

## Stories in Transit

An Anthology of Texts by Exiles, Migrants and Émigrés, translated from  
the German with an introduction and conclusion  
by  
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*Jehovah, muvambi nomukwanisi wezvose, ndimi mandisvitsa pano. Ndatenda.*

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<sup>1</sup> Shona Proverb

## **Introduction**

Dreadlocks and skinny jeans are a combination you rarely see as you walk through the alleyways of the quaint Bavarian city of Regensburg. So naturally, after sharing my name—which also did a great job of adding to my mysterious persona—I would find myself answering a second question, which often had something to do with where I was from. I would have the feeling my audience was not expecting an answer along the lines of a George Ella Lyon poem,<sup>2</sup> in which I would proudly say that “I [was] from laughter, from icy winters and soulful house music. I [was] from the thick aroma of sadza on a blustery August afternoon!”

The last six years have brought a lot of movement for me. After spending the first two at a boarding school a few hours away from home in Gweru, Zimbabwe, I moved to Johannesburg, where I lived with my father and sister. I was informally employed and frantically trying to figure out the next few years of my life. A few months later I was attending college in New England, reading up on study-abroad opportunities in Germany, where I then spent a little over half a year. Now here I am, months away from graduation and about to embark on the next leg of my journey, sensing the familiar feeling of wanderlust, mixed with a dash of anxiety, and an overwhelming desire to find a place to call home at last. But while I remain in transit, I will be listening to voices around me, collecting their stories as I write my own, in the spirit of the Somali-Canadian wordsmith

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<sup>2</sup> Author of “Where I am from”

Keinan Abdi Warsame, “You have to let the world speak to you [...] so I’m in that moment now where I’m finding the world’s voice.”<sup>3</sup>

With every stop come unique challenges: bureaucratic hurdles, language barriers, and the question of integration—whether to fit in, to stick out, or to position myself somewhere in between. This thesis project constitutes a response to those challenges: a collection of both fictional and non-fictional accounts of émigrés, migrants, and exiles at various stages of their journeys; transplanted—as my advisor so rightly put it—from German into English.

The original plan for the anthology was to organize the selections chronologically, starting with a protagonist at a very young age and then stitching together a collection of stories that represented life’s progression. Working with this structure soon became impossible. Many of the authors to whom I was drawn went into great detail about their identity, the encounter with a foreign language, and the specifics of their journey; and merging these stories chronologically would ignore some of the thematic relationships within the texts. But after coming to this realization, I turned the focus toward these themes. The three main themes became the three primary perspectives according to which the pieces are organized: migration and bureaucracy, language, and identity. These three aspects figure prominently in travel and resettlement making it not possible to separate them completely from one another; rather they form a confluence and add to the complexity of the experience.

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<sup>3</sup> Melinda Newman’s interview with K’naan for Hitfix, 2011

The first author in the selection is Vladimir Vertlib. Born in 1966 in St. Petersburg (then Leningrad), Vertlib emigrated as a child to Israel, then to Austria, then back to Israel, and finally back to Austria, passing through the USA. His first book was *Abschiebung* (1995) and in 2001 he won the Adelbert-von-Chamisso-Prize of the Robert Bosch Stiftung, and the Anton-Wildgans-Prize.<sup>4</sup> The first few pages of his novel *Zwischenstationen* (2009) feature in this selection.

Fahimeh Farsaie was born in 1952 in Tehran, Iran. After spending 18 months in prison under the Shah regime for her work in art and literature, Farsaie sought exile in Germany in 1983. She was awarded the Tascha youth prize for Iranian literature and is actively involved with causes for migrants and anti-discrimination in Germany.<sup>5</sup> A section of her book *Eines Dienstags beschloss meine Mutter Deutsche zu werden* (2006) occurs in the third chapter of the selection.

Yoko Tawada's *Talisman* (2011) soon joined the collection. Born in 1960 in Tokyo, Tawada studied German literature in Hamburg and then in Zurich. She writes both in German and Japanese and has also won the Adelbert-von-Chamisso-Prize of the Robert Bosch Stiftung as well as the Goethe Medal.<sup>6</sup>

Barbara Honigmann is the only German-born author in this selection. Born in Berlin in 1949, two years after her parents returned to East Berlin from

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<sup>4</sup> Vertlib, Vladimir. *Zwischenstationen*. 2009

<sup>5</sup> Farsaie, Fahimeh. *Eines Dienstags*. 2006

<sup>6</sup> Tawada, Yoko. *Talisman*. 2011

a period of exile in Great Britain. Her mother was the first wife of Kim Philby,<sup>7</sup> the British double agent who later defected to the Soviet Union. *Damals, dann und danach* (1999) was used in this anthology but she is also known for her books *Roman von einem Kinde* (1986) and *Eine Liebe aus nichts* (1991). Honigmann left Berlin in 1984 for Strasbourg, where she currently lives. In 1994 Honigmann was awarded the Nicolas-Born-Prize for her contribution to German literature.<sup>8</sup>

Wladimir Kaminer was born in Moscow in 1967. The bestselling author of *Russendisko* moved to Germany as a refugee in 1990 and has written for several media outlets as well as publishing numerous collections of short stories in German such as *Militärmusik* and *Mein deutsches Dschungelbuch*.<sup>9</sup> Short stories from *Ich mache mir Sorgen, Mama* (2004) appear in each chapter of this anthology.

The individual texts were chosen for the different ways in which they approached the three main themes. The first section, with the theme of migration and bureaucracy, begins with Vertlib's "Petersburg Interior." In this selection, he speaks both from the perspective of a small child before emigrating and from that of an adult coming back to visit his grandmother in post-Soviet Russia; he thus evokes both legs of the journey. This text deals with the process leading up to the decision to migrate, detailing the racial and political climate that made it impossible for the family to remain in St. Petersburg.

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<sup>7</sup> Walter, Natasha. *The Guardian. Spies and Lovers*, 2003

<sup>8</sup> Honigmann, Barbara. *Damals, dann und danach*, 1999

<sup>9</sup> Kaminer, Wladimir. *Ich mache mir Sorgen, Mama*. 2004

Vertlib's text is followed by Kaminer's encounter with a kind of peculiar predicament often experienced by immigrants. In "Sebastian and the Aliens Registration Bureau," his three-year old son is receiving personal letters from the Bureau, informing him that he has been living in Germany illegally for the past three years. Kaminer pokes fun at the stringency of German bureaucracy by juxtaposing it with the carefree attitude of his son, who simply grunts and runs off to play when he is confronted with the questions on the permanent-residence application.

Kaminer continues this topic of debilitating bureaucracy in "German Passport," an explanation of the seemingly impossible feat of acquiring German citizenship. This story touches on issues of racism and prejudice, showing the great lengths to which many Russian émigrés have gone to rebuild their lives in Germany without being naturalized.

The last text in this section is "My Friend Victor," the next installment of Vertlib's journey. Vertlib describes being in nursery school in Israel, and witnessing, without fully understanding it, the friction his parents experience with the immigration offices and their disappointment at the country that had seemed so promising. The family then moves to Vienna for a fresh start. One of the greatest challenges Vertlib faces as a child is adjusting to the language: he is surrounded by people who speak Hebrew, and his best friend, Victor, happens to be quadrilingual. This account provides segues into the next section: language.

In "Our Dialects," Kaminer's son has started learning his first words, and the initial hope is that these utterances will allow the family to determine



whether Sebastian is German or Russian, but unfortunately the words to which he gravitates belong to neither cultures but are shared by both.

This section features both of Yoko Tawada's texts. In "The Talisman" and in "I really shouldn't be saying this, but Europe doesn't exist," Tawada takes a single word and teases out issues of race, nationalism, and intercultural (mis)understanding. In "The Talisman" she uses the word 'talismán' to describe her relationship with a housemate, who thinks she is plagued by wicked forces. Tawada uses German as a talisman that is meant to bring her closer to her housemate but after it all she still feels misunderstood. In "I really shouldn't be saying this, but Europe doesn't exist," Tawada uses the word 'whiteness' to draw attention to physical appearance and how it can tie so closely to people's view of themselves and to their impression of those they see. Physical appearance transitions into nationalism and cultural assimilation, and it finally comes back to language: how the medium of language dictates the way you form your ideas and opinions and ultimately how you convey your thoughts.

The final section takes up the theme of identity. It starts off with Fahimeh Farsaie's "One fine Tuesday my mother decided to become a German." As the title suggests, Sima, the mother, decides to become German, not for the cultural significance of that nationality but for the benefits. The father, Abbas Agha, who is very proud of his Persian heritage, does not receive the news well, and the children are caught in the middle. This piece touches on questions of identity and home, and how much influence geography carries.

“Losing my Tradition” is Kaminer’s take on cultural traditions and customs and their fate under conditions of exile, portrayed through his father who has not caught on to German traditions despite living in Germany for years.

All three of Honigmann’s texts are in this section, all dealing with different aspects of her Jewish identity. “I am not Anna!” addresses the racial aspect of her identity. This piece touches on the idea of ascribing physical traits to Jewish people and being able to ‘recognize’ that someone is a Jew—reminiscent of the Nazi era. “Of my great-grandfather, my grandfather, my father, and me” traces the historical significance of her Jewish identity. She offers stories of assimilation and expulsion, chronicling the efforts that her forefathers made to become German and the ways in which their being Jewish stood between them and the realization of that dream. “Self-Portrait as a Jew” explores the religious and cultural aspect of her Jewish identity. In spite of the rejection she describes in “Of my great-grandfather, my grandfather, my father, and me,” Honigmann decides to embrace Judaism, to go beyond the conversations of the painful history Jewish identity carries, and to live a Jewish life with her son, not merely give him a ‘Jewish heritage.’

# 1

## Migration and Bureaucracy

# PETERSBURG INTERIOR

**By Vladimir Vertlib**

*Dear ones!*

*I write this letter in the hope that by the time it arrives you will have already received news of the passing of Rahil Solomonovna. Accept our condolences and that of all friends, and family members, of whom so few still remain . . .*

My grandmother lived to be eighty-four. She died in the autumn of 1993 after a long illness and in great pain. I saw her one last time before her death. It was my first trip to the city of my birth since I had left early in my childhood. St. Petersburg, Finland Station. The international train is directed onto a siding and comes to a halt by a long, barrack-like building and some sheds. Only a few people are waiting on the platform. As I get off, I catch sight of the train station—a concrete structure as ugly as sin which looks like an extremely large shoebox—shortly before two pictures, photos actually, appear to me in the flesh: one of my uncle Aaron, swaddled in a dark, threadbare raincoat that screams postwar era and a cap that covers his bald head. He recognizes me instantly—I too, a living photo—as he smiles shyly and reaches for my suitcase. The other is my cousin Robert, whose development I had been able to follow—a Young Pioneer with a clumsily tied neckerchief, an awkward first-year student in the company of his classmates, scowling defensively, then later, standing in front of a monumental

piece of architecture with his father and grandmother, finally, in the first color photo, an aging bachelor with a receding hairline and prematurely gray temples.

The usual awkward questions about my trip. Then I am dragged past the train station to the Metro. I am informed that the welcoming dinner awaits and that Grandmother is already so upset that after three sleepless nights she feels she earned the right to be called right away. The telephone booths bring back memories. I think of the series *The Reunion* on Saturday afternoons on Austrian TV, the old films that I used to watch as a child. The call does not go through until the fifth attempt and cuts off before I can squeeze in a frantic “hello.” I can’t understand what Grandmother is saying. Worried murmurs on the other end of the line. In spite of my increasing nervousness I try to keep a self-assured, casual tone in my voice. Too late.

I look around once more. As the GDR was coming to an end, an astute journalist wrote that every other decade in that country had been skipped, or rather, had been disappeared. After the 50s came the 70s, then the Fall of the Wall. The Soviet Union skipped every three decades, that was cheaper. The 50s gave way to the 90s.

Posters advertise the need for small business to computerize, or advertise video recorders and household appliances from Siemens. Meanwhile the crowd gathered under a single poster that covers half of a building’s façade grumpily force their way onto a rickety bus that threatens to tip over, then nonetheless starts moving.

I must hurry; these sour-faced people can't take a joke and I am starting to learn that friendliness is a mockery. It does not come cheap. After my polite apology for stepping on a stranger's foot comes a shove, then a blow from the swinging door, the result of my erroneous assumption that it would be held open for the next person. The ear-splitting rattle of the wooden escalator, and before I know it I am making my way past a larger-than-life mosaic of Lenin. The great leader of the world revolution has gleaming eyes and with his right hand is pointing toward the horizon of the bright future—straight at the Marlboro advertisement on the other side of the tunnel.

The merciless melee at the vehicle's narrow door provides a good workout. My backpack helps me; I employ it as a battering ram. "Stand clear of the closing doors, please!" My uncle and cousin explain how to use public transportation. I soon learn why I am instantly recognized as a foreigner. "It's because of your respect for others and self-confidence you show," my cousin would later say with a smile, "when you let somebody go ahead of you onto the bus and try to keep a distance instead of pushing forward until you can't breathe." One cannot simply make the excuse that each country has its own customs.

