Florida, Missouri, California and Tennessee.

There are also ten restaurants called "Yellow Deli", which primarily serve as missionary places. The two Bavarian communities in Wörnitz and Klosterzimmern with a total of around 150 residents belong to the European tribe. There are a further five official communities in Spain (100 people), England (30), France (130) and the Czech Republic (under construction). Overseas, the Twelve Tribes have also founded communities in Canada, Brazil, Argentina and Australia, where they have around ten members.

communities with just as many cafés and restaurants. While the Americans seem to be characterised by the historical urge to settle and are rapidly establishing new branches, the Germans are trying to consolidate their headquarters in Klosterzimmern. German disciples are convinced that greater control over the members can be exercised if the tribe is less fragmented. At the same time, local elders follow the laws of the Twelve Tribes to the letter and implement the rules strictly and rigorously.

The council of elders of a congregation consists of between seven and twelve men. The hard core of the council consists of five to eight brothers. The remaining members are loose cannons, whom the council removes from time to time if they do not prove themselves in the spirit of Yahshua. Those men who joined the Twelve Tribes in the 1980s and are instrumental in setting up branches in Sus in France, Oberbronnen in southern Germany and Pennigbüttel in northern Germany are predestined for ongoing leadership roles as elders. They are men like Arel and Abiram, who are officially regarded as particularly spiritual, but in fact simply enjoy the greatest trust of founding father Yoneq.

Wherever Yoneq sends his tried and tested forces, they quickly take over the leadership of the Council of Elders. They form the nucleus, the bow that breaks through and paves the way for the first generation to be born in the Twelve Tribes.

While Yoneq once declared that the first generation would experience the coming of God, the founding father soon realises that the Day of Days is at least three human generations away. The Twelve Tribes do not grow as rapidly as planned, so Yoneq establishes a generational mindset that imposes restrictions on individuals. From then on, women and men of different generations are no longer allowed to intermarry, but this revelation soon fails to materialise: the number of women and men does not add up, and the influx of new disciples is too small overall for a stable second generation to emerge. Faced with this dilemma, the older members of the first generation and the

third-generation boys. "I already suspected this," admits Yoneq, "but I didn't want to demotivate you." At the same time, the founding father warns against inbreeding. "Be careful, write down exactly who is marrying whom," he implores my mother-in-law Baruchah.

"Inbreeding is a great sin in the Bible." Three of my wife Shalomah's siblings are married to children of other elders. The offspring of these couples are forbidden to have children together. In view of this plight, as Shalomah's husband I am a welcome foreign blood.

In addition to worldwide and European gatherings at which Yoneq's promises are proclaimed, the founding father sends ambassadors from the centre to the individual congregations. There are five or six men who enjoy his special trust and check the outposts for the right spirit. If heating is skimped on in the monastery rooms, there is a reprimand, because "the Holy Spirit can only live in a warm house", just as when the commandments to eat with chopsticks or not to play football are broken. "Brothers and sisters," the ambassadors raise their voices, "what is going on here? You are no longer God's people. You are losing tradition." Even the powerful elders of the church have to submit to these scouts, as they speak with the voice of God and come directly from Yoneq. The messengers are legitimised by the highest authority. Congregations that refuse to receive them are excluded from the Twelve Tribes. Yoneq once dreamed of expanding the system of ambassadors to include a school of prophets, in which a handful of his closest confidants with special expertise - for example in agriculture, economics and technology - would assist him like ministers in a cabinet.

However, this work also remains unfinished.

In the Klosterzimmern community, the elders divide up the various areas of expertise. While the council of elders makes the decisions on a spiritual basis, the respective experts have to implement the decisions in agriculture and in school, in the household or in business. These

strategy ensures that the divine spirit is guaranteed despite the earthly pressures - such as having to produce enough kilograms of carrots for the brothers and sisters.

However, mental control sometimes leads to decisions that go against common sense. As a baker, I am not allowed to prepare leaven on the Saturday Sabbath, but have to wait until sundown to bake bread for the Sunday market that night. Also on a Sabbath, it rains on a fellow brother's hay. "Trust the Father", the elders implored him and refused to let him work on Saturday. It promptly rained cats and dogs on the Sabbath. The elders are consistent in their spiritual interpretation, no matter how great the human madness, the lack of sleep or the labour input of the individual. If something goes wrong, it is God's judgement. "Well, man makes his plans and the Lord directs our steps. Our father wanted to show you something," we are told. Accidents and misfortunes serve the members of the Twelve Tribes as an indication of God's will.

A disciple is driving with his wife. When he fails to turn off quickly to look at something on the side of the road, a lorry crashes into the back of his car. His wife suffers a broken pelvis. In the elders' meeting, the driver has to face probing questions. "Why is God punishing you? What sin is on you?" The lesson follows: a disciple must stay straight on God's path. He must look neither to the left nor to the right. The fact that the brother has turned off to look at something that lies outside his mission is seen as criminal independence and sin, which God has long wanted to show him. But since God can never take hold of him, he has resorted to harsher means.

There are two households in Klosterzimmern. Each household is headed by a male head of household, who in turn reports to an elder. The head is responsible for managing the building and people. According to the instructions of the elders, he decides which resident of the house will go to a building site and which will wash up in the kitchen. Subordinate to him is a female head of household who organises the cooking and washing. Mostly

these two managers are the longest-serving couple in the house. The kitchen is run by the head chef. Together, the leading women decide who cooks what on festive days or who picks how many strawberries in the garden. There is a strict meal plan and female teams who do the cooking.

With so many committees, the senior brothers have long since stopped working with their own hands. In the meantime, I also sit in these assemblies as a responsible person. We feel like shepherds, talk a lot about the spiritual qualities and problems of the individual members and agree on sanctions against those brothers and sisters who do not want to obey. Again and again I sense the arrogance of this leadership. The elders consider themselves superior to those who do the work outside while they sit in the warmth inside and make the decisions. Their talkativeness is annoying. I sense their complacency, which stems from their spiritual superiority and which gives rise to a kind of pity for those who are spiritually poorer. Their hour-long conversations remind me of the Pharisees' eternal discussions about the law in ancient Israel - even if it's just about whether butter can be served with boiled corn on the cob, they go on and on.

When I express my displeasure about the elders to my wife Shalomah and declare: "Your father is also a cult leader!", I have to answer for my words to the council shortly afterwards. "Is it true that you told your wife that her father is a cult leader?" they interrogate me. "I'm really sorry, of course he's not a cult leader," I reply ironically. "But when I was the brother in charge of the household, I was a cult leader."

Their mouths are open in the face of this criticism of the system. In fact, I don't know any elder who hasn't acted as a cult leader after a certain period of time. Every one of them is proud to be a chosen one and to be allowed to direct the others in God's name. The horses are also running away with me. At the time, as head of the household, I no longer want to see my wife Shalomah in the run-down

I have to work in the kitchen. I order my overtired brothers to renovate the kitchen every evening after their work on the building sites. I grind them until the work is done. The men's objections are futile - all complaints end with me. What the head of the household decides together with the council of elders is a divine mandate. "If you have a problem with your head of household," is the irrefutable law, "you have a problem with God." A superior is to be followed unconditionally, even if their decision is clearly wrong. The mere thought that something could be wrong is a sinful earthly view. An elder once explained to me: "If God wants you to dig a hole and then fill it up again, then that's what you do. The important thing is that you are submissive and our Father can use you as he wants."

The dregs of the Twelve Tribes are their children. They are at the bottom of the hierarchy. Their feelings, opinions and wishes are suppressed by the adults and their will is broken. The children in the circle of the original Christians have no claim to physical and spiritual integrity. Only animals are lower than children. They are used exclusively as farm animals. Even cats are only on the farm to chase mice and are not allowed to be stroked. Pets are simply not allowed. Pigs and dogs are considered unclean and are also forbidden. It is written about the latter in the Bible that they, like homosexuals, must live outside the city.

Children belong to God. God gives their parents the task of raising them. The parents merely act as carers for their offspring. The council of elders is responsible for the godly upbringing of their children. As long as the parents follow the rules of the Twelve Tribes, the offspring belong to them. If the father and mother do a poor job from the community's point of view, the elders use their power. In the event of blatant misbehaviour on the part of the children, they may banish the boys and girls from the community. After all, the parents in the consecration gave their girls their 81st and the boys on their 41st day of life to the community. Expression of this greatest possible power of the adults

over their children symbolises the circumcision of the sons, which the father performs on the seventh day after the birth of his boy.

I watch fifteen of these procedures. Each time, the children scream their heads off. There is no anaesthetic. The act is barbaric. Cutting off the flesh seals the boy's covenant with Abraham and is an obligation to raise the child in the spirit of the progenitor. The fathers fix the son's foreskin with a clamp and cut along it. Cautious fathers who do not dare to make a strong cut often have to use the carpet knife a few times. Sometimes the result is bloody carnage. When circumcising my son Shimshon, I accidentally cut his leg. The knife is extremely sharp and the overseer, chosen by the elders as a medical expert, forgets to put a blanket over Shimshon's legs. I make the cut in one fluid movement - and it's already happened. The boy is screaming. The following night we tie his legs to the baby seat with a cloth so that he doesn't tear the wound open with his stomping. My wife and I keep watch. Another child from France almost bled to death after this procedure. Unnoticed, blood dripped from the boy's scar at night.

Before I can marry Shalomah, I also have to undergo a circumcision. With weak knees, I wait in my room for the people the council of elders will assign to me for this act. When the door opens, I am horrified.

My father-in-law of all people appears in the room - a knife in one hand, a fork carved from buxus tree in the other, with which the adult man's foreskin is fixed. The elder who has accompanied the disciple for years as a shepherd is actually supposed to make the cut. In my case, the council of elders decides to raise the bar for my godliness a little higher. Without anaesthetic, I stand naked in front of my father-in-law. Thoughts of escape run through my head. Two brothers hold me down, then a third pulls my foreskin forwards with his fingers and clamps it in the fork.

Ephraim cuts. The pain is short and intense. It literally explodes inside me and fills me completely for the moment. My legs buckle beneath me. The men grip me tighter. The foreskin is cut below the glans, the flesh wound looks brutal. Months later, on my wedding night, the scar is still sensitive. When I am allowed to go out to dinner together for the first time a week later, the scar bursts open and warm blood runs down my thighs. At night, I put an upturned banana box on my abdomen and carefully lay the duvet over it, because even the slightest pressure robs me of sleep.

Circumcision manifests the total reception of the individual. This surrender is the expression of the greatest power that a group can exert on the individual. The maximum self-sacrifice of my ego is one of the most difficult moments of my life. It is the terror of the many over the one. An elder once explained to a brother who refused to be circumcised: "You know that dirt collects under your foreskin, that is the corruption of man. You're not serious about sticking your dirty thing inside your wife, are you?" I still can't come to terms with the mutilation of my sex and that of my sons. Back then, I didn't have time to think about it.

Self-reflection is not provided for in the Twelve Tribes system. If the command structures leave me no room for individual decisions, there is not even a niche in the strictly structured daily routine of the community to ponder about myself. In the community, fathoming one's own self is considered a sin. Circling around oneself, it is said, is a hindrance in the pursuit of higher things. After all, people are supposed to overcome their personal needs and not fathom them. The ego has no place in the daily rhythm of the Twelve Tribes. It is to be denied.

The day begins with a wake-up call. At 6 a.m., a resident of our house walks through the corridors and sings. I immediately jump out of bed to be with God for a moment.

to have a chat. Then I help the children get dressed and go to the toilet in the morning. The morning service starts in an hour - and the whole family has to be present.

The entire congregation gathers twice a day for Minchah. The communal prayer usually takes place at 7 a.m. and 7 p.m., in exceptional cases an hour earlier or later. On the Saturday Sabbath, for example, the twelve-hour cycle shifts to 8 am and 8 pm. When the shofar sounds, a gazelle horn blown by a disciple downstairs in front of the house, brothers and sisters gather in the common room and the so-called "shalom" warm-up phase begins.

It is always the same ritual, regardless of whether we gather in the morning or evening for prayer. We greet each other and have spiritual small talk. Many brothers and sisters have read the Bible or read teachings by founding father Yoneq before the meeting and have prepared themselves inwardly for the gathering. When the murmuring in the room dies down, the guitarist picks up his instrument and plays a song of praise. A circle immediately forms, with the elders and young people jostling and dancing in the centre.

