

Berlin Notebook



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Joshua Weiner

BERLIN NOTEBOOK
WHERE ARE THE REFUGEES?

by

Joshua Weiner



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FOREWORD

“Berlin Notebook: Where Are the Refugees?” (<http://blog.lareviewofbooks.org/category/berlin-notebook/>) started as a straightforward journal transcription of my experiences in Berlin during October 2015, a time when the influx of refugees from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon, and Libya into Germany and the rest of Europe was peaking to become the largest since World War II. The Notebook posted daily at the Los Angeles Review of Books throughout February 2016. But by then, the situation had changed. A terrorist attack in Paris, in November 2015, left 130 dead, many more wounded, and shook the world with another careful coordination of simultaneous strikes against multiple targets. In January 2016, over New Year’s Eve, hundreds of women were sexually assaulted in the crowded public squares of Köln by asylum seekers believed to be from North Africa. Then, in early March, two Afghan asylum seekers sexually molested two teenage girls at an aquatics center in Northern Germany, an incident that repeated similar attacks at the same location two years earlier. A shadow had passed over Willkommenskultur. “The situation has become very hard here,” a friend in Berlin wrote in an email.

I decided to return to Berlin in April to see for myself. A week before I got there, while I was traveling in Spain with my family, multiple timed bombings at the Brussels airport reverberated across Europe. We talked about it in lowered voices with our friends in the public markets of Barcelona. The day this spring that I arrived in Berlin, the first refugees were being sent back to Turkey from Greece as part of the deal the EU had struck with Turkey to control migrant movement. Borders had closed, and were closing. At the same time, I discovered more programs in place in Germany to help with integration, some quite inventive; the “subject” of refugees had also become hot, with at least a dozen new titles stacked on bookstore tables throughout the city. The refugee crisis had itself migrated from the political arena to the larger realm of culture. The refugees were now being sheltered all over the city in hotels and public buildings; everyone could answer the question, “where are the refugees?” Why, down the street, around the corner, not far from here. The two weeks in Berlin in April resulted in new material—interviews, travels, little personal social experiments—that I’ve added to update the Notebook for its republication as an e-book. It maintains the form of a chronology.

I have tried to be as faithful as possible in my reporting of interviews. I have not tried to verify the facts that people presented (when they told them to me); I have tried, rather, to convey the experience of talking with them, what it was like to be there, and to listen, to ask. The form of the interviews may seem to move like the “streaming” metaphor one finds everywhere in use to describe the movement of people across national borders.

Washington, DC

April 13, 2016

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First thanks go to the refugees seeking asylum in Germany, most of whom requested that I not use their real names, and who talked with me, humored my naiveté, dispelled some of my ignorance, and disabused me of preconceptions.

Thanks to Barbara Gügold and the IES Abroad Institute for a research associate fellowship that brought me to Berlin in October 2015; and to the faculty at the Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Humboldt Universität zu Berlin. The *Berlin Notebook* was conceived of, researched, written, and published with support of a John Simon Guggenheim Foundation fellowship, and additional funding from the English Department at the University of Maryland, College Park. Thanks to those institutions for their support.

I've had the good fortune to work with stellar editors at the *Los Angeles Review of Books* who supported this project from the beginning: Gabrielle Calvocoressi was the first to express enthusiasm, and kept me going throughout October with her encouragement; Tom Lutz has stood firmly behind me the whole time; and Michael Ursell's skillful, sympathetic editing made the *Notebook* readable and sharp. My thanks to all of them.

Among others I interviewed, I'd especially like to thank the poets Lian Yang, Alistair Noon, and Alexander Booth; artist Susanne Gerber; film-maker Karsten Eckardt; Rabbi Walter Rothschild; Cantor Jalda Rebling and Anna Adam of Ohel Hachidusch; Joseph Aish of Baghdad; the members of Freygang Band; Razan Nassreddine of the Berliner Multaka: Treffpunkt Projekt; photographer Alexandra Kinga Fekete; Syrian journalist Yasmine Merei; and all those volunteers working with the relief organization, Moabit Hilft.

Thanks also to Rosmarie Waldrop—poet, translator, editor, and publisher extraordinaire—for permission to print her translation of Gerhard Rühm's poem, "europe 1954" (*I My Feet: Poems & Constellations*, "Dichten =" series, number 7, Burning Deck, 2004).

I am indebted—*verschuldet und verpflichtet*—to Linda Parshall for help with the German. Any errors are due to my ignorance and inattention. (When she trained her hawk-eye on the typescript, the English also improved).

For six weeks in October 2015 and April 2016, Sarah Blake held down the fort in DC while I was in Germany. Her novelist's attention to the typescript pushed it further in the right direction. There are no thanks equal to my gratitude and love.

Parts of the *Berlin Notebook* have been published in *Tikkun* (www.tikkun.org), *B O D Y* (www.bodyliterature.com), and *The Threepenny Review* (www.threepennyreview.com).

ICH BIN EIN BERLINER?

Thursday, October 1, 2015

Getting into Germany couldn't have been easier. I said good morning to the blank-faced woman at Passport Control; she found a blank page in my passport, stamped it; I pulled my bag from the conveyor belt and walked into the heavily policed shopping mall of Flughafen Tegel International. My eyes were dry and itchy from staying up all night on the plane reading Patrick Cockburn's *The Rise of the Islamic State* and trying to learn a few words of Arabic with my Nemo phone app. *Marhaban*. Hello. *Na'am*. Yes. *Herzliches Willkommen*. No, wrong language. I'd hear the phrase soon from the folks at the Institute sponsoring my trip; how many others entering the country today would hear likewise?

Stepping outside, the airport shade felt chilly; the temperature would be dipping lower with every few days, and people living on the street would wait longer for the morning sun to warm them. October would bring rain. Sickness would follow. I stepped back through the sliding glass to don my German kitschy Jack Wolfskin fleece, with a giant paw print stitched between the shoulders. *Ich bin ein Berliner?* Hardly, but I was happy to be back for the month.

In the cab to Mitte, the city center, I asked the Turkish driver how long he had lived in Berlin. 30 years. Did he like Berlin? Oh, ja, sure. Where are the refugees? He gave his head a quarter turn, What? I repeated my question. What? He didn't understand the word—*die Flüchtlinge* (literally, *the fleers*)—and it wasn't my German, as bad as it is. He had never heard the word (maybe I should have said *Asylbewerber*—asylum seeker—but I hadn't learned it yet myself).

Germany has known its *Flüchtlinge* of course, fugitives fleeing Nazism in the 1930's, so many that in 1933 the League of Nations created its High Commission for Refugees, now the UNHCR, located in Berlin near old Checkpoint Charlie. But before that, try 1685, when the Edict of Fontainebleau outlawed Protestantism in France and hundreds of thousands of Huguenots fled, that time to Germany. I thought of Franz Tunda, the Austrian lieutenant in Joseph Roth's novel, *Die Flucht ohne Ende* (*Flight without End*), who escapes from the Russian P.O.W. camp at the end of WWI and flees back to Europe. Could the ironical itinerant Roth, himself always on the move between hotels, ever have guessed that the title of his 1927 novel might refract the experience of so many 21st century non-Europeans, today's *Flüchtlinge*? Flight without end. A political plight becoming a state of mind.

I pressed my cabbie, *the Syrians*, I said, though I could have added, and the Afghans, and the Eritreans ... Ah, ja, *die Syrer*; he shook his head and said, I don't know. But they're here, in Berlin, right? Ja, they're here, but I don't know where. We crossed a small bridge over the Spree into Moabit, the immigrant thick *Kiez* originally settled by fleeing Huguenots, and the location of the State Office of Health and Welfare (Landesamt für Gesundheit und Soziales, or Lageso), the office where the refugees in Berlin wait to register with the state. (*Gesundheit*, indeed; I thought of the coming cold.) I think they're near, I said. Ja, they are near, he said, his head moving left to right scanning an intersection as we slid through, it's a big problem.

*

The taxi driver dropped me on a quiet street off Chauseestrasse in the Scheunenviertel *Kiez* (literally "barn quarter"), Berlin's old Jewish Quarter that maintains the winding lanes of a village even as it's exploded as a hip area for shopping, dining, and looking at contemporary art in the converted

barn courtyards of its yesteryear (the hay barns were kept to the old city outskirts due to fires). The building in which the Institute had situated me is small and mod, like a cheap imitation Mondrian you could live in. When I knocked on the Hausmeister's door at 8:30 a.m., I was greeted by a dour unsmiling woman who dragged on her cigarette and returned to the landline. Missing the warmth of the Frau at Passport Control, I took a seat and waited, silently rehearsing some fumbling German in my head.

Ten minutes later I had signed papers, received keys, and was standing in a small bright clean flat of blond wood and metal and halogen, an Ikea-nized space. The windows opened onto a vacant courtyard created by a matching pair of large dark modern stone buildings framed by even darker materials around corporate-sized windows. I could look directly into them and count the louvers of the executive shades in each room as well as the metal railing banisters that zigzagged up and down the windowed staircases. Both buildings were completely vacant of people and thwarted my fleeting interest in spying on working German suits. Sterile emptiness. Over the flat box rooftop, I could make out the peaked red tile roofs of the Naturkundemuseum (natural history museum) the next street over, and beyond that the Hauptbahnhof (central train station). A sky-scape everywhere punctuated by huge cranes—the construction of reclaimed space in Berlin will continue for another 20 years or more ... *Herzliches Willkommen*. Here now, I was eager to enter it again.

BEING A REFUGEE IS NOT A PROFESSION

Friday, October 2, 2015

Barbara Gügold, the director of the Institute, shakes my hand and leads me out the door. We chat pleasantly on the way to a favored lunch spot in one of the many barn courtyards of the neighborhood—an upscale joint that served *cuisine*. I order the octopus. Is the flat okay, she asks. Oh, it's great, just what I need. Those dark stone buildings behind you..., she says. That make the courtyard? Yes, that is the new location for the CIA. It's probably the safest street in Berlin. It's not a dangerous city, I say; we smile. And so what about the refugees, I ask—(this would soon become my favorite non-sequitur)—Where are they? Oh, they're *everywhere*. Well, what do you think of their coming to Germany? Oh, Germany *must* take them, we *must*, and they are very welcome here, she leans forward, *very welcome*. But we need to make distinctions between those truly seeking political asylum and others who are coming for economic opportunity. From Albania, Serbia, Macedonia—these people *cannot* stay. Their lives are not in immediate danger from imminent threat. And they are coming with the Syrians because soon the EU will declare those countries 'safe' and asylum will not be available to them. You mean *politically* safe? Yes, politically safe. I take a bite. The pulpo is excellent. The atrium-like dining alcove is empty but for us, with muffled acoustics, warm and luxurious. My family were refugees, she continues, Huguenots in the 17th century; they fled here from France. Gügold: my surname is a Germanized French name.

When we warmly shake hands goodbye, she points out the direction to nearby Humboldt Universität, where I will later be giving a lecture; she hands me an issue of *Der Spiegel* about the refugee crisis and a program directory for the much-touted Robert Wilson extravaganza of *Faust* (*both* parts) with music by Herbert Grönemeyer, the largest-selling German pop star who also famously plays the war correspondent in Wolfgang Petersen's adaptation of *Das Boot*. As she would be launching on a month-long recruiting trip in the US, we won't see each other again.

*

As I cross the famous Unter den Linden avenue and walk onto the campus of HU, I spot a sturdy used bike for sale locked to a crowded bike rack. It looks like the kind of bike for rent in Berlin, with strong wheels and thick tires for cobblestones and broken glass. I take down the address for a shop nearby.