*... though I am convinced that my report will come off as being somewhat unclear and tangled, given that so little time has passed. So much gets mixed up and in my mind (as in life) chaos reigns...*

Riding the train was a special experience for me for as long as I can remember. It was not simply the way the stations glided by in the night, my fascination with the lights that emerged in the distance, growing larger and larger, and eventually appeared to engulf the whole world, the occasional squeal that came from the brakes, then the scraping of metal on metal and the jolt that hurls you back into your seat. A sleepy provincial station with old arcades and lowered metallic shutters on the stores and tobacco shops, which give the impression that they have been closed for centuries. A railroad official running past, in most cases with a red (or blue or green) cap, a muffled loudspeaker announcement that remains unintelligible, as if coming from some far-off and mysterious headquarters. A couple of yawning figures with suitcases and backpacks, who, after sitting for a long time or lying uncomfortably in the train, stumble over to the taxi stand, not yet fully realizing that they are home. Finally the whistle blows and I slide away until the train disappears from view. The rattling of the disappearing letters on the mechanical information board on the platform, as if the train were on an unknown route and the displaying of the destination were only a momentarily necessary hoax.

Although it appears to me that I have been on the move for twenty years now, I gather that the trains do in fact reach their final destinations.

My parents and I left our hometown of Leningrad by train as well, back when we emigrated from Russia. I remember that night clearly. No one told me as a five-year-old that we were emigrating. I was in kindergarten at the time and

any idle chatter could have been risky. Instead, I was told we were going on a long trip. A notion one could use without having to tell the child a lie.

“Aren’t you going to miss me, even a little?” my grandmother asked.

“No, definitely not!” replied the child defiantly, well aware of the love he received and of his own power. The corners of his grandmother’s mouth turned down and the laugh lines on her face disappeared.

“You don’t love your grandmother at all!”

“But I do Grandma, I love you more than anything! You’ll come and visit us.”

I saw her again twenty years later. The Soviet authorities had denied her a tourist visa five times. She was told she did not deserve to see her daughter again. She should have raised her daughter to be a good Soviet citizen who did not turn her back on her homeland. Not until Gorbachev came to power was Grandmother granted a few weeks in Austria. But on that night, the night of our departure, we waited for a long time in the station concourse. Family and friends came to say goodbye. My father’s sister, a Party member who therefore had to be especially cautious, ran to us and hugged my brother, kissed my mother, took me by the hand, and brought me to a dark corner of the station so she would not be seen as she hugged me, kissed me, and cried. I cried too, not understanding what was going on. The whistle signaled the train’s departure.

In 1971 the existence of the Soviet Union had seemed assured for at least two hundred years, with the Iron Curtain separating East from West for good.



When I asked my parents why everyone was crying they did not give me an answer. They simply looked away or stared at the ground.

My aunt did not accompany us to the platform. Her son, Cousin Vadim, told me later that in his family we were never spoken of again. His parents were members of the Party, his father a professor. In order to protect their son, they kept unpleasant information from him. He was not even allowed to have a key to the mailbox, lest he find our letters. So he first came to know that he had relatives in the West after his parents' death. At this point the Soviet Union only had a few more months left. I visited him during my stay in Petersburg. He was reluctant to speak of his parents.

*... and it led to a sort of blurring of her mind (for instance she tried to destroy the bookshelves in the corridor, walked around the apartment completely naked, then for one reason or another tried to climb onto the bedside stand where the TV stood). I gave her all the heart tablets I could find and went into the kitchen . . .*

Now, when I came to Russia more than twenty years later, my grandmother showered me with so many well-meant pieces of advice that I could barely breathe. Uncle Aaron complained to her in my presence that she never gave his son, my cousin Robert, this much attention, or that she ever would—yet Robert was ill and had plenty of problems. My grandmother offered some absurd answer, along the lines of “What attention does he need, what’s all the fuss?” My uncle looked at me, suddenly turned red, and left the room.

Grandmother was no longer the scrawny, agile lady I had remembered over the years. She fell in my presence several times and could move her bulky body from her bed to the toilet and back only with great difficulty. Yet even in her old age she managed to stay in the thick of things. She constantly checked up on her son, now over sixty. When he was at work she called him incessantly to see if he was really there.

Already on the first day of my visit I find myself alone with my grandmother. I discover that we have nothing to say to each other. The elaborate greetings have passed; the expressions of affection have too . . . We both smile and I am overcome with guilt. She surveys me warily. Where does my loyalty lie? Then she pitches a topic to me. I am about to be dragged into trench warfare.

She tells me “in confidence” that she is not too fond of her daughter-in-law, whose marriage to her son Aaron in 1955 she has still not fully come to grips with. Breathing heavily and barely keeping her body upright, she sits on the bed in her small room. Both the TV and radio are on, and a flood of words fills the room, making our conversation agonizing. Grandmother, who is hard of hearing, has to shout, but she adamantly refuses to turn off the devices, explaining that she constantly needs to hear human voices.

“Fanya is a good person,” she screams, “but she is dishonest, she puts on an act. Everything she does is for show. What do you make of her?”

I knew that my aunt was very fond of me as a child. Or so I was told. “She was nice to me,” I said.

“Yes, yes, to you she is nice,” my grandmother says, “simply because you’re from the West and bring her money and other things, yes . . . One night she was going out and I asked her where she was going and she answered, ‘That’s none of your business, I am not accountable to you!’ What kind of an answer is that? *Nekulturny*, the dear lady.”

Then a loud lamentation begins: she says that no-one ever tells her exactly who is going where and when, that she never knows exactly when anyone is coming home, that she is alone and abandoned.

Aunt Fanya and Uncle Aaron are sitting in the next room and I can hear their furious voices.

The important things are soon talked about and Grandmother has fallen asleep in bed with the TV and radio still on. I can fully comprehend the agitations and apprehensions of this old woman; I believe I see my own future in them.

I know that the germ of all my grandmother’s neuroses is already present in me, the same obsession with security and the addiction to having everything under control that sooner or later result in fury and powerlessness. What will happen when I am eighty? I notice how my grandmother tries to shoo away her own decline and approaching death by talking on the phone as she slides into ever-increasing despair at her repeated failures.

*We summoned the doctor on call, but even he was unable to calm the patient. Soon afterward she fell into a coma-like state, one that seemed to promise no positive outcome. As she gradually regained her speech, however, and also got back on her*

*feet (something she was absolutely not supposed to do) —every now and again she became somewhat violent—the doctors came; each had a different diagnosis. She had a healthy appetite, which helped her recover quickly. After three weeks she began to walk around the apartment again. All attempts to prevent these activities, because she overexerted herself, were met with resistance, usually with the words, “I won’t ask you for permission, I know myself what I should do!”*

Home, sweet home; everything remains as it has always been. I try to believe it is this way out of necessity. The geometric patterns on the pink wallpaper, the heavy curtains, the light-brown sofa that takes up half the living room, already cluttered with massive pieces of furniture. In the middle, the table that reaches almost all the way to the wall, so you have to press yourself against the wall and squeeze sideways to get from one corner to another. Overhead is a bright yellow lampshade with dusty fringes. Not to forget the dark-red tapestry, the ornamental porcelain plates mounted on the wall, the picture with the sailboat and the sun setting over the ocean.

My aunt and uncle have spent a whole month’s salary in order to offer their rich guest from the West a suitable feast: tartlets, rissoles, fish, vegetables and fruit.

Life has become dangerous, I am told. Going out in the evening could cost you your life. If you disregarded the danger you had only yourself to blame. In the following three weeks I would be on my guard constantly, occasionally looking over my shoulder.

“The neighbor’s son, a young man just your age,” says my grandmother as she held me by my sleeve, “went missing two weeks ago. He left for work in the morning and never came back. Everyone thinks he was murdered.”

“I spent my entire savings on a new door and a deadbolt lock,” said my uncle, “I had to invest the money in something anyway, otherwise the inflation would have gobbled it all up. Just two more months and it would have been only enough for a kilo of bananas.”

*In the morning she got up half asleep and did number one and number two on the floor, which is where we found her, and lugged her back to bed. This time she was not violent at all, she was completely conscious but unable to speak, which was quite agonizing. Gradually I learned to figure out what she wanted. She, on the other hand, always understood everything.*

I take the Metro to the Finland Station. There I board the express headed north. I get off five stops later. A rickety platform. At the end, a wooden railroad guard’s hut. Concrete steps lead down to the unlit tunnel under the tracks. The tunnel was not here before. I remember how my mother and I often used to crawl under the boxcar standing on the siding. I remember the slight fear of being run over, remember the steam locomotives that pulled the freight trains but are no longer in use today. I still remember how mother took me in her arms, lifted me onto the platform and then scrambled up herself. Back then, five new apartment complexes stood on the other side of the tracks, connected to the city by a wide

avenue. Swampy meadows. Meanwhile a new neighborhood has emerged here, with tree-lined paths and real parks. The old factories have disappeared from the other side of the station and the deep trenches overrun with weeds that marked the battlefield from 1941 to 1943.

I do not find our building right away. The wide-open area between the northern railroad line and the housing complex has been built up in the meantime. I have to consult the map. Finally I am standing in front of the entrance. The house looks almost abandoned. The hallways smell like cat piss. Up one flight of stairs, I stare at the plaque on our door that holds an unfamiliar name; to the right is the red button of the doorbell. At the last moment I pull my hand back. I go back downstairs and walk around the house to the courtyard, searching to see the window, behind which my parents' double bed, my crib, and my father's desk used to be. Grandmother had slept in the living room. The curtains are drawn.

I close my eyes and see two men rummaging through my crib. One lifts the mattress and throws it on the floor. A third ransacks my father's desk drawer. My father stands silently by. At the time he is still a slim man with thick, dark brown hair. Grandmother sits on my parents' bed with me on her lap. She holds me so tightly I can barely move. Grandmother is also silent. Where mother is I do not know. I wonder why father does not protest; when I so much as touch his desk drawer, he yells at me.

One of the strange men says something that I do not understand. "I refuse to answer that question." The man's voice gets louder, more hostile. I think to

myself, something bad is about to happen; I close my eyes and bury my head in my grandmother's bosom. "I also refuse to answer that question," I hear my father saying. Now all three men are talking at once. Their voices resonate with something that I cannot pinpoint, something more than just evil. One sentence has stayed with me: "We're taking you in now, asshole. And we'll make sure you don't come back, don't ever come back. Is that clear?!"

Father continues to stand motionless next to the desk. His face remains unchanged, seemingly unfazed by the other men's words. "Is that a question or a statement? If it is a question, I refuse to answer it."

Although at the age of four I could not understand what was going on, at no later time did my father seem as strong as he did then. The three men pack books, letters, carbon copies and a typewriter into a box. Then they leave, taking it all with them. Only then does my grandmother let me go. The house looks as if it has just been broken into. As Grandmother starts to tidy up the room, I watch Father drag himself into the living room, as if it were a slow-motion film and he had lost all feeling in his legs.

*Earlier, when she could still speak, she would sometimes start telling a story that we already knew. But we pretended to listen as though we were hearing it for the first time. I believe she was really pleased with the fact that we were so attentive and even asked questions...*

Father was what was later called a refusenik. During his time at the university he had a few colleagues who saw emigration to Israel as the only way to achieve and justify their existence as Jews. Zionists had formed small, loosely connected groups by the mid-60s.

“When we would meet in people’s apartments,” my father explained later, “we would turn on the radio and whisper messages to each other. I assumed that our apartments were bugged.”

In 1968—I was two and half at the time—my parents submitted an emigration application to the OWIR, the appropriate Soviet agency. A few months later their request was denied. They submitted another application, which would also be dismissed. Not until 1971 could they leave the country. In 1969 my father wrote a letter addressed to the Supreme Soviet. He castigated the policy toward minorities and called for the border to be opened for all who wanted to leave. He smuggled a copy of this letter to the West through a Danish reporter. The letter was published in Western newspapers and read on Israeli radio, whose shortwave service also broadcast in Russian and could be received in the Soviet Union. As a result, many friends broke off all contact with my parents—out of fear of reprisal.

Among my earliest childhood memories is this scene: it is a warm summer day and I am out and about with my grandmother. I am three years old and I am dragging a brown teddy bear by the ear. It has only one eye. Grandmother has promised to sew back the missing right eye in the evening. That way, when I put him down on my left in the commuter train he will be able to see me too. But



most of the time, the other passengers refuse to give up a seat for Mischa, my teddy bear.

I feel content. I just had a glass of soda that my grandmother bought me from a vending machine. The pleasantly sweet taste lingers in my mouth. The golden dome of one of Leningrad's largest cathedrals gleams in the midday sun. I have to squint when I look up at it. It is warm and sunny, unlike anything I have experienced before. I crouch down and feel the hot asphalt. Grandmother is not pleased by this behavior at all, not one bit. She says I am getting my hands dirty.

People are in no hurry on this wonderful Sunday. As we stood in line by the vending machine, a woman asks me what my name is and how old I am. Then she said something to Grandmother, to which she responded with a laugh. When grandmother laughs she gets dimples in her cheeks and her bushy eyebrows quiver. I am not afraid of people. And when someone looks scary, I hide under grandmother's skirt and the scary person has disappeared.