After the dance, each member of the group can share what drives them spiritually. Some talk about an encouraging experience. Others read something from the Bible or talk about what they have taken away from one of the teachings. Sometimes there is silence and an elder asks the group: "Doesn't our father have anything to say today? Are we not prepared? Who is holding back? I'm sure our father wants to speak." The pressure stimulus loosens the tongue. I myself realise that it does me good when I can build up my brothers and sisters with my speeches. It's nice to process my feelings and impressions together with the group. I then feel that God needs me as an instrument. Sometimes an elder approaches me after the meeting and praises me: "You should speak more often. Feel free; what you say is good." When the elders realise that a member can reach others with his sentences and can convey Yoneq's revelations in such a way that others understand them better, they urge him to take the lead. It makes me happy every time a brother or

One sister explains: "Wow, that's really encouraged me. That's exactly what I see in myself." Other members of the congregation have other motives. They want to prove to their fellow congregation members how far their spirituality has progressed in comparison to that of other disciples and engage in a divine-spiritual performance show. Take Obadiyah, for example, who witnessed the beginnings of the community in the USA and sees himself as Yoneq's closest advisor. The overzealous Swabian gives long monologues with memorised Bible verses.

After the speeches, all those present raise their hands in the air as a sign of purity and unity and pray together. These spontaneous prayers, which everyone is allowed to say, usually relate to general topics. "Thank you Father for taking care of us! Please protect the brothers of the solar teams on the rooftops." - "Abba, give us good weather for the harvest," prays a young gardener.

Sometimes the prayers take so long that my aching arms sink down. A prompt admonition follows. A booming "Amen!" ends the meeting.

The disciples whose paths cross at the Twelve Tribes once hired themselves out as simple labourers or skilled craftsmen, were farmers, bakers, criminals or drug addicts. Among them are academics and university dropouts, the poor, the rich, single mothers and single fathers, failed old people and young people searching for meaning. There are also alcoholics and dropouts who are looking for an alternative to the entrenched social model. What these people have in common are dramatic crises. They are people who have lost the why of life, at least for a short time. They look at piles of broken pieces, broken families, failed marriages and a sad existence. In the maelstrom of their psychological state of emergency, they look for an anchor - simple, fundamental truths. Many of them are religious and do not feel represented by the Protestant and Catholic churches. They are people who want to be led and who are used to recognising authority. They are people in need who have experienced a lot of suffering in their lives and who, in the

moment of greatest pain: "God, if you get me out of here, I will dedicate my life to you." In this life situation, they are receptive to the slogan of the Twelve Tribes. The disciples of Yahshua usually approach these lost people on the fringes of an alternative festival and hand them relevant information brochures. The tenor of the material is: "Get out of the Christian system! Christianity is the whore of Babylon! The Twelve Tribes are the true bride!"

Men and women who are firmly established in life rarely knock on the door of the Twelve Tribes. The worldwide community is primarily a place of refuge for people who feel empty at a certain stage in their lives and/or have incurred financial or moral debt. These include religious people who do not see their attitude realised in the institution of the church, but also two American Vietnam soldiers, for example. After the two military men survived war missions in the 1970s, they decided to dedicate their lives to God from then on and joined the Twelve Tribes. In the German offshoot, life stories like those of Rainer Holt and Petra Maßen (names changed) are more common.

Rainer Holt is in his mid-forties and one of the masterminds in the community of Klosterzimmern. He graduates from high school in a small Westphalian town as the best student in his year. He then hitchhikes through America and, unable to find a place to stay, spends the night with the Twelve Tribes in Vermont. He writes to his parents: "I have found the answer to all my questions." Three months later, Rainer Holt, who now goes by the Hebrew name Jeheskel ("God will strengthen"), returns home from the USA to do community service. His parents hope that he will go on to study medicine. But the son does not want to go back to his old life and moves overseas to the Twelve Tribes in Boston. In the community there, he met Gilah ("joy"), the two married and fathered six children. Rainer Holt is now an elder in Klosterzimmern. He would have gone far in any society. After all, he trained as a medical first aider in the USA, which, from the point of view of the

The monastery's dentists are able to perform minor operations on them. To save on medical costs, Holt is also trained by a dentist friend to become a dentist in just a few weeks. He takes care of the community members' teeth in the dentist's surgery, which is hidden away at the back of the Klosterzimmern estate. He is assisted by a young assistant. The girl is happy not to have to work in the kitchen and even hands out little cards to the patients with the dates for their next check-up. Rainer Holt comes from a Catholic family and was an altar boy as a child.

He considers the institution of the church with its hierarchies and rules to be misguided. "We don't want to love in word and tongue, but in deed and truth," he explains. When he admits to chastising his children when questioned by the local youth welfare office, he soon finds himself in the Czech Republic, where the community is setting up a new branch. The spontaneous transfer is probably intended to prevent his seven children from being taken away by the youth welfare office.

Petra Maßen is responsible for children's education in the municipality of Klosterzimmern. Her knowledge in this area is profound. In the former GDR, the woman in her mid-fifties worked as a crèche teacher and taught two-year-olds the values of the state. The content is different now, but the methods don't seem dissimilar. "What the children learn out there at school," she says, "you can't clean it all up again." The children belong to the Twelve Tribes because "God gave the children to the families, not to the state". In addition to her work as a teacher, the council assigns her children who cause problems for their parents. Although her military drill is respected and recognised by the children, her mercilessly hard hand also leaves deep scars and fears in them. I clash with her time and again when, as the teacher in charge, I criticise her uncompromising manner. Unfortunately, Petra enjoys the absolute trust of the elders. She brings order to families when it comes to enforcing the code of behaviour in the community.

* * *

At the centre of the complex in Klosterzimmern is a church with an iron weather vane on the tower. The members of the Twelve Tribes have removed all Christian symbols from the church - crosses, statues of the Virgin Mary and depictions of Jesus. They consider Christianity to be a false belief that does not bring true healing. The brothers and sisters are convinced that no disciple of Yahshua is allowed to enter church buildings where services are held. Satan lives there, they say. If a cross catches the eye of the disciples in the world outside the community, they must lower their gaze to the ground. For them, Christian symbols are the expression of a false understanding of God.

In addition to praying together in the morning and evening, there are many other meetings throughout the week. Every Friday, all parents meet for an educational meeting before breakfast. The adults receive instructions from the elders on how to deal with their children. On Monday mornings, the so-called cook meeting takes place, at which the five women in charge discuss the needs of the house and kitchen. Tuesday is the social meeting. The women and men in charge discuss solutions together, for example with regard to preparations for a wedding. Every Wednesday, a man presents the ideas from the social meeting to the elders' meeting. At the meeting, which lasts from morning until late evening on this day, the elders decide on all proposals submitted. Decisions must be made unanimously.

In view of the large number of committees where attendance is mandatory, the burden on the individual is enormous. Added to this is the compulsion to be united, which restricts the individual in deed and word. Anyone who steps out of line is penalised.

If two brothers are at odds with each other, there are two possibilities. Either the two members have settled their dispute by sundown, i.e. before the upcoming joint prayer, in which case there are no consequences. Or

Their disagreement becomes official at the meeting when it says: "Brothers and sisters, these two disciples cannot raise their hands. They have no unity!" Generally speaking, the men or women higher up in the hierarchy have the right on their side in such conflicts, because superiors must be obeyed at all times. Their opponent must take off the signs of unity with the group: a woman the headscarf, a man the white tiara. From then on, those who refuse to obey orders are "cut off" from the community and are no longer allowed to stand in the circle of their brothers and sisters in the two meetings one day or raise their hands in prayer. The council of elders meets immediately after the church meeting.

If a delinquent refuses to repent publicly or rebels against the elders' decision, the congregation pushes him to the sidelines. By decision of the elders, he spends days, sometimes even weeks, in isolation. Unbelievers are not allowed to have any joy because they are not in good relationship with God. They are forbidden to dance with their wives and children and to actively participate in festivals and gatherings. Within the group the "cut off" loses their position and reputation. The other members are only allowed to talk to such a person if the conversations are of an instructive nature and are suitable for leading the apostate back to God's path. I myself repeatedly lose my position after controversies with my brothers and sisters and have to give up my position as head baker as well as other positions. An apostate should use the time-out to reflect on his sins.

The longer the exclusion from the community lasts, the more the lepers feel the reprisals. Soon they no longer feel connected to God because they are not allowed to take part in the communal prayers or the spiritually important breaking of bread on the Sabbath. The phase in which they are separated from God grows and grows - and with it the self-doubt blossoms. "Why can't I hear God? What is wrong with

me?" the outcasts ask themselves. They wrestle with themselves. It can happen to anyone.

A young brother secretly rides his bike to the neighbouring church and buys himself a soft drink. Another disciple discovers him by chance and tells an elder about the "offence". The lemonade drinker is "cut off". Amittai, another brother who joins the congregation shortly before, cannot stop smoking. He lights a cigarette behind a wall projection. The hiding game is discovered. The smoker is "cut off". An elder is asked to give up his elevated position, which authorises him to carry out tasks such as official business for the twelve tribes. When his colleagues in the Council of Elders require him to work as a teacher, he struggles for months with his demotion. The unrepentant man is "cut off".

The council of elders decides on sanctions for any form of dissent. While these punishments for young people consist of practical prohibitions such as house arrest, for adults they are aimed at the core of their personality. Men and women have to undergo hours of intense interrogation with up to seven or more elders. On such occasions, the council repeatedly turns my soul inside out. The elders pick apart my motives for a supposed offence down to the smallest detail. I hate these inquisitions. I am always relieved when, after a long back and forth, my humility is accepted by the elders and a phase of reconciliation occurs. The hardening in me dissolves, I actually repent in my heart at that moment and am relieved. The time of my leprosy is over. I am allowed to return to the circle of brothers and sisters.

On the way back from a mission, we get stuck in a traffic jam on the motorway. Levi asks if he can stand on the crash barrier for a moment. He has to pee. I open the car door and hear the squeal of tyres. My brother is hit by a car driving past the traffic jam on the hard shoulder. Levi hits the bonnet and is thrown into the grass. The wrong-way driver is a surgeon. He examines Levi and apart from a minor shock

nothing serious. He promises to cover the costs if any damage is discovered afterwards. I take his personal details and am glad that nothing more has happened; then we resume our journey. Back home, word of the story spreads quickly and I'm called before the council of elders. I have to justify the fact that I dealt with the situation on my own and didn't consult an elder on the phone. "You're acting with this eternal independence again," they reprimand me. "We are very worried that you always want to handle everything on your own. If the Holy Spirit was filling you, you would have come to us for advice."

When my wife Shalomah falls ill with her soul, my inner break with the elders is final. I suddenly recognise their stubborn fanaticism. In all seriousness, the council members see the cause of her mental illness in my soul.

"Your wife is not ill," the elders explain to me. "You have an evil spirit and it is causing your wife to have mental disorders." Their conclusion: "Psychosis is not an illness, it's your mental problem." This makes me realise that many of the elders have long since drifted into unattainable spheres. They no longer listen, they have switched off their own feelings. Time has brought these men into line. The staff in the Council of Elders are on the same spiritual wavelength. People like me are seen as ricochets. The elders favour brothers and sisters who doubt themselves and can accept themselves in the meetings without contradiction. The number of followers is enormous. They repeatedly criticise me for arguing in a professional and well-founded manner, for acting independently and finding my own solutions. What is considered a quality in liberal societies is a disadvantage for me in the Twelve Tribes. My cogent arguments are always seen as defence speeches in the community.

Background IV: The true word of God

"They sold what they had and gave it to everyone, each as much as he needed ... And the Lord added to it daily those who were to find salvation."

Acts 2,45+47

People who join a "conflict-prone religious community" are often looking for a new meaning in life during or after a personal crisis, are afraid of the future or do not see their religious ideals realised in the big churches. They are in favour of traditional family values and strictly reject abortion, gender mainstreaming, homosexuality, ecumenical cooperation with other Christians and any criticism of the Bible. For these people, the Holy Scriptures are the true and reliable Word of God. They are not interested in a contemporary examination of the book of books, but rather in an uncontradictory proclamation and implementation of the commandments

God - right up to the belief that all illnesses can be healed with the help of the Holy Spirit. These self-proclaimed guardians of the faith deny that God fulfils his revelation in the Bible through the word of man and that what is written is anything but clearly formulated and can only be understood in a historical context.

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Child labour and other undertakings

If I hadn't left the Twelve Tribes for good with my four children in 2011, my offspring's careers would have been predetermined. My three-year-old daughter Leah would be working in the kitchen today and would never have left her place behind the cooker in her lifetime. Shimshon would have become a craftsman in the community's solar company and would have worked his way up to foreman on the external construction sites. He is a good boy who needs harmony and would certainly have fitted into the system. Asarah might later have become a teacher in the Twelve Tribes because she is good at explaining things. After her marriage, she helps the other women with the washing and cooking and otherwise looks after her children. Naarai would have caused problems for the community. He is intelligent, scrutinises everything and sees through many things. He has the potential to resist. As a teenager, he would probably have run away from the community in Klosterzimmern - and never returned. Or I would have had to send him away one day and he wouldn't have been allowed any contact with his siblings or old friends.

