

Tobi Dahmen Akram Al Saud

# Al-Fazïa'

## Das Grauen

Überleben in Syriens Gefängnissen



Herausgegeben von Uğur Ümit Üngör  
und Charlotte Schallié

CARLSEN  
COMICS

# al-fazia'

الفتية

## das grauen

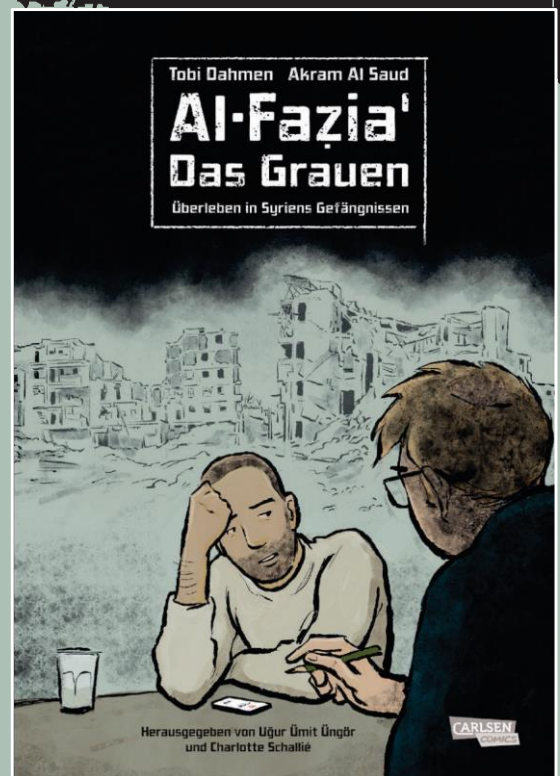
überleben in syriens gefängnissen

**Tobi Dahmen's harrowing interview-based comic about the fate and ordeal of a young Syrian dissident during the Assad regime.**

**AL FAZIA'** tells the harrowing life story of Akram Al Saud, a young architecture student who moved to Aleppo at the age of 19 and was wrongfully arrested for the first time as early as 2010. After nine months in brutal detention, he joined the revolution against the Assad regime. Despite further arrests, he held onto his hope for a free Syria and was eventually forced to flee to Europe in 2016. Drawing on personal conversations, Tobi Dahmen uses powerful imagery to depict the life of a man who found the courage to resist despite the terror.

At the same time, the comic highlights the special collaboration between Al Saud and Dahmen and serves as an example of how the unspeakable can find expression in art. The book was produced as part of the international project 'Survivor-Centred Visual Narratives' at the University of Victoria in Canada and was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). A comprehensive appendix provides a detailed account of the historical background and the collaboration surrounding the project.

Edited by Ugur Ümit Üngör and Charlotte Schallié.



ISBN 978-3-551-80912-4

Hardback, 128 pages, colour,  
EUR 25 **Publication date:**  
**26 May 2026**



**TOBI DAHMEN**, born in 1971 in Frankfurt am Main, grew up in Wesel on the Rhine and studied Visual Communication in Düsseldorf. He completed his degree with the illustrated book 'Poetry And All That Jazz,' based on a text by Jack Kerouac. Since then, he has worked as a comic artist and illustrator for a wide variety of clients. Tobi Dahmen has received numerous awards for his work, including the ICOM Prize for the best short comic and the Red Dot Design Award. His comic story **FAHRRADMOD**, originally published as a webcomic, appeared in book form with Carlsen in 2015. In 2024, his graphic novel **COLUMBUSSTRASSE** was published, in which he explores his family's stories during and after the Second World War.

Tobi Dahmen lives with his family in Utrecht, the Netherlands.

**ALSO BY TOBI DAHMEN AT CARLSEN:**

Following the death of his father, Tobi Dahmen discovers a collection of old family letters. Drawing on these moving eyewitness accounts, he reconstructs a chronicle of the German war years as reflected in his own family history.