Grandmother turns into a side street with me, at the end of which lies the entrance to a park with a playground. Only a few people are on the side street. A woman comes towards us. I recognize her face; I have seen her many times before. Quick, what is her name again? I try to think. Mascha? No. Dascha. I am almost sure of it. It is Dascha, who used to visit us often. She gave me the fire-truck that is wound up with a small key and then drives around in a circle, sirens wailing. Father does not like it but Grandmother has nothing against it.

I yank myself free from Grandmother and run toward Dascha. "Dascha," I shout, "Dascha! I haven't seen you in so long!" I expect her to bend down, open

her arms and lift me up as most adults do. But Dascha acts very peculiar. She gives me an unfriendly look. Her face turns pale. Suddenly she turns her back on me and hurries away crossing to the other side of the street. I stand there, confused. Why is Dascha angry with me? Did I do something wrong? But I was always good when she visited us. I begin to cry. Grandmother takes me in her arms. "You can't do anything about it," she says, "forget it, just forget it, act as if it never happened." She quickly begins to tell me a fairytale about green sheep, flying dwarfs, and horses on bicycles. I have never heard anything this absurd from my grandmother.

*With her right hand she would sometimes make gestures that we could not clearly understand. But who can truly understand what a dying person is experiencing. We will find out all too soon, because this great test lies in store for us all.*

A must-see for all those who visit Petersburg is Petrodvorets, the castle and the park by the sea. Canals, fountains, pleasure palaces, and lakes. All my relatives raved about Petrodvorets. I am sitting with my cousin Robert in the commuter train. Across from us sits a middle-aged woman in a quilted jacket, boots, and a hand-knitted bonnet. It is autumn; it starts off being a little drafty and then the wind whistles through the window frames and the door cracks. The woman has a red nose and blue circles under her eyes. She smells of alcohol. Her slightly shaking hands are callused and chapped. I find myself staring at these hands; my gaze always wanders back to them involuntarily.

“It’s from working in the garden,” the woman says; I find it uncomfortable because I do not want to talk. “I have a small plot of land here where I grow potatoes and vegetables; it helps me get by.” My cousin begins to converse with her and learns that she is actually a mechanical engineer but cannot make ends meet on her salary. The woman curses as she talks about her money problems, complains about conditions in the country, and refers to the neighboring states, the so-called “near abroad.”

“Look at Estonia,” she says, “no inflation, the currency is more stable than the German mark.”

“And why is that?” a male voice comes from behind my ear, making me start. I turn around to see an old man with a high forehead and sunken cheeks.

“Because the Estonians have a government that loves its people,” he says, “not like our president, that drunk Yeltsin.”

“Oh really?” another passenger pipes up. “Have you drunk together, that you can be so sure of that and pass judgment on him?”

“Shut up back there, no one is talking to you. I’m talking to these folks here, not with you and your type.”

I grit my teeth and hope the man does not figure out what my true opinion is, does not guess my origins and where I live. Soft murmurs break out, the coach begins to seethe, even though no more of the passengers try to barge into the conversation. I observe the curious faces of our fellow passengers; see the glint in their eyes. I wonder whether it will come to a brawl. They seem to be waiting for something, these faces.

“I know the Estonians,” the old man continued, “They never should’ve gotten independence. They became way too clever and cheeky, but like she said, they love their own, not like our little guzzler . . . After the war I was part of a special operations unit in Tallinn, where we simply strung up the Estonian terrorists. I saw them dangling there with these very eyes, and yet my own mother is an Estonian. I guess that’s life.”

The mumbling in the car dies down. Now you can hear only the rattling of the wheels and the vibrating of the windowpanes. The tension is building, and instinctively I duck for cover.

“That’s all crazy talk,” the mechanical engineer breaks the silence. “I don’t begrudge the Estonians their freedom. The Jewish Mafia is responsible for our misery. Some say that Yeltsin himself is a Jew, but you can’t know for sure, oh well, and that pig Gaidar, that criminal, we all know he’s half-Jewish... It’s the same old story.”

“That’s common knowledge my dear, the Jews are without a doubt the worst criminals of our time, especially the American ones...”

How should I react? Should I give myself away, protest, use my fist, risk ending up in the hospital, have a run-in with the militia? I was scared. My cousin also did not say a word.

An old, bald-headed, brawny man rose to his feet and made his way toward us. Up to that point he had been following the scene silently, and I had noticed the look in his eyes.

“How old are you?” he asked the man behind me.

“Seventy-five,” he answered.

“So we’re from the same generation, but it wasn’t for scumbags and pigs like you that we won the war. Get off the train!” he yelled.

The other one turned pale. The old man grabbed the anti-Semite by the scruff of his neck and yanked him out of his seat before anyone could protest. The train was just pulling into the station and braking, so he hurtled through the car, shouting something that was drowned out by the screeching of the brakes, fell against a wall and was kicked out of the train after the doors opened. He did not try to get back on.

The woman across from us did not utter another word and stared ostentatiously out the window. The old man withdrew to his corner. All the other passengers acted as if nothing happened. Their faces turned glum again, with the indifference usual on public transportation.

“What am I doing here?” I thought. I briefly toyed with the notion of leaving the country the next day but was secretly pleased with what had transpired.

*Our never-ending activity intensified her disorientation, although we tried everything in our power to ensure that she ate enough and stayed clean.*

The route we take leads my cousin Vadim and me along the Nevsky Prospect—the city’s grand main boulevard with its classical buildings and pretentious

palaces—past a table set up in the middle of the pavement and stacked with flyers for the taking. We give the cluster of people a wide berth.

Two veterans, not looking very warlike, dressed in medal-studded uniforms, hold up a banner, “The Kuril Islands are essential for the existence of Russia, economically, politically and strategically.” Laughter from the passers-by. A plump lady in a kerchief, who clearly belongs to the uniformed individuals, stands between them and curses at the mockers. “Send this trio off to the Kuril Islands, they’ll take care of the mess there,” says someone. More laughter. Only a few stop by the table, study the flyers and the literature on display. The long walk and all the impressions make me hungry. Once we had forced our way through the herd to a café and paid for a voucher, we made our way to the counter, where we were given some sort of rice and meat dish in a metal bowl and sweet, dark coffee, from a rusty-looking metal container. The coffee is poured into a mug with a ladle.

“Don’t see all this as too grim,” says Vadim. He explains that these are phenomena of the transition: his salary—equivalent to two hundred Austrian shillings per month—, the anti-Semitism, the weird characters with their Kuril Islands, the cramped spatial conditions. He declares that he has chosen Russia; he feels at home here and would never emigrate, certainly not to Israel. He insisted that his young son receive his mother’s last name, not as obviously Jewish-sounding as his. “When you’ve chosen a country, you must make the best of it. Why should I complicate my son’s life unnecessarily? My job is to pave the way for him. What he then does with his life is up to him.” He is probably right, it

is not my place to argue, and definitely not as a “Westerner”; but now the food tastes even worse and I leave the coffee untouched.

An old woman comes to our table, one of the many elderly people who sit for hours in cafés waiting to pounce. “Well, boys,” she says as she looks over my cousin’s shoulder directly onto my plate. “Are we going to finish today?” A short pause. “If not, would you mind if I help you clear that plate?”

*We managed to get hold of some Cerebrolysin at a private pharmacy for a lot of money (an Austrian product, incidentally). I went from pharmacy to pharmacy. I am sure you would not have been able to do much more and should not torment yourselves with reproaches. I promised to do everything humanly possible and I kept my word...*

Grandmother complains that she is not loved, only tolerated, that she had to give up her own apartment and barely has room to move anymore. She says she no longer wants to live. For decades she lived alone and is now, for better or for worse, at the mercy of her daughter-in-law. The woman next door still has not found her son, either in the morgue or in prison.

She says with a grin that everything is actually getting worse and worse. From the pogroms she experienced as a child, the Stalinist terror that cost her brother his life, the war, my parents’ emigrating—a hard blow for her—right up to the present, when all of a sudden nothing she had learned under seven

decades of Soviet rule applied anymore. Besides that, poverty had returned. Better? No, it was never truly better before, only different.

*He sat by her bed every night, they held hands and sobbed, now and again he said something, stroked her limp hand, her head. He was very attached to his mother, perhaps too much so.*

The uncle owns four television sets, a VCR, three telephones, three radios. He invested everything in these devices, back when money was still worth something, surely the dollars we sent him also made their way there. It was no wonder: electronics were always his passion. But as a Jew in the fifties he was not allowed to study electrical engineering and radio technology.

The gadgets are turned off shortly after midnight and it all starts up again at seven—the morning news on the radio. The political events come thick and fast. Yeltsin has dissolved the parliament. I am watching as the news is announced on television.

“Right,” my uncle shouts, “now there is going to be civil war!” Then he stays in bed for half the day with a bad migraine.

“If Yeltsin falls, then God have mercy on us,” he said to me later. “When people curse, most of them forget who ran the country into the ground. It definitely wasn’t Yeltsin; it was the others . . . And once he is gone, the first thing that will happen will be a pogrom.”



“Oh, stop it,” my aunt said, “you’ve been talking about pogroms for three years but nothing’s happened.” Her voice sounds a bit unsteady.

When I ask Grandmother for her opinion she just shrugs. “You see,” she said, “I’m going to die in a few weeks. Don’t tell me otherwise, I’m sure of it. Perhaps I should be anxious, or contemplate what will come after I am gone, for my children’s or my grandchildren’s sake, but I just can’t bring myself to care anymore.”

*She ate a good dinner at six; at seven she called me by knocking on her wooden bedframe. The last thing she did was gesture that her chest and stomach were hurting.*

I was on the move again. It was late in the evening. The train was approaching Vyborg, the station on the Finnish border. My fascination with the stations we passed in the night had waned.

The last thing I saw in Russia was a billboard: “Snickers, you are not you when you are hungry!” I went into the dining car, bought myself some chocolate and devoured it so fast I felt sick.

*They say you should dress the departed in the clothes they loved the most; so we put on her purple skirt and her favorite brown flowered sweater. A white kerchief was wrapped around her head and a pretty blanket was laid over her body, and that is how we committed her to the flames. The next day we had to travel with the*

*urn all the way across the city to get to the Jewish cemetery (which did not have a crematorium). Taxis are hard to get and besides, we were outraged at the absurd prices the taxi drivers charge. Well, dear ones let me make it short. Something unfortunate happened on the way. There was the usual crowding as we transferred from the streetcar to the bus. Aaron, already on the bus—thank God—had the plastic bag containing the urn knocked out of his hand. The jar broke of course, and the ashes scattered all over the floor of the bus. The other passengers yelled at us, someone tripped and fell. But we were eventually able to bring what remained of the ashes to the cemetery and bury them. The heck with it; the deceased no longer feel pain, and the living get on with it.*

# SEBASTIAN AND THE ALIENS REGISTRATION BUREAU

**By Wladimir Kaminer**

Quite a while ago my three-year-old son began receiving letters addressed to him personally. Not love-notes from his nursery-school buddies but official letters from the Aliens Registration Bureau. They read:

“Dear Mr. Sebastian,

You have been residing illegally in Germany for almost three years now. This simply cannot work. Please call us as soon as possible.

Yours sincerely,

Spende”

Sebastian recently discovered the telephone and it has become his latest toy. After quickly discovering that every number combination has an amusing voice behind it, he now calls all sorts of people by randomly pressing buttons. He listens attentively but he does not have much to say yet so he just grunts pleasantly and hangs up after a while. Such a telephone call would be poor consolation for Herr Spende, I thought. So I took the matter into my own hands and called the Aliens Registration Bureau. Herr Spende turned out to be a woman.

“I am sure you know, Herr Kaminer, that in Germany every child needs to apply for a juvenile passport five months after birth at the latest. Your child is already three years old and still hasn’t reported to us.”

I defended myself: “Don’t be upset, we simply forgot, you see he was never asked for a passport in nursery school and he hasn’t had any contact with the police or with the border patrol. Besides, we’ve been very busy.”

“Are you kidding me? Do you think we are just playing games here?” Frau Spende responded furiously.

“No, definitely not. I’ll come over there immediately and apply for Sebastian’s juvenile passport,” I said, attempting to calm her down.

“You won’t get a juvenile passport for your son because neither you nor your wife are German citizens. Your son is considered a foreigner and must start by applying for a residence permit,” she explained.

“But he has never been abroad, except in his mother’s womb. Since he was delivered he has been living permanently in Germany. Even if he wanted to he could not have travelled because, as you rightly stated, he doesn’t have a juvenile passport.” I answered.

“You’re trying to mock me again, aren’t you,” she replied, insulted.

Expecting the worst, I asked if I could not download the permanent residence application from the Internet or possibly receive it by mail. “Neither nor” was the curt answer. I had to pick up the application in person. Then I sat down at the table with Sebastian to fill it out; the “application for a residence

permit” consisted of twenty-seven questions that all needed to be answered in detail, as Frau Spende stressed several times.

The first ten questions pertained to Sebastian’s family background: prior convictions, previous marriages, and former citizenships. I answered them simply by writing in “child.” Things became quite problematic from the twentieth question onward.

“What is the purpose of your stay in the Federal Republic of Germany?” I read out loud to Sebastian. He grunted. He had not quite understood the purpose of his stay here. For this question there were five possible answers listed in the application: visit, tourist travel, study, starting work, etc. After going back and forth for a while we decided on “etc.”