From the beginning of their lives, the community gets children used to being productive and useful for the group. At first, there is something playful about girls who are only just able to sit upright and use their fingers purposefully chopping up small carrots in a circle of kitchen women and throwing the shreds into their mother's large bucket. The children have been involved in their mum or dad's work since birth. Soon the boys are mucking out the stables under their father's care or the girls are sweeping the corridors and stairs with an extra small dustpan under their mother's care. The children still enjoy working in

to perform "big" tasks in the adult world and receive praise for it. "Great Rachel, how you help Imma with the sweeping." - "The Abba will be proud, Bachir. Did you muck out the stable all by yourself?" But then the fun comes to an end.

At the age of five or six, the girls and boys are already fully integrated into the production process. When the workers at the community-owned solar company have to assemble 5,000 panels during the week, the children sit at large tables on Sundays and fiddle with the corresponding screw sets. Two washers, screw, nut. Nut, screw, two washers. Monotony. For hours on end. Children's games are forbidden in the Twelve Tribes, but child labour is not.

Harvesting onions is impossible without the children's co-operation. As part of a school trip, all the children and teachers drive out to the fields five kilometres away one autumn afternoon to harvest several tonnes of onions. Without the nimble hands of the little ones, the vegetables would rot in the fields. Even when the municipality later buys harvesting machines, the children still have to get stuck in. My brothers and sisters think child labour is a throwback to the good old days when farming families, from grandma to toddler, still harvested the crops together. Child labour is nothing reprehensible, they say in Klosterzimmern, but an expression of successful togetherness. The children would probably rather play.

In the bakery, eight-year-olds clean and grease the baking tins or use a packing list to fill boxes with different bread rolls and loaves to be sold at markets the next day. Asher, a lively and creative boy, has to go to the bakery every day after school. His father greets him with words of encouragement, then it's off to the giant dough mixer. With nimble hands, he cleans and polishes the machine, which is completely covered in dough. Asher is often chastised by his father during his labours because he still lacks stamina.

When harvesting carrots, six-year-olds pick up the carrots from the ground, tear off the green stuff and throw the orange-coloured

vegetables on the trailer. The community sells the carrots at the Stuttgart wholesale market or supplies them to retailers in the surrounding area. During the spelt harvest, ten and twelve-year-olds sit at the separator and during the potato harvest at the vibrating sieve that separates the dirt from the tubers. If their parents don't have time to assign them a task, another member finds an activity to prevent the youngsters from idling. Pickling vegetables intended for internal consumption has long been the children's very own task. When it's cucumber season, the council of elders requires one school class after another to pickle the green squash in a jar with salt, vinegar and spices during the first lesson. Being allowed to sit on the swing for a short time before dinner is the only reward for their hard work. The children serve as unpaid labourers, sometimes spending whole afternoons toiling away in the industry. Child labour is only more professional in the twelve-tribe communities in the USA.

At the turn of the millennium, the Twelve Tribes were making wooden furniture for a mail-order company owned by Hollywood actor Robert Redford. When the company learnt that unpaid children were working in the joinery and sawmill in Coxsackie, it removed the handmade furniture from its range. "We are surprised and shocked," commented the retailer of natural products. Children under the age of sixteen are not allowed to work in factories in the US state of New York, and children under the age of fourteen are even prohibited from working at all. "As in any family business," countered a spokesperson for the Twelve Tribes at the time, "the children help their parents. We believe in this and will not apologise. We believe this is the best way for children to be supervised by their parents."

At the beginning of 2001, a global cosmetics company also ended its three-year co-operation with the Twelve Tribes. In Cambridge, also in the US state of New York, the global corporation commissioned the Twelve Tribes to produce a skin peeling with sea salt and a foot cream. The factories for this are to be used for

500,000 US dollars were paid by the company. "They were unable to give us a satisfactory explanation for the facts that we researched," explains a company manager. In Cambridge, five-year-olds are said to have packed tins of cream in paper boxes and stuck pretty stickers on them. The New York Post quotes former member Laurie Marrano Johnson as saying: "My children had to work in the candle and soap factory and do leatherwork from the age of six." In fact, candles and soaps from Twelve Tribes enterprises also find their way into US commerce.

In the meantime, a wholesaler sells the natural soaps and a grocery chain offers the beeswax candles made by the American brothers and sisters. Whether in America or Germany, as soon as the children's abilities permit a certain activity, they are utilised accordingly.

My father-in-law Ephraim's professional skills, on the other hand, are limited to working as a postman. My mother-in-law Baruchah at least has a high school diploma. And Twelve Tribes founder Yoneq, before his life as the Chosen One, worked as a barker at fairs and is a qualified teacher. One day, however, he hears God's voice from behind his stall. "Is this what I have called you to do?"

The work that a member of the Twelve Tribes has to do is determined by the Council of Elders. The meetings determine who is assigned to which work. The respective head of household then decides the further details. He plans on a daily basis which member of his household will be assigned to the office, the garden or the kitchen. Those who show commitment and contribute good ideas in the garden, for example, can be promoted to foreman and are quickly appointed to higher positions by the elders - if their spiritual orientation allows it. Those who are productive and adapt will rise in the circle of disciples.

In 2002, the men of the Twelve Tribes assembled fitted kitchens in private households for the Mahler furniture chain. But neither the furniture store nor the Klosterzimmern community

is sad when the collaboration comes to an end after a few years. The council of elders realises that the young screwdrivers in particular are taking too much pleasure in the comforts of the outside world. Rock music is played on the radio in private homes and the occasional Coke is served. In the USA, many young people are lost to the community in this way. The German elders want to do better - and promptly find a solution.

My brother-in-law Joshua ("Hoshuah") is a smart guy. On a building site, he meets a contractor who gives him an introductory course in solar technology. He learns eagerly, initially working on the entrepreneur's account, until the twelve tribes decide to found their own solar company. Our company even acquires a patent for special mounts that we manufacture ourselves. The idealistic advantage of this company is that the construction of photovoltaic systems fits in perfectly with the structure of the community - it requires many, many labourers and only a few foremen. We are a long way away from our original idea of selling handicrafts such as pottery and natural clothing at medieval markets, but the solar market is buzzing on the roofs outside the Klosterzimmern courtyard wall at this time of year. There are a lot of euros to be made.

At the same time, we continue to farm to cover our own needs for fruit and vegetables and sell the surplus at the markets. In the meantime, we rent out machinery and even buy spelt from neighbouring farmers to fill our silo and set up a business. We set up a small farm shop and opened a café in neighbouring Nördlingen. Modelled on the American Yellow Deli, the café serves as a place of mission.

Yoneq is of the opinion that faith should be carried into the world in our restaurants. Conversely, he demonises regular customers. The guests should not come to us primarily to eat, but rather come to the café to receive sermons from the brothers and sisters. At the same time

Nördlingen customers particularly like the atmosphere and music there and appreciate great salads and other wholefoods.

In any case, the tables and chairs remain mostly empty when we regularly organise religious evenings. We also have mobile cafés with which we travel to large festivals in France and England. We try to attract new disciples there with Israeli dance workshops.

The community in Klosterzimmern has to earn a lot of money. The sums for heating alone are horrendous. Fixed costs quickly add up to more than 10,000 euros a month. When the community is once again short of money, the elders decide to fall back on child benefit. Founding father Yoneq once forbade the acceptance of state funds, but do God's people want to harm themselves? Many families are entitled to around 1000 euros a month in child benefit. And as the state has saved up this money for four years in arrears and the Twelve Tribes are a people with many children, the first application adds up to a tidy sum. We use the cash injection to renovate the Klosterzimmern estate and to pay the fines imposed for refusing compulsory schooling.

Officially, however, there is no talk of accepting child benefit in the community: The elders don't want to spread the word that the families out there are entitled to a hefty starting capital if they opt out. One elder explains to me in all seriousness that the child benefit is not in principle a gift for the families, but compensation for the taxes that the community as a whole pays to the state. After all, everyone

Younger people - with or without children - pay VAT, and therefore child benefit is for the common good.

However, the financial prosperity does not reach the individual. Families in the community lack the most basic necessities.

Once a month, an elder goes to the ATM of a bank in Nördlingen and withdraws the child benefit from the accounts of the twelve-tribe parents. He stands at the ATM, inserts one card after the other into the slot and types in the respective

secret numbers into the keyboard. One day, a passer-by sees him and alerts the police because he thinks he has caught a fraudster in the act. The police arrive, arrest the eldest and escort him to Klosterzimmern. There, every card holder is interrogated and has to confirm that he has used his vending machine card.

"voluntarily". As I understand it, there can be no question of voluntariness. The cards are kept by the elders and stored in a safe place. It is the same with the school certificates that individual children are allowed to acquire during a phase of concessions to the school authorities. Parents see the certificates for the secondary school leaving certificate exactly once after the children's state examination, before they disappear into a lockable compartment in the school building.

The intention behind withholding certificates and bank cards is clear: we don't want worldly recognition, we want to raise our children in the spirit of God.

When I made my first attempt to break out of the community in Klosterzimmern with my wife Shalomah and three children in 2009, I vehemently demanded my ATM card and the corresponding PIN. At first the elders hesitate for a few hours, but then they hand over what I've asked for. When I want to hire a car for me and my family from the car hire company to flee to my sister in Berlin, it becomes clear how my brothers have used the time before handing over the card: For one thing, the PIN the elders tell me is wrong. Secondly, to my surprise, my account is empty. Those who leave the Twelve Tribes receive neither money nor any other support for a new start. Some dropouts run off across the fields with just a few things under their arms.

In 2012, my father dies. He only just realises that I have left the Twelve Tribes for good. But there is no time left for him to correct my disinheritance. During his lifetime, my father wants to prevent his legacy from ending up in the church's pot. Consequently, he sees the only way to achieve this as my disinheritance. My father knows that, as a rule

neither the heir nor the community in which the heir lives have a say in where the bequeathed money goes and what it is used for. In the case of large inheritance sums, this is usually decided by the elders at the American headquarters. Sometimes they buy a farm somewhere in the world, sometimes they build a new restaurant in America or support economically deprived communities. During the start-up phase of the German branch, we also receive funding from the head office. When our business flourishes after a while, we have to transfer part of the profits to the centre. We disciples learn nothing about how the financial system of the Twelve Tribes works in detail.

In order to obtain the financial reserves from the parents of elder Rainer Holt, the Twelve Tribes even make an unusual concession: father Holt is allowed to buy a property in the Franconian town of Wörnitz in his son's name. Although the house is now officially Rainer's private property, it actually serves the Twelve Tribes as a second, smaller branch in Germany alongside Klosterzimmern. The community also pays for the renovation of the Wörnitz building with money from Rainer's father.

The Twelve Tribes prove to be tactically skilful when it comes to raising money from secular relatives. When the state education authority imposed a requirement to replace the oil stoves in our classrooms with central heating, the parents of the communities hurriedly sent a begging letter to the grandmas and grandpas of the children outside the walls. The tenor of the letter is: "Help us to give our children a great school." The words are effective and we will soon be able to install a wood pellet system.

In the middle of the last decade, the municipality's own company for solar systems, known as Baufach, experienced an economic boom. As landscape gardeners in the early days of Pennigbüttel, we travelled to the sites in a rusty 207 Benz and jeans, whereas now we solar workers own a Mercedes Sprinter, the finest

Tools and professional work clothes. The only thing that distinguishes us from other workers on the outside is our ponytails - and the fact that we don't know what our hourly wage is. For the Sprinter, we sign a modern works contract with the dealership and don't even have to repair the vehicle ourselves. That's more cost-effective.

The eldest Werner Klinger is a hard-core calculator. He is a master carpenter, carries out the structural calculations for the solar systems and ensures that all safety regulations are adhered to. Sometimes the supervisor checks our construction sites, and we can't afford any trouble. Klinger's idea is also to make some solar workers partners in the company in order to save on health insurance costs. At that time, self-employed people were still free to join the fund. When this changed, we were working in a grey area. Everyone who has two hands free has to help on the building sites, with the elders trying to minimise costs. We have no accident or health insurance. If one of us falls off the scaffolding, we pay for medical care with food or services. Only if our negotiations with the doctors fail do we pay cash. We save wherever possible. That's why my brothers even charge each other the rent for the company offices in Klosterzimmern on their tax returns.