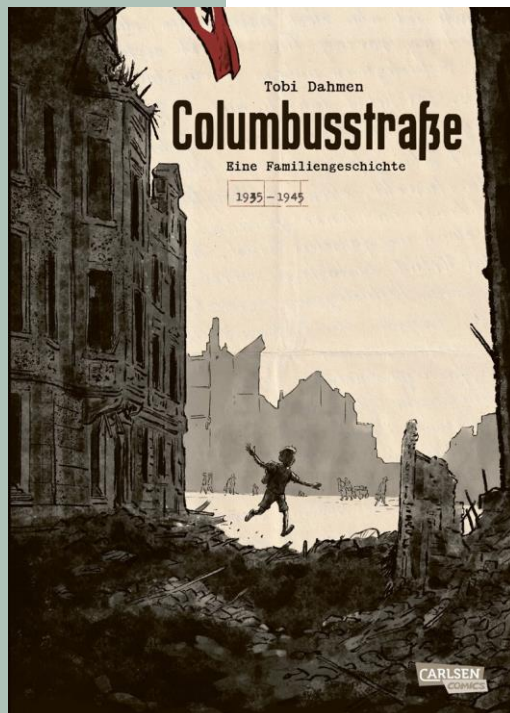
Meticulously researched and sensitively told, Tobi Dahmen's gripping graphic novel **COLUMBUSSTRASSE** not only recounts his family's story but also offers a powerful reflection on Germany's past and the questions of political and personal responsibility.

*"With his graphic novel, Tobi Dahmen has established himself among the masters of historical comics."*

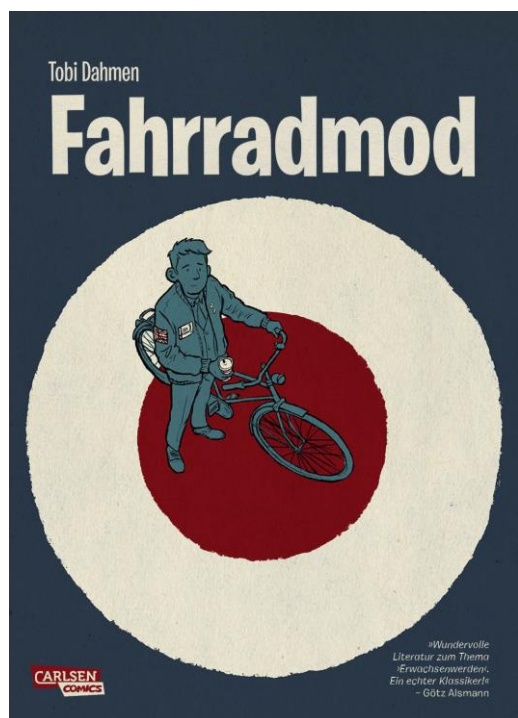
**WELT AM SONNTAG**

*"Nuanced, gripping – a deeply moving work of remembrance."*

**SWR**



ISBN 978-3-551-79663-9  
Hardback; 528 pages  
sw, EUR 40



ISBN 978-3-551-80308-5  
480 pages, b/w, EUR 20

Mods, skinheads, scooter boys – British subculture also reaches the small town of Wesel, where Tobi grows up in the 1980s and 1990s. He becomes a Mod, adopts their trendy style, listens to ska music and seeks recognition. The movement will never let him go, yet the boundaries with other subcultures are fluid – and dangerous.

With his autobiographical coming-of-age graphic novel, Tobi Dahmen crafts a powerful narrative about a love of music, youth culture, and the danger of going down the wrong path. His moving work is now available for the first time in a high-quality softcover edition.

*"This work replaces metres of shelf space filled with rambling books that explain youth culture and define subcultures. It is also wonderful literature on the theme of 'growing up.' A true classic!"*

**Götz Alsmann**



**“We often talk about refugees. But do we also talk to them?”**

## **Tobi Dahmen in Interview**

**Dear Tobi, before we talk about your new project, perhaps a few words about your acclaimed graphic novel COLUMBUSSTRASSE, published by Carlsen in 2024. The starting point for COLUMBUSSTRASSE was interviews with your parents, from which, after years of research, you compiled a German family chronicle set during the Nazi era. What was the deciding factor for you back then in taking on this mammoth project?**

The initial spark for the project was my father’s death. I realized that all the stories he had told me about his childhood during the Second World War might be lost if I didn’t document and preserve them. At the same time, a lot emerged from his estate that supported his accounts. I then set to work and started by sorting everything out, and in doing so I noticed that my family’s fate in some respects also mirrored the course of the Second World War. And I thought that this might also be of interest to readers outside my own family.