“How long do you intend to stay in the Federal Republic of Germany?” I asked my son. Sebastian grunted again excitedly. Filling out the application seemed to please him, but he preferred to play “hunting the wild piglet” with me. The game goes like this: Sebastian hides behind a curtain like a wild piglet and I have to tiptoe around the apartment, calling out for it. You only have to ‘sort of’ look for him because the piglet grunts so loudly that it is impossible to miss the curtain it is hiding behind. He loves this game more than anything and simply cannot get enough of it. So in the application I wrote “eternally.” At once I began to have doubts: is “eternally” overdoing it a little? I crossed out “eternally” and wrote “a long time” in its place.

“Do you plan to seek employment in the Federal Republic of Germany?”  
Hmm. . . I looked deep into Sebastian’s eyes. At times it did not seem it would

happen, but who knows . . . I cautiously wrote in “not out of the question.”

Sebastian grunted again.

Two weeks later I paid Frau Spende a visit. She read through the application and became annoyed again.

“You are pulling my leg again!” she said reproachfully. “Very well, then,” she said in conclusion, “we waited for you for two years, now you have to wait a few hours for us.” I sat down in the waiting room and took a thick book out of my bag. Frau Spende turned out to be a good person and an outstanding employee. And she had not contrived all this nonsense about the application on her own. After just twenty minutes she called me in and I received—all at once—Sebastian’s residence permit and a new super-thick hardcover passport. Now we can fly with him all around the world.

## MY FRIEND VICTOR

**By Vladimir Vertlib**

Someone tugged at my sleeve. A little boy around my age stood next to me. His ears stuck out, and he had brick-red hair and he twisted his freckle-dotted face into a grin, while his eyes remained serious. He said something unintelligible that sounded neither like Russian nor Hebrew and I was so startled that I had to take a few steps back.

Victor had spoken in Ukrainian, since, as I would later learn, he came from a small Ukrainian city not far from the Moldovan border. Like my family, his had immigrated to Israel only a few weeks earlier.

“Let’s run away,” Victor said in Russian, after he had picked up on my confusion. “It’s really easy: over this fence and up the hill. We just need to be careful. The teacher mustn’t see us.”

“And then?”

“Then comes the big street, where the bus runs, and across it there are the sand dunes—that’s where we have to go.”

“Why?” I did not see why we should sneak away from the nursery school.

“There’s a cave there, and a dwarf lives inside.”

“A dwarf?” I asked suspiciously, “You’re lying! There aren’t any dwarfs—my mama said so.”

“I swear!” he said solemnly, “If I’m lying let me be struck dead and start rotting right away.”

That sounded quite convincing, the more so because he was not struck dead and definitely did not start rotting. I offered him a stick of gum; he immediately stuck it in his mouth, looked around nervously, and whispered in my ear, “Can I trust you with a secret that you mustn’t tell anyone else?” I nodded and held my breath.

“This dwarf,” he whispered, “has a magic wand. If he touches us with it, we’ll be able to speak Hebrew just like that, I mean without having to learn it, and we’ll be smarter than all the others. We can even cast a spell on them and turn them into frogs or giants. And we can make sick people well again and healthy people sick.”

“I’ll turn the teacher into a broomstick,” I said, then thought for a second and asked, “Can I get myself a little brother or sister?”

“Of course,” he answered, in a voice that dispelled all possible doubt, “but only a brother, not a sister because the dwarf isn’t a dwarfette, see.”

That seemed perfectly logical to me, and we set off. Unfortunately the teacher was faster than us. She ran after us, scolding, and caught us before we could even see the street and the sand dunes beyond.

We tried again and again, but we never made it to the magic cave. The preschool was a one-story building and behind it was a large yard with a playground. In the yard stood two eucalyptus trees, which we often used to climb, even though it was strictly forbidden. From above we could look down



onto the flat roof of the preschool and peer into the distance for something exciting, something unusual, also hear the other children calling to us, until we finally obeyed the teacher's orders and came down. Since we were about the same size we would stand next to each other in the line-up, dance together in a circle, waving little flags as the teacher played a patriotic song from the pioneering days of the Jewish state on her guitar. We both dressed up for Purim as dwarfs wearing earth-colored hoods as if we had just come out of a cave.

"You two look so alike but somehow one can tell that you aren't brothers," the teacher said to us one time, and laughed. It seemed quite odd to me and I could not understand why she found it so funny. I was actually a little insulted, perhaps because I had always wished for a brother, and all the other kids had siblings. That evening I asked my mother to give birth to a little sibling for me, preferably that very night.

Victor had picked up Hebrew fast. It was his fourth language—after Ukrainian, which he got from his mother, Russian from his father, and Yiddish from his great-aunt and uncle, who had stayed behind in the Ukraine. Sometimes he would mix up the four languages, and only I learned how to decipher his secret code. I was jealous when he raced around with the other children. My mother would hold him up as an example: "Look at how well Victor speaks Hebrew," she said, "and how good he is about playing with other children. You isolate yourself and hardly want anything to do with anyone else. Your teacher has been complaining that you pretend not to understand her. She views that as a provocation."

I was not familiar with the word 'provocation,' but I liked it. When an adult asked me how I was doing I would often respond proudly, "I'm doing well. I am a provocation."

I still recall the noises that came out of Victor's parents' bedroom; they resembled the huffing and puffing of a locomotive about to depart. Someone explained that this was Victor's grandmother, who was ill and had difficulty breathing. I was afraid to enter the room, afraid to get infected. I was told that a heart condition was not contagious; but when it came to such things I did not believe a single word the adults said.

My parents and Victor's would meet regularly and discuss things I did not understand.

"In the Ukraine my son was clearly 'the Jew,' because of his appearance and last name; in school he was no doubt labeled the 'filthy Jew,'" Victor's father explained in his usual phlegmatic way, in a quiet voice but with ironic undertones. "Whereas in Israel he is a goy because his mother is not Jewish. So, ladies and gentlemen I ask you, where should justice be found?"

"Justice is a Jewish joke," my mother answered dryly.

Victor and I preferred to make a sand castle in front of our building and escape the boredom with which the adults ruined their afternoons and weekends. We lived in a housing development with about ten apartment blocks on the eastern edge of Tel Aviv. This was a great privilege, as many of the Soviet immigrants were assigned apartments in newly built-up areas far from the major cities, not seldom in the Negev. I would have loved to be in the desert, I

even dreamed of camels. I never did see one with my own eyes, even though our settlement stood in the middle of a sandy, stony landscape with only a two-lane road leading to the city.

My parents became even more irritable and depressed after every conversation with the family they had gotten to know. It was quite peculiar: a few hours with good friends and my parents would argue even more than usual. Their agitated voices were audible in my room, and sometimes my name would come up. Had I done something wrong? Perhaps they were upset because I adamantly refused to offer my hand to my school friend's grandmother and say good day to her.

One night I could not fall asleep. My conscience was eating me up. I slid out of bed, opened the door to my bedroom, and froze, dazzled by the light. My father was sitting on the sofa, wiping the sweat off his brow with his palm. My mother stood in front of him, hands on her hips, shouting, "What did you expect, you dreamer? That everyone here would live together in harmony like brothers and sisters? That happiness would grow on trees and be there for the picking? There is dirty foam here as well, just like everywhere else."

"Only the foam is in the immigration office," my father replied, " and the housing office and the employment agency and the political parties. Why do we always get involved with that foam, tell me that."

I could not make head or tail of what my parents were saying. When I hear foam, I think of father's shaving cream and the frothy foam on his beer because he often drank beer at night. What was so bad about that? I could not

think of an answer. My parents noticed me standing there, stopped their conversation and ordered me back to bed.

That night I dreamed of a ship cruising along Israel's foamy Mediterranean coast.

I reported the peculiar conversation I had overheard to my friend Victor. It was immediately clear to him, "My God, you're such an idiot," he said. "foam are people who foam at the mouth. My father says that when you ask the authorities for anything they start to foam at the mouth because they have to work."

One morning my parents woke me at an unusually early hour. We were going on vacation, they said. Three bulging suitcases stood in the hall. We left for the airport in a taxi. It was quite an exciting experience, as it was only my second or third taxi ride. I was informed in the airplane that we would not be returning to Israel.

I was sad to lose my friends. I would especially miss Victor. Also my children's books, the record player, all the records and most of the toys I would never see again. But that evening I was plunged into a new world.

An emigrant my parents had met at the entrance to the Soviet Consulate brought us to the "Russian castle" in a district of Vienna called Brigittenau. It was an apartment house occupied almost exclusively by Russian Jews, who, like my parents, had emigrated to Israel, had left the country disappointed, and were waiting in Vienna; the hub of emigration from the East, for permission to return to the Soviet Union, their original home. For weeks. For months. They earned

their living in Austria as day laborers, house cleaners, babysitters. . . the general mood was quite depressed. A nervousness hung in the air, one that bordered on despair. Their hope of returning “home” was slim. The land of the proletariat wanted her lost daughters and sons back only in the rarest of instances.

# GERMAN PASSPORT

**By Wladimir Kaminer**

Many of the compatriots I had gotten to know twelve years ago in an asylum seekers' camp could profess to having established themselves successfully in their new lives. The only thing most of them had not yet managed to accomplish was becoming German citizens. Why, you ask? The appropriate legal basis was in place, the time was ripe, you needed only to bundle together the usual hundred forms and head over to the appropriate offices. A few made it through the legal jungle; several got stuck in it, or are still weaving their way through the various agencies, as they have been doing for years.

My old friend Dmitri Feldman—who, together with his brother, published the largest Russian-language newspaper in Germany—knew all about this, especially since a year ago he was voted onto the board of the Jewish community in Berlin. Feldman was responsible for the so-called integration matters. During his office hours he was visited—almost exclusively—by people who were not making any headway through the red tape. Theirs were almost always hopeless situations. Recently a mother came in to complain that her twelve-year-old daughter could not be naturalized because the appropriate authorities required a report on her knowledge of German from the first and second grade, but she had one only from the fourth grade.

“We also need one from the first grade, that’s the law,” said the official.

The school refused to issue such a report however, and claimed that there was no such thing as a language test in the first two grades. The mother ran back and forth. Our friend Feldman could not really help her; he could only set up an appointment with Berlin's Senator of the Interior and put the question to him.

"If the girl has a report from the fourth grade it means that she can speak German; otherwise she wouldn't have been able to make it to the fourth grade."

"Yes," said the Senator of the Interior, "you are absolutely right."

"Now what do we do?"

"Nothing. Those are the laws and I can't change them," said the Senator of the Interior.

For every law that made it possible to become a citizen, there was another that blocked it. For instance, the one stating that the unemployed and the welfare recipients had no right to be naturalized. But that was the case only in Berlin-Brandenburg.

"Why are the unemployed in Munich, Hamburg, and Stuttgart permitted to be naturalized, but not those in Berlin?" Feldman asked the Senator of the Interior.

"Because Germany is a democratic and federalist country, in which each state can devise its own laws. And Berlin doesn't want to give up this right."

So here an unemployed person had no right to be naturalized. And those who were not unemployed might become so at anytime. An older woman who had toiled for years as a nurse in Berlin waited many years for a decision from the Naturalization Bureau. Nothing came. Then she was fired. The authorities

wrote to her immediately, saying: You cannot be naturalized because you are unemployed.

These were all people who had unlimited residence permits, people who could never give up their residence in any case—whether with or without German passports. It was a rather impossible task for a fifty-five-year-old nurse to find a job in Berlin. But the law was the law. Feldman could not help this woman either, but in the meantime he had learned how to put his fellow countrymen in a good mood.

“Look at me!” he said in such hopeless situations, “I have been living here for twelve years; I founded an important newspaper and hold office hours in the Jewish community on matters of integration. But I haven’t been naturalized either, have only a foreign passport like you.”

His visitors then no longer felt like isolated outsiders who were being treated unjustly. If the man with the fancy tie did not have a normal passport then it almost seemed just.

Like me, Feldman moved to Berlin with his family in 1990. He was admitted as a Jewish quota refugee and enjoyed the exception of not having to wait ten years to apply for German citizenship but could do so after eight. His only misfortune was that he lived in Wilmersdorf, where separate laws prevail. Four years earlier gunfire had erupted in Wilmersdorf. The newspaper said that Russian pimps were partitioning their spheres of influence in the red-light district at gunpoint. There were two deaths. The next day Feldman and his wife arrived at the district office to submit an application for naturalization. The first



question the official asked him was whether he had been present at the shootings the previous day. Since then a lot of time has passed. The officer in question has since been promoted, but Feldman still calls the Wilmersdorf district office once a year to check on the status of his application.

“I have been here only a year and a half, I still need to learn the ropes,” said the new official.

Feldman threatened to bring a grievance.

“If you bring a grievance, I’ll have to address it. That takes a lot of time and one of your fellow countrymen will have to wait even longer for naturalization,” was her response.

There were rumors that many rich Russians had settled in Wilmersdorf and Schöneberg. As a result, the officials handled the naturalization application with care—they did not even touch them. Surely these Russians would not become unemployed, but perhaps at some point they would turn out to be Mafiosi. Who could tell?