The Behrenstrasse souvenir shop owned by a Vietnamese couple is typical, with postcards, Berlin bags, t-shirts, hats, and knick-knacks, and it's bustling with tourists. The couple is busy, one running the register, the other re-stocking. I ask them about the bike. We haggle a little over the price and I settle for the asking, with a lock thrown into the deal.

Mih emigrated to DDR Berlin from Vietnam 39 years ago, a move from one communist country to another. He was trained to be a machinist and engineer. Mih and Lienny's children had studied in the US, done well, and could take advantage of the advanced degree programs offered to academically high performing German students. They are proud parents, and I am admiring. And what about the refugee crisis, I say. (We speak in German; I ask them to speak slowly.) When they come here, Lienny says, they will have a hard time finding work, there are too many. They will become criminals. Also four thousand of the refugees from Syria are terrorists. Where did you hear that, I ask. On Facebook, she says. There are too many coming, Mih adds. When I came here, he continues, it was the DDR. I was trained, I worked hard, I learned German. We integrated into German society. With the Muslims this will be a problem. Mih, I say, I would like to ask you a question, do you feel that

you are German? He smiled and gave a little laugh. No, no, he said, I am not German.

Before I ride off I make sure the front and rear generator lights are working properl—the police will ticket you otherwise. Mih points out the quality Shimano generator on the front wheel. If you have a problem, he says, come back, I will fix it.

Berlin is flat as a coin. With little effort on a bike you can fly ahead, out-manoeuvre traffic and get anywhere you need to go in the city. There's nothing like slipping through the narrow space between cars and pulling ahead to spike a sense of superiority. The friction of air against the body wakes you up, the body having effectively joined the machine at five points of contact to become the moving parts of a light-framed locomotive. You are one of the rushing corpuscles through the arteries of Berlin, and you feel every rapidly changing contour of its paved and cobblestoned surface.

I'm headed for Oranienplatz in the Kreuzberg district of East Berlin, some kilometers away. I had heard that 500 refugees and activists had taken over the square and occupied it since 2012. Many were from Ghana and had come to Germany through Libya and the Italian island of Lampedusa.

At a red light I see a poster: *Flüchtlinge ist kein Beruf* ("Being a refugee is not a profession"), and a website; I jot it down before the red turns green and take off. Physically exhilarated, I wonder if there'd be anything to find at Oplatz (as its called). But there isn't. The tents and makeshift structures of dryboard and wood have been bulldozed by the city months ago, the refugees pushed off, in some cases physically carried off, into hostels or shelters, the activists sent packing to regroup online, in cafés, and on the street. The square, once the site of a fixed protesting eyesore, a kind of stationary march where Berliners could gather to mobilize hearts and minds and bodies, has been quietly re-inhabited by neighborhood folks. Elderly men and women sit on benches and talk, young men sit on the grass drinking bottles of beer, moms ride through slowly on their bikes with kids strapped in back seats. Dogs sniff around and lie quietly near their owners, off leash, totally obedient; I watch one, a huge shepherd mix, lick his owner's hand. The dogs of Berlin are the best-behaved dogs in the world.

REUNIFICATION DAY

Saturday, October 3, 2015

Late in the afternoon I head out to a reading and talk at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, (a cultural center near the Reichstag) titled “Time’s Attack on the Rest of Life: Revolution,” with the German writer Martin Mosebach and the Chinese poets and writers Yang Lian, YoYo (Liu Youhong), and Guo Jinnin. I’m intrigued to hear this panel discuss the history of Chinese revolts, and how experimental non-linear literary forms that disrupt our conventional experience of time can play a subversive positive role in workers’ resistance. It sounds somewhat grand, but I’m game for anything.

As I pedal along Invalidenstrasse on my brand new old bike, I come up against a set of police blockades on the stretch in front of the Hauptbahnhof. People with rolling bags and kids in tow are rushing to get through the manned entrance to the train station; it’s quickly being closed off by cops reluctant to let people through. I turn around to retrace my route but find myself between barriers. The only detour leads in the direction opposite to where I need to go.

I approach an officer. What’s happening? Demonstration. Of the left or of the right? This is Berlin: of the left *and* the right. Where’s it happening? Right here. When? Right now. From around the corner of the train station several hundred demonstrators march behind a large banner: *Wir sind für Deutschland / Wir sind das Volk* (“We are for Germany / We are the nation”). White haired women in sensible shoes walk alongside *chic*-sas in spiked heels; guys in army jackets and leather jackets, wearing jeans or dressier slacks; young and old, yuppies and geezers, all are marching in a right-wing demonstration against immigration. From out of nowhere ten or so young men and women ride up on bicycles wearing t-shirts that read “Refugees Welcome” in English, some wearing string bags with the same logo, a yellow silhouette on black depicting a fleeing family. The anti-demonstration protestors start screaming anti-fascist slogans, some in English, some in German: “Say it now / Say it clear / Refugees are welcome here!” “Nazis out! / Gegen Nazis!” The demonstrators respond by singing patriotic songs. Birds are flipped and screams exchanged. As the march leaves the train station area, the cycling leftists take off in the opposite direction, obviously hip to the detours created by the blockades and determined to navigate around the streets of Mitte in pursuit of the nationalist xenophobic parade. I follow.

Bitte, I call out, pulling alongside a hale lefty chap riding with his girlfriend to the next parade point, *Ich bin ein amerikanischer Schriftsteller, ich versuche über die Krise zu schreiben. Sprechen sie Englisch?* He spits back, *Nie! ‘Schuldigung!’* They speed up. And why would they want to talk to a bulky American writer pushing the pedals? Determined, I pursue from a block behind, and when I catch up to them they have already unfurled a “Refugees Welcome” banner of the same design as their shirts and bags. The activist swag makes it look like a team sport. I think of Seamus Heaney’s poem, “Casualty,” and his noting the graffiti scrawled on a wall in war-torn Derry, keeping track of the deadly score: “PARRAS THIRTEEN, the wall said, BOGSIDE NIL.” Another war with too many sponsors. Well, not a civil war here in Germany, not yet, one hopes not ever; but the proxy wars of the Middle East, political and often divided along religious lines (as it had been in Ireland) now intensified with Russia on the scene in Syria, a country lost in full-blown civil war.

As if it weren’t murderous enough. A mixed group of young and old leftists move *en masse* into the street and lie down, the demonstration still several blocks away. Thirty seconds later, police pick them up and move them aside like sacks of potatoes. I have never seen so many cops and vans for such a modest demonstration; it seems as if a cop is there for every two marchers. A line of them creates a human fence between the right-wing marchers and the leftist protestors. From a short distance I peer into the neutral cold eyes of the most stunning policewoman I have ever seen. Without

a helmet her glossy brown ponytail creates an athletic look, *sehr sportlich*. I notice that the thick power-beard on the stony face of the policeman next to her makes a good match. A handsome couple. I picture them on a sunny day at an open air firing range. I try my bad German again with a different set of young protestors on their bikes. Yes, they speak some English. Yes, I can talk to them. Yes, following them is okay. (We speak in a mixture of English and German.)

There's no single umbrella or even sizable organization of activists in Berlin; everything is improvisation as the situation develops, small groups posting information on Facebook, Twitter, and the like, with very short notice—from distributing the marching routes of nationalist demonstrations, to regrouping the Oplatz effort, opening up homes to refugee families, picking them up in Hungary in private cars and driving them across the border, to protesting the very idea of national borders altogether—*Keine Grenzen!*

Are you guys putting up refugees in your apartments? Philip and Johanna, both in their mid-twenties, give little smiles at my naïve question. No, we don't have room to do something like that, says Philip, we don't have the space or the money. I am doing an internship and she is a student. Our friends are the same. Do you think that the crisis, *die Krise*, is creating new feelings against immigrants, or is it waking up feelings that have always been there? The feelings are old and new, he says, but they have always been there, deep down. Do you see more young people such as yourselves joining the right in their efforts to stop the refugees? Yes, always more young people are joining the right, they are open about it now. I point to a cop carrying a large video camera. Even the cops are filmmakers now, I say. Oh, ja, everyone likes movies, he says. They look at each other. We're going now. And they ride down Ackerstrasse, further south into the tough East Berlin neighborhoods of Friedrichshain.

I look around. I'm in the area between Alexanderplatz and Rosenthalerplatz that Alfred Döblin brings to life in his 1929 novel, *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, a physically brutal and idiomatically vital story unlike any capital-centered work in Anglophone modernism—the rough pathos of Frank Norris, the camera-eye technique of Dos Passos, and something like Joyce's feeling for city life at street level. Döblin's talent consummate with his environment, he was one gold standard in the measure of adequate attention.

Powerful thick rock music, abrasive fast melodic, is blasting from a single large stereo speaker on Ackerstrasse pointed at the demonstrators marching along Torstrasse. I listen for a minute and approach a leathered-up sixty-something guy in horn-rims and with a gray ponytail standing outside the storefront where the speaker is plugged in. What's this music, I say, it's great. Ja, this is a band. My German is bad, I say, but I'll try. He smiles faintly; he'll humor me. What is the band? Freygang Band, he says. I don't know it, I say. Oh ja, started in the DDR; it's playing here tonight. I look up at the sign over the club's door, Shockoladen (Chocolates). What time? Eight. I look at my watch. It's only five. Are you in the band? Yes. He gives me a little smile. What instrument do you play? Lead guitar. His head angles toward the door. Do you want to come in, he says.

The club owner pops a Berliner Pilsner, a local favorite, and puts it in front of me. Egon downs a shot of vodka and lights a Galouise. (We speak in a mixture of German and English). So, you're a writer, he says. I'm a poet, I'm trying to write about *die Flüchtlingskrise*; I think you probably have a good perspective. When did the band start playing, I ask, opting for a crabwalk towards my agenda.

Freygang Band is the kind described as seminal. Although it came together in 1977 in East Berlin, inspired by American bands such as the Rolling Stones, Kinks, and MC5, they were instrumental in more than one way in broadcasting the energy, attitude, and style of American music in East Berlin

at that time. From behind the wall, *der Mauer*, American music of the 1960's and 70's was hard to hear, but once heard impossible to forget; and it inspired Egon Kenner to somehow find an instrument and play it. He still plays the guitar an American musician gave him in 1973. The band is a seductive fusion of rock & blues, hardcore attitude, political lyrics, and an open free approach to playing without any jaded irony. Freygang Band is still earnest, serious, straight-ahead. But, as I would hear that night, they don't preach, they just destroy through total commitment and conviction. The structures are simple, the execution resolute, the vision epic with an awareness of history's long view; but like great poetry, it starts with the sound. (The sound and the sentiments that fueled it earned them persecution in DDR-days that only amplified their *bona fides* as artists deemed *verboten* by the state).

With a second round my German is definitely improving, as is Egon's English.

And what about the refugees? Things are changing always, he says, the most important thing is solidarity. No one can say what's going to happen. 200 years of colonialization of one kind or another have led us to this moment. But when immigrants come, he continues, the insularity of ethnic groups also becomes a problem. Andreas Kick, the keyboardist, joins us. I ask him what he makes of the reports of violence between Syrians and Afghans in the crowded shelters in Leipzig, Bonn, Hamburg, Kassel, and elsewhere. Of course, they will fight, it is too crowded. Now the right can say, you see, they are violent, we must control them. This is just the way it happens. I say, young people forget this history. Egon smiles wryly and adds, old people also forget this history.