It struck me that many aspects seemed familiar to me, such as the marginalization of certain groups, a shift

in language, and the uncompromising polarization of opinion during the Weimar Republic. We are seeing all these phenomena again today.

But another aspect also played a role: my father died in 2015, and shortly afterwards there was talk of the so-called refugee crisis. I was astonished at how little empathy was shown towards people fleeing war, in a country that had itself been so deeply affected by war. There are stories of flight in so many German family histories. I felt it was important to describe how terrible our country looked just a few decades ago, and what we have achieved since then. How rich our country is again in comparison. Pointing this out was another motivation for the book.

**In recent years, more and more comics have been published that deal with themes such as the culture of remembrance and bearing witness, and seek artistic equivalents for the traumatic, often incomplete memories of survivors. In your opinion, what makes the comic book form so attractive for this kind of historical work?**

An important element of the comic is how it engages the reader. Ultimately, the reader must mentally connect the images side by side and deduce a narrative from them. At the same time, when I depict history in a comic, I can present not only the dry facts but also the emotional impact that the events had on those who experienced them. In the hope of simultaneously evoking empathy in the reader, the comic serves as a way to put oneself in the shoes of the eyewitness.

Furthermore, through its unique visual language, the comic also offers the opportunity to omit details when the

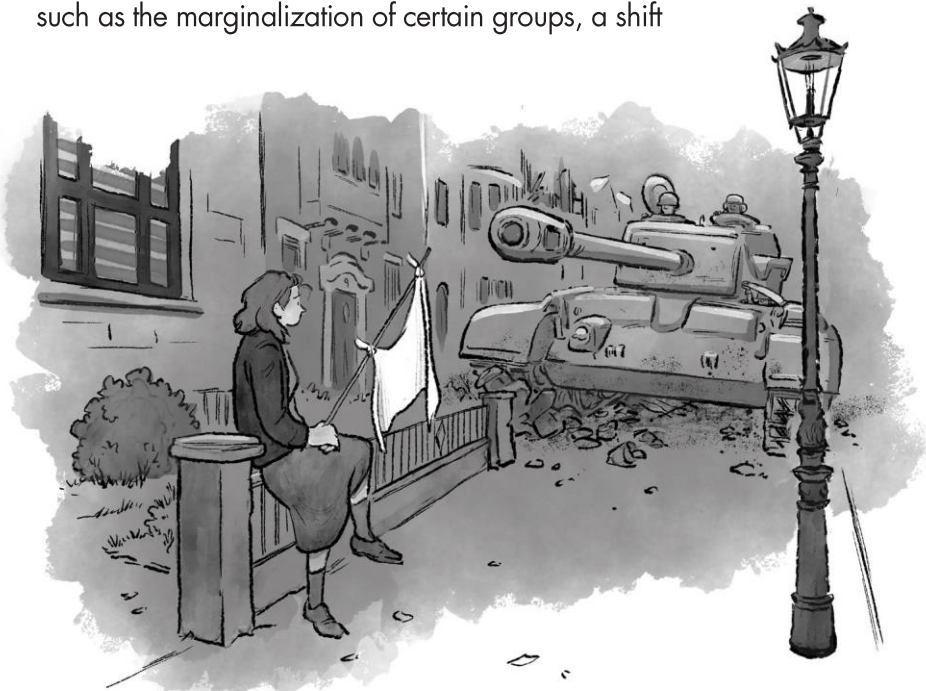


Illustration from Tobi Dahmen's COLUMBUSSTRASSE (Carlsen)

necessary information is lacking, for example, merely hinting at backgrounds when you don't know exactly what the surroundings looked like. And skipping over periods of time that are undocumented or irrelevant to the plot.

But I can also deliberately leave things out: banishing excessive violence from the focus of the image or pushing it beyond the edge of the frame.

When reading comics, I also experience the huge impact the images have and just how interactive the reading experience actually is. A young listener once said to me: 'I know I'm only seeing still images here, but I fill in the colours myself in my head and I can hear the wind howling across the Belarusian steppe.' Another said: 'I had the feeling that this was about me too.' The medium's accessibility is another advantage.