For us in East Berlin, the matter of citizenship went quite briskly. My wife and I hesitated until the last moment because you generally want to spare yourself the annoyance of dealing with officials. Besides, we had managed to survive for twelve years without passports, just with stateless persons’ travel documents issued by the German Aliens Registration Bureau—and we felt just fine with them. As quota refugees we could travel freely almost anywhere in Europe. But then the travel documents did not get renewed and we had to go to the district office to assert our right to German citizenship.

After only six weeks we were naturalized, though under false names and without the children. There were legal reasons for that, of course. In Germany, foreign names were permitted to be entered into documents only in ISO standardized forms. So I am currently called Kamjenier and not Kaminer, and my wife sounds like an alien: Ol'ga Grigor Evna. Technically, in order to receive German citizenship we would have had to present an affidavit stating that we no longer had Russian citizenship. Since we had left the Soviet Union and had never applied for Russian citizenship, we had refugee status and did not need to request additional certification from the Russian authorities. According to Russian law, this procedure would have taken years and probably would have ended in disaster, since we had never registered ourselves in Russia.

Logically enough our children, who were born in Germany and had never been to Russia, were not recognized as refugees. So they had to submit an affidavit stating that they either had or did not have Russian citizenship. Or they had to wait until they turned sixteen and see what would happen. The Russian side said that such an affidavit—a non-citizenship affidavit—did not exist, but no one wanted to put that in writing.

In spite of these difficulties our contact with the German authorities did not break off. We had become German citizens, even with only temporary papers, false names, and stateless children; but what the heck; there was no going back. We also had no fear of the officials per se; we knew that they were not evil and sometimes in person even quite nice.

They did not have to think about their jobs at all, just be aligned with the law and follow the regulations. And I knew: sooner or later we, and most of the others, would make it.

Currently more than thirty thousand people from all over the world are waiting for their German citizenship. I do not know how many officers are on their cases. Nevertheless, we applied four months ago for a name change in order to retrieve our lost identities from the dubious ISO standardization. For that I needed to fill out ten pages' worth of forms and bring in a crate full of Proof of Earning Certificates, tax statements, and my parents' and my grandparents' notarized addresses. The official in charge assured us repeatedly over the phone that our file was right on top of the pile on his desk. We hope it fares well.

# 2

## Language

# I REALLY SHOULD NOT BE SAYING THIS, BUT EUROPE DOES NOT EXIST

**By Yoko Tawada**

I remember a conversation I had with Xander, a character from my story “The Bath.” At the time Xander regarded the “whiteness” of his skin as a feature of his body and not as a metaphor.

“Do you truly believe that skin has a color?” I asked cautiously, so as not to slip into the tone of a know-it-all. He laughed briefly and answered, “What sort of question is that? Or perhaps you think that color comes from under the skin?”

I offered the following explanation, like a physics teacher: “There is no color under the skin either, it comes from the way light plays on the surface of the skin. There is no color *in* us.”

Growing uneasy, Xander replied, “But the way light plays on your skin is different from the way it does on ours.” I was startled by his emphasis on the words “your” and “ours.” I could not understand what he was trying to say: if being “white” was such an important part of his identity, then logically he would have to argue that no “white” person had paper-colored skin and that what the so-called whites had in common existed on an entirely different level.

He stroked his right arm with his left hand, as if to assure himself he possessed white skin.

I responded, "Light behaves differently on each person's skin, from month to month, from day to day."

Without light there is no color; and when you find yourself in total darkness, without ascribing anything negative to it, it offers us a chance to free our eyes from everyday images. Since visual perception comes to us so naturally, we tend to accept it at face value. Out of laziness we apply our linguistic images to the visual instead of letting the play of light translate into language. He is a black, says the brain, and the eyes become incapable of actually perceiving his skin.

Because I was not accustomed to taking note of people's hair and eye color, it never occurred to me that colors in European daylight reflected differently off me from the way they did off Europeans. What really struck me was that a European body always looks for a gaze. Not only the face but also the fingers and even the back hanker to be looked at. Hence each person is obligated to cast a gaze at some other person's body. Not just that: the eyes are also obligated to express a reaction to what they see. Though it is acceptable to render a negative response, it is not permitted to show no reaction. Often I had to close my eyes on the subway or the bus because this task had become too much for me. I frequently received aggressive remarks on the street simply because I did not glance at a man. I prefer not to observe every person visually, much less form an opinion on each figure, because then the opposite process would occur: my body would become something that would be continually recreated by each glance. The body that wants and needs to be seen is the

European one. Narcissism need not even play a role. This need to be seen is based much more on the fear that something that cannot be seen can disappear.

I can think of two actors associated with the word "Europe": one is female and the other is male.

The male character wishes above all to be beheld by the public. Though you can criticize him, you must not say that he does not exist. It is not easy to criticize him, because he constantly criticizes himself and so promptly and well that no one could do it better. He even criticizes another culture when he is too influenced by it. His critique goes as follows: "Why do you not remain as you are? Why do you imitate me? I am a bad example."

Europe is a master at criticism, and that constitutes one of her attributes. When she does not criticize she disappears. Her greatest fear is non-existence. I too attempted to criticize her because she demanded it of me, but I did not succeed. The most I could do was repeat her self-criticism. A better critique did not come to mind. For me, criticism was never a creative way of expressing myself and that which is foreign. For her it is dishonest, mendacious, almost immoral to criticize others and not oneself. She never talks about any person, any happening or institution without criticizing it. Not because she wants to tear it all down, but because criticism is the basis of her thinking.

The female form of Europe is the one who allegedly disappeared from view in mythical times. Now and then in a bar, I saw certain Europeans dressed as knights, sitting at their regular table and talking about the lost Europe. They determined each time that Europe was lost and discussed how one could find

her again. They drank good wine and after a while headed peacefully home. I suppose the knights were only pretending that a real character had gone missing, and they named her Europe. You see, they needed a character that had gone missing and hence could be idolized.

When I wrote in a poem that Europe does not exist, I certainly did not mean that she had gotten lost. Rather, I wanted state that right from the beginning Europe was created as a figure of loss. Sometimes I feel the need to embody this figure again. It is, however, not possible. When I say, “Europe is suffering from a middle-ear infection,” or “Europe’s little finger is longer than her ring finger,” her ears and fingers turn into a metaphor and her body loses its corporeality.

The belief that only European music is real music is probably more widespread in Japan than in Europe. Many Japanese people do not hesitate to consider culture from a Eurocentric perspective. In their eyes, Europeans do not own European culture, because it is so easy for others to imitate. They say the best culture is the culture that can best imitate European culture and that definitely would not be European culture, but Japanese culture for example. This twisted nationalism has now become an everyday reality in Japan.

Japan does not exist in Europe, but you cannot find Japan outside of Europe. In order to see Europe I need to use a Japanese lens. Since anything resembling a “Japanese point of view” did not and does not exist—and that is not an unfortunate fact as far as I am concerned—this lens must inevitably be fictitious and constantly needs to be manufactured anew. In this respect my



Japanese point of view is not authentic, despite the fact that I was born and raised in Japan.

Yet my Japanese lens is not an instrument that can be bought from a store. I cannot put it in or take it out at will. This lens grew out of my eyestrain and grew into my flesh, as my flesh grew into the lens.

You could picture Europe not only as a single figure, but also as a collection of images. I could take a few pretty postcards from my collection and construct an imaginary world from them. I will not do that here though, because the danger exists that the result will simply be an inversion of orientalism.

The images—whether directly or indirectly—always have a connection with optical perception. I however no longer want to perceive Europe visually but rather with my tongue. If my tongue tastes Europe and says Europe, perhaps I could cross the line between the object and the spectator. Because that which has been eaten enters the stomach and that which is spoken travels through the brain to the flesh.

When I came to Europe I had nothing to say about Europe because I did not know any language that my new fellow human beings could understand. Bit by bit, I learned Xander's language by repeating everything he said.

This language, which I now use to speak about Europe, is also a European language. Perhaps not only the language but also the forms of argumentation and the tone belong to Europe and not to me. I repeat Europe in Europe. I no sooner begin to speak about Europe than I simply repeat her. Therefore I stop speaking. I need to find another way deal with her.

## OUR DIALECTS

**By Wladimir Kaminer**

“Are you raising your children as Germans or Russians?” my old friend Andrej, a Russian journalist, asked me.

We were not too sure.

“Their first words are the most important,” Andrej explained to us. “If the first words are Russian, then your children are Russian,” he said.

But even this simple criterion brought no clarity to our situation. Our children’s first words were international. First “Mama” and “Papa,” then “auto” and a little later, quite surprisingly, “idiots.” The latter became my son’s favorite word. For him the word “idiot” did not carry a derogatory connotation, it was more of a greeting. As Sebastian rolled to nursery school in his stroller after a good night’s sleep, he would wave cheerfully at the people on the street and enthusiastically cry out, “Idiots! Idiots!” We told our friend Andrej that it was common practice; our children speak “Berlin dialect.”

It made us anxious nonetheless. Where had the little boy learned such a word? He could not have picked it up from us at home. Maybe at nursery school? I figured that would be unlikely, since I had never heard such language from his nursery teachers or comrades. The only possible source was my father, Grandpa Vitja. He sometimes had a quite depressed attitude toward life, especially when

he was under the influence of a six-pack of *Berliner Kindl*. Then he sometimes cursed to himself.

Grandpa denied it all of course; he would never allow himself to use such terms around young children. He claimed that when his grandchildren came to visit, he spoke only high Russian. He felt slandered and demanded the right to confront his accuser. Sebastian kept on calling everyone and everything “idiots.”

“Do not call them that,” I lectured him. “They are pedestrians.”

That word however, was too complicated for him and I could not think of a better one, so we stuck with calling it “Berlin dialect.” Not only people on the street were idiots, but now also noodles on his plate, airplanes in the sky, and soap bubbles on the balcony. I felt guilty because I could not give my son a better alternative to this handy term. I still had much to learn myself. Just last week I received the revised manuscript of my new novel from my editor. “Dear Vladimir,” she wrote, “the word ‘shit’ appears in your new novel seventy-one times. That is not what one would expect from a Kaminer.” For that reason she had diligently changed the word ‘shit’ into ‘damn’ seventy-one times. In some cases I had to admit that she was right, for instance when the word appears twice in the same sentence it does not carry the same punch. Otherwise I could explain my editor’s concerns only in reference to “Munich dialect.” The publishing house is in Munich and I am in Berlin; and these two cities are worlds apart. For whatever shit happened, a person from Munich would say damn, and the opposite was true of us. The heck with it! Almost everyone here has his or

her own dialect. I experimented with new words out loud. "Idiots!" my son said, and laughed.

# THE TALISMAN

By Yoko Tawada

There are many women in this city who carry a piece of metal in their ear; for that specific purpose they make a hole in their earlobe. Not long after arriving, I wanted to ask what that piece of metal meant. I just was not sure if I could speak about it candidly. In my guidebook it said that in Europe you should not ask questions that pertain to religion or the body of a person with whom you are not yet familiar. I sometimes thought that the metal—especially when it took on the shape of a sickle, a bow, or an anchor—could be some form of talisman.

At first glance the city did not seem to be that dangerous. So why do so many women walk around town with talismans? Granted, it is sometimes scary to walk alone through the city. There are simply too few people living in this city. It is even the case that during the day I would often walk home from the train station without seeing a single person.

If the piece of metal is meant to be some form of talisman, then why is it so common among women? I did not know the name of the evil force from which women wanted the talisman to protect them. They did not disclose the name to me and I never truly tried to find it out. Where I come from, they say that the name of an evil being should not be uttered aloud, lest it appear in reality. They say you should refer to it indirectly. For instance, instead of a name you can simply say “it.”

Gilda, a student who lived in the same house as I did, walked around with a triangular piece of metal in her ear. She told me—the first time we had a longer conversation—that a fifty-five-year-old librarian at the university had committed suicide the day before. This librarian fought the introduction of computers in her department to the death. Gilda said that the woman was not intelligent; she did not realize that computers were simply tools and not monsters. Apparently the introduction of computers was not the actual reason for her suicide. She had been severely depressed for the last ten years. “She lived alone,” said Gilda, touching her triangular piece of metal.

What is the meaning of this talisman, I asked Gilda. Startled, she looked at me and asked if I meant her “earring.” The word “ring” had an unsettling effect on me. Gilda answered flippantly that the earring was just a piece of jewelry and did not have any other meaning. As I had guessed, Gilda did not want to talk about the significance of the earring. Instead she told me that women with a high level of education get their ears pierced relatively late, whereas working-class women wore earrings from the time they were girls.

I had read in a book there are cultures in which a part of the sexual organs is cut off during the initiation process. The sexual organ can be represented by another part of the body, for instance the feet or the ears. In this case not the earring but the earlobe must carry the significance. But why was Gilda so afraid? One day she placed two porcelain dogs on the windowsill. She did not want to put the flowerpots I had given her there. These dogs were supposed to sit there the whole day and guard the apartment, much like the

stone dogs in my country that guard the Shinto shrines. Gilda said that when she was alone in the apartment, she often had the feeling that a stranger might come into her room through the window.

Once she came to me in the middle of the night saying that something was wrong with her computer. It really surprised me that she had woken me up for this. Gilda was aware I did not know the first thing about computers. Soon I figured out what it was really about: Gilda claimed that some being was living in her computer and producing sentences. She kept on discovering sentences in her papers that she definitely had not written herself. She did not want to give me an example because these sentences were really obscene. I suggested that Gilda attach a talisman to the computer so that the wicked force would leave the computer and no other would enter. I referred to it as a “wicked force” because I did not know what else to call it.