More of the band shows up, along with the merchandise. Egon gives me a copy of their new cd, *Tanz Global*, and I unfold the lyric sheet. There I find a photograph of the legendary East German poet, Bert Pappenfuss, and a poem with his long lines lapping any of the other lyrics penned by the band. Why, I ask, is there a photograph of Bert Pappenfuss and a poem by him on the lyric sheet? Oh, says Egon, he is a good friend of mine; we've set many of his poems to music, we sing them all the time. But not tonight: too many words. Would you like to meet him, he asks. Pappenfuss is little known in the US, but his work (translated by Andrew Duncan) jumped out at me from the pages of Rosmarie Waldrop's anthology, *16 New (To American Readers) German Poets*. Later I discovered—late again—that he was one of the heroic figures of the alternative art scene in East Berlin's Prenzlauer Berg, publishing underground magazines, playing in rock bands, and re-vitalizing East German literature before the *Mauerfall*. I look down at the little photograph. Electric eyes peer out from under a plain cap brim and a thick nose bridged to a long fuzzy beard *a la ZZ Top*. I look up at Egon. *Sicher*, I say, "for sure." The next day Egon would text me the phone number. (I would write to Pappenfuss, but he would decline to respond.)

At some point they have to get ready to play and they leave me. I help myself to some salami and cheese on buttered dark yeasty bread. I remember the stunning judgment of a French baker who set up every weekend in the open market in Winterfeldplatz near where we lived two years ago in Schöneberg: "Don't tell anyone I said this," said the Frenchman, "but the Germans make the best bread in the world." I look around. This small club is now filled with a couple hundred people. Time has gone down smoothly with the pils. I move through a room of foosball and waiting musicians, past the barroom, to the stage area, packed with fans. Smoke from cigarettes folds, furls, and uncurls in the red stage lights. Ann Jangle, the opening act from South Africa, introduces herself and launches into a ferocious and beautiful set of folk rock accompanied on her acoustic guitar by Cami Scoundrel on electric bass. Jangle's voice hangs in a middle range, capable of dynamic and dramatically meaningful changes. She has an impressive tawny lion's mane of hair. The duet plays with sympathetic joy and personal relish.

Then Freygang Band takes the stage. They kill it that night, and for the first time I feel the great

positive energy of Reunification Day—not between East and West, and certainly not between left and right, but between musicians and their audience. Teen fans slam against fans dating from the *Mauerfall*, and devotees from the band’s earliest days welcome the physical contact from the pit’s periphery. Everyone sings along, wet with each other’s sweat and the sporadic fountain of beer from an over-jostled bottle. The music ends promptly at 10. This well-known club for alternative music and culture, that had started as a squat in 1990, has had its unruliness trained back by gentrification: new neighbors insisting on the German institution of the 10 pm curfew (I think of the scolding notice in the laundryroom of my building: “No Washing After 22.00 Uhr”).

Cooling off outside the club, Eric, a young man who had introduced himself earlier, approaches me. Hey, American guy, I want to ask you something. Wide eyes and a wide smile play on the most animated expressive German face I have ever seen. He could’ve been an actor (maybe he is one). Hey, let me ask you: is war the last opinion? What? He repeats the question. I repeat the question, not quite sure what he is asking. Is war the last opinion? Is he asking me if war is the last word in an argument between nations? Or if history, in order to be written, requires war, and victors in war to tell their side of a story? Whatever. Given the context, I get the drift; there can only be one answer.

No, I say sincerely. The back of his hand gently thumps my chest. Everywhere I go, he says, around the world, in Europe, in South America, I ask this of Americans, “is war the last opinion.” They all say “yes.” You are the first American to say “no.” Well, I say, I think you’re hanging out with the wrong people; I’m not the only American who would say that. Yeah, but what kind of country do you live in? There’s no *democracy* there. Everything is controlled by *money*. Your democracy is controlled by *money*. You can’t even vote for who you want to, you can only vote for the names on the card. That’s not true, I say, but I couldn’t deny that the political system was appearing more like a plutocracy, what with Trump still leading the run for the Republican nomination and billionaires funding super-PACS to protect their interests. Is Trump your next president, he asks. He has a crazy smile on his face. I can’t tell if he is being friendly and ironical, or menacing.

No, I say, but right now he is our Berlusconi. What about the refugees, I say, exercising my prerogative non-sequitur, I’m trying to write about what people think here, and nobody’s asking people like you. Oh, *Mann*, he says, I should take you to my parents, in Saxony, in Dresden. My father is an engineer. When the wall came down, he lost *everything*. Reunification *ruined* him. Now he’s spent 25 years paying into the new system. And the refugees, they want to come here and take. And he says, “That’s *my* money, they want to rob me!” Hey, American guy, we are going to a very alternative party, you must come. But I have only my bike here, I say. You’ll get it later, come with us. A taxi pulls up. This is our taxi, he says. I get in with him and four other friends.

I can’t make out in what direction we are heading; I have gotten turned around too many times in pursuit of my two-wheeled anti-nationalist protestors. Maybe we’re heading south into Kreuzberg’s more derelict bar scene. The mood in the taxi is frothy, though the German chatter jumping between my five party Virgils is too fast for me to follow. Eventually we pull into an apartment lot. The door opens. Ann Jangle and Cami Scoundrel, the musicians from South Africa, are standing there with drinks in hand. We’re leaving, Ann says, this party sucks. The others de-cab, and Ann and Cami get in. I stay seated. I have no idea where we are, at least I’m in a taxi. The door closes and Ann punts an address to the driver and we take off.

Hey, I say, you guys were fantastic tonight. You speak English, Ann says, oh thank god, where are you from? Washington DC, I say. Oh, man, I’d love to play there, says Ann. Well you should, I say, you were great. Where are we going? To a bar in Kreuzberg, she says. A flurry of chitchat gets us acquainted and I explain why I’m there. Where are the refugees? Oh, man, they’re *everywhere*, says

Ann. But where? Just look around you, human misery is everywhere in this city. Go to Warschauerstrasse or Hallesches Tor, (two metro stops in East Berlin), you'll find them. (I would go the next day, but I never saw any refugees there, only grimy career bums, young bushy beards with dreads hanging or roped back, playing guitars, drinking beer, and hanging out on narrow strips of trashy grass with happy well-behaved dogs.) You'll find them, says Ann, the situation. Cami has to leave in two days because of her passport situation, she adds. Borders. There *shouldn't be* any borders. You shouldn't need some piece of paper to go where you want, where you need to go. (A world without borders. It sounds like an anarchist theme, but I'd hear it over and again, more centrally *au courant* in Berlin now—and of course the existence of the EU is predicated, to begin with, on loosening control of the borders.)

The bar is a simmering warm Kreuzberg scene, crowded, edgy, friendly. Everyone seems to know each other but to come from radically different sectors of society. At one table, a beefy goth guy in studded leather, make up, spiked hair and a metal bolt shooting out of his chin is talking to a thin dapper cat in a cardigan and tie. Girls on the lam from American sororities rub shoulders at the bar with broad, thick-handed guys in durable work shirts. At least in the bar it seems to be a world without borders. I ask Ann and Cami where they are living. "Nowhere," is the answer. Where are they sleeping? In the flats of friends, or on a park bench. On a park bench? Yeah, says Cami, I woke up on one this morning. Were you guys paid for the performance tonight? Yeah, says Ann, fifty bucks. Fifty bucks for both of you? Yeah, and I sold a few cd's, but we've already spent that. She hands me a Mexicali shot. What's this, I say. It's for your health. We clink and bottom up.

Ann turns to play a dice game with a huge guy at the bar who looks like he has just walked off a Fassbinder set, Expressionism itself sitting at a bar, killing time as civilization wanes into darkness. I ask Cami about her life and her music, what inspired her in each, and she tells me about Cape Town and the music she loves, such as Fuzigish (the ska punk band from Gauteng) and the slam poets, Kyle Louw and Roche du Plessis, as well as her grandfather, who emigrated with such resourceful determination to South Africa from Lithuania. Are you sure you guys have a place to stay tonight, I say, you shouldn't be sleeping on park benches (I am showing my age and sheltered lack of experience). Another round and Ann and Cami are reciting their poems to me, egging me on to do the same.

I have now been drinking slowly but steadily for eight hours. Some things simply are not possible at that point, at least for me, and one of them is calling up any of my poems to memory (a *real* poet's memory, of course, would only be turned on by drinking ... Will there ever be a time, I think, when you won't feel like a poser). Cami pats me on the head and looks me in the eye. I see a lot of white, she says. I'm being told my age. At some point the two of them disappear down a staircase. My offer of shelter no doubt having looked like a proposition, they have properly ditched me. I sit and study the bartender as he tries with some difficulty to light short candles set in glass that he then haphazardly slides along the bar. Berliners love candles, a fetching impulse in a dark city. A sign on corrugated cardboard cut from a box is sloppily taped to the wall. "How to Survive Kreuzberg," it reads. Clocking in at 3 am, one suggestion stands out, "Don't open a map."

Eric of the bright eyes and broad smile has walked in, but I can't bear another political entanglement, I'm fried. I go to say goodbye. You going? He gives me an enormous bear hug. I will look you up on Facebook, he shouts across the two-inch chasm between us. A taxi and a bike ride later, I walk into my Scheunenviertel flat and stand at the window for a while, staring blankly at the shadowed bulk of the new CIA in Berlin.

WHERE WERE THE REFUGEES?

Sunday, October 4, 2015

Severe hangover. Head throb pushes me out of bed. I move through the morning routine and get out the door to find a strong *Schwarzer Kaffee* at Karaca, my local joint on Chauseestrasse. The guys who own and run the place, four or five of them, are always hanging out and kibitzing. The café is like a business-cum-frat house for them; it draws people in. I get my coffee *zum Mitnehmen* (to go), and welcome the fresh air. Beautiful fall morning in Berlin to look for a shop that can remove my head and replace it with a pumpkin. Passing the Brecht Hause, I duck into the adjacent park to find a bench and mentally lick my brain.

Within about 30 seconds I realize I've wandered into a cemetery. Empty of pedestrians, the only ones here are prone. The sound of my feet on the small gravel paths is a kind of acoustic cereal for my ears, oddly soothing. I find Brecht's grave, then the stones for Hegel, Fichte, Heinrich Mann, Elisabeth Hauptmann, Paul Dessau, Hans Eiler, Ruth Berlau ... I've unwittingly dropped into the *Friedhof* of the Dorotheenstädtischen Gemeinde on Chauseestrasse, probably the most celebrated cemetery in Berlin. I find a stone bench.

Where were the refugees; who are they; what stories do they have to tell, what songs and poems do they carry with them in memory; what nightmares; what dreams, what hopes, what sorrows. To capture the force of their movement, I only ever hear one metaphor used, that of water—a flowing, a stream, a wave, a tide, a torrent; water moving so fast and hard it's impossible to stop and difficult to control. And new moving water has no name; it is merely the sum of its parts, anonymous, ahistorical, and once in motion inexorable. My companions here in this plot devoted themselves to thinking about the force of history and the emblematic lives that expressed it, added to it. What was there to add? God, my head hurt. So I sit there a while, very still, in the sun, with the famous German dead.

I WAS BORN IN A REFUGEE CAMP

Monday, October 5, 2015

A typical Berlin night, my friend Susanne says with a short laugh when I tell her about my escape. But we don't do it anymore—we are too much in our routines, we make arrangements now to meet each other at precise times. So, she adds, nothing ever happens. We are on our way down to the Landesamt für Gesundheit und Soziales (Lageso), the first place of registration in Berlin for all the refugees; in a way we are retracing the route I had taken from Tegel International through Moabit the previous week. It's another beautiful fall day in Berlin, leaves starting to turn, quite warm in the sun, a little cool in the shade. As we walk up Kirchstrasse, just a few blocks from the Lageso complex of buildings, midday diners sit at sidewalk tables eating Vietnamese, Italian, or traditional German fare, such as *Maultaschen* (a kind of filled dumpling, like ravioli, a specialty of the south). Cafés are full, people are buying books in a local store. It's difficult to imagine what we will find at Lageso given the happy promenade here. We try cutting through a construction site and are promptly scolded by a hardhat perched on cinder, drinking from a thermos. As we turn round a fenced-off corner, Susanne says, you know, I was born in a refugee camp. What? *Ja*, she says, (the vowel sound floats away like a bubble), I was born in a refugee camp.