**AL FAZIA' was published as part of the 'Survivor-Centred Visual Narratives' project at the University of Victoria in Canada, which has also produced, among other works, the anthology BUT I LIVE and the graphic novel EMMIE ARBEL: THE COLOR OF MEMORY by Barbara Yelin. What is the project all about, and what approach are the historians taking? What role does the comic play in this endeavour?**

Originally, the project's founder, Charlotte Schallié, was looking for ways to teach her son about the Holocaust, even though he hardly ever picked up a book anymore. She was, of course, familiar with Art Spiegelman's masterpiece MAUS, but she also reflected on the fact that there are still so many stories about the Holocaust that need to be told. At the same time, most visual depictions of the Holocaust merely present the perpetrators' perspective.

Would it not be necessary to give the victims themselves the opportunity to tell their stories and also to influence the visual representation of their testimonies? This is how the idea arose to bring eyewitnesses together with illustrators, who then record the stories. At the same time, this collaboration may also yield new insights: illustrators

ask for different details than journalists might: after all, they have to depict the events and the surroundings. In a normal interview, one would probably not ask what clothes the guards in a Syrian prison wear...

The project also works in partnership with international historical institutions; in my case, the NIOD in Amsterdam (Netherlands Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies). And it is not limited to the Holocaust, but also covers other genocides and mass crimes around the world: Bosnia, Turtle Island (Canada), the Yazidis in Iraq, Rwanda.

The historians then support the project with background information; in my case, the renowned scholar Uğur Ümit Üngör. Our book also includes an extensive appendix with additional texts and background information on the history of Syria and the Assad regime.

**Tell us about your first meeting with Akram Al Saud – how did this meeting come about and what did Akram's life story trigger in you?**

Akram was put in touch with us for the project by Uğur; he had already interviewed him for a book of his own and was impressed by how well Akram could recall the events of his youth in Syria. Our first real meeting then took place at the NIOD premises in Amsterdam. I approached the meeting with a fair amount of trepidation. Would Akram trust me enough to open up to me and tell me his story? How would I handle it? Within the first few minutes, I realized what lay ahead: no one had ever told me before that they had been subjected to torture. But over the course of our numerous meetings and the many hours we spent talking, a deep bond of trust developed. I am very glad about that, and that he told me all this. I now have a completely different perspective on the people who have survived all this. Akram's fate is that of many Syrians. And he is one of those who can still speak about it; hundreds of thousands can no longer do so.

**Towards the end of the comic, your comic**

**alter ego asks Akram why he took part in this project. He replies that he wanted to do his bit to ensure the world recognizes the scale of the Assad regime's crimes and never forgets them. How do you feel about that? What kind of reactions do you hope your comic will provoke, and which people do you hope it will reach?**

Raising awareness and remembering the crimes of the Assad regime are very important to us. But these are, of course, also linked to the people who had to endure them. We talk so often about refugees but do we actually talk to them? Are we really interested in why they come to us, what they have

experienced? When Akram started studying architecture again in the Netherlands, none of his fellow students were interested in his story. If I can stir up some empathy for the fate of these people – and not just for them – we will have achieved a

great deal. We also hope that the book will be discussed in upper secondary school classes. Ultimately, this would also take into account the cultural background of so many pupils in our country.

And hopefully the example of Syria will also make some people aware of what is happening in other parts of the world, for example in Iran, and has been for decades as well.

**Scenes of torture are among the most difficult to depict graphically – how did you go about illustrating these gruesome passages without coming across as too voyeuristic or even trivializing them?**

That was indeed one of the major challenges of the book. How can we depict the horrific conditions in torture prisons without overwhelming the readers? But how do we also ensure that I do not abuse the trust Akram has placed in us, how do I



ensure that his dignity is preserved in the drawings as well? As part of the project, we took part in short webinars where we were briefed on how to avoid causing survivors to experience new trauma through our collaboration, and how to deal with depictions of violence. My solution was to show the consequences of violence rather than the violence itself. Depicting torture and beatings outside the frame, or in the background, barely visible. Or, for example, through explanatory illustrations found online, which Akram pointed out to me during our conversation. And, of course, communication was very important here too, ensuring that Akram was involved in the entire process, from the sketches to the finished pages.

When Akram finally saw the coloured pages in front of him for the first time, he said the depictions were accurate. That is probably the greatest compliment he has ever paid me. I cannot judge that, of course, but if I have indeed succeeded, it is solely down to Akram's descriptions.