What Gilda ended up choosing as a talisman turned out to be very different from what I had pictured: I had pictured a puppet made from raffia or a piece of snakeskin. But Gilda bought three sticky notes from a health food store. A picture was painted on each note, a picture that was probably meant to embody the wicked force: a car, an atomic power plant and a gun. Above each picture were the words: No Thanks.

It struck me as too polite to reject an evil force and thank it at the same time, but perhaps the using the word “thanks” was just an attempt to avoid aggravating it.

Gilda stuck the stickers to the front of her computer next to the screen and seemed pleased. A week later she bought three more stickers and stuck them on her bicycle, her refrigerator and the door to her apartment.

I do not think she was reassured by them. Her computer had been purged, but apparently she got the feeling that her body had now been invaded by a foreign being. She bought herself a sweater with a large image of a tiger's head on it. The tiger cast a sharp eye at whoever looked at Gilda. She also bought a jacket made from the skin of a dead animal. Gilda wore tight pants with leopard print and a belt that had metallic triangles clamped onto it. I would not have been surprised if she had also put on a mask with a lion's face.

In spite of all this, she was still anxious. At dinner, for instance, if she were sitting alone in the kitchen eating, she would suddenly have the feeling that the very thing she was trying to escape from was now in her soup. She told me that for that reason she planned to fast for a few weeks. She told me that there was so much poison in the food, and besides, she had too much unnecessary flesh on her body. Gilda was not fat, but she could not love her own body because she sensed a foreign element in it. "Chemicals," she called it. Every culture has one or more cleansing rituals. In this city, however, the day and the hour for when the ritual is meant to begin, or the prayer that goes with it, are not set in stone. There is no stipulation for it; at least there were no rules that I was aware of. One day Gilda bought herself a book about fasting, and a few days later, when I met her on the staircase, she was already doing it. Her face was not as narrow as it normally was, but rather round, as if water had built up under her skin. The piece of metal



in her ear seemed heavier and colder than usual. I swallowed the words I intended to say to her because she suddenly looked like a stranger who—even though I was living in her language—did not understand me.

A sticky note on her door was flapping, trying to detach itself from the smooth metal surface.

# 3

## Identity

# I AM NOT ANNA!

**By Barbara Honigmann**

Frau Schulze lived on the second floor and I lived in the attic. I was a student, and to this day I do not know what profession Frau Schulze had. When I hurried past her door I would often hear a peculiar noise from behind it and sometimes a peculiar silence, both of which I found quite eerie, and at times I had the feeling that she was standing behind the door, lying in wait for me. In the evening and far into the night, you could hear her all through the house, shouting and babbling. I soon caught on that she was a drinker.

That is why, several times a day, I would sneak past her door as quietly as I possible could.

One evening however, as I had always dreaded, she tore open the door and dragged me into her apartment as I snuck by. Violently she pulled at me, shoving and pushing me so I could not fight back, and howled, "Come, Anna, come in, you've finally come over, Anna." Then she pushed me down onto a chair in her kitchen, where I saw and smelled alcohol. Frau Schulze refused to let me go and howled and bawled, until finally I said, "What do you want, what's the matter?"

She shouted all the more, asking why I had not come sooner and who I thought I was. "Why did you never come to see me, Anna?"

I said that my name is not Anna, that I am not Anna, and that she must have me confused with someone else.

“But you are a Jew, I noticed that right away.”

I said, “Yes, I am a Jew.” Was I supposed to say no? Well, that did not make me Anna, not by a long shot! But now I could guess why it was that she was screaming at me and refused to let me go.

“Shut up, Anna! Just shut up, don’t you dare talk back to me, you’re the most ungrateful creature on this earth, and I knew it all along.” Now I too began to shout, saying she was crazy and drunk, and that I was not Anna; she needed to get that into her head “I’m not her, no, no, no,” and now I would like to leave and go up to my apartment, and if she did not leave me alone I would call the police the first chance I got. She let me go, and kept on yelling and bawling, throwing anything and everything off the table, forcing me to take cover before I sprinted toward the door, but she overtook me and whined, “Why haven’t you tried to stay in touch with me, Anna?” I said once more, “Frau Schulze, please be reasonable, I’m not Anna and I have no idea who Anna is even supposed to be.” Then she shoved me back into the room, pulled out a photo album that was close at hand. I saw photo after photo of Frau Schulze and a young girl who really did look like me when I was a young girl: black hair, dark eyes, thick eyebrows. Frau Schulze said that Anna had come to live with her and she had taken care of her during the bad time. But then Anna’s mother had come back and Anna had left again with her, her mother had come to pick her up and simply said they needed to get out of there and not a word more. The two of them had not been heard from since. Poof, just like that! Gone away! Ungrateful! Shameless! Now I had a rough idea of what the story must have been, and I tried to explain to Frau

Schulze that Anna had to be a few years older than I am, that I was born only after the “bad time,” that Frau Schulze had even seen my mother a few times here in the building. Now that I had been lured into discussing Anna, she refused to stop and actually insisted that, if anything, I at least had to know where Anna was now, I had to look for her and find her. Yes, I had to do that and bring Anna back to her, since I was also a Jew—as she claimed to have picked up on so quickly —couldn’t I? Once again I said, “Yes of course, but Frau Schulze please be reasonable!”

This scene repeated itself many times over the years, even though I tried day after day to walk past her door silently, or conversely, clearly walk past with company. Time and again she caught me, pulled me inside, and began to yammer and act out her Anna-drama, and with time I learned to recognize the climactic and turning points of the performance. I also anticipated the moments when her emotions would run their course and I could flee. Before long we played our roles like seasoned character actors without investing ourselves all that much, and at the door, just before I slammed it shut and left, my parting reply was always the same: “You’re crazy and drunk, I’ve nothing to do with your story. I can’t help you, it’s not me, it’s not me, Frau Schulze, I am not Anna!”

I did not have the best of relationships with the other people in the building either. The rhythm of my day was very different from theirs, and because I always had many visitors, they called me a slut and a whore and banged on my wall. Sometimes they even called the police, whom we brought in

and invited to sit down and join the group, which they obviously did not do, but they also could not find anything vile or criminal going on.

Certainly Frau Schulze was always in trouble with the other residents, too, because she yelled, made a commotion, insulted everyone, and was obviously crazy. As a result, one day she was summoned before the arbitration commission for verbal abuse. Because they wanted to make trouble for Frau Schulze, their major accusation was that she always referred to me as “that filthy Jew,” and that such language was prohibited now. Her accusers came to me beforehand and asked if it was true, and I said that she had never said it to my face and I did not know what she said behind my back. No, they said was it true that I was a Jew, and again I said I certainly was; after all, I wanted to be a proud Jew.

From that day on no one in the house called me a slut or a whore, that is to say they no longer spoke to me at all; at most it would be “Good day,” relatively politely. Frau Schulze received some kind of sentence and after that we were almost accomplices. Be that as it may, I never got rid of my assigned role in her drama, right up until the day I moved out of the building and assured her for the last time, “No, Frau Schulze, I’m not her. I am not Anna!”

# ONE FINE TUESDAY MY MOTHER TO DECIDED TO BECOME

## A GERMAN

By Fahimeh Farsaie

“I want to become a German.”

With these words my mother caused an uproar in our family that has lasted to this very day. My father, Abbas Agha, was the first to hoist the flag of insurgency. He is a terribly proud Persian. He always was, everywhere and in every way. Thus he takes every opportunity to imitate the national hero, Dash Akoll, a son of the people. Even at dawn, as he sits behind the cash register in his restaurant and stares at the dim light dribbling from the Cologne sky, he revels in his Persian pride. He floats on a Persian carpet woven of honor and pride as he breathes in the dense aroma from his kebab stall, closing and opening the register to kill time. Without his sense of national identity, Abbas Agha would lose his balance like a cat without whiskers.

At dinner, Mother bravely stood firm against Abbas Agha’s withering gaze, enumerating the essential advantages of becoming German, and added, “I don’t care what nationality I have, Persian, German . . .”

“Siiiiiiiiimaaa!”

My father roared out her name, trying to intimidate her. His voice swelled with every syllable. He wanted to sound like Dash Akoll, whom we recalled as looking like the Persian actor Behrooz Woussoghi.

Sima refused to let herself be tyrannized; she winked and said, "What's wrong? Well, it's true. I'm at home wherever my children live. That is where I am happy. Whether it is in Iran or on Mars, at my age I couldn't care less."

My mother is not that old. She is actually a few years younger than my father, who still believes he is the same age as the young Omar Sharif when he played the son of a chief of an influential tribe in *Lawrence of Arabia*. Now and then he imitates Omar Sharif, whenever he wants to demonstrate his power to us.

We learned pretty early not to take her "age" references seriously. "No, actually quite late," my brother would interject every time I dared to say this out loud. Maybe he was right. I did not understand it until recently, when I was twenty, whereas he picked it up at fifteen. Since then he has not wanted to be called Reza, but Ryan.

Earlier Sima Khanoom had tried to fashion every detail of our lives around the "Commandments of Age." She was wont to say, "Every age has a particular behavior expected of it." She was of the opinion that one must not display conduct that is inappropriate to a certain age. That would be disastrous, she said. After all, you would not exchange day and night.

According to this indisputable logic, I was not allowed to pluck my thick eyebrows at the age of sixteen. Until I was eighteen I had to go around with those



blacks beams that looked like the hairs on a goat's leg. Until recently Reza, sorry, Ryan did not dare to wear earrings. And now? Now all kinds of gold and silver rings dangle from his earlobes, his nose, and his neck!

Ryan is the apple of Abbas Agha's eye. As the oldest and sole male heir, he is supposed to defend the stronghold of his sacred little family against all attacks. Ryan is at once his life and his soul; his *djahn*. As if Djahn were a part of Ryan's name, Abbas Agha uses it without exception, even during arguments. It would be an insult if Ryan Djahn's name were ever spoken without this reference to the apple of Abbas Agha's eye. This expression of fatherly affection delighted Ryan right up to puberty. Now that he was on the road to adulthood and was trying to lose his virginity and his girlish voice, he was no longer enthused by it, especially when Abbas Agha would chauvinistically emphasize the phrase "Djahn, Djahn," like the gracious Dash Akoll. The shades in Ryan Djahn's voice—that every so often would switch between light and dark even within the same short sentence—were indicative of his frustration. Truth be told, I was tickled pink by this vocal salad. At any rate, we learned not to give too much value to age and its demands, and to our astonishment we realized that mother's repertory of prohibitions was slowly shrinking. Obviously Sima Khanoom did not forsake her age argument. She tried to broaden the ways in which she expressed it, drawing on the pedagogical methods she had acquired during her years as a teacher in Iran.

After Ryan acquired his first piercing, on his left eyebrow, Sima Khanoom began to commune with invisible spirits. They would always emerge as if on

command and listen to her insults and humiliating remarks without any resistance. When Sima Khanoom discovered the ring on Ryan's lower lip she cursed the fictitious ghosts without restraint, saying that they possessed no spark of human dignity, that they did not treasure the blessing of living as free beings, and were voluntarily behaving like slaves.

Ryan, who felt under attack and definitely insulted, asked, " 'Scuse me, Mother, are you talking to me?" Furiously, my mother shoved the grilled kebab with tomatoes from Abbas Agha's restaurant into the microwave and answered sanctimoniously, "No dear, I am talking to the people who behave that way." Obviously my mother would never speak to us directly; rather she used her new method to make us feel guilty. It often worked. Her reproaches would trigger great stabbing pains in me, as if I had been pierced by splinters of wood.

The day Mother informed us of her decision was a dreary one. It was a rainy Tuesday. Tuesdays are generally boring and dreadful. They are neither energetic like Mondays nor encouraging like Fridays—which bring the promise of the approaching weekend. On Wednesday comes a new surge of energy at the thought that the week's back has been broken. Tuesday lacks the faint and dim light that gently illuminates Wednesday. I would not be surprised if one fine Tuesday I had an accident that left me paralyzed for the rest of my life. For fear of the irreparable things that can happen this day, I would never arrange to meet with Peter on Tuesdays.

As a matter of fact, that Tuesday was as bleak as the breath of an invalid. I pictured my father spending the whole day sitting behind his noiseless cash register in his restaurant, staring longingly at the turbulent world that swirled outside. Most likely stooping under the weight of her age, Mother was pacing around our four-room apartment, asking, "What should I do now?"

It is the question that Sima Khanoom always asks herself. She is often so lost in her thoughts that she forgets what she has taken care of and what still needs to be done. Sometimes the answer is: she should wash up because she has just relieved herself. And sometimes: she should argue with Abbas Agha because she cannot stand it anymore. At the end of one such planned what-should-I-do-now-question argument, Sima Khanoom put my father under so much pressure that he sold our wonderful silk carpets and replaced them with wood flooring. Sima Khanoom was ecstatic. She put on her red pumps, boisterously stumbled through the apartment, and exclaimed with satisfaction, "Oh how lovely! At least now I can hear my own footsteps all day, I can tell that I am still alive and my ears still function."