Susanne Gerber, a Berlin-based artist, was born in 1949. Her mother was German, her father Czech; but his German family roots made him one of a minority in Czechoslovakia. It was therefore not a stretch, with the advent of World War II, for him to join Germany's mobilization. He made his way into the SS. After the war, many Germans outside of Germany were being sentenced to prison; Susanne's parents were forced to flee Czechoslovakia. They reentered Germany as refugees and settled into a camp in Kornwestheim, near Stuttgart. Susanne was too young to develop many memories stronger than impressions; but she remembers the men who, with no work, whittled away the time talking, smoking, and playing chess. The idle talking was an important influence on her, as the men, confronted with the vast emptiness of idle hours, often talked to little Susanne on the way to losing themselves in the wandering exchanges of those with too much time on their hands. She thereby learned to speak early. The general feeling she had in the camp was of not being quite properly looked after; she was often left on her own. Remarkably, she says, in Stuttgart she never felt marginalized as a refugee; she never internalized that perspective herself. But being a refugee is a strong part of my identity, she says, being a stranger in the world is completely clear to me. When later I saw Büchner's *Woyzeck*, or the first production of Peter Weiss' *Marat/Sade*, she continues, I found myself *in there*, the origins of my story. I still feel that I am never a local person, but someone from everywhere, from somewhere else.

Once we hit Turmstrasse, the Lageso street, the scene changes. Bourgeois diners and shoppers disappear, replaced by bands of four to six single men, clearly refugees by their worn dress and stressed postures, walking down the street talking to each other with urgency, or on their phones. Refugee families with small children in strollers pass by. Everyone's eyes are focused somewhere in the distance, everyone's gait has an urban quickness and conveys a 360-degree alertness. There is nothing but immediate purpose, immediate need. We know we are getting closer. Soon low-price stores disappear, and set back from the street, behind a set of fences, two very large white convention type tents, with separate free-standing toilet facilities between them, provide shelter in bad weather. They stand with the same proximity to the sidewalk as any storefront and abut the first set of official buildings. These buildings along the street mark the beginning of the Lageso complex; soon we enter its mouth with dozens of others. Buildings shadow us on both sides of a small avenue into the opening of the courtyard belly. In this Lageso courtyard, we pass a food tent in which volunteers are ladling hot minestrone soup and handing out *Brötchen*. Nearby, an elderly volunteer wearing plastic gloves spryly fills plastic cups with water from the taps on a cooler cabinet.

Boys climb on top of a flat-roofed shed next to a *Röntgenmobil* (for x-rays) and a truck from the Zentrum für Tuberkulosekranke parked beneath chestnut trees. The food tent and trucks stand opposite a set of official buildings, further defining the waiting area. At one end, hundreds of people, mostly men, stand in a mass that grows denser towards the front, where a digital console on a tall pole displays a set of nine brightly lit amber numbers. Women and children sit on blankets to the side, eating, sleeping. Children draw or play a game their parents grabbed for them in quick preparation to flee. A boy with a cane makes his painstaking way along the perimeter. Another passes in the opposite direction in a wheelchair. A jacketed man in his thirties sits sleeping in a bassinet stroller, his legs splayed on either side, heels digging in to keep him propped up—even in a dead sleep his body bound in effort. Some wear hospital face masks. A few guys in their twenties stand around an iPad, laughing and knocking each other's shoulders. Boys chase each other through a slalom course of standing adults, kick soccer balls, or try to catch falling chestnuts. Having been fed, they are doing what they live to do, exerting themselves in play, improvising the day within its terribly narrow confines. A dozen voices shout in excited cheering—someone's number has appeared on the console. Susanne and I move slowly and freely through the grounds, stopping here and there to listen and observe. No one stops us, no one asks us what we're doing there. We are obvious in our privilege. Security in red fleece mill about or stand in fixed positions. Green vests spear trash. A long line snakes outside an office. A woman in a lilac head-covering and dressed in pinstripes emerges with a thick set of files in her arms. She walks over to where we are standing near an exterior wall and leans against it to rest. Susanne begins a conversation in German.

Ishan Wahbi, a Lebanese woman in her mid-40s, came to Germany over thirty years ago. She volunteers as an appointed legal representative for those too compromised to navigate the registration process on their own. She's currently representing a single mother from Yemen who crossed the Mediterranean with four small children and a newborn. Are all those files for them? Frau Wahbi nods, yes. Several hundred people are waiting in line, about two thousand are on the grounds, with 500-600 arriving daily. She is waiting for the mother to meet her there, having recently been released from the hospital.

Talking about the refugee situation has created some kind of tension in her that is now an uneasy barrier; we don't know what it is, but we sense it. Susanne and I thank her and move off. A man wearing a backpack is arguing with a security guy in front of the office entrance. Voices spike, hands gesture with agitation. Susanne becomes a little nervous, so we walk to a more open area under some yellowing lindens, where the people waiting there on the lawn, on blankets, on benches, could be, in another context, picnicking or hanging out at a festival. They have relaxed into the interminable boredom of waiting for their number, waiting to take the next step in the process of being granted asylum. And today is a nice day. There are pockets of rest to settle into momentarily before the next push. We head out. I'll come back tomorrow.

THE GREATEST OF MOTIVATIONS

Tuesday, October 6, 2015

The weather has turned grey and the temperature has dropped without the sun. At Lageso men and women stand about in heavier coats and hats, hoods and scarves. A man walks by wrapped tight in a bedsheet. A security guy in red fleece and a close cropped mohawk trails him for a while with his eyes. I've been rehearsing my few words of Arabic on the way in. A young fella with a pleasant aspect stands nearby. *Marhaban*, I say, *atadhir, min fadlik* (Hello, excuse me, please) ... Do you speak English? Yes, a little bit ...

Marwan has been living for the last two years in the adjacent Charlottenburg district of Berlin, where Nabokov spent his years in exile and Walter Benjamin his turn-of-the-century childhood. Marwan is here with his cousin, Sami, who arrived from Damascus three weeks ago. Sami appears by his side, suddenly made visible to me by virtue of my learning his name. In their mid-twenties, Marwan would like to continue his university studies in business (he had finished one year in Damascus before fleeing), and Sami has hopes of continuing practice as a lawyer. Marwan has just completed a two-year state-sponsored language course. (We speak in a mixture of German and English.) Sami's English is not as good as his cousin's; it will be difficult for him, I think, at age 26, to learn enough German well enough to practice law in Germany. But maybe I'm simply projecting my own experience trying to learn German—after all, he's obviously smart and well educated; he has family connections here, and the greatest of motivations: survival and necessity.

We are joined by a friend, Bassel, also a lawyer, who made the journey three weeks ago with Sami. Fearing conscription into Assad's army in Syria, each sold his car to raise the 5,000 or more euro to pay the traffickers. I love Syria, Marwan says, we all want to go home. He is thinking of the long journeys here, through Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, Turkey, Morocco, Afghanistan ... But we must stay until the war is over. So you are here now, I say, and you've been here for two years, and you've learned German, and you want to continue studies at the university—so, let's say that happens—when will you return, in two years, in five years? Maybe in ten years, he says, or twenty years, or thirty years, when the war is over—I have to think in terms of my children ... (What children?—he is imagining his future German-born children ... Will they want to return, should it ever be possible?)

What's it like here, waiting? It is terrible, of course, says Bassel. Marwan explains. They are only calling twenty numbers a day now, he says, gesturing at the console displaying nine brightly-lit amber numbers. And these security guys are Turkish, they are very cruel. They pushed a woman down, with her baby, and killed her. Where? Right there, he gestures to a central area in front of the console. Why? Who knows, because she was asking about something and he didn't like it. You saw that happen, I say. No, but I heard about it; *it happened*. The Turks don't want us here, he went on, the German people are very good, they try to help, but the government is too slow. Why do you think they're so slow? Because, he says, they want to discourage more people from coming.

Fathi, another friend, joins us, a 23-year old engineering student from Damascus, who walked for a week without sleeping to get to Berlin. Sami looks at me from under a hoodie he's wearing beneath a bigger coat. Excuse me, but where are you from? I'm from America, I say, from Washington DC; I'm trying to write about what's happening here so that people will understand. Sami looks at me with a wry little smile. I am sorry, but America has been part of the problem. I know, I say, that's why I'm here. What do you want the US government to do now? Marwan breaks in. Russia will not help the situation. Putin is not really fighting IS [Islamic State], he is with Bashar [al-Assad; but they all refer to him as Bashar]. The US only has to fly planes over Syria, he continues, and the

army will shake with fear and go underground. That would help? I say. They only have to show they are present, says Marwan. So, you want the US to show its potential for using force in the region, I add. Yes, that would make some difference. Sami looks at his phone. Excuse me, he says, and walks away.

You all have phones, ja? They nod. Where are you charging them every day? Marwan says, I bring a portable battery I charge at home. I scan their faces; they're a sweet bunch. I can feel the strength of their comraderie, their determination and courage. I have to go, I say, what would you like to tell Germany today? Give me a number, says Bassel, I want to work. Marwan writes down his e-mail address on my notepad. *Shukran lak* (thank you), I say. We shake hands.

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On the way back to the S-bahn station, I stop at a Jehovah's Witness stand on the sidewalk right outside the Lageso grounds. I'm struck by the cover image of their pamphlet in Arabic, a photograph of a happy modern Arabic family (the mother is not in hajib, the father not in robes, the children's duds are from any fashionable catalog or outlet—they could be a secular family anywhere in the West). Posed together, they smile into the father's smartphone as they take a family selfie. I pick up a copy and start leafing through it. A white German guy in tweed—he'd fit in at Oxford or Cambridge—begins to tell me about the contents: Lots of good information about how to manage money, be a good parent, a good husband and wife ... Are Muslims trying to register at Lageso showing much interest? Oh, yes, they really are, he says. They know about us already because we have people in Syria. But here, he continues, Arabs who were afraid to show interest in Christianity are free to ask questions and come to our meetings. And some Arabs are already Christian, I say. Oh, yes, they really are, he agrees, and we have so much practical information to help them get started in German society. Are you getting many converts yet? Oh, yes, we really are. The Arab people who come to Germany are very interested. I find the cheerful optimism grotesque given the situation of the refugees; the modern family depicted in their literature, pure fantasy, has no resemblance to anyone or anything in Berlin—Muslim, Christian, Jewish, or of any faith. But the Jehovah Witness' prohibitions (no interfaith marriage; demonization of sexuality outside of marriage, including homosexuality and masturbation), and their control of congregants' lives, does dovetail nicely with Sharia control of an individual's personal life. Even their corruption of sacred texts (the Bible, the Koran) as fundamentalist codes of conduct share a common set of ambitions. Maybe the guy's not exaggerating. And with the 165,000 Jehovah's Witnesses in Germany living peaceful lives? There could be, *and are*, worse influences. (Though the history of the Jehovah Witnesses appeasing of Hitler is a different story.)

THE PROBLEM OF THE “PROBLEMATIK”

Wednesday, October 7, 2015

Die Flüchtlinge = the refugees. You see and hear the word everywhere. (You can hear it at the beginning of the new opening montage for the fifth season of *Homeland*). The *Flüchtlingskrise* (crisis) has created a stage for the virtuosity of the German language to invent compound-nouns, new substantives that one keeps stumbling over in German newspapers and magazines.