**I found the passages particularly poignant where Akram recounts a night in a 3x4-metre prison cell into which the secret service had crammed 150 prisoners. On a double-page spread, you capture your own shack at this unimaginable cruelty. As a reader, you can sense the sheer strength of will it must have taken to draw these pages. Would you mind telling us a bit about how you took on these difficult parts?**

There are indeed passages in Akram's story that are almost impossible to imagine. And trying to imagine them sometimes pushed me to my limits. I've captured this process – the impossibility of depicting it – in a drawing.

In the end, I looked at pictures of crowds of people. From concerts, where people stand packed together. A completely different context, then, but an attempt to somehow grasp the scale of it. You might be able to endure such cramped conditions

for the duration of a concert, but for months on end? That, again, is simply unimaginable. Fortunately, Akram only had to endure that cell for 24 hours.

**The comic ends with a time jump – it is 2025 and the rebel forces of Ahmed al-Sharaa have driven Assad out of the country. How does Akram view the country's political future, and what is your perspective from the outside? What role can projects like AL FAZIA' play in the social reconstruction?**

You'd have to ask him that yourself. Things are still very uncertain. But he has already been back there several times since then. He works for an NGO with a branch in The Hague, where he lives, coordinating aid from here and training people on the ground in Syria.

One can only hope that the people in this ravaged country will one day be able to lead a normal life again. So much has been destroyed, most people live below the poverty line, and there are still many conflicts between different groups. But they have experienced so many terrible things that the desire for peace is palpable everywhere; we must not let this opportunity slip away. But that also requires a great deal of forgiveness. And, of course, the injustices that have occurred must not be forgotten. There will continue to be much pain and grief; many will never find out what happened to their family members who disappeared in the prisons.

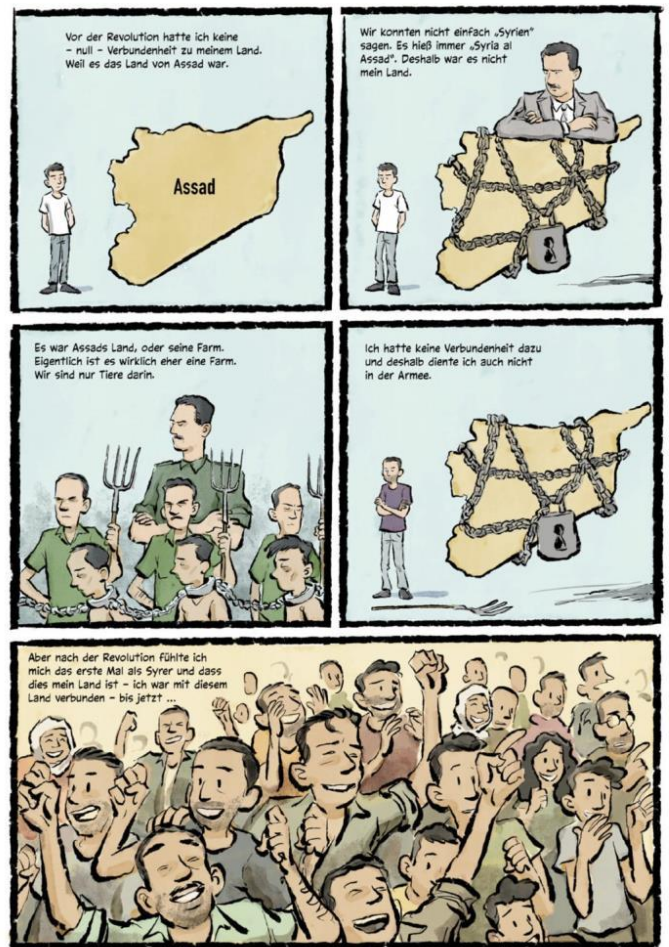
Our task is to understand what these people have been through. As a community of nations, we must work to ensure peace so that the country can be rebuilt. It alarmed me that, just days after the fall of the regime, opportunistic politicians expected everyone to be able to return home. Whereas for many, Europe has long since become their home.

**Do you have a new project in the works?**

Immediately after drawing the last page of COLUMBUSSTRASSE, I carried on straight away and began work on the sequel. There are already 140 pages. It will focus on my mother's story. But of course, it will also be about the Dahmen family in Düsseldorf. How are they coping with life after the war? The postwar period is also very important to consider; in my view, it is part and parcel of the Second World War.