Her rather well functioning ears, however, later caused great problems for Abbas Agha, because he was forced to sell the Siemens refrigerator he had bought about a year earlier and buy a new one. Apparently the incessant humming of the old appliance had penetrated Sima Khanoom's brain like a drill and deafened her.

The fact that my mother has problems with her ears does not bother us anymore. It becomes an issue only when she sometimes forgets she actually has

them; then she closes her eyes and talks on and on like a waterfall. In such situations neither Abbas Agha nor Ryan nor I allow her to get a word in edgewise. On that gloomy Tuesday my mother behaved as if she had come to the world without any ears. At dinner, as she put down the tray, from which wafted the delicious aroma of the Basmati rice, she informed us of her desire to become German.

# SELF-PORTRAIT AS A JEW

By **Barbara Honigmann**

My mother and father are dead. I put in my time as my “parents’ child,” but now I must move to the front in the generational chain, where no one else stands between death and me. But that is not the only thing that hurts.

I believe that we, the children of Jews in my parents’ generation, remained our parents’ children longer than others, perhaps everywhere but especially so in Germany. For it was hard to escape the history and stories of our parents. Others have heard stories about the front, about Stalingrad, about the flight from East Prussia and Silesia, about being prisoners of war, and about the bombs falling on German cities. The legends of my childhood were different, however, and I stayed under their spell for a long time. Under the spell of chants from mythic places and events, invoked thousands of times and simultaneously surrounded by much silence.

The routes of exile

Crossing through stormy seas

Vanished cities

The fidelity of companions

The infidelity of companions

The country of refuge

The island of survival

A foreign language

Vienna before the war

Berlin before the war

Paris until the occupation

London

Bombs falling on London

The Blitz

My father was spirited away to Canada in a small sloop and interned. At the time my mother was at the hairdresser's, and did not even get a chance to say goodbye. In the camp he had to cut down trees and had no idea where he was in Canada. A miracle that he made it, with ships being sunk left and right in the submarine warfare. A handful of scattered German Jews in a nutshell on the ocean between Canada and England leaned overboard and puked.

My father would later become the head of Reuters' European Service and my mother a production foreman at an armaments factory. That is how they fought the Germans, and then they returned to Germany.

They had decided for the Russian Zone. It was a kind of defection, from the British to the Russians. From that point onward they lived only with émigrés. The immigrants were the nobility, and the nobility communed only with their kind. Non-immigrants were not suitable company. My childhood friends were the children of immigrants like myself.

Now that my parents are dead, I easily give in to the temptation of succumbing to the spell of these myths. But now I also hear the things that were probably not said back then and see, or think I see, that which was hidden.

“What became of the others, of your families in Hungary, Austria, and Germany? Are they dead, are they still alive, what sort of life do they have and where?

“Why don’t you speak of your parents’ graves, why do you speak so little of your parents altogether? What were you doing in the GDR for heaven’s sake? Was it more than Party orders? Was it only Party orders? Why did you obey?”

These were painful questions and became more so over the years. Later, to spare my parents, I refrained from asking them. My mother would just shrug. My father was a bit more open, and this was his mantra: “I am a great-grandchild of the Enlightenment, and I believe in reason and the idea of equality and fraternity. ‘Our people’ were not the Jews from the shtetl, rather the proponents of the communist ideal. Moreover I am a German Jew, a Jewish German; they wanted me out of Germany but I came back, and that gives me satisfaction. I belong here, even if it makes me feel cold and empty. “

Perhaps this coldness and emptiness did not emanate solely from the fact that the socialism my parents wanted to help build did not come to be, but also from the fact that my parents were caught betwixt and between; they no longer belonged to the Jews, yet they did not become German.

Much later, I decided that Jewishness should also have a place in my life. In the ’70s I registered in the Jewish community, the same one that my parents

had resigned from in the '50s. In the community was a small group of more or less young people who came from backgrounds similar to mine and also wanted to "return." Only much later did we discover that we were part of a worldwide movement for the return to Judaism. We began learning Hebrew and took an interest in the contents of the Hebrew Bible and the legendary Talmud, for we had heard that the process by which the Jewish Bible became the Luther Bible was like a game of telephone. My parents had concealed knowledge of Judaism from me, or had not possessed it themselves.

When my first son was born I wanted him not simply to have a "Jewish heritage" but also to be able to lead a Jewish life with me. This decision has often been misconstrued as fleeing to orthodoxy. In reality, I was in search of a modicum of Jewish identity, of an order to the year according not to the Christian calendar but to the Jewish calendar, and a conversation about Judaism that went beyond the perpetual focus on anti-Semitism. I would still call it a minimum today, something that suits me well for a life between the worlds; but for German conditions even this is already too much.

Hence we had to leave. The Jewish communities are too small and do not leave sufficient leeway for a Jewish life, and moreover I always felt the conflict between the Germans and the Jews to be too intense, actually unbearable. The Germans no longer have a clue what Jews are, they know only that a terrible history lies between them, and every Jew who shows up reminds them of this history, which is still painful and irritates them. It is this hypersensitivity that I



cannot bear. Both the Germans and the Jews feel bad in these encounters, make impossible demands on each other, but are unable to leave each other in peace.

Although I bring up Jewishness myself and insist on my Jewish life, I am shocked whenever someone mentions it to me and consider it an indiscretion or aggression. I feel the impossibility of being able to speak of “things Jewish” in a relaxed and unencumbered way. I react irritably; the reactions on both sides seem excessive and every word, every gesture, false.

Sometimes, but quite rarely, Germans have told to me that they find conversations about Judaism equally agonizing and constrained. I find it even harder to stomach the spurious ease with which some people take intentionally chosen Judaism to be a passing fad, because they seem to completely deny me my identity and reveal their inability to tolerate a life different from their own.

It sometimes seems to me as if that were like the frequently invoked German-Jewish symbiosis, this bound-together-for-life-ness; in Auschwitz the Germans and the Jews became a couple that even death cannot separate.

It is this conflict, this extreme tension, which I ran away from. Here in France, I feel much less involved; I am only a spectator, a guest, a foreigner. This has freed me from the maddening proximity to Germany.

If someone asked me if I were German or Jewish I would surely say Jewish—to distance myself from the Germans. Being German is not open to question, while being Jewish remains vague and uncertain. In the good old days of the GDR it could officially be stated: “We do not know of any Jewish people.” For that very reason I had to emphasize my affiliation to the Jewish people. My

Jewishness is an important dimension of my identity; it is something I cannot shake off even if I wanted to, something more like love; something that enriches one and still hurts and moreover restricts the mind to seeing the world from only one perspective. In this case, whether something is good for the Jews or not.

I am also a writer; and people are quick to say a Jewish one. But I am not so sure, because all that I have just said does not yet make me a Jewish writer. Existentially, it makes me feel as if I belong more to Jewishness than to Germanness. But culturally I belong completely to Germany and to nothing else. It sounds paradoxical, but I am a German writer even though I do not feel German and have not lived in Germany for many years. I believe the writer is what he writes, and above all he is the language in which he writes. Not only do I write in German, but the literature that formed and educated me is German literature. I relate to it in everything I write; to Goethe, to Kleist, to the Grimms' fairytales and to the German Romanticism, and I know quite well that all those gentlemen were more or less anti-Semites, but that does not matter.

I left Germany as a Jew, but in my work, through a very strong bond with the German language, I keep returning to that country.

# LOSING MY TRADITION

**By Wladimir Kaminer**

Even though East and West have been moving closer together in recent times, the respective cultures are still miles apart. It is easier than ever before for people to move from place to place, but they will carry their cultural traditions everywhere they go. Like a slave's chains, their maladjusted traditions are something they cannot shake off. That is very evident in the case of my father, who, even after living in Germany for ten years, still has not learned to drink without a specific reason. Simply having a drink in the evening in front of the television or drinking in the bar with a few friends and relaxing was not enough for him. He could not do that. He always needed a solid reason to drink, which elevated it to a mission.

In Russia, so-called "washing" is the most widespread folk tradition. When a neighbor, a friend, a family member, a fellow worker, or simply a casual acquaintance buys something, whether a bicycle, a television, or a new pair of trousers, that item needs to be "washed" right away. Preferably with vodka. If there is none available, then wine or beer will also do. Only if it is washed is a bicycle able to handle the toughest of terrains, will the television always get good reception, and will the trousers last forever; or so we were told. I still remember quite well how years ago my father stood on our balcony in Moscow and with great enthusiasm terrorized our neighbor.

“What have you bought?” he shouted to her, as she lugged a huge carpet across the courtyard. “Not a carpet, is it? We have to wash it right away! What do you mean you don’t feel like it? Are you crazy? It’ll get eaten by moths otherwise! You don’t have moths? Well, you’ll get them! You don’t have any money? I can lend you some! What do you mean you’re tired? I have two bottles right here, I’ll be right over!”

My father held fast to the folk traditions. The furniture, pieces of clothing, and all electrical appliances in our apartment were thoroughly washed before their first use, and some were even washed several times—just to be on the safe side. Whether you believed in it or not, they lasted forever; nothing in the house had ever broken. But one time my father wrecked his bicycle. He was pedaling over to see his colleague from work because a newly purchased wall unit urgently needed to be washed. On the way back he cycled behind a bus because he felt safe in its wake. The one thing he had not considered was that the bus made frequent stops. They were going downhill, quite fast; the bus driver braked by the bus stop at the bottom without giving my father any warning. He flew into the bus; the bicycle was beyond repair. My father had to get four new teeth, which he had to wash immediately, and, despite all the efforts of German dentists, they remained firmly fixed in his mouth.

At first, my father always had trouble finding a legitimate reason to drink. Two years ago, he read an interesting article in a newspaper about the campaign “Boozing against the Right,” but eventually realized that it was simply a fundraising campaign for the victims of right-wing violence. His own small self-

contrived campaigns—“Boozing for better integration” or “Boozing for the imposition of the mother tongue on the natives,” for instance—had very little success. Most people here just knock back a beer without rhyme or reason. They do not want to make a mission out of it, and when they drink too much they become either sentimental or aggressive. It is for this reason that my father put the bottle down altogether.

# OF MY GREAT-GRANDFATHER, MY GRANDFATHER, MY FATHER, AND ME

**By Barbara Honigmann**

Sometimes we ride our bicycles down to the Rhine; it is only a quarter of an hour from our house. There is a park there and a path all along the Rhine. On the German side you could even hike or bike all the way to Basel, but on the French side you would get lost somewhere in a steppe just before you get to an industrial complex, and we happen to be on the French side. We sat down on a bench close to the water and look across the river: over there is Germany. To Peter I said we do not know where we belong exactly, and he answered that it was not important; we just belonged at our desks.

A gust of wind rustles the trees. On a bench next to us sits a family. The children are playing ball. The wind carries the ball away, and it lands at our feet. We throw it back, the child does the same, and we carry on like this for a little while before we speak first to the child and then to the parents.

They are Turks; they were in Germany before, but now they own a store in Strasbourg, not at all far from here—we should come by some time. They recognized that we were Jewish, thanks to Peter's beard and his cap, and they ask us whether we also have a store.

No, we say, we do not. That surprises them, since most Jews do have shops: watches, jewelry, and fabric shops. But we seem to be doing well?

Yes, we are doing well, quite well, one could not say otherwise, yes, thank you.

Then they ask: "So tell us, how did you manage, with the exile and all? How did you acquire such good positions and even wealth and power?" Peter and I look at each other: Wealth? Power? Positions? Manage?

My great-grandfather David Honigmann was the secretary general of the Silesian railway. He learned German at fourteen from Moses Mendelssohn's Bible translation; he explains this in the reminiscence of his childhood and youth. The language he spoke before that he referred to as "the dialect," probably meaning Yiddish. All his life he fought for the emancipation of the Jews in Prussia, and seeing that his support in this battle came especially from the Liberals, he became a Liberal, a democrat, and a member of the German Progressive Party.

He also took part in the Revolution of '48. Once I received a letter from Jerusalem inquiring whether I was a descendant of David Honigmann, the democrat from the Revolution of '48, and I proudly answered: Yes, I am.

My great-grandfather wanted to carry over these new ideas into Judaism, whose ossified and authoritarian state he remembered with horror from his childhood. He belonged to those who invented and established German Reform Judaism.

He was also an author, a German author, who wrote novels and novellas in a rather conventional way. He was no Heine or Börne and also no Berthold Auerbach, with whom he was close friends; indeed, he was friends with

absolutely everyone who, back then, had a yearning for German culture. He wrote for the journal *Der Israelit*, in which he polemicized against the anti-Semitic, conservative parties. As a lawyer he worked on legislation that would finally permit Jews to enter the Prussian society, granting them equality. In his obituary it was said that he had been a pioneer and fighter for inner and outer emancipation: “Determinedly, he mounted the barracks wherever injustice threatened or where it befell the Prussian Jews. He died a true Jew, a good German, a pure human being.”

His son, George Gabriel, my grandfather, decided to leave Judaism altogether, and embrace German culture. He assimilated before complete emancipation had been achieved and had to wait quite a while before receiving a professorship. He, like many of his Jewish colleagues, served the world of scholarship, but not in the established core disciplines; they served rather in peripheral disciplines, in his case, homeopathy and the history of medicine.