We are involved in this new *Flüchtlingewerk* (work), to provide *Flüchtlingshilfe* (help) to those *Flüchtlinge* making their way on the divergent *Flüchtlingsroute*, at least when they don't run up against a *Flüchtlingssackgasse* (impass). The *Flüchtlinge* have created a *Flüchtlingsproblematik*, by virtue of the *Flüchtlingsandrang* (crush), the *Flüchtlingssturm* (onslaught).

Both *Flüchtlinge* fleeing existential threat and what they call the *Wirtschaftsflüchtlinge* (economic refugees, those from the Balkans seeking better wages and working conditions) are living in *Flüchtlingsunterkunft* (camps). The new situation in Germany is driven by *Flüchtlingspolitik*, and is leading to what they're calling the *Flüchtlingsfrage* (question).

This last neologism is the most troubling in light of German history, the great problem of the *problematik*, and it echoes down the worst of the nation's tragic corridors. For prior to the current *Flüchtlingsfrage*, there was, and still is, in Germany, the *Ausländerfrage* (the foreigner question), and before that, the more pointed *Judenfrage* (the Jewish question). The Jewish question, which had been floating through European anti-Semitism (and its corresponding Zionism) since the 18th century—what to do with Jews, what to do *to* them, and to what degree they belonged to any nation—culminated in a solution to the question, the Final Solution of the Wannsee Conference in 1942.

The *see* (pronounced *zay*) in Wannsee means “lake.” Into it flowed the question, which resulted in an abyss we call the 20th century, home of Leviathan, the monster of our methods. Is it any wonder that now we face what we've become, a *Flüchtlingsströmen* (ceaseless streaming). 60 million displaced, globally, and growing ...

GERMANY IS MY DESIRE

Thursday, October 8, 2015

I head back to to Lageso. It's been raining on and off for the last 36 hours, not hard, but hard enough to make a day standing outside waiting absolutely miserable. The grounds have turned muddy; large puddles have joined to create even larger pools that the refugees work around as they navigate each other's haphazard maneuvering. Bassel and Sami spot me; we shake hands. They're surprised to see me again. Journalists covering this complicated fast-moving story have so many aspects and pieces to put together, they keep moving on to the next site, the next conflict, tension, announcement, ineptitude, disaster ... Today there are so many television reporters and cameramen on the grounds with their equipment, you can feel how curtains have parted on a new theater of the situation. What publication do you write for, what kind of writing are you doing, asks Bassel. I'm writing for a journal in the US, I say, and show them a letter from Tom Lutz, the editor in chief of *LARB*, confirming my assignment. I'm a poet, I add, I teach at the university.

Hamraz, a 39-year old mechanic from Herat, Afghanistan, overhears and approaches. I also am teacher. We shake hands. What do you teach, I say. English, he says. He is here with his wife and two daughters, ages 7 and 13. They've travelled for three weeks to get to Germany, through Afghanistan and into Iran (where his parents live), Turkey, Greece, to Hamburg, and onto Berlin.

A non-believer, Hamraz is fleeing religious persecution. In Afghanistan, his atheism puts him in life-threatening danger; were he to move his family in with his parents, his life would be in danger there as well. Here in Germany, he says, is democracy, freedom of speech, freedom of opinions. Germany is my desire. My mind is like the culture of Europe, my opinions are the same. I like the law, my security here is good. I am relaxed here. I cannot be persecuted for what I think. I can wait here. Twenty days. One month. Two month. It's not a problem. My children are safe. They play every day. My future is here. I want to work. I have to continue my lessons. What is your work, I ask (maybe he teaches English on the side, or as a public service). Big autos, he says, trucks and vans. My father is a mechanic; I learned from him. I learned English in Kabul. You speak well, I say. I reach into my bag. Here, I say. I put a Langenscheidt German-English dictionary into his hand. The bright yellow cover of durable plastic is practically an icon of foreign language study. For me? he says. His gratitude for so little embarrasses me. In an instant three more guys join us, talking to Hamraz in Dari and gesturing at me. They want to know if you have more, he says. I wish I did, I say. I get a troubling cold stare from a square-jawed big-boned guy. I don't like the look of him. I say good luck and call it a day.

STILL AS A TOMB

Friday, October 9, 2015

I ride my bike down Friedrichstrasse to the Checkpoint Charlie area to find the United Nations High Commission on Refugees. Originally established by the League of Nations, it was reiterated by the United Nations after World War II, with the idea that it would work hard for a few years to solve the crisis of European refugees after the war. But the need for it during that period was renewed when the Soviets crushed the Hungarian Revolution in 1956. Since then, it's never been out of commission.

I realize quickly after parking my bike and wandering around a courtyard area on Zimmerstrasse that I'll have to sneak in the building with some other visitors. I loiter a while, and join a small group that gets buzzed in. Luckily, I've donned a button-down shirt and sport jacket—my official costume—and look like I might have a reason to be there. But I don't know what floor the office is on. I walk up five stories and find it. Door locked. On either side of the door is a thick glass wall. I peer in. Standing flags and open office doors. A few attempts at ringing the bell with no results. I wait outside the door for 15 minutes, staring intently through the glass. I can't see into any of the office spaces, even with the doors open, but I can see the sun coming in from the exterior windows, sending shafts of light through the rooms and out the thresholds. I study the dust motes to see if I can make out any swirling disturbances that would suggest a moving body inside. Nothing. Still as a tomb.

THE INSIDER OUTSIDE AND THE OUTSIDER INSIDE

Sunday, October 11, 2015

Pedaling through the Tiergarten on a bright Sunday in October, you would expect to see plenty of others enjoying the day; but today the park is teeming with thousands of stragglers still in town after yesterday's massive demonstration against the US-EU trade pact (TTIP/CETA). Hundreds of thousands came out, by the literal busload. The speeches and music floated up several kilometers and over the roofs of the Naturkundemuseum and the new CIA building to tickle my ear through the open window.

I've stayed inside, working on these journal entries, studying some German, and losing myself in Joseph Roth's Weimar-era writing about the city (collected under the title, *What I Saw: Reports from Berlin 1920-1933*, translated by Michael Hofmann). Though these dispatches originally appeared in newspapers, they transcend their immediate genre. As *flâneur*, Roth was not only observant, sympathetic, ironical, and intrepid, paying close attention to the lives of struggling immigrants, displaced Jews, and homeless in the mechanical metropolis with its seedy glamour—his vision is penetrating, his comprehension indelible. "Phenomena and atmospheres and experiences differ," he writes, "not in their essence, but in secondary qualities like scale." Everywhere in these reports from the streets of Berlin, Roth shifts the scale so that we can see what otherwise we'd walk right by, "to learn that a slightly bent hand can hold in it the misery of all time." The novelist is always awake in these sentences. Roth was paid for each one, but a personal relish for the startling detail and comprehensive sweep animates every phrase.

But one cannot always be observing firsthand; one must also stay inside and reimagine, sift, refine, and sharpen sentences. Such was Saturday. And with such a massive demonstration, I would get lost in the scripted sentiments, the replicated postures. But you couldn't escape the gist: "STOP TTIP/CETA für einen gerechten Welthandel" ("STOP TTIP/CETA for a world of fair trade"). Today, red and green flags still wander the Tiergarten, the demo anti-corporate/pro-environment/pro-labor/pro-consumer/pro-democracy vibe sustaining a feeling of positive lift.

I pedal through the aimless political drift, zigzagging my way to the Chinese poet Yang Lian (or, as one would say in English, Lian Yang) in Schöneberg, my old *Kiez* from two years ago. The hookers of Kurfürstenstrasse are already out on a Sunday afternoon, a block or so from Lian's conspicuously renovated stretch—such is Berlin, where prostitution is legal. They all look like immigrants from the East, some having perfected their slow sexual strutting, others merely standing in the street as if they are saving a parking space for a friend. Bright high-cut shorts hug flesh-tone tights—it's getting colder—and make theatrically explicit the parody of flashy mating dance. Maybe women hooking from Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, Serbia, Macedonia have the relative privilege of working in the brothels ... am I seeing a societal labor sub-class? Note to self: ask a German guy in a *Kneipe* near Oranienstrasse (another street, in Mitte, where I'm living now, also known as a district for sex workers—they hover around the historic Neue Synagogue).

Two years ago, when I was living in Berlin, Lian and I had worked together on translating his verse triptych about Nabokov's exile in Berlin (1922-37). I hadn't seen Lian since, though we'd stayed in touch. He and his wife, the novelist and painter, YoYo (Liu Youhong) had lived for many years in exile themselves (first in New Zealand, then London, and now Berlin) having fled Beijing with the growing violence that led to the collapse in Tiananmen Square of the democracy movement. Lian is a lot like his poems, full of expressionist intensity and phrasal bursts. Words seem to shoot out of him; he's like a walking language gun.

Lian and YoYo live in the kind of high-ceilinged pre-war apartment building with big well-lit rooms that were demolished all over the East for their bourgeois decadence. Although they had some difficulty renovating it—Berlin subcontractors, seeing they were Chinese, assumed they were therefore super-rich, and tried to rip them off—it's now a lovely, warm, spacious flat. Exile has become home.

As we settle on the couch behind steaming cups of tea, I can tell YoYo is antsy as Lian and I slowly lose ourselves in poetry talk. She is getting ready to show her paintings—colorful impressionistic abstract work on large paper, with strong calligraphic elements—to a gallery owner coming later. She excuses herself. Lian and I plunge into our shared obsession—poetry, its cultural history and global reach. Lian, deeply read in several traditions, makes the kind of connections that frame poetry as a historical network of trans-national practice. He carries himself with an elegant modesty, and is instantly recognizable in a crowd with his shoulder-length mane and quick smile. In China, he is famous for joining a native tradition with European modernism, something he shares with other poets from the so-called “Misty School” of late 20th century poetry in China, whose metaphorical language communicated feelings and ideas to Chinese readers that the state deemed *verboten*. However, as with much of the poetry in communist bloc eastern Europe, the language of poetry is often difficult for the state to prosecute: it's hard to say in a court of law what, exactly, it means. The poetry flourished there in its stylistic ambiguities; still, because its subversiveness was understood, it had to be suppressed. Since the collapse of the democracy movement in 1989, Lian's body of work has grown in significance; a standard collected works is in preparation in China, and he is translated and published the world over.

Our conversation turns to the refugees. I ask him what he makes of the situation given his experiences living in political exile for the last 25 years. Exile, he says, is the grammar to connect people across time and space, it is the grammar of poetry. The real story is the most powerful thing; no one can *invent* that experience in real life. Tiananmen or Syria now, everyone lives in history, really. We need to see that it is the same story in different countries in order to understand the situation—not only is it *their* situation, but it is *our* situation: that's the most important point. When people talk about China, they often recycle Cold War ideology, black and white—but recycled talking points do not meet the deeper layer of reality of the situation. So in reference to the refugee crisis now, he says, I feel that the reason for the crisis—how IS [Islamic State] has squeezed the *internal space* within Arabic culture—that's a real source of worry. Inside of those countries (Syria, Iraq, Iran, even Turkey) the *liberal space* is getting smaller and smaller. The only hope for the world is that one day a real *modern* transformation will happen. It has to happen. In 2003, Lian continues, Adonis [the Syrian poet, recognized around the world as one of the great modern Arabic writers] said to me, “I am anti-Islamic because religion is always used to compel people to believe and to behave.” This was so great and such a relief to hear. I see in him, says Lian, one great individual, in his body, speaking for the awareness of this need for this kind of *individualism*. This kind of thinking has to happen more often with more people. That is the only hope. History goes like that. One person can really decide the direction of history. But we have to think when we see refugees, we are refugees too. We live in a peaceful time and place, but the violent situation driving them from their home is so close to us. I say exile is a grammar, says Lian, crossing time and space—and, really, from our experience after Tiananmen massacre, that grammar helps us to see ourselves and the refugees, both walking here in Berlin.