Founding father Yoneq attaches great importance to watertight tax returns. "Make sure," he warns, "that your papers and accounts are in order." In his opinion, the greatest danger is not that the Twelve Tribes will be destroyed from within, but from without. Together with a tax consultant, Werner Klinger develops a watertight company structure. Two predecessor companies have to close down so that the company books become obsolete. Proof of tax evasion would be a disaster for any community. After tax proceedings, the community in Sus can no longer pay bills and is financially devastated. Many young

As a result, members and the leader of the congregation leave the Twelve Tribes.

The working days on the construction sites are extremely long, lasting up to sixteen hours. However, most of the young people are happy to leave the Twelve Tribes farm. Sometimes, during a break from work, we grill beef that someone picks up from the butcher and drink forbidden lemonade with it. There's usually a disciple sitting there who tells us off. "What's wrong with you?" an elder says to us in the evening. "You're totally carnal." Another time, we are installing a solar system on a factory building. There's a drinks machine in the building. The boys get coffee for 50 cents. Coffee is considered an illegal drug by the Twelve Tribes.

Of course, the coffee drinkers have to justify themselves to the elders shortly after their return. "Why do you buy this stuff?" ask the elders and realise: "We don't drink coffee!"

In the Twelve Tribes, it is almost impossible to be spiritual and in a good mood at the same time. On the journey to the construction site, we solar workers are forbidden to listen to music on the car radio. We switch on a news channel.

The elders promptly forbid that too. We have to remove the radio. The younger ones are angry and complain to the council of elders because they now have to drive to the construction site for an hour and a half without music. The elders concede a CD with the same music that is playing in our café in Nördlingen. The next veto follows: the CD is too upbeat. "It's not spiritual," they say. "The young people just consume music, let it drone on and fall asleep in the car." In order not to violate the principles of the Twelve Tribes, Germany then requests a USB stick with authorised music from America. During the long journey, we listen to sounds from the Bolivian Andes - and occasionally switch on a pop music station. Provided the council of elders hasn't put a minder in the car. It's a grotesque game of cat and mouse.

When parcels with sweets from relatives end up in Klosterzimmern, my brothers and sisters hide the chocolates

and sweets at the very back of the drawers. And when the solar workers leave the yard, they first knock out the kitchen women's spelt rolls to take a load of buttered pretzels on board at the first bakery on the route. Despite all the prohibitions, most of the disciples want to treat themselves. We have long since memorised the Subway sandwich menu. Unlike McDonald's, this snack chain is officially authorised by the elders, and we regularly stop off there on our way home from the construction site. Later on, we just as regularly turn down the dinner kept in the church: Firstly, we are full to bursting, and secondly, we have bread with millet spread.

Over time, we have to learn that the economic activities of the twelve tribes are not very successful. Although the solar farm is doing exceptionally well, the bakery and the small shop on the farm are closed. The sale of spelt is faltering, as is that of the café in Nördlingen, which has since closed. The public school, which the Bavarian Ministry of Education allowed for many years under the name of supplementary school, lost its licence in 2014, partly because the teachers did not have sufficient professional training. My brothers even have to slaughter the goats because they are infected with disease. "Where is the good fruit?" I provoke an elder, because I think that the great successes of our lived vision are being denied. "Be patient," he says. "God is testing." However, it is not God who destroys much of what is good, but the church itself.

There is a bakery in England in the 1990s. The baker in charge is ambitious and enjoys working with dough. With these qualities, he manages to get the shop up and running. But his business acumen is a thorn in the side of the elders in his community. They remove him from office and appoint more spiritually-inclined staff in his place. From then on, the bread tasted miserable and the source of money dried up. I experienced something similar as a responsible baker at the same time in Sus, France. I had built up a regular clientele with wholemeal yeast breads, when the

Revelation that only sourdough bread is allowed. The company goes bankrupt because of this fanaticism.

In America, founding father Yoneq grants his own more freedom. His motto is: you can build big companies and drive great cars if you manage to bring in enough money. The one true apostle has no objection to wealth. So his closest followers set up the construction companies BOY and BOJ. The companies build houses, but above all employ dozens of people to help other companies complete the same old people's homes over and over again. For weeks, twelve-tribe disciples use cordless screwdrivers to attach decorative mouldings and stucco elements made of wood to the facades and ceilings, attach toilet seats and toilet handles. The construction companies of the Twelve Tribes generate a huge amount of money, mainly because the community's labour force, whose wages flow directly into the community coffers, have hardly any living costs. From the point of view of the community leadership, this labour is also the perfect opportunity to instil a submissive attitude in the brothers.

I meet one of the workers who screws on hundreds of toilet roll holders over many months. One day, he complains to his eldest: "Does God only need me for toilet roll holders?" "You have to let go, you can't think like that," he explains. "You shouldn't realise yourself, you're not a violin maker." The Twelve Tribes believe that too much creativity undermines absolute obedience.

In the early days of the Twelve Tribes, the disciples in the USA can still train in instrument making. However, the community had bad experiences with this. Many brothers who devoted themselves to making violins and guitars later left the community. Apparently, disciples who work creatively are more likely to rebel against the elders than those who do mindless work. Those who learn to use their own heads do not remain submissive forever. I also notice this correlation in myself: if I manage to achieve something that I am proud of, I find it difficult to feel proud of myself.

to the elders. If, on the other hand, I only draw carrots, my head remains empty and I function in their interests.

In Klosterzimmern, the heads of the two households each receive different budgets from the community fund. The distribution is based on a key that allocates different units to the men, women and children. The more men live in a house, the more money the individual house has at its disposal. There are three funds: The first fund is used by the head of the household to finance minor renovation work and the vehicles belonging to the house. The second is used to buy food; it is managed by the chef. The third is used to finance personal necessities such as clothing and toiletries. There is also a central fund from which the community pays for larger expenses for overall projects or special items such as the purchase of wood, heating oil and medicines as well as medical bills.

The kitchen budget is particularly tight. If the chef has done badly over the week, they have semolina porridge with a little milk and lots of water for breakfast on Friday morning. To make ends meet to some extent, the kitchen women try to buy cheap bargains or old food in the shops and on the wholesale market outside the estate. Every now and then they buy some vegetables from our gardeners at favourable prices. But the gardeners also have to make sure that their calculations are right: On the one hand, they need enough produce to sell at the market. Secondly, they have to pay for the petrol for the van and their agricultural equipment themselves. While the simple brothers and sisters are officially not allowed to own a cent and suffer from the administration of the shortage, a real money traffic has established itself among the cashiers.

If I ask the "woman for personal needs" for a pair of trousers for one of my children, she usually writes my request down on a long list first. The stock is small. It often takes weeks before the "needy" woman finds the right item of clothing in some second-hand shop. The first few years in Pennigbüttel we walk

with clothes from the old clothes collection. At the time, we were sorting out boxes of clothes for the German Red Cross free of charge and were allowed to choose something as a reward. To overcome shortages, the wife of one of the eldest sometimes ordered the cheapest items from a large online mail order company. And in the depths of winter, we buy dozens of flip-flops, which are then on sale in our in-house shop. The rest is haggling.

When my brothers from the stable team slaughter a cow, the meat actually belongs to the community. However, the butchers take a few kilos from time to time without realising it and put it in their own freezer as a personal supply. If a disciple comes along whom they trust and who has access to money because of his work, the black market is perfect. Ordinary labourers such as bakers and gardeners can only watch such transactions. Unlike the solar company fitters, they do not have their own cash register. The result is different levels of prosperity within the community.

I also have a few private euros that my mum gives me from time to time. I keep them secret so that I can sometimes treat myself and my family to a little something. At the same time, I always have a guilty conscience. Especially when our community is once again short of money and the elders explain at these moments that God cannot bless our church financially because one of us is hiding money. But the shadow economy is difficult to stop given human nature. Especially since the elders also profit from it.

One of the first things I learn at the beginning in Sus is secrecy. It is an open secret among those brothers who are allowed to run errands for the general public by car outside the French community that the vehicle must be cleaned of all rubbish before returning. Two villages before Sus, we pull the car into a car park and throw the biscuit and chocolate wrappers and all the empty soda bottles into a container. This has nothing to do with a sense of cleanliness. Rather, our bigoted language is that we don't want to cause the other brothers and sisters to stumble spiritually.

want to bring. Sweets are strictly forbidden, as they are considered both a delicacy and a temptation.

Often the only sweet food in stock in the early days of the Twelve Tribes is a handful of sultanas. When a baker for Pennigbüttel adds a layer of leftover pudding and raspberry slices to the old bread in my boot, I don't even have to carry the tray into the kitchen when I arrive at the church. My brothers and sisters are still gobbling down the baked goods in the car.

"Stop eating that sugar stuff right now!" the elders grumble when they see the rush at the car and decide that I'm no longer allowed to bring such leftovers.

One day, I have such a craving for sugar and fat that I leave my brother at our shared stall at a grocer's market and rush into the nearest patisserie. Shortly afterwards, I'm sitting on a park bench with a view of Lake Constance, stuffing a piece of cream cake into my mouth. I feel safe because the other person is alone at the stand and therefore can't leave. With a doubly guilty conscience, I take a big bite out of the cake and am terrified that God will punish me for it. To my great surprise, I don't taste anything.

In Klosterzimmern, our house with more than fifty residents has two small cars: a VW Polo and a Fiat Ducato. As I was head of the household at the time, I get 30 euros a week in petrol for the vehicles. But I rarely fill up with petrol for the full amount. Instead, I lend the cars to other brothers who are doing company jobs and should actually be driving the Sprinter. My trick works so well because everyone involved benefits and keeps quiet. The brother saves a lot of money because the Sprinter uses twelve litres per hundred kilometres, while the Polo only uses five. And I can keep some of the 30 euros for myself, because the brother returns the Polo, which was half empty before the journey, to the yard with a full tank.

I use the money saved to buy seat covers for the two cars or to give my brothers an unexpected treat. As

When a friend's father is allowed to take his family to the lake on a hot July day, I slip him 10 euros. "Invite your family round for an ice cream," I explain. The brother looks at me in disbelief and then throws his arms around my neck with joy. The chef gets a twenty. She should put two or three steaming turkeys on the table for our household. I feel good about what I've done - but unfortunately the birds fly up. The day after our feast, the elders' heads are burning with anger.

"Where did you get the money for turkeys?", they shout at me.

"I saved it on petrol," I reply, not without pride.

"You think capitalistically," they humbly tell me and admonish me: "If God gives you 30 euros, you have to fill up with petrol for the money."

The tough exit

The names of my children reflect my inner attitude towards the Twelve Tribes at the time of their birth. In a way, my spiritual development can be read from the meaning of their four names.

In the time before my daughter is born in 2004, I gradually realise that my wife Shalomah and I have a variety of skills that form our spiritual treasures. Although my wife has no schooling, she is intelligent and, above all, very talented artistically. She sings and plays music extremely well, sews and organises the kitchen. I myself get the community school up and running, am good at guiding the children and can quickly find solutions to problems. As a young father, I have the expectation that our child also has numerous talents that will help him to develop and serve the Twelve Tribes. My wife and I have chosen the name Asarah Tifarah for our first-born daughter. It comes from the Hebrew. Asarah means "helper" and Tifarah

"Glory". The name comes from my wish that my daughter should recognise her abilities. She should find her glory in helping other disciples with her potential.

In the years 2004 to 2006, my doubts about the hierarchical life model of the Twelve Tribes grew. I criticise the arbitrariness and stubbornness of the elders in their dealings with the disciples.

The elders often summon me before the council to answer for my allegedly ungodly behaviour. They castigate me for being a miserable servant of God and repeatedly cut me off from the congregation. At the same time, they sow self-doubt. I struggle with myself as to why I don't serve God to the same extent.

trust, as my brothers and sisters obviously do. I am struggling to find a stable connection to God and am dissatisfied with myself.

When my son was born in 2006, he was therefore given the name Shimshon Nacham Hezekiah. Shimshon means "sunshine", Nacham "comfort" and Hezekiah "strength of God". At that time, I was looking for the warming light and comfort that comes from loving God. I ask God to strengthen me to overcome my doubts and stay on God's straight path.

In the last weeks of pregnancy, we rehearse a play for a Bar Mitzvah celebration. The play is based on a story from the Old Testament. In it, the extremely strong warrior Shimshon (Samson) succeeds in destroying more enemies in the hour of his own death than in his previous life. In tears, he recognises his sins and submits to God's will in the end. On the day our young people make a covenant with God, we use the play to show them the basic attitude they should adopt towards God in the future. I play the role of Shimshon and am deeply moved when I study his life beforehand. I recognise myself in him and hope that I too will succeed - at the latest in my physical death - in giving up my independence towards God.