To this very day, the occupant of the chair in the history of medicine at the University of Giessen sits under the portrait of the founder of this chair; it is my grandfather. He was of course also the editor of a journal, in this case not *Der Israelit* but rather *Hippokrates*, in which he intended to renew medicine in a holistic sense.

He offered his first-born son, Heinrich, my father’s only brother, as a sacrifice to the German fatherland. He died as a cadet in September 1916 in the 5<sup>th</sup> Baden Infantry Regiment Nr. 113—my father knew the number by heart sixty



years after the fact—somewhere around here in France, not far from where I now live. On Sundays when we drive to the Vosges we often make scary discoveries. Many hillsides are dotted with graves. Initially you do not notice them because so many pieces of the red sandstone that was used to build the Strasbourg cathedral are scattered around there. You see them only when you look closely or perhaps when you go to sit on such a stone for a picnic, and you discover inscriptions with no name, only: 2 French soldiers; 8 German soldiers; 6 Frenchmen; 2 Germans; and then underneath is the regiment number. All the way to the summit, the gravestone lie there every few steps, as if the dead men are creeping up the hillside, transformed into red rocks.

My father was called Georg, like his father, Georg Friedrich Wolfgang. You can see from this name that no Jewishness was left, not even in a second or third middle name. He too, earned his doctorate, in the spirit of the joke: What is the most common Jewish first name in Germany? —Doctor!

My father did not have to abandon Judaism: for him it was already so foreign and remote. He had probably almost “forgotten” it and actually believed that Germany was his home and that he was a German.

This belief was shattered when he had to flee from his German home to foreign lands and had to go into hiding, but even there the Germans hunted down Jews like cannibals searching for human flesh. The slogan promoted by the Jewish Haskalah, which went, “A Jew at home and a person on the street” was ironically altered by my father: “A person at home and a Jew on the street.”

When he returned after the war no one had a desire to know what Jews were, and on the street he found himself being asked repeatedly if he was Turkish, Greek, or Italian. He associated himself with the political movement that promised him “equality and fraternity”—less emphasis was placed on freedom—and pretended to be blind to race, recognizing only classes and wanting to completely abolish the “Jewish question”: Communism. Like his grandfather and father, he published newspapers and wrote books, but his were “biographies of people who were as unlike him as possible and did not interest him in the least; he published these works in a publishing house that he despised for its other publications.”

My father’s literary pursuits had none of the euphoria and not even the illusions that his forefathers had invested in German culture. It was subservience to the Party, abnegation of his Jewishness and his bourgeois heritage. For home he kept irony and distance, and they were only another form of despair. I found the following passage in a journal I read after his death, written in the first few years after the war: “At the circus in the evening. Go home feeling sad, have no idea where I am. Like the Italian who performed there, who was actually from Russia. Anyway, an Italian like me.”

My great-grandfather, my grandfather, and my father dreamed of feeling at home in German culture. They longed for it, stretched out their arms, and strained toward it, and tied themselves in unbelievable knots, trying to become one with it. Instead of being accepted, they experienced rejection and expulsion,

and my father had the privilege of witnessing the final chapter of the German-Jewish story firsthand.

And I, the great-granddaughter of fearless pioneers, now stand here, a terrified late-born-child, rather baffled. After some contemplation and observation I thought to myself I should stay away from pioneering and tying myself in knots.

I will do better to separate myself; I decided to stay on the periphery, at a distance. The best thing would be to live in another country, with the Germans just as neighbors, without awkwardness.

I moved to Strasbourg where I live on the edge of the inner city, three streets before you reach the border, as if my courage had not stretched any farther.

Now that I had arrived in this other country, albeit just three streets away from the German border, I began to write—or, we may say, to write “in earnest”—as did my great-grandfather, my grandfather, and my father. Naturally, like them, I wrote in German and published with a German publishing house.

So that was a return of sorts, when I had barely departed. Perhaps writing was a form of homesickness and an affirmation that we belonged together, Germany and I. As they say, inseparable, especially now, after all that happened. For the most part, my writing had come more or less as a successful separation, similar to the way lovers write letters to each other in the early stages of infatuation and then not again until they break up. I had experienced this once

myself: When I still lived in Berlin, I wrote a few plays, composing them after I had permanently left the theater having realized that my profession was not in theater, and that the world of the theater simply could not be my world. I wrote these plays as a kind of farewell, so that in spite of it all, something could remain between us, between the theater and me, so that not all bridges would be burned.

I had wanted to conduct myself completely differently from my great-grandfather, my grandfather, and my father, and now I see myself, just like them, bidding for the others' attention, hoping to be heard and maybe even understood, calling out: Look at me! Listen to me, if only for five minutes.

When I truly consider it, the brevity of my texts grows out of the fear that if I talk longer people will not listen at all, that my time will be up.

I realized that writing means separation and that it is very similar to exile, and in this sense it is probably true that being a writer and being a Jew are very similar in that one depends more or less desperately on others and gaining their attention. For both of them, too much closeness to others is dangerous, and total assimilation could be their undoing.

Contrary to the conviction of my great-grandfather, my grandfather and my father, I no longer believe that you can be released from exile early for so-called good conduct. In this context, the recent story of my friend comes to mind. I recall hearing my friend who returned from Israel saying she had not felt at home there at all and did not know why. My friend originally came from Libya, and after the expulsion of the Jews she lived in Rome before marrying and

moving to Strasbourg. She later found the explanation: She said she simply did not feel at home in Israel because there were none of the others to whom we always referred, saying, "I was completely lost always being among my own kind."

I was told that as a child I had a thing for being Jewish. That is what my parents said, who were also Jewish and had a thing for trying to hide their Jewishness as much as possible. It was impossible for them to forget it, however. They lived among other people like Marranos: outwardly tense and inwardly clinging to the pretense that by now "I-know-nothing about Judaism."

They spoke of "it" at home and outside of the home they never spoke of "it." And when others mentioned the war, Silesia, East Prussia, the trek, the bombing of German cities and the atrocities of the Red Army, they remained silent. I often wondered why others were allowed to tell their own story but we were never allowed to do the same. At the time I did not know that it took this generation of survivors twenty years to start speaking, twenty years before others were able to listen to them, and that it took this long not only in Germany but in all countries to which survivors returned; it was this way even in Israel. The books of those who chronicled their story right after the war, *Primo Levi*, for example, went completely unnoticed in the bookstore and remained so for twenty years until the end of the '60s when they were "discovered." Only then were they reprinted in large editions, sold and actually read, followed by a true

tidal wave of novels, reports, documentaries, and historical works that continues until this day.

As a Jew I now wanted to speak out and tell my own story and that of my parents and my grandparents.

I do not want to claim that my beginning to write had something to do with what I just described, rather that everyone who writes has his own theme, or rather: the theme has him. It seems to me that every author, every artist only has one theme, only one topic, which he hides better or worse over time, that he circles around all his life and cannot escape.

And when you finally sit down in front of that white page and begin to separate the light from the darkness, bringing order into the chaos, when you decide to speak to the others as you did when you were a child, sometimes just walking up to another child and saying: Do you want to be my friend?—you needed to be very bold to put forth a request like that because you were not just asking for a small friendship lasting three or four days but rather for an eternal one—one that would be tried by fire and water and that would require you to want to share your whole truth openly.

What was now really my story I merely caught a glimpse of, for it came from far off and was quite old.

It was a story of futile love, of the gap between great expectations and their fulfillment, of immense effort and chasing after the wind. It was the story of the thwarted hopes of my great-grandfather, my grandfather, and my father, and also of my great-grandmother, my grandmother, and my mother, except they did

not write any books. This story is characterized by existential experiences and by no means only Jewish ones, but the Jewish experiences are distinctly more catastrophic.

So my great-grandfather, my grandfather, and my father all published books in German, and here I am, imitating them as if nothing had happened. Naturally I am very critical of their work; my great-grandfather's was too pompous, my grandfather's was too assimilated, my father's was too submissive.

They spoke and wrote much, but it was all for naught. Perhaps they used the wrong words and therefore it was all in vain. If I wanted to start writing now, maybe I had to start from scratch and use a completely different vocabulary when I spoke. That is probably why I named my first longer piece of prose piece *Novel of a Child*, although I never fully understood why I did so. This title came from pure intuition and all I knew was that it was right. In no way did the title relate to contents of the book, which was not actually a novel but more a collection of prose texts. The title pertained only to the stance of the book, which from the outset was like that of a child.

Perhaps that is only a pose. The role of the pioneer has been played out, and precisely this lack of guidance could open up a new path.

No one should think that I want to be overly modest, on the contrary; I want to speak of the "big things," only of them, of exile and deliverance but not in the language of the pioneers who know the whole story by heart and whose words carry them along, but rather to be in tune with the clueless, whose words grope for scattered memories and vague images swimming around inside them.

Words that one finds in everyday life, banal “nothings” that are easy to toss out and are therefore lying around in case one wants to pick them up and (with the current trend) recycle them.

At any rate, my forefathers’ dream of entering the paradise of the better circles in Breslau’s bourgeoisie seemed closed to me, and I had to “set forth on a journey around the world to see if I could get in from the back.”

Before I “really” began to write—and when I say “really” I am referring to writing books that were published by well-known publishing houses, instead of writing plays that were never performed—I had to take leave of the East and make my way from Germany to France, even though France was a foreign land where I knew no one, to which I had no connection or particular affinity, and whose language I did not speak.

I was more of an Anglophile, and not because of a special familiarity with or a love for England, no, it was simply the country that took my parents in and saved them; so you could say it was out of love for my parents.

In this respect therefore, without any specific affection or dislike, France became the country of freedom for me.

None of my forefathers had ever lived there, making it easier to begin all over again there. To begin being a “real” Jew and a “real” author, I might say starting over.

I do not harbor any illusions about these two aspects: Judaism and literature. I want to live with them in truth, not in lies, and I know there is no escaping from this story of great effort and chasing after the wind, none at all,



yet in this other land Judaism and writing have moved to the center of my life. Precisely at a distance, as if only then could I start telling my own story in my own style. In this very respect therefore, France became the “country of freedom” for me. No one looked at me, and I could live free from observation and judgment, and the gaze of others did not define me. Lest I allow any fairytale notions to arise I want to add straight away that above all this freedom depends on a lack of interest in immigrants and is often hard to tolerate.

But I simply had to tear myself away from the nest of ever-familiar faces at some point, the landscape, politics, the language, and the safety that I found in all of them, and which, I clearly knew, I would probably never find again.

Before this, in Berlin, I lived with a circle of friends, some of whom, mostly men, were already authors or artists, and I was permitted to be their companion. In jest they would sometimes refer to me as the Gertrude Stein of Prenzlauer Berg: what they meant was that I had a salon of sorts, brought people together, was always available to discuss my friends’ poetry, theater productions, and various works, to criticize, to comment, and to inspire them to more works and ideas.

Naturally the fact I was Jewish fit very well with this salon-role. They could have called me the “Rahel” of Prenzlauer Berg, since I too was limited to the role of a convener, just as she was, and my works consisted of long letters and staging of unhappy love stories. The book, *Novel of a Child*, was a letter about ill-fated love and at the same time a parting from these stagings and long letters.

Needless to say I took on my role willingly and I do not blame anyone for having hindered or delayed my relatively late “liberation.” Only much later did I break away or find the strength to part from my group, whose nearness gave me security and a foothold and equally posed limits that I later needed to cast off. I did not dare declare myself to be an author in their presence, let alone actually write and publish.

For this reason I had to set forth on a difficult journey, to live in a different country, even if it was only three streets beyond the border.

We are sitting on the other side of the Rhine looking toward Germany, “over there,” as it was called in the GDR for so long. In the meantime the wind has died down and the Turkish child desperately wants to keep playing ball with us. I take a step and play with him, not because I am dying to play ball with a child I do not know but because it is less strenuous than explaining to his parents why we do not have a shop, correcting the image they have of the Jewish people, which is just as crooked as our image of them, and on this afternoon of all times, clearing up all of the misunderstandings that have piled up between us, telling them the whole story of my great-grandfather, my grandfather, my father, and me.

## **Conclusion**

After a discussion on Rolf Dieter Brinkmann's translation of Frank O' Hara's poem "Lana Turner has collapsed," Professor Ulrich Plass added that the first stage of translation is actually the writing process, the translation of thoughts into words. This implies that when a text is translated from one language to the next, it becomes a translation of a translation. With every new stage of translation, a thin film is added between the reader and the text, running the risk of removing some of the life and nuances that are so specific to a language or a culture. After coming to this realization, I discovered that the biggest challenges I confronted in this translation process were figuring out how to transplant situations; staying true to the emotions, the clarity, or ambiguity of a text; finding idioms that evoked the same feelings in my readers as the original German texts evoked in me; and not being overly pedantic about the literal meaning of each word. This process had an extra layer of complexity for me as I was, in a sense, translating from one foreign language into another! To me, having been raised and educated in a Zimbabwe version of British English, the phrase "Oscar, that is not used in American English!" from my thesis advisor was one that became very familiar over the past eight months. This extra distance between the language and me proved quite helpful, because in the revision process I became part of my audience, and the goal was, in spite of the minor language gap, to create a natural reading experience for myself.

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