Why did you guys move to Berlin and make your home here? With our experience in Beijing, said Lian, there is a direct link between Tiananmen Square and the opening of the Berlin wall. The blood in Tiananmen Square [spring 1989] served as the textbook of days for Europe and Berlin [fall 1989]. Gorbachev's visit to Beijing [that spring] brought students into the street. [Gorbachev was viewed as a figure of increased liberalization, which ran counter to Chinese communist party hard-

liners, but excited those involved with the democracy movement]. So all the international TV stations were in Beijing, Lian continues, and that called the world's attention to Tiananmen Square; and when the massacre happened, it was the first time in front of all the world's eyes. Tiananmen Square—Berlin Wall: it is almost like one pair of words, each made up of three characters in Chinese, like coupled lines in a poem.

We discuss some of the differences I was hearing at Lageso between the desires of those from Syria and from Afghanistan. Afghanistan's experience is longer, says Lian, with the question of what can be a stable home. First the British, then the Russians, then the Taliban, then America [took control of the country]—the meaning of home keeps changing—you can live in exile *at home*. And home is also in *this*, our body, he gestures to himself, Afghans are clearer about this than those from Syria, he says.

Why is it so important for you to live in exile; after all, at this point, you *could* go back, right? After Tiananmen Square, says Lian, so many Chinese writers were living and writing in exile. But now, most of them have gone back to China, or to Chinese-speaking areas. It's a strange feeling. But it is so rare to have a real Chinese writer with open international experience and therefore a larger understanding; and to put in the hand of Chinese people the possibility of a modern transformation of Chinese culture, and to *push it*. You can be a greater force for change *in* China, I say, by living outside of it than if you lived there. Lian responded, I don't want to lock myself in the small space of living in China, but *pushing* for change from here. We have been called "the Insider Outside and the Outsider Inside."

Would it be safe if you returned? For many years, says Lian, when I landed in China and turned on my phone, the first call I received came from the secret police. "Oh, Mr. Yang, you are here again, welcome. We hope we can sit down soon and discuss matters." In other words, you are being watched. But this has stopped. But this does not mean I feel safe. On the other hand, where is safe? In the West there are commercial pressures, and a huge culture that keeps changing day to day. Always you feel you are a stranger. But I am quite proud to be a stranger. Every new poem makes me stranger *and* stronger. I abandon my old self to write a new poem. All these challenges make us stronger individuals. I hope this can be shared with the refugees from Syria, but also for those born here, and living here for many generations. It feels like before World War I right now, he says, before the world became separated by two big ideas, capitalism and communism. *Exile* links everything. We have to be the *active Other*—that is *the point* of awareness, he says, the attempt to understand others is part of your *own* ego, part of your understanding of yourself.

On my bike ride home I think of the first televised images I saw in 1989 of the *Mauerfall*. My paternal grandfather, Sam Weiner, had just died, and I was in Hollywood, Florida, for the funeral, and helping to sort out my grandparents' apartment. Watching Germans from East and West climb the wall, and try, without much effect, to hammer and chip at it ... It was the end of one era and the beginning of another, especially in light of my grandfather's own boyhood flight from Russia and his eventual journey into the US through Ontario. With both sides of my family hailing from Russia, I had to wonder about my last name, Weiner: it's a straight-up German name (related to Wagner, or meaning wheelwright, or in Yiddish, wine merchant).

STATELESSNESS

Tuesday, October 13, 2015

In her essay of 1943, “*Wir Flüchtlinge* (We Refugees),” Hannah Arendt asks the hard question about how Europe allowed the persecution of its Jews, and the even harder question of how the European Jewish loss of identity—the desire not to be perceived *as Jewish*—is a kind of self-annihilation that leads, literally, to suicide.

“In the first place,” she writes, “we don’t like to be called ‘refugees.’ We ourselves call each other ‘newcomers’ or ‘immigrants.’ “Yes, with the current legal parsing of “refugee,” “asylum seeker,” “migrant,” “immigrant,” it’s all too easy intellectually to contain people within an imposed social category. Is it really possible to see people in their full individual humanity, free of that status? Who can one *be* outside of one’s relation to others? “We lost our home,” Arendt writes, “which means the familiarity of daily life. We lost our occupation, which means the confidence that we are of some use in this world. We lost our language, which means the naturalness of reactions, the simplicity of gestures, the unaffected expression of feelings. We left our relatives in the Polish ghettos and our best friends have been killed in concentration camps, and that means the rupture of our private lives.”

The condition of *statelessness*, which, in Arendt’s historical reading, European Jews after World War II internalized and converted into an *inauthentic* assimilation in whatever country they happened to adopt, lead to a profound existential despair: “we try to put up a front, to hide the facts, to play roles.” This condition is now a global situation, a global diaspora. The *particular* aspects of that condition, of Jewishness, remain stubbornly Jewish—(“A nice little fairy tale has been invented to describe our behavior; a forlorn émigré dachshund, in his grief, begins to speak: ‘Once, when I was a St. Bernard ...’”).

The refugees in Goethe’s cycle of stories, *Unterhaltungen deutscher Ausgewanderten* (*Conversations of German Refugees*, 1795), are not *Flüchtlinge*, not so much *fleeing*, as migrating—they are migrants, *Ausgewanderten*—and you can hear the *wandering* in the word. They are not eternally wandering, but circumstantially on the move, displaced by the French Revolution, changing abodes, as the word *migrate* indicates. (And you can follow the line of this conceit from Boccaccio’s *Decameron* to Goethe’s *Unterhaltungen* to Brecht’s play, *Flüchtlingsgespräche* (*Refugee Dialogues*)—finished in 1944, Brecht’s conversations take place in a train station.) In European lore, the Jews are not given even that uncertain status; they are denied the temporal limits of such movement; they are, rather, the *Ewige Juden*, “Eternal Jews,” their wandering knowing no bounds, only borders, all foreign. The “Eternal Jew” is forced from a native relation to the land, and into an unending unbound relation to time. The best of what European Jewish culture had to offer the world was born in this double bind of denial and conferral.

There is no need to try to draw equivalences between the Jews of Europe in the 1930’s and 40’s and the Middle East refugees now—for the Jews of Europe then had no homeland *to begin with*. This difference is all the difference in the world, the difference, you could say, of *the difference*. Yet Arendt puts forward an understanding also larger than the Jewish situation: “hell is no longer a religious belief or a fantasy, but something real as houses and stones and trees.” For those at Lageso, the houses have been destroyed; the stones they sit on grow cold; the trees they lie beneath are shedding their leaves ... They are in a different brand of hell, because they know where they’re from.

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I receive an e-mail from a friend in Berlin who had offered to introduce me to a Syrian woman she knew. But the woman, once approached, refused. She didn't want to speak to any writers or anyone from the media about the war or about being a refugee—"there is such a shitstorm about it right now," my friend writes, "the media is all over it. She just wants to get on with her life and integrate ..."

PEOPLE WILL MOVE

Thursday, October 15, 2015

Dinner plans with the English poet, Alistair Noon, and his partner Sabine, who is German. The U-bahn ride is only a few stops, but Berlin-wise a different world from my secret service block—the blue collar district of Wedding (pron. *Vedding*). Alistair's directions have me walking through what he calls “a spooky park.” Without any light at all in the park, I find myself walking long stretches beneath rows of thickly foliated trees that block out any ambient illumination. My urban hackles and sixth sense are raised; it'd be a cinch to jump me here. On the other hand, only an idiot would walk through this park and you'd have to be an equal one to wait for him in such deep darkness (a woman would never make the mistake). But I've never had a problem in Berlin, and I go pretty much everywhere—it helps, I suppose, to have some size (what I lack in height I make up for in girth). I get through all right, every other step giving me away with clinking beer bottles in tote.

Their flat is modern, small and neat. They've just moved in, having re-done the floors—(in Germany, renters are expected to pay for their own renovations; people don't move around much and they often rent the same flat for decades—thus the inevitable epic wait to secure new digs). I have beaten Alistair home, he is on a beer run. Sabine and I are soon joined by their friend, Malte Fuhrmann, a cultural historian at the Türkisch-Deutsche Universität zu Istanbul, who slowly strips off his cycling rain gear—he is well protected head to toe, a true all-weather Berliner cyclist. Alistair soon follows and within minutes we're all drinking outstanding Franconian beer. Conversation percolates over lentils, chard, and potatoes. As I find with Lian (and maybe this is a sign of authenticity) Alistair is very much like his poems—satirical, sharply enunciated, urbane, far-reaching in global reference, and fun to listen to. He's been living in Berlin since before the *Mauerfall*, and makes his bread as a translator of legal documents (he also has good working command of Russian, and has translated Pushkin and Mandelstam in addition to contemporary German poets such as Monika Rinck).

Sabine teaches German as a second language to refugees—specifically those who have already achieved an official foothold in the society. She describes some of the culture clashes between the values of Western open societies and Eastern notions of propriety, decorum, and social license (e.g. to live an openly gay life; for women to talk directly and freely and to exercise self-determination; to be openly physically affectionate; to express one's sexuality without fear of reprimand or punishment ...) Sabine's class includes a wide range of nationalities, ethnicities, and religions.

There are sometimes tragi-comical episodes, such as building evacuations over forgotten book bags; but also alarming acts of violence against people with different expectations and ideas about how to act in society—different ideas about what society, in fact, in the West, *is*.

I ask her if the idea of a million Muslims entering Germany gives her cause for concern. No, she says, what scares me are the right-wing extremists in Germany. (I would hear that again and again, the feeling of many Germans that the far right in Germany, and *of* Germany, is more dangerous than the foreigners entering).

Alistair breaks in. No one should be surprised by the massive movement of refugees across the border, he says, after all, capital has been moving across borders without hindrance for at least a generation or more; it only makes sense that at some point people will move as well. The system, however, is designed to check *people* while allowing for the free movement of *capital*. But who creates the capital, he asks rhetorically. Well now the same system is breaking down. And, he adds, for

good reason. Malte, whose focus as a scholar is the Ottoman Empire in the 19th & 20th centuries, breaks in with an especially acute reading of the situation. Unfortunately too much beer from Bamberg, Erlangen, Nürnberg have fritzed the synapses, and all I can remember is my impression that he knew more than any of us.

The evening ends with Malte and I walking back through the spooky park, which, with our blood alcohol levels, has been transformed into a foggy midnight pastoralia. I do remember, however, one of Malte's subspecialties: Ottoman beer production in the 19th century and the transformation of public space. All hail Franconia! (And one of the main regions of entry for refugees in Germany....)

☒

Cyberspace

An e-mail from Malte Fuhrmann arrives, responding to my request for his (lost) thoughts about the crisis.

On the one hand, we are all a bit puzzled how differently things are running now compared with the big asylum-seeker influx in the early 90s (destitute people from economically wrecked Soviet block countries plus mostly Bosnian war refugees). Back then the CDU [Christian Democratic Union party, the center right catch-all party in Germany] kind of welcomed the attention towards the refugees, as this distracted from their obviously economically ruinous policy towards Eastern Germany. Also many mainstream intellectuals and the media jumped on the bandwagon. Now, there is this big consensus from the CDU through the mainstream media to not allow for racism, leaving the racist segment of society (which, mind you, is still big) looking for obscure organizations like Pegida and AfD [Alternative for Germany, one of the right-wing populist parties, fairly new]. Whether this or the old strategy is a better long-term solution to keep the right-wing small, I do not know.