When my second son opened his eyes for the first time in 2008, Shalomah and I chose the first name Naarai Meshachrer Kolliah. Naarai loosely translates as "servant of the king" and Meshachrer as "voice of God". Shortly before he was born, I took part in an international teachers' meeting in the USA as a teacher from Klosterzimmern. I am inspired by the many conversations and feel a renewed unity with my brothers and sisters. At the meeting, we agreed that we do not want to train our children to become academics, but rather ambassadors of God. Our children do not need school qualifications. The boys and girls should not be qualified to teach or study outside the Twelve Tribes, but to be the voice of God. Naarai understands

is a high-ranking title for the king's closest confidant. In a sense, he is the most important servant of the Lord who proclaims his message.

In 2011, when my daughter Leah Hadassah was born, it became increasingly clear to me that I wanted to leave the Twelve Tribes for good. Two years earlier, my first exit, which I had undertaken together with my wife Shalomah, had failed. At the time of Leah's birth, I had already been living outside the community for six months at the behest of the Council of Elders. The reservations about the Twelve Tribes that sprout within me manifest themselves in my daughter's name. On the one hand, "Leah" is the first child's name I have chosen that does not trigger any astonished enquiries outside the community. It works "inside" as well as "outside". Secondly, it stands for the Hebrew word "tired" and "exhausted". In fact, in view of the rampant fanaticism of my brothers and sisters, I am now exhausted in spirit. The eternal struggle, the endeavour to live in a godly way, has made me tired. The second name Hadassa refers to the evergreen shrub "myrtle". Myrtle blossoms delicately, but is also hardy enough to thrive even in deserts. The plant symbolises fertility and hope. At that time, I still hoped that the wounds inflicted on our family by life in the Twelve Tribes would heal.

My greatest wish is for the six of us to leave the Twelve Tribes together and become a happy family outside the walls of Klosterzimmern.

My sister is a therapist. During my time with the Twelve Tribes, she supports me in word and deed. We talk a lot about the command and punishment system in the community. When I left the community in Klosterzimmern with my wife Shalomah and children Asarah, Shimshon and Naarai for the first time in 2009, my sister in Berlin was our first port of call. It is a hectic, difficult time. The months leading up to it have robbed me of all hope.

After the birth of my son Naarai, my wife Shalomah suddenly started behaving strangely. I can't understand her strange

I can't understand her behaviour and report it to an elder I meet in the corridor outside my room. "I think my wife is losing her mind," I explain and cry. "Oh, it's an evil spirit," he explains. "We'll have to exorcise it with prayers." Later, a doctor explains that my wife is suffering from a postnatal mental illness.

For several weeks I try to help my wife with alternative healing methods, but she gets worse and worse. She no longer recognises me or the children and refuses to eat. When she refuses to drink herself a few days later, I take her to the psychiatric ward.

The elders hold me responsible for her condition during the weeks of her illness. "God is turning your life to ashes," the elders judge in a meeting. They offer to give my youngest son to another family so that he can be brought up there while I look after my sick wife. I refuse. Instead, I always carry Naarai in a carrycot. I want him to feel the warmth and affection he needs after the loss of his mother.

Shalomah responds to the medication and is allowed to leave the psychiatric ward after just one week. My trust in the elders, on the other hand, is completely shaken. I try to contact a friend in the USA by e-mail who had left the Twelve Tribes a year earlier. I am interested in his motives.

But the elders get wise to me and forbid me access to the computer. As the telephone is also in a place that is always supervised, I have no chance of having private conversations. The former GDR teacher Petra Maßen seems to be spying on me. I steal the household mobile phone from a drawer in the kitchen cupboard. In the woods, I secretly phone my sister and my mum and seek their advice. To give me some comfort, my mum gives me an iPod.

One evening, I discover that the neighbour's Wi-Fi network is unsecured and that I can access the Internet via my iPod. I immediately get in touch with my friend in

America. He tells me how the hypocrisy of the founder Yoneq and his wife Ha-emeq drove him out of the community. As a young brother, Yoneq's wife had encouraged him to engage in sexual acts. Since then, he has felt immense guilt. When he finally confronted the founding couple, he was sworn to secrecy.

My doubts about the truthfulness of the Twelve Tribes continue to grow, eventually becoming a conviction. I have no choice but to start a new life outside the community.

I tell my wife that I want to go away with the whole family. Her parents join us. "I didn't give you my daughter so that you could take her out into the world," father-in-law Ephraim clarifies. "You have lost the right to my daughter." Again and again, I beg Shalomah to try at least once outside the Twelve Tribes. With just a few bags, my five-month-old son in my back carrier and the other two children between us, we finally arrive at Berlin Zoo station. My sister picks us up. I'm happy to have made it, but also full of worry about what awaits us.

Shalomah and my sister talk for hours.

At first, Shalomah gets involved in the discussions. Gradually, she even begins to take on her share of responsibility for our children. So far, she hasn't been able to empathise with the role of mother. After years of paternalism, she lacks a sense of personal responsibility. Once she explains to my sister as if a spark has suddenly been ignited: "I'm the mum. I know what they need."

I have hope. I sense that Shalomah wants to rebel and make a serious attempt to take control of her new life outside the community as a mother and a person. "Now I'm going to be a woman!" she confesses to me.

However, it soon becomes clear that she is incapable of breaking away from the community of the twelve tribes into which she was born. The word initiative alone makes her freeze, as she is time

She has been brought up to do what other brothers and sisters tell her to do. She has internalised that living for herself is a despicable sin.

Shalomah simply can't find her way around the new social structure in Berlin. When chatting to other mums, she hardly knows what to say. The women talk about clothes, children's games and films. These are topics that Shalomah doesn't know anything about. She is not very practised at talking to her peers at all. In the Twelve Tribes, she always has older sisters around her. Shalomah behaves insecurely and independently. She is overwhelmed when she goes shopping. She takes refuge in the tried and tested. Even today, I sometimes come across full jars of spices in the furthest corners of the pantry. Shalomah buys similar quantities in the supermarkets as she did when she was the community chef. Our pantry shelves bend under mountains of wholemeal pasta and millet. She cooks the same dishes as in Klosterzimmern. Toast Hawaii and salami pizza are not on the table, but millet is served for lunch and dinner - first as cooked porridge and then as a refined spread. Shalomah panics about doing something ungodly, about daring to do something new and possibly improper.

Shalomah lives with the fear that God's great punishment will come upon her immediately. She believes that being outside the Twelve Tribes is a sin. From her point of view, she has broken the divine covenant by turning away from the church. God will take revenge for this. You'll see!

The greater her fear becomes, the more she takes refuge in the old structures. She falls back more and more into the daily routines she knows from the twelve tribes. I get her some fabric so that she can sew clothes. The work is supposed to distract her; at the same time, we want to earn some extra money by selling the clothes we make ourselves. I realise that Shalomah is struggling to make use of her freedom and persuade her to at least buy herself a nice blouse and a new pair of trousers. Eventually she complies with my request. She likes the new clothes - and feels miserable in them at the same time. At the Twelve Tribes, she learns that tight

Trousers are not permitted for women. There, beautiful things are seen as jewellery that distracts from the divine spirit, precisely because they make you feel good.

* * *

During our time in Berlin, Shalomah stays in close contact with her parents Ephraim and Baruchah. I understand that my wife needs emotional support, but I also know that her parents try to persuade their daughter and grandchildren to return every time we speak on the phone. They put a lot of pressure on Shalomah and threaten her with God's revenge. I want her to cut off communication with the church.

But I am ultimately powerless. I fail not least because of the double standards of the Twelve Tribes. On the one hand, the elders forbid any dropout to have direct contact with their relatives in the community. On the other hand, the same elders allow my parents-in-law to have daily telephone conversations with their daughter who lives outside the community. The Twelve Tribes rely on the emotional bond that Shalomah naturally has with her parents. The conversations with her father and mother have an effect. Shalomah, who suffers from constant emotional tension, is torn between her old life and her new one.

Our start in Berlin is difficult. We start without a job, without a flat and without money. We were effectively homeless and penniless. Without my sister's accommodation and my mother's financial support, Shalomah and I wouldn't be able to feed our then three children, let alone provide them with a roof over their heads.

Turning away from the Twelve Tribes cannot be mastered without someone to help you leave. The help of my family is a blessing. Finally, a few months later, I even find a flat in Brandenburg. The property manager liked us and gave us a chance. With a permanent residence in my pocket, I apply to the authorities for financial support

and the job centre approves my training as a driving instructor. After a lot of back and forth, even the health insurance company accepts me and we gradually put down roots in our new life.

When I make the decision to enrol daughter Asarah in school and son Shimshon in kindergarten, a world collapses for Shalomah. Back in the Swabian town of Aalen, when she is supposed to go to public school herself, her father Ephraim is in prison because he refuses to send his daughter Shalomah to a state institution.

Shalomah now believes that by enrolling our children in such schools, we are betraying her father and bringing a grave sin upon ourselves. For her, this issue is a dogma that she cannot overcome. Shalomah wants to return to Klosterzimmern. On the one hand, she enjoys every time we manage to have a picnic in the woods or take the children on a trip to a playground, despite the constant control of the community. On the other hand, she feels miserable afterwards in view of the joy that such moments give her. Two hearts beat in her chest and with them two sides of her being that she cannot unite. Perhaps this insurmountability of two extremes contributes to the fact that she becomes ill in her soul.

A few months after our arrival, we are back on the platform in Berlin in September 2009, but the signs are completely different. I suddenly realise that I only have the duration of Shalomah's journey home to Klosterzimmern left to convince my wife to live outside the Twelve Tribes. As soon as she is in the community, she will be lost to me.

Since we left our flat in the morning, I've been talking non-stop to Shalomah. She had said goodbye to her children and put Naarai, who is less than a year old, on my sister's arm. I implore her to reconsider her decision to return. I talk myself into a rage, reassure her again and again of my love and that we will somehow make it back.

will manage. Finally, I run after the departing train and shout: "Think of our children." As the last carriage shrinks to a small dot on the horizon, I reach for my mobile phone and excitedly type in Shalomah's number. She doesn't answer. I try again and again. Suddenly there's her voice.

"Shalomah, please get off at the next station and drive back," I say in a shaky voice. "Let's try, we can do it." Shalomah doesn't respond. My helplessness and my anger mix into a dangerous concoction. Finally I explode, stand on the track and shout at my mobile phone. She hangs up.

I hear from the elders that Shalomah is at the end of her tether when she arrives in Klosterzimmern. Her emotional problems and the pain of being separated from the children and me are breaking her heart. I'm not allowed to speak to Shalomah on the phone myself. I'm sitting in Berlin with three small children and have no idea what to do next. The children miss their mum. Three children, no job and an uncertain future. I am overwhelmed. I'm plagued by fears and doubts as to whether I've done the right thing. I also want to be able to look my children in the eye later when they ask me whether I really did everything I could to keep the family together.

"Listen, I want to come back," I explain to the elders of the twelve tribes on the phone a few days later. "I love my wife."

The reaction is brusque: "Forget it, you've gone one step too far by running away. You can leave your children here and then we'll see what else God has for you." Communication takes place exclusively via three selected elders. After a while, I find understanding with one of them. Werner Klinger has a soft heart. Despite my escape from the circle of the twelve tribes, I enjoy his trust. Klinger persuades the elders to make a deal. The congregation promised to rehabilitate me if I brought my three children back to Klosterzimmern and spent a year in the community.

I lived outside the community for a long time. Today I wonder about my decision, at the time I accepted the offer.

I buy the children suitcases and some clothes they need, like shoes. Then we go to Berlin Zoo. The animals rush past me. The approaching farewell blocks my perception. I feel like a clown who has to go into the circus ring on the anniversary of his mother's death. The next morning, I pack the three children into the car and we drive to Klosterzimmern. I drop them off there. I'm not allowed to see my wife. My children are picked up by my parents-in-law and I say goodbye. It is one of the darkest moments of my life. I drive back to the motorway and can hardly see the road because of my tears. I briefly consider whether I shouldn't just crash into the tree next to the slip road. From then on, I have no contact with my family for six months.

At least I get to work on a building site in eastern Germany where some of the twelve tribes members are working. I have to sell my possessions. Sometimes I get a bit of information from disciples who have seen my wife and children in Klosterzimmern. These are details that soothe my wounds for the moment, only to leave me longing all the more soon afterwards.

The elders summon me to a meeting in Wörnitz in central Franconia. The branch is about sixty kilometres away from Klosterzimmern. Convinced that I might visit my wife and children in Klosterzimmern on such occasions and swear them to go away again, the elders modestly arrange for my wife and children - including my parents-in-law Ephraim and Baruchah - to move to Sus in France.