That said, I have also published three books in recent years and contributed to two more. It's been quite a whirlwind, which has meant I've often had to put work on the sequel on hold. So if I could find the time to step back and finish writing the story in peace, that would mean a great deal to me. Perhaps I'll also find the time to look into funding. My books have, after all, been recognized for their social relevance on a few occasions. Beyond that, I do have other ideas and projects, but nothing is set in stone yet.

For now, though, I'm looking forward to handing over the finished book to Akram. And then presenting it together with him. After all, it is his story.





Unser erstes Treffen. Im NIOD, dem niederländischen Institut für Kriegs-, Holocaust und Genozidstudien.



\* Nederlands Instituut voor Oorlogs- en Genocidestudies



Unsere erste Begegnung.

Schön, dich kennenzulernen. Wie gehst du mit all dem um, was passiert?

Das werde ich ihn in den kommenden Monaten noch öfter fragen.



Kurz zuvor hatte ein schweres Erdbeben das syrisch-türkische Grenzgebiet erschüttert. Zu diesem Zeitpunkt gab es bereits 50.000 Tote.

Mir geht's gut. Ist schwer, aber mir geht's gut.

Und deine Familie?



Sie sind sicher, aber im Land um Aleppo und Idlib ist viel kaputt. Ist schlimm!



Erst die Revolution, dann der syrische Krieg, die russischen Bombardierungen, dann der IS.

Was noch? Man sollte meinen, sie haben genug gelitten.



Wir reden ein bisschen über die Lage in Syrien. Ich lerne ein paar neue Worte: **Mugabarad** ist ein wichtiges Wort! Es bedeutet „Geheimdienste“. Plural. In Deutschland fürchtete man die einzelnen Organe Gestapo und Stasi; in Syrien gibt es vier Geheimdienste.



Wenn das Wort fällt, verkriechen sich sofort alle unterm Tisch.

Wenn dich ein Geheimdienst freilässt, kann dich der nächste gleich darauf wieder festnehmen.



# LESEPROBE



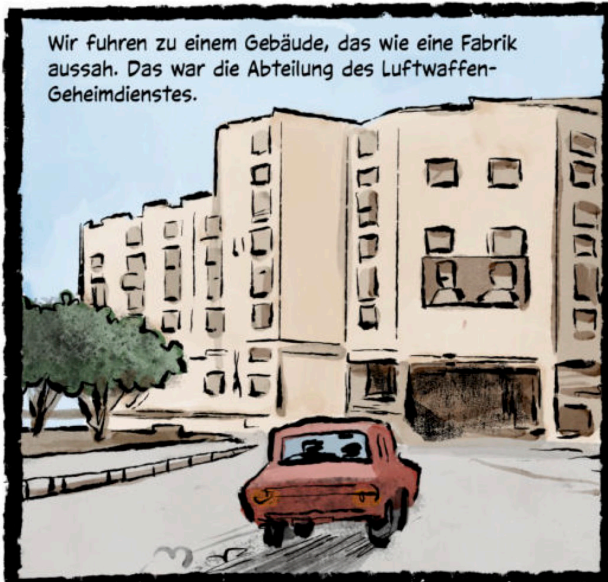
Den Haag, 7. Juni 2023







# LESEPROBE



# LESEPROBE



# LESEPROBE



Nach einer längeren Fahrt hörte ich so etwas wie ein Burgtor, wie eine sehr, sehr hohe Mauer, die geöffnet wird.



Ich hatte das Gefühl, wir waren irgendwo sehr weit weg.



Sie steckten mich in eine neue Zelle, die ist ein bisschen größer, Zellennummer ist Zwei.



Oben ist ein kleines Fenster nach draußen zu dem Ort, wo gefoltert wird, ich konnte das Weinen und die Schreie hören.

Ich wartete.



Dann ging plötzlich die Tür auf. Ich glaube es war gegen zwölf Uhr nachts da brachten sie jemanden und der legte sich sofort schlafen.

## CONTACTS

**Claudia Jerusalem**  
Carlsen Verlag GmbH  
Claudia.Jerusalem@carlsen.de  
Tel: +49 (0)40 39 804 563

**Filip Kolek**  
pr@filip-kolek.de  
mobil +49 (0)172 83 70 206

[www.carlsencomics.de](http://www.carlsencomics.de)