Other things which are different: back then buildings with people inside were set on fire, now it is "just" empty buildings. Nowadays Syrian war refugees get asylum status, whereas Bosnians in the 90s only received "Duldung" (status of being tolerated). It made it easier to deport them at short notice and excluded them from education, the job market etc.

Another perspective is of course having lived in Turkey for several years. My friends from Turkey laugh at the fuss Germans make over the arriving refugees, as Turkey has lived with 2 million refugees from Syria throughout the last years. However, Germany offers much more to refugees than Turkey does (welfare, emergency housing, language education etc.), where there are a few mass camps for first arrivals, but many Syrians live in a state of destitution in the streets. German society is a structurally very conservative one: most people did not really want their lives to change with reunification, and now they also would wish things just to return to normal. However the present dilemma has possibly shown a split between those that realize that Germany is just a smaller area of Europe/Asia/Africa and cannot ignore if other parts of those continents are at war, live under dictatorships, or in misery. However there is this obstinate lot that still thinks the question is how many refugees Germany thinks "it can handle," not realizing no one will bother to ask that with their backs against the wall. One immigrant friend (admittedly a Turkish American professor, not refugee) claimed however that while in Germany one occasionally runs into some ignoramus, people are in general more open-minded than in Switzerland, where people seem to generally have the attitude that somehow the system will take care of everybody, and if somebody falls out of the system, it is their individual fault.

SHABBAT DINNER

Friday, October 16, 2015

ExBerliner, the expat Anglophone magazine in Berlin since 2002, is devoted this month to two themes: the refugee *Willkommenkultur* (Welcome Culture), and being “Jewish in Berlin.” Two good things that go together? Jewish “right of return” by those of German descent has been joined in Berlin by a growing influx of Jews from all over the world, most controversially (for Israelis) from Israel. *Willkommenkultur* is the welcome to refugees demonstrated by members of churches, synagogues, community centers, mobilized neighborhood volunteers, and leftist activists who are stepping in to fill the gaps left by a government bureaucracy staggering under the burden of overwhelming refugee numbers and underwhelming preparation for a crisis that was apparently on its way from the vantage of many months. This effort is starting to show fault lines in the German people’s attempt to welcome so many desperate and hurting refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, most of whom are practicing Muslims. (Though when I write “practicing Muslims” the image I call to mind is of the taxi driver I saw in Washington DC on my way to the airport, on his knees on a prayer rug outside the Marriott-Wardman hotel). While the government tries to expedite deportation of Balkan refugees (the *Wirtschaftsflüchtlinge*, or economic refugees) and constrict the spout of benefits, Berlin scrambles to find empty buildings and plan emergency construction of 30,000 apartments next year. The Federal Office of Migration and Refugees had been consistently low-balling estimates until the Interior Minister dropped the bomb of accurate numbers in August: not 450,000, but twice that number are now expected; likely even more. Many more. Hungary has closed its borders; other countries are sure to follow. The grimmest indicator may be that Munich’s decision in September to house refugees in the Dachau concentration camp somehow made sense; the outcry, writes Ben Knight, was not as loud as when Rhine-Westphalia actually put refugees in an outlying concentration camp building only seven months earlier.

Although no state agencies collect data on Jews, the Institute for Jewish Policy Research estimates that Germany has the third largest and fastest growing Jewish population in Western Europe, after France and the UK. There are 120,000 or more Jews in Germany today; according to estimates, half of them live in Berlin. Before the Holocaust, the ratios were even greater (170,000 of 195,000 German Jews lived in Berlin). The number of anti-Semitic attacks on Jews in Berlin hovers over 200, but parsing that number in terms of German perps or foreigners, explicit acts of anti-Zionism, and acts “against Israel” (whatever that means), is rather like separating green beans from wax beans. Anti-Semitic crimes are recorded, writes Sara Wilde, by their political motivation. That’s a murky depth to plumb. Jews wearing *kippah* have been physically and verbally attacked in Neukölln (the *Kiez* with the thickest Muslim population); but many Jews who do live in the area say they have not experienced anti-Semitism there. Anecdotes and ambiguous stats make it difficult to draw a clear picture. Amongst Germans, feelings about Jews and the nation’s bloodied history is a deep psychic pool, deeper even than ideology, and something akin to the legacy of slavery in the US. The more time I spend here, the more I feel that anti-Semitism is a core problem in the form of a Gordian knot: the right’s hatred of Jews comes together with its hatred of Muslim immigrants, many of whom also themselves hate Jews. The left, with its self-inoculation against Islamophobia as well as against anti-Semitism and anti-facism, finds itself in a double-bind: how can it strike against Sharia and fundamentalist jihad without appearing anti-Muslim? Some are quick to point out that, hey, these guys (Islamic fascists) are not just anti-Semitic, they’re also anti-homosexual, anti-liberal, anti-democratic, anti-tolerant, and not big proponents of women’s rights. How can the left sympathize with the cause of Palestinian self-determination without reanimating anti-Semitic goblins? Can the German left make meaningful distinctions between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism? For many Jews, any criticism of Israeli policies is anti-Semitic; yet the Israeli left has long attempted an intellectual and activist critique of Israel’s reactionary policies (e.g. in the West Bank). You could

spend your life sorting it out; and to some extent, to be determined only by your conscience, *you should*. As always, talking to people is the first step.

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Evening, I head out on the metro. The U-bahn to Charlottenburg is a stewing gumbo of disparate language sounds, and every stop introduces new ingredients to a German base are added mixtures of Slavic, Arabic, and Asian. Some South American guys boarded with a small amp and brass instruments, and start up “When the Saints Go Marching In.” They smile and sing and pump the brass valves for a few coins, break off abruptly at a stop and move on to another car.

I’m on my way to a shabbat dinner with Rabbi Walter Rothschild, Director of the Institut für Jüdische Besserwissenschaft (Institute for Advanced Jewish Studies) and his family, having been invited through an active listserv that started with an ordained feminist rabbi based in Hollywood, Florida—my aunt, Cheryl Weiner. A short walk past the infamous KaDaWe—the “shopping mall of the west” (and in DDR days greatest symbol of its decadence)—past some kosher stores, and I’m facing the apartment building on Passaustrasse. Two guys outside greet me querulously as I approach the outside board of buzzers. Hallo, they say; it’s a question. Hallo, I say, it’s my answer. Hallo, they both say again, meaning, more aggressively, *what do you want here*. Hallo, I say again, meaning, with equal aggression, *none of your fucking business*. I move past them and ring up. (I later learn that they stand outside as guards for a small Sephardic community that convenes in the building).

I enter another spacious old high-ceilinged apartment with overstuffed, bulging, sagging bookcases, packed cd-racks, and a great milky way of everyday objects everywhere, the evidence of a vivacious and busy household. The home gives off a warm vibe boosted by good smells of roasting chicken. Rabbi Walter greets me—we have never met—and offers me a whiskey. Shabbat hospitality indeed. We are off to a good start. We walk over to a set of old maps hanging on the wall. I begin looking at them closely. One is a colored map of the Middle East, the other a city map of Jerusalem. Notice anything, he says. They are both German maps from the early 1940s. Well, no Israel, obviously, I say, looking at a territory labeled Palestine that would later become the State of Israel. These are tactical maps of the *Wehrmacht* (German armed forces), he says, you can see what they were planning for their invasion of the region. He points out where the Nazis were imagining train routes and where they would billet the troops in Jerusalem. Scary shit, I say. Yes, indeed, he says, very scary shit. A neighbor found them in his attic and let me hang them.

Rabbi Walter Rothschild came to Berlin from the UK in 1998 to help revive the Jewish community here. It hasn’t been easy, he tells me, in large part because of the conservative congregations that turn their backs on interfaith marriages and conversions. It’s hard to launch a revival when the values are stubbornly constrictive. The rabbi talks at a quick British clip, with precision, point, humor and wit. Listening to him and surveying his home, I gather he is a man of appetite, discernment, ironical play, and intellectual and artistic endeavor. I soon find him to be a kind of Renaissance polymath—a poet, musician, scholar, a writer of short stories and memoirist reports from the front lines of rabbinical teaching. As our conversation takes various turns, he pulls down notebooks of scholarly studies, volumes published long ago and just released, a cd of original songs with his band, a quarterly he writes and edits devoted to train systems in the Middle East, a satirical cookbook of cannibal recipes, another of anti-moralisms titled *Aesop’s Foibles*. His grown daughters are equally charming and full of great humor and openness. They welcome me as an old friend, and are clearly practiced at the Jewish custom of inviting strangers into the home on shabbat. We are joined by a friend, Eva, and her new boyfriend, who, though he speaks little English, communicates en-

gagement with sharp eyes, quick smile, and expressive brows. Dinner is the kind of bubbling conversation and cross table contact of people who delight in each other's company. As we move into dessert—Eva's "cockies"—homemade joke cookies in genitalia shapes—and more wine, tea, whiskey and schnapps (will Berlin ever not be Berlin?) I grab my moment to ask the rabbi about the refugee crisis.

Earlier in the evening the rabbi had said to me, rubbing his eyes, I know you're here to write about the refugees, but I have almost nothing to say about the situation. Now though, with a "cockie" on my plate and a cup of hot tea, I try a different tact. The good mood of the table and the sociable atmosphere help. I know, I say, that the refugee crisis is being covered by mainstream media like flies on an open wound. They seem to be doing a good job, I say, I don't have anything to add to it myself. But I do have a question for you. I wait for the invitation to proceed. So, I say, I'm wondering: What kind of *pressure* do you think a million Muslims entering Germany is going to put on the Jewish community here, specifically the community in Berlin?

The rabbi begins by telling me about getting mugged by three Arab guys outside the Wittenberg U-bahn station, just two blocks from where we sit. Luckily, when a fist smashed his glasses against his face, the shattered lenses did not puncture his eyes. One of the three perps was detained by a security guard; the other two were later picked up by the police. Their heads, says the rabbi, were filled with hateful shit. I'm concerned with who put it there. So, that's a worry. One big problem, he continues, is that Germany is not really funding efforts for interfaith understanding. It's difficult, he says, to educate people without adequate funding. The rabbi describes efforts he had taken up with priests and imams to go into schools to talk formally with students—but the stipend is so laughably horribly small, that after taxes and paying for one's own meals over the course of the day, one has only a few dollars left to pocket. It's not working, we can't sustain the effort, and there are too few people who can do it to begin with. What's going to happen to Jews in Berlin? The influx of Muslims is an issue, he says, but it's not the main issue. In 10 to 15 years, the meaningful presence of Jewish congregations will disappear because the older generation is not bringing up a younger generation. The average age of congregants is 85. There's no interest in interfaith growth or conversion through marriage. What about all those Israelis coming to Berlin? The Jewish Israelis and the Jewish Americans coming to Berlin, he says, are not coming here to practice Judaism. And even if they have an interest, unless they are registered to pay taxes, they cannot formally join a congregation. Because all these congregations are funded by the state. That's why they exist, because they get money. And whoever gets the money controls what the community does and how it does it. And in the meantime, they don't really know what being Jewish is. The whole thing is a Potemkin village, there's no Judaism there; the continuity has been broken. There *was* continuity in England, he continues, because German Jewish refugees went to the UK, they taught there. I grew up in that German Jewish liberal tradition, he says. And that's why I came to Germany, to complete that circle of Jewish renewal. But I look around at the rabbinical conference here and I despair. I thought, he continues, in 1998 that there could be a generational change. But people warned me. My big mistake was in not realizing that change couldn't take place because the only role models here were the previous generation. There is no real spirituality in Berlin; no prayer; it is a Judaism without God.

He then explains his own congregational experiment, to see if there are enough Jews in Berlin to begin a community that would detach from the state tit and renew a practice of Judaism determined by individual commitment to a collective spirituality. It's been very hard, he says. There is very little creative Jewish writing in Germany right now; there is no new German Jewish theology, no new ideas. So, in terms of your question, there is no critical mass here to counter the pressure of a Muslim presence. There are 200 Jewish births a year in Germany. So, say half of them are boys. That's two circumcisions a week. No *mohel* can make a living doing two a week! And the Jewish butchers and bakers are slowly disappearing, he adds. The disappearance of fresh food expertly turned out

seems like the final tired tap on the coffin of conversation. The rabbi rubs his eyes. I can see the circles under them. It's been a hard day, he says, maybe we can't stay in Germany. We pour some more Tullamore Dew.

BERLIN'S "QUIVERING HEART"

Saturday, October 17, 2015

I have plans to meet Karsten Eckardt, who has been helping me with German conversation, this afternoon at Alexanderplatz, for the demonstration organized by Moabit Hilft—the volunteers at Lageso come primarily from this *Kiez* association, that organizes and mobilizes at the registration office in response to the crisis as it has built up in their district. Without the volunteers' work ladling hot meals, pouring water, providing shelter and medical care, many of the refugees would be even more desperate and frustrated and despairing. No doubt, Moabit Hilft (Moabit Helps) kept the situation at Lageso from spiking in tension and, potentially, violence. While the government should've been preparing for dramatically increasing numbers of refugees, it dragged. When the crisis hit Berlin square on, it was unable to meet the demand. Government failed; many had never seen it do so. Local volunteers saved the day, the week, the month, the season. But they need more support; and they want to push the government hard to increase the processing speed. That means more hiring by the government, more training. And Moabit Hilft needs more volunteers. They are exhausted.

But before I meet Karsten there, at Alexanderplatz, I want to revisit the Winterfeldplatz Markt, in Schöneberg, where I once shopped for local produce, handmade cheeses, cured meats, and fresh bread. Today, I'd also shop for a little nostalgia. (Is there a German word for the guilt you feel indulging in nostalgia? Should be one ...) The Market sets up on a block-sized *Platz* in front of a church, and one block from the Nollendorfstrasse that Christopher Isherwood helped make famous—and my favorite street in the neighborhood, with its wide cobblestone avenue blocked off from car traffic and shaded by a canopy of trees I should know the names of, but don't. On a Saturday, the market is quite tight with Berliners and tourists squeezing round each other through narrow aisles created by trucks and stands.

I suddenly see the same hard-luck woman I always saw, with a prominent beak and slightly crushed-in face, doggedly moving from person to person, asking for change. The formula is concise, she hardly waits for a reply (almost always a refusal) before moving to the next person. But she seems to have gained weight since I saw her last, two years ago; and she has a new haircut, long on the left, buzzed short on the right. She's not begging for change now, she's selling one of those newspapers that the downtrodden are given to sell—in Berlin it's *Der Strassenfeger* (*The Streetsweeper*). Seeing her in clean jeans and Doc Martens and a studded belt marks something like good incremental change in one person's fate.

Her presence collapses time for me; it could be 2012. I had forgotten she existed, and to her I was just a weekly penny score; my face just a blur, I hardly existed. Yet my recognition now links me to her. And having seen her again in this way, as a kind of full rhyme with a former self, she'll stick to me and maybe make me more real (she's as real as it gets). Is this connection what Lian calls "the grammar of exile"? I buy a paper from her. Nothing special happens. She's already gone.

But all the other regulars are still here. The Greek selling olives, hummus, feta. The friendly German family from a local farm with the big-boned fleshy son who spent a year living in Boston. The Turks still overcharging for dried fruit (I buy some). The fish lady with her lovely *Räucherlachs Brötchen*—I buy one; it's disappointing. (The sandwiches in Europe are always disappointing; they simply don't know how much stuff to put between two pieces of bread.)

I see the seamstress I once bought some hats and gloves from. After some careful deliberations at her stall, I buy a new hat for Sarah, and a pair of what they call "pulse warmers"—basically long

tubes of colorful boiled wool that cover from wrist to mid-forearm. I pay her and ask her about the refugees. Oh, she's not so worried about the refugees, she says, she's worried about the TTIP/CETA trade pact. Ja, I say, it's not good for workers or consumers. It's not *good for children*, she says. Why not? Because TTIP will introduce new American syrups to the German market and all our children will become fat pigs. The phrase in German is *dicke dicke Schweine*—it has a cruel ring to it that makes it a favorite taunt on the playground.

I head to Impala Coffee to meet the poet and translator, Alexander Booth, whose translation of Lutz Seiler's *im felderlatein* (*in field latin*) will soon introduce Anglophone readers to this German poet whose prominence here is starting to go international. The café is crowded, but we find a corner. Our conversation ranges widely over big cups of *Schwarzer Kaffee*—from his publisher, Seagull Books, which is bringing so many good new German translations to market, to the ideological binds of Muslim and Jewish relations in Berlin. This street here, where Isherwood lived, I ask him, pointing to the corner where the traffic's blocked off—what are those huge trees? Those are plane trees, says Alex, imported by the Romans. And actually, Isherwood lived on the other side, across Maassenstrasse, at number 17. Alex hands me something; it's a present! *The Seeker*, the second volume of collected poems by Nelly Sachs, translated into English by Michael Hamburger and others. Sachs, a Jewish German, fled the Nazis to Sweden. Opening the contents, I read the title, *Flucht und Verwandlung* (*Flight and Metamorphosis*), a volume from 1959.

*How light
earth will be
only a cloud of evening love
when released as music
the stone goes into exile*

I look to the left side to find the German word for exile. *Landsflucht*, maybe literally “country-flown.” She lived right over there, says Alex, pointing to a building a stone's throw away, across Maassenstrasse.

Heading back to Nollendorfplatz, he points out the terrace of the local brothel on a conventional Kleiststrasse apartment building. You always know when it's open, he says, when they hang the flag of the European Union out the window. Seeing the circle of twelve yellow stars on a blue field of cloth: the symbol of the European Union used as a signal that the sex trade is open on a Sunday afternoon collides with the mental image of the yellow six-pointed star that the Nazis forced Jews to sew on their clothes as a mark of condemnation, a disturbing visual rhyme across time. The neighborhood concatenation of the tragic and the heinously absurd is suddenly too much, the juxtapositions too over-determined, and I bark out a bitter clipped laugh. At the U-bahn station, I stop to read the plaque on the exterior wall commemorating the gays and lesbians murdered by Nazis. Sometimes Berlin can feel like an enormous Holocaust memorial that then turns into a rave at night.

I meet Karsten at Alexanderplatz underneath the World Time Clock. Alex (as Berliners refer to it, my second Alex of the day) is a major hub in the city, a concrete world of tram lines, new shopping malls, street performers, and mobs of tourists wandering the spaces between a discordant array of architectural styles, punctuated by the Fernsehturm (TV tower), visible from just about every spot in the city. In the twenties, the area was pure skank, a bustling and deeply sour world of urban dirt that Alfred Döblin called “the quivering heart” of Berlin. We walk to one of the perimeters, where the Moabit Hilft demo will take place. Underneath the elevated hot pink water pipes that move ground water around Mitte, a red stage truck has parked and green vested volunteers are setting up. It's a good time to talk to people.

Jan Tenhaven, a Berlin-based filmmaker, has been taking care of refugee families for several months, as many as seven people at a time living in his flat. Some have been invited to move into neighborhood apartments when the owners were away for extended periods. At the moment, Jan has a mother, father, and four children staying with him (ages 4-15). Just yesterday, after 35 days, they have been able to register with the government. Everyone understands, he says, that the enormous influx of people has put organizations in a bad way. I mention to him the possibility that, through bribery, some are getting registration numbers more quickly than others. I don't believe there's bribery, he says (others have expressed the same skepticism). What's it like to live with a whole new family in your apartment for weeks on end, I say. It's very nice, he says, we cook and eat together. But we're all new to this situation, and I am learning about it along with them. I turn to another volunteer standing with us.

Connie Albrecht has also been hosting people from Iraq, Syria, and Pakistan. At the beginning, she says, I said only women and children, because I live alone. But now I am helping young men, too. They are not much older than my own son. When I was there, at Lageso, as a volunteer, and I saw one, in the cold, who only speaks Arabic and didn't know what to do, I said come with me. Another, from Iraq, stayed with me for five days. We're trying to find a hostel for him. But the hostels don't want to accept anyone paying with the government vouchers, because the government is taking too long to redeem them—they don't get paid for over six months. I made 39 calls before I found a place that would accept them. And then there are the illegal hostels, which put eight people in a room meant for four, or worse. Because they can, she adds, people have no choice.

Kristina Bachmann, one of the principle coordinators of the Moabit Hilft effort, introduces me to Thorsten Buhl, 39, who served as a paramedic on the front line of Lageso for four weeks at the end of summer, when the situation there had already worsened past the point of the government's preparations. We had one tent for medical treatment, he says, and thousands of people every day. From a medical point of view it was really horrible. What kind of treatments were you making, I say. Oh, people had crude stitches from torture wounds, open sores on their legs and feet from walking here thousands of kilometers, a pregnant woman past due who had walked here, can you imagine, a man stabbed on the lawn and robbed of his asylum stipend, and dirty traumatized children, exhausted and scared; when you looked into their eyes, there was nothing there.

What are you doing now, I say. I started an NGO in Friedrichshain, he says, like Moabit Hilft; we act as a kind of donation chamber for smaller groups who distribute clothes and give lessons. What is your strongest feeling, I say, about the overall situation. I am optimistic, he says, because the people are providing so much help. Before I started working with Moabit Hilft, I really had a bad feeling about the future of German society. I found it selfish and materialistic. But after these experiences, I'm hopeful. Society is not dead. My life has changed, and also my mind, my own thoughts about the future—what is really important, what is not important. For myself, there is a new perspective. The help I provide is not just good for the refugees, it is also good *for me*. (Here was evidence of the empathy and imagination Lian hoped to encourage, I thought.)

I don't do it just to help others, he says, but to help myself. I ask him about young people joining the right: is it a new feeling they're discovering or something that has always been there, latent, buried, and has now woken up in them? Well, he says, racism is everywhere. And Pegida [the name Pegida is an acronym for Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West, or, in German, *Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes*] are Nazis. That *is* what they are. I see everyday people who have nothing, and they need help. To help them requires strength and humanity. Those following Pegida have neither the one nor the other. The hatred has always been there, but now it is awake and people are out in the open. I get angry messages all the time on Facebook, Thorsten says: *Ja, you are a good Mensch, you should be sent to the gas chamber.*

I look around. The arena has filled with a few thousand people as we've been talking; the demo is about to begin. Thorsten writes down his e-mail address. I make sure I can read it. _____@yahoo.ca. Canada? He nods. I thought a while ago, that I would leave Germany and emigrate to Canada, because the society here had died. But now I am going to stay. I want to be a part of this new society, to help create it.

The demo starts up. I hardly need any German to understand the complaints flying from the megaphone: there are too many people coming in; the process is too slow; the supplies too few; the volunteers are exhausted; there is no government help ... I look around at the signs.

Ich bin so wütend! / I am so angry!

Politik sitzt es wieder einmal aus ... / Politics sitting it out again ...

Es reicht! / It is enough!

Handeln