When I hear about this, I panic. I know of cases in which the Twelve Tribes ship relatives to the USA so that they remain out of the picture for their family forever and ever. In Wörnitz, the elders also tell me that I have lost all rights to my children and my wife because of my behaviour in the eyes of God. "Take the time that God gives you to work here. If you

If you prove yourself and our God gives you repentance, you can come back into the community at some point," they explain to me. "But you can kiss your family goodbye. You can live in America as a widower and read in the Twelve Tribes magazine about your daughter getting married. Be glad that you can give your children away and that they are in God's hands. In your messed up hands you would have ruined everything. What God has given you, you have destroyed. You are not worthy of your family."

I'm angry, aggressive and desperate at the same time. The official announcement that I am never to see my family again pulls the rug from under my feet. I cry until there are no more tears and the skin around my eyes is inflamed. I take long, thought-heavy walks through the forest. In a clearing, I sink almost routinely onto the soft grass and call out to God. On my knees, I plead: "God, help me to find humility!" My brothers and sisters have softened me up. I show myself humble and guilty towards them too. I publicly acknowledge my guilt. Finally, I am allowed to live in Klosterzimmern for a month on trial. The parishioners are to be given the opportunity to convince themselves of the depth of my atonement. I want them to make peace with me, to recognise how purified and broken I am.

They watch me for a few weeks and ask me questions to test my godliness. Eventually, the church agrees that I can rejoin them and I am washed of my sins. To my surprise, I learn a few hours later that I can visit my family in Sus. I have had no contact for six months. Now the elders allow me to spend three weeks in Sus. Then they want to order me back to Klosterzimmern so that I can build a new foundation for myself and my family there.

The joy of seeing each other again is indescribable. The three weeks turned into three months, during which Shalomah and I became physically closer and conceived our fourth child Leah, but

otherwise remain strangers to each other. Everything we have built up together as a couple has been erased after the past six months. At the same time, the church assigns me my father-in-law, of all people, as the responsible elder. Ephraim is my contact person for any problems.

The situation is grotesque. While Shalomah and I try to pick up the thread of our relationship, my father-in-law won't leave our side. Shalomah is under her father's thumb and I have no say in the matter. I can also feel the mistrust that Shalomah's mother has for me. A real new start for my family is hardly possible. It's not easy for my wife either. On top of that, my father-in-law Ephraim is also hard on my daughter and my sons.

The children have to pay for their months in Berlin. They are in a miserable mental state. Stooped over, they creep around and seem frightened. They no longer understand the world. Grandad has done a great job. In my absence, he takes over the children's upbringing and resorts to draconian measures.

Naarai got the worst of it. My son, who was one year old at the time, hardly ever had a meal without his grandad hitting him repeatedly on the hands with the rod. He sits in his baby chair in the next room and receives his blows with every spoonful of porridge he swallows. Even other brothers and sisters criticise Ephraim's harshness towards the baby as inhumane. The boy is totally exhausted. His life up to this point is a disaster. He is born and his mum is unable to look after him due to her own emotional distress. Dad takes over. The family moves to Berlin. Mum slowly gets back on her feet and looks after him. Suddenly mum is gone again. Then dad takes him to mum in Klosterzimmern and is gone again. Grandad takes over the parenting and tries to get him back on the straight and narrow with hard blows. Then he goes to the community in Sus without his dad. Months later

Dad there again. The real miracle is that Naarai is now a happy and bright child despite everything.

We are allowed to move back in with the twelve tribes in Klosterzimmern. But my frustration with our life in the community remains. Inwardly, I am already on the verge of leaving again. The elders sense this, admonish me and send me to work on a building site in Gersthofen during the day. I have to install solar panels near Augsburg. When this arrangement didn't change my attitude towards my brothers and sisters, the elders finally sent me away completely. "We thought that God would give you back the right to your wife and children," the elders explained to me. "We wished it for you too. But you are showing us that you no longer have any mercy for your family. You must leave again! You must leave the community."

While I am still unsure whether I should leave the stage without a fight, my wife Shalomah keeps asking me to accept the judgement of the elders. "This is our only chance," she says.

With a heavy heart, I finally pack my things and find a small furnished flat in Bischofsmais in the Bavarian Forest. Soon afterwards, I got a job at a yarn factory in nearby Deggendorf. I work in shifts and somehow manage to muddle through the days on my own. I'm not even wanted in Klosterzimmern for the birth of my daughter Leah. This time, my wife is accompanied by an official midwife because the women in the community, who are usually the only counsellors and helpers during a home birth, don't trust me as a supporter, but at the same time don't want to be responsible for a birth alone with my wife. The midwife is also my only link to my wife, she regularly reports to me on her state of health after her visits.

When the text message

"Here we go!!!" arrives on my mobile phone, I'm in the middle of the early shift. I explain to my shift supervisor that I have to finish a little earlier today, drive a few kilometres by car and sit down on a washed up

tree trunk in the sun. I stare tensely at the display of my mobile phone minute by minute for the next few hours. Finally, the redemptive news arrives. Mum and Leah are well. The midwife also sends me a picture of my daughter. I am relieved. At the same time, a shrill pain pierces my insides. Will I ever get to see my newborn daughter? Will I even be allowed to hold my family in my arms again?

Leah has already been in the world for a few days when an agitated eldest suddenly gets in touch. "Your wife is ill again," he says into the receiver. After the birth, Shalomah is mentally miserable - apparently due to an altered hormone balance. In the meantime, she is suffering from delusions. "Then let's stop playing games," I explain brusquely. "That's my wife, those are my children. I'll be right there." "Nah, nah," replies the eldest, "it's not that quick. We have to discuss it in the council of elders first." "Fine," I say and issue an ultimatum. "I'll give you an hour to sort it out. I need an answer by then because that's when my shift starts." Less than half an hour later, my mobile rings again. "Okay," agrees the eldest. "We've talked about it. You can come."

I storm into the company office, explain in a few terse words that I'm resigning without notice and jump into the car bound for Klosterzimmern. As soon as I've pulled into the courtyard, I rush up the stairs in a rush to see my baby. Daughter Asarah comes into the room, sees me and falls into my arms. She sobs pitifully and big tears roll down her cheeks. Then I notice Shalomah's dark circles under her eyes. She seems disorientated. She stands there motionless. It's obvious that she's not feeling well at all.

There is no time to lose. Since her first mental illness, when she nearly died, I know what I have to do. First, I get permission from the elders for us to consult a doctor. Then Shalomah and I take the car to the outpatient psychiatric clinic in Augsburg. During the consultation, the doctor realises that I have acquired some knowledge about the illness through my self-study. He trusts me, and

We agree that I can take Shalomah with me again, but that I should keep him regularly informed of her condition by phone. Under no circumstances do I want her to be hospitalised. The doctor prescribes her psychotropic drugs and her condition stabilises noticeably the very next day.

At this very time, a three-day international elders' meeting is being held in Klosterzimmern. A leader from America sees me walking across the courtyard and feels compelled to investigate the matter. At the meeting, he asks his German colleagues: "Why is Yathar back with you? He was banned from the community." "His wife is ill," they explain. The American remains adamant: "Yes, fine, but if you send Yathar away for spiritual reasons, it doesn't matter what happens to his wife. Even if she dies, our laws must be obeyed. Why are you bringing him back? He's been sent out, he has to go, he has nothing more to do with his wife."

There is a knock at the door. Three elders are standing outside, making serious faces. "We need to talk to you," says one of them. "We made a mistake when we brought you back. You're not mentally ready." "Yes, you can see that too," confirms the second elder, "that you trusted the medicine again straight away, that you called in the doctors." The third in the group takes the same line: "You should have followed in the footsteps of us elders. But what are you doing? You're taking the initiative again. We told you that your wife's illness is not a medical matter. It's a purely spiritual matter."

I look at the three elders in amazement: "A purely spiritual matter? What a load of rubbish. This is not a spiritual matter. This is about medicine!" The debate becomes heated. "No, this is a spiritual illness, and a spiritual illness can only be treated spiritually," they explain to me. "But you can't give Shalomah this spiritual help. You've proven that several times now." "So," says another elder, "now pack up your things and leave."

I look at my wife. "Shalomah, we're going. We're taking the children with us too - all of them! All four of them. The baby too!" My wife groans hysterically. Then the elders grab her by the arms and escort her out of the room. "That's enough, I'm taking responsibility for my family," I shout after them. "Give me a car. I'll drive it to Berlin, then you can have your car back." Apparently surprised by my clarity, I actually get a car from the Twelve Tribes and drive off towards Berlin with the four children. I still have a place to stay in Bischofsmais, but for the time being I prefer being close to my sister to being isolated in the Bavarian Forest. I want to catch up with Shalomah later.

In the hope of being able to speak to my wife, I called Klosterzimmern three weeks later on suspicion. I had heard that Shalomah and her parents had to move to the Belgian branch of the Twelve Tribes after my departure, but were in Klosterzimmern for a meeting at the time. Shalomah actually answers the phone. As divine providence would have it, the phone next to her rings just as she is working alone in the kitchen. She picks up, hears my voice and says nothing at first.

"Shalomah, what's wrong?" I ask. "I lie awake late at night," she bursts out. "I think about you a lot. I want to see you! I want to see the children! But they won't let me go." "I'll sort it out," I reassure her and a little later I have a phone call with an elder. "Shalomah said she wants to come to me," I say. "Why won't you let her go?" "We don't know anything about that," is his answer. "But if she really wants to, she can come to you, of course. We're not keeping anyone. That's Shalomah's decision."

My sister's nerves are shot when I'm actually standing in her hallway in Berlin with Shalomah. I'm back, my four children are back - and my mentally unstable wife is now back too. At the same time, my mother is occupying one of the rooms; she has just arrived from South America to visit my

to visit my sister. And as if that wasn't enough, my brother-in-law is anything but happy to see our archaic parenting methods once again. When Shalomah starts beating the children with a stick as usual, he is furious. "No child is beaten in my household," my brother-in-law yells at Shalomah.

The atmosphere is tense to breaking point. One spark is all it takes for tempers to flare. To ease the situation for all of us, I set out to find a small house or flat for us. In vain.

Shalomah and I decide to move to Bischofsmais in Lower Bavaria with the children. I know the area well by now, the Bavarian Forest appeals to me and the loneliness out there is easy to bear with Shalomah. A little later, I find a house in Schönberg. The landlord is touched by my story and lets me have his parents' house, even though I have no income at the time and receive no state support. The house is like a godsend for us: it's big enough, has a garden and is fully furnished - even the plates are still in the cupboard. As we don't own anything apart from a few items of clothing, we are happy that we can take over the entire inventory for a small transfer fee. I sign the tenancy agreement in May 2011.

My wife is trying harder than ever to master her role as a mother. She rebels, but she just doesn't manage to really be there for her children. She's simply not capable of it. At the same time, she still wishes she could think and act like her father Ephraim. She is convinced that her husband should pick up where her own father left off. Personal responsibility is alien to her. I work from home for four hours in the morning for a local trading company, then pick up the children from school and nursery and sit in front of the computer for another two hours in the afternoon to fulfil my 30-hour week. Our life is just picking up speed, I've just got our finances under control, when Shalomah packs up a few things at the beginning of September and returns to

Klosterzimmern back. She leaves our house and our four children and doesn't come back.

In the meantime, Shalomah lives in the Middle Franconian community of Wörnitz. I try to contact her several times, even though she has already written me an unmistakable letter. In it, she asks me not to contact her again. I should neither write to her nor try to get in touch with her in any other way.

As I am sure that the elders dictated the lines into her pen, I don't give up. A neighbour finally volunteers to be my messenger. She wants to help me because she is horrified that a mother is leaving her four children behind.

She believes that Shalomah is not acting of her own free will. I write Shalomah a letter and the neighbour secretly hands it to her when the opportunity arises. There is no reaction. Then the neighbour finds out that Shalomah has left the community of Wörnitz. No doubt about it, the elders have sent my wife to the Twelve Tribes in the USA.

I use the friendships I still have with individual members of the Twelve Tribes and finally find out which American community Shalomah has been placed in. They also tell me that the brothers and sisters of the overseas communities now celebrate Shalomah as a hero, just like their mother Baruchah. While Baruchah is considered a kind of first-class disciple there because she resists a therapist for weeks who wants to cast out the Twelve Tribes and finally returns to the church, Shalomah even leaves her own children out of love for God. I dial the phone number of an American brother I know from previous meetings in the States. I disguise my voice, give a false name and ask him to get Shalomah on the phone. The ruse is successful. "Hello?" she whispers questioningly in a thin voice. "Hello, Shalomah. It's Robert here. How are you?" I rumble off excitedly. Shalomah hangs up.

I'm standing in front of a stand with glasses. The optician has pushed the range onto the pavement in front of his small shop and now the dark glasses are flashing in the light. I like the glasses. I would love to buy a pair of sunglasses. I have the money in my pocket. For months, I've been sneaking around the glasses stand, occasionally putting a frame on my nose, looking at myself in the small mirror on the stand and getting scared.

Eyeglasses are illegal, I realise. In the Twelve Tribes, they are only permitted if a brother or sister has demonstrably poor eyesight. For these cases, they have standardised glasses. They are hideous nickel glasses with round lenses that make some of my brothers and sisters look crazy. Square and oval glasses are not pleasing to God because they express a certain individuality. I make a dozen visits to the glasses rack before I finally reach in and pick out a cool pair of sunglasses with deep black lenses. They make me feel good.

Background V: Living true to the Bible

"The laws of the Lord are without error and gladden the heart. The instructions of the Lord are clear and enlighten the eyes. Reverence for the Lord is good and everlasting. The commandments of the Lord are perfect and righteous. They are more precious than gold and sweeter than honey. I too listen to the commandments of my Lord, and those who keep them will be richly rewarded."

Psalm 19:9-12

Some Christian groups, which operate more or less independently of the large church structures, have an authoritarian structure. Protestant theologian Peter Zimmerling writes: "Most fundamentalist groups have a very specific patriarch in their church leadership whose views are binding for the group. His behaviour is often patriarchal in the positive sense of the word. It is therefore difficult for the members of such a group to find their own maturity, to find an independent relationship with God as it corresponds to the New Testament." By joining such associations, members undertake to adhere to a large number of rules of behaviour.

The Würzburg prophetess Gabriele Wittek is at the head of the "Universal Life" community (estimated to have up to 5,000 followers). She describes herself as the "greatest messenger of the spirit of God since Jesus of Nazareth" and sees herself as an absolute law. Her private revelations,

The information she makes known to her followers makes her unassailable to her followers.

Former members - not only of the "Jehovah's Witnesses" - report that in such communities, celebrations such as New Year's Eve,

Birthday, Christmas and Easter are forbidden. Sex before marriage is also forbidden, as are cigarettes and alcohol. Every area of life is subject to strict regulations. Life in such a community is sometimes strictly separated from the outside world. Contact with old friends and family is severed. Relatives are left behind who no longer know what to do. If members violate such principles, they are banished from the community by the leadership.

However, if they repent of their actions in the distant future, a back door often remains open for those who have been purified to return. Equally common among these groups is the idea of the imminent end of the world, also known as "Armageddon". Those who do not live their lives according to the teachings of the Bible will be crushed by an angry God.

* * *

Back to life

I have just parked the car in the driveway and am standing in the hallway with the full shopping bags when I see that my daughter Asarah is on the phone. To my astonishment, she doesn't say a word. The conversation seems to be confusing her. I try to get to the bottom of her strange behaviour and press my ear to the outside of the earpiece. The phone doesn't have a loudspeaker. "It's Shalomah," Asarah whispers to me. My heart is pounding. I haven't heard from my wife since the custody battle two years ago: now she's suddenly talking to our daughter and I can't even understand what they're talking about. Four minutes later, Asarah has obviously had enough and hands me the phone.

After a brief greeting, my wife asks me why we don't reply to the letters she keeps sending us. "What letters?" I ask in astonishment. "I can only remember one letter at Christmas. You sent the children a few sheets of paper with colouring pictures. Didn't you receive the children's reply letters?" Now Shalomah is also puzzled. The elders in Klosterzimmern have apparently stopped all correspondence between the children and their mother and have taken the sheet with Shalomah's personal lines out of the only letter, Shalomah's Christmas letter, which they actually forwarded. As we are not supposed to know where exactly Shalomah lives in America, the children have to send the letters to their mother to the church. The church has promised to forward everything, but I don't think it has done so. I also learn that Shalomah hasn't even received the gifts that the children and her mother were supposed to send.

I bought on our first summer holiday without her mother and sent it to her in America.

"Do you have a partner?" she asks bluntly. I swallow briefly and when I answer in the affirmative, she reproaches me. "That you hurt me like that and go behind my back. It's adultery," she complains. "I've remained faithful to our marriage and pray every day that you'll come back." I am stunned by this twisted view. "Shalomah!" I raise my voice. "Your brothers and sisters have forbidden us to have contact with each other. Your brothers and sisters have said that I am no longer your husband and you have accepted all of this. Why are you blaming me? I've waited long enough for you. Only then did I meet my new girlfriend Diana."

There is nothing more to say. I sense a great human distance between us. We hang up. The Twelve Tribes have succeeded in creating a deep mistrust between us. The elders have always had their fingers in the pie. A real life partnership in openness, reliability and security is impossible in the community.

Of course my wife has a right to her children as long as she doesn't harm their souls. When the children are old enough, they will be allowed to visit their mother in America. But until that time comes, it must be ensured that a third person is always present when Shalomah meets with the children. Now that Shalomah knows I will never return, I fear the risk that the members of the Twelve Tribes might kidnap my children or simply keep them there when they visit the community. The need of these disciples to "save the children from Satan" is stronger than all the laws of this world. It could happen that one day my former fellow brothers drive up to our house in their car and take my children away in an unsupervised moment.

In fact, I have heard of cases in which the Twelve Tribes are said to have abducted children or sent women abroad with their children so that the offspring can no longer be found by their fathers. So I hear that the children

of an Australian disappeared from the face of the earth because the elders sent his wife somewhere in England with their offspring. From what I've learnt, I have no faith in the Twelve Tribes and don't want to take any risks with Shalomah's contact with my children. At the moment I also have the impression that my children miss their mum very little. Nevertheless, we try to honour Shalomah. My children know that their mother was born in the Twelve Tribes and can hardly choose how she lives and what she thinks. They are not angry with Shalomah, but see the Twelve Tribes as the cause of our broken family. My five-year-old son Naarai explains our situation like this: "The community is called the community because it is mean."

All my children still have to learn to move within social structures. What other boys and girls learn from an early age is difficult for them. They have an overwhelming need for harmony and find it difficult to tolerate even the smallest conflicts with other children. It stresses them out. One day, my ten-year-old daughter Asarah comes home and is completely distraught because her best friend doesn't really want to talk to her anymore and favours another girl. It's the usual catfight at that age. But the next morning, a perfectly healthy Asarah tells me that she is ill and can't go to school. She no longer dares to go near her friends. After a long discussion, I finally take her to school after all. When I pick her up at lunchtime, she beams at me. The little argument with her friend has vanished into thin air.

Like the children, I also lack experience of conflict situations. When someone criticises me at work, I find it difficult to let the criticism bounce off me and simply carry on as before. For me, too, enduring conflict is little less than a paradigm shift. In the Twelve Tribes, I have internalised that every disagreement must be resolved immediately and consistently. There, all disciples must always be at peace with each other. There is an absolute compulsion to

Harmony, with the elders acting as mediators. We are therefore not used to leaving a disagreement in the room and hoping that the situation will resolve itself. For us, sitting out the smallest disagreement is pure psychological stress.

My children and I have learnt that commandments must be obeyed without reservation. The Twelve Tribes have a myriad of laws and guidelines. If a brother in the community steps out of line, he is promptly penalised. We have been conditioned to always adhere to the required standards for fear of reprisals. When the teacher in my seven-year-old son Shimshon's class tells him at the beginning of the lesson that all the children should sit down, he immediately rushes to the chair and sits down. If another child is still running around and there is no punishment, Shimshon is completely upset. He can't cope with someone breaking a rule and not being punished for it. Any form of individuality - even if it's just standing up without permission - causes him great insecurity.

The children and I have learnt to live within the tight structures of the Twelve Tribes. We do things even though we sometimes don't feel like it. In the community, we don't ask whether a brother or sister enjoys celebrating the start of the Sabbath on Friday evening. Regardless of how we actually feel, we turn up to the feast with a grin on our faces. We have to be happy, joyful and grateful on this day. If a member turns up and expresses displeasure through their facial expressions, they are immediately scrutinised.

We have practice in pretending and functioning within the framework of the Twelve Tribes beyond our own feelings. This pretending is seen in the community as a sign that we are a new person and grateful for our salvation. Anyone who prefers to lie on the couch with a book on a Friday evening is considered an old, fallen person.

Individuality is not a concept in the Twelve Tribes. The daily routine is the same for all members of the congregation - regardless of whether they are three,

are thirteen or forty-three years old. When a party or a gathering is over in the evening, the whole family has to go to bed together. Families get up together, have breakfast together, go for a walk together. One brother doesn't play football, the other reads and the third bakes a cake. Brothers and sisters are organised in the same way. Any form of independent leisure activity is forbidden. It has just become fashionable among the families to take the children on a short bike ride in the Nördlinger Ries, when the elders announce a law that no bike rides are allowed on the only day off in the week, the Sabbath. Individual fun with the family was not pleasing to God.

As these tight structures fall away with our departure from the Twelve Tribes, fear and uncertainty take over our lives. The vacuum had to be filled first. Even today, my children always want the same thing at the same time. If the two older children are allowed to watch TV a little later in the evening, the younger children want to do the same. If one child gets a small gift as a consolation, the other children demand one too. More than other children, they can't accept that sometimes there have to be individual standards.

I also find it difficult myself. After I've repaired our car, I sit behind the wheel and do a little test lap. I steer the car into the road, sometimes left, sometimes right. Suddenly it occurs to me where I actually get the right to drive around here like this. It's difficult for my children and me to deal with our newfound freedom. We are inexperienced.

In the first few weeks after we left, I often lay apathetically on the sofa. I don't know what to do with myself and my free space. I don't trust myself to do many things and switch off.

After all, music helps me. My old saxophone, which my mum kept for me for many years because I was forbidden to play it in the Twelve Tribes on the grounds that I play too jazzy, sits in the corner. I walk every day for many months

until I get over myself, take it out of the instrument case and blow into it. It takes another eighteen months before I feel comfortable enough with music again to give free rein to my playing on the saxophone. In the Twelve Tribes, you are not allowed to express yourself in music, to express your feelings and emotions. Music is made there exclusively for the audience. These are sounds without an inherent soul. The principle behind this is: pure music comes from a pure spirit, and a pure spirit is always connected to the spirit of God. Making music serves the joy of God and is a service to the brother. The musician's joy of playing is undesirable.

When the children sing in a choir at Twelve Tribes festivals, their singing is joyless. They reel off the lyrics with their arms folded and no facial expressions. This is the text of the musical "The Clockwork", for example:

*"We learn to carry each other.
Love in what we do and say.
We help each other along the way.
We build together!
People who live for each other, are
friends and like to give; Restoration
of all things is there; Everything will
be as it was."*

At a young age, children have already learnt to separate music from themselves. During this process, something breaks inside you that I can't describe. But one evening I find myself in the music of all things. I am soaking wet and play and play. At the beginning I was still afraid to expose myself to these all-consuming feelings that burst forth when playing the saxophone, but suddenly all self-control dissolved. I play myself into ecstasy to my favourite Ray Charles records. The burden and pressure of recent years

fall away from me. I feel myself again, let go and play music to get the pain off my chest. It is as if I have picked up the thin thread of my youth again, the days before I joined the Twelve Tribes. But my old musical idols have never completely disappeared in my twenty years with the community.

Since modern music is forbidden in the Twelve Tribes, I'm happy every time I have to go to the hardware store to run errands for the community. I wander aimlessly between the shelves and listen to simple acoustic versions of Bob Marley, the Beatles or Pink Floyd. At one point, I'm standing at our stall at an alternative market and the stall owner next to us puts on some Bob Dylan music. "What a treat," I think at the time. Founding father Yoneq doesn't like this cheerfulness at all. For him, all fun must have a higher purpose. When the music gets too wild for him at a party, he grumbles: "Are we in a pub here?"

I recently fulfilled a childhood dream. As a teenager, I enjoyed racing across fields and gravel tracks on my motocross bike. Now I've bought myself an off-road vehicle. The maiden voyage with my girlfriend Diana and my son Naarai is an experience. We drift and jerk through the forest. Nature flies by. Suddenly I feel joy. I am happy. In the Twelve Tribes, I am not allowed to have fun that results from such material things. I realise that this stems from a behaviour that is still deep within me. When someone from the neighbourhood or family asks me how the new car is, I immediately feel the need to justify myself. I then reply: "We really needed a bigger car." Or "It wasn't expensive at all." Simply allowing myself to have fun and owning up to it is strange and difficult for me. If I could allow myself such pleasures more often, it would probably be better for my children too. Perhaps they would already be further along today.

When one of my children asks me if they can take some orange juice from the fridge, I have to force them to put a restriction on their behaviour. I limit everything and everyone for fear of excess. "Yes," I say, "but only half a glass." Life in the Twelve Tribes has taught me not to allow myself or other members to have fun. I reflexively associate anything that brings a little pleasure with a rule of behaviour, a rule that restricts. I can't let my children decide for themselves. One morning, my daughter Asarah and my son Shimshon are supposed to get bread rolls and croissants from the local bakery. But as the croissants are sold out, they opt for half a yeast plait. When they put the wheat pastry on the kitchen table, I am horrified. You actually made your own decision out of desire! It's only in the second moment that I realise that I should be happy about it. My children are starting to live their freedom. It's difficult for me to let go of a behaviour and way of thinking that has been trained over more than twenty years. I struggle with taking the children to McDonald's, buying them lemonade or sweets. That's another reason why I give my friend Diana a lot of space when dealing with my children. Her natural behaviour exposes my strange way of thinking.

My children and I are now integrated in Schönberg in the Bavarian Forest. I most recently worked for a retail company that sells electronics and am responsible for returns. Two of my children go to kindergarten and two to school. They all have friends. My eldest daughter Asarah is the second class representative and has now learnt to approach people openly. She has told her friends about the Twelve Tribes and her mother's life. Only my son Shimshon has problems with our new life. Unlike his sister, he is too young to deal with his fears intellectually and is also less courageous. He doesn't understand some things yet. When a teammate at his football club runs towards the goal alone with the ball at his feet and doesn't make a clearance, he stands there helplessly. Neither playing football nor

Solo runs of any kind are permitted in the Twelve Tribes. Shimshon is not familiar with behaviour such as solos with the ball, which are perfectly normal at this age. They alienate him.

When my daughter Asarah starts school, I try to get in touch with her teachers. I want to prepare them for the fact that my daughter will display unusual behaviour and ask for their understanding.

Living with the Twelve Tribes means that Asarah has little initiative and motivation of her own. Her impulses have to come from outside. She needs clear guidelines and instructions from her teachers in order to fulfil the expectations placed on her.

If she is free to act on her own initiative, she does nothing.

God hardly plays a role in our family. We do celebrate Christian festivals such as Christmas and Easter, but we ignore the actual topics of faith. I don't have a clear view on how to deal with this topic. I am overwhelmed. Rituals such as singing Christian songs and praying, which determine the daily routine in the Twelve Tribes, no longer take place in our everyday life. Instead, I try to instil a belief in goodness and hope in the children. Sometimes we take part in Christian events. When my children have prepared the Christmas service at the Catholic kindergarten or the pupils in my son Shimshon's class have prepared songs for Sunday, the whole family sits in the first pew as a matter of course.

In the Bavarian Forest, church, school and kindergarten are closely interwoven. All the children know the priest by name. On Ash Wednesday, the little ones burn streamers in the kindergarten. The priest uses the ashes to draw a cross on their foreheads. Asarah attends the Catholic class as a so-called guest student. I don't want her to attend ethics lessons as an alternative because she would be the only child who would have to travel to another town in the afternoon. Her religion grade is miserable. She doesn't want to deal with God and refuses to study religion.

When my wife Shalomah returned to Klosterzimmern in September 2011, I soon realised that I wanted to have sole custody of our children. Whether at the authorities, in schools, at nursery school or when visiting the doctor - my wife's signature is required alongside mine everywhere. Every time, I have to send the relevant form to the elders of the twelve tribes and often wait weeks for my wife's signature, with whom I am not allowed to have any direct contact. "I'm not going along with this crap any more," I explain to the elder Kefa ("rock") on the phone. "I want sole custody." "You'll never get that," counters Kefa. I point out to him that a quick agreement would be better for everyone involved because otherwise I would have to fight for sole custody in court. I say: 'In that case, I'll have to tell you how things are really going with you. But I'd prefer a peaceful solution.' "If you want war, you can have war," Kefa grumbles. "God will find a clear answer and the community will have all four of your children at the end of the day."

I write an email to the Twelve Tribes urging a peaceful solution. I tell them that I don't want to cause any trouble, I just want custody of my own children. Now it was up to them to prevent a legal dispute. In response, I receive a letter from disciple Asa (name changed), consisting of two closely written pages in block letters. When Asa comes to the Twelve Tribes years ago, fatherless, I take on the role of the older man at his side. We sympathise and like each other. Apparently, the Twelve Tribes want to take advantage of this relationship. Asa writes: "I will tell you that whoever takes the Messiah's consecrated children, he will punish him. Every consecrated child belongs to Our Father. I want to appeal to your conscience because you know deep down that you did wrong when you left the community and especially when you took His children. Our Father will see to it that His children return home. The parents are only stewards of the children. When they are before the Last Judgement

court, they have to give an account of how they have raised their children."

Most of the letters are inspired by founding father Yoneq and threaten eternal death. The lines are intended to appeal to the fear that the Twelve Tribes have instilled in me and other brothers and sisters over the years. It is the apostates' fear of eternal purgatory. But that doesn't change my decision to fight for custody of the children. However, when I'm travelling by car, diffuse fears suddenly arise that I could die in an accident.

I'm also afraid that something bad will happen to my children. I am constantly on the alert. It takes time to gain security in life. But I am no longer afraid of God. I am at peace with Him.

In summer 2012, the family court judges at the Freyung-Grafenau district court awarded me sole custody. According to the judgement, my wife Shalomah doesn't even have the right to visit her children and have contact with them without my consent. The Twelve Tribes are appealing. The case ends up at the Higher Regional Court in Munich. A Munich court assistant tries to mediate between my wife and me. She visits my wife in Klosterzimmern, talks to members of the Twelve Tribes and to my daughter Asarah. The court assistant's compromise fails. The Twelve Tribes don't want to be told what my wife Shalomah's meetings with her children should look like. The community withdraws the appeal.

Parallel to the custody proceedings, I seek publicity in spring 2012. In May, the first article about the educational methods of the Twelve Tribes appeared in the press. Under the headline "They break your will", the news magazine FOCUS reports on the merciless system of punishment and injustice in the community of Klosterzimmern. The nationwide response is enormous. By going into the media, I want to publicise the falsehoods in the Twelve Tribes. From my point of view, illegal things are taking place within the community on a daily basis, while the

Brothers and sisters pretend to be a peaceful, God-pleasing group. Unlawful practices such as beating children with rods, the circumcision of men and boys, medical interventions without anaesthesia or the obvious evasion of health insurance contributions for workers are justified by the Twelve Tribes with reference to God's will.

The residents of Klosterzimmern are morally and psychologically forced to break the law within the community. However, as mothers and fathers are involved in beating and circumcising their children themselves, they can hardly go public. Perpetration - no matter how great the pressure from an entire community - silences the people of Klosterzimmern.

When the FOCUS article appeared in May 2012 with the statements of a number of young dropouts from the Twelve Tribes, the people in charge of the school and youth welfare office in the district of Donau-Ries contacted me. The gentlemen are sitting in my living room in Schönberg in Lower Bavaria and advise me not to say anything because my words could be used against me. I get the impression that they are questioning my credibility because they think I am primarily a troublemaker. The officials have maintained close relations with the community in Klosterzimmern for years. They visit the community and see children who are well-behaved and well-behaved. This impresses them because they have no idea of the reasons behind the children's behaviour. In contrast, I must seem like a bitter dropout to them.

The public prosecutor's office in Augsburg finally opens proceedings against me and a few other Twelve Tribes families - for breach of duty of care and grievous bodily harm, among other things. Together with my lawyer, I have to attend a hearing in court. The case is quickly dropped. I keep quiet because I don't want to incriminate myself - and the case is closed. The proceedings against the other families also ended without result. Nevertheless, the Bavarian

Ministry of Education and Cultural Affairs cancelled the Twelve Tribes School's permit. The reason given was that there were no sufficiently trained teaching staff. The community then lodges an objection, but later loses the case before the administrative court in Augsburg.

In spring 2013, a reporter from the TV channel RTL calls. He says he has read the FOCUS report from back then and now wants to carry out undercover research at the Twelve Tribes in Klosterzimmern. At a meeting, I explain to him in which rooms the children are beaten and what educational principles underlie the whole thing. He infiltrates Klosterzimmern and, with the help of small cameras that react to movement, manages to record numerous scenes of rude beatings. The footage, which the RTL reporter hands over to the authorities before it is broadcast on 9 September, creates a new awareness. The Twelve Tribes initially want to prevent the TV programme from being broadcast, but fail with a temporary injunction before the Cologne Higher Regional Court and the Federal Constitutional Court. The RTL reporter is investigated on suspicion of "violation of the confidentiality of the word" because he was filming secretly. The proceedings are discontinued.

On 5 September 2013, the police took a total of forty children from the farm in Klosterzimmern and from the house of the small branch in Wörnitz in central Franconia and placed them in the care of foster parents and in homes. Custody proceedings begin at the courts in Nördlingen and Ansbach. Twelve families are affected. The judges have to assess each individual case separately on the basis of psychological reports on the children. The legal process is complex and drags on for months. After all, the Ansbach lawyers cannot prove any specific criminal offences. Some of the children are allowed to return to the Twelve Tribes. However, the proceedings at the court in Nördlingen continue. While the Twelve Tribes initially claimed that the film footage was faked, they have since admitted that they practise punishment with the rods and regard it as God-ordained. My own concern is not only to

I want to document not only the beatings, but above all the psychological pressure within the sect. I want to show that the loving façade of the community conceals a brutal regime that oppresses individuals and makes them unable to make their own decisions about their lives.

I want to divorce my wife Shalomah soon.

Emotionally, as far as I'm concerned, our separation has long been finalised. Now I want to make this step official. When Shalomah left the children and me in 2011 and was unreachable until this last phone call in early 2014, I felt like she had died. Our separation is not because we regularly argue or otherwise live apart, but because Shalomah is torn from my life. The elders have decreed that we are not allowed to live together as a married couple. Third parties have torn Shalomah away from my side. It is this external control that I finally capitulate to and that causes Shalomah to leave her four children and me behind twice. I don't hate Shalomah.

Twice a week I stand in the courtyard of Klosterzimmern. Dark clouds lie over the farmstead. Suddenly I catch sight of Shalomah, who disappears behind a window on the upper floor of a house in the distance. I want to go to her, but the members of the Twelve Tribes hold me back. "She doesn't want to see you - get out of here," the elders order me. I tear myself away, run towards the house and storm through the corridors. Panicked and in a cold sweat, I open the doors of every single room and look inside. But there is no sign of Shalomah. Whenever my longing is at its greatest, I wake up in my dreams at night. I sit up straight as a candle in bed, dazed by heavy thoughts. It takes a while for my eyes to adjust to the darkness and for me to realise where I am. I get up, walk through the dark house and give every sleeping child a kiss on the cheek.

Then I lie back down in my bed and slide in close to my new partner. My children now call Diana "Mum" as a matter of course. They made me promise that I would never let them go again. With Diana by my side

I've filled a vacuum that was created when Shalomah left us. Diana also accepts me for who I am. She doesn't hold my enjoyment of music, exciting films or my SUV against me as carnal sins. I love her and am happy that we finally have a real home. I am happy that my children can grow up without the constant beatings from me and others.

As free people.

Picture section



Finally - after a long wait, the wedding with Shalomah



The bus of the Twelve Tribes at the Missionary Camp on the occasion of the Folk Festival in Görlitz 2006



View of Klosterzimmern



The welcome sign of the Twelve Tribes in Klosterzimmern



The meeting place in Klosterzimmern



My son Shimshon tightly swaddled as a baby



With my children shortly after returning from six months of exile



With my new partner Diana and her son Dominik as well as my children Asarah (back row), Leah, Naarai and Shimshon (front, from left)

About Robert Pleyer / Axel Wolfsgruber

Robert Pleyer was in his early twenties when he joined the Twelve Tribes. He dropped out of university and initially worked in horticulture and in the bakery before he was appointed a teacher and taught the children of the sect. He married the daughter of a tribal elder and the couple had four children. Since leaving the sect, Robert Pleyer has lived with his children in the Bavarian Forest.

Axel Wolfsgruber, born in 1967, is now head of the sports department at the news magazine Focus. He met Robert Pleyer while researching a report on the Twelve Tribes in spring 2002. Ten years later, Robert Pleyer, who had left the Twelve Tribes in the meantime, contacted Axel Wolfsgruber again and reported on brutal punitive actions and educational methods. Further research and articles followed, which led to investigations by the criminal authorities and debates in the Bavarian state parliament.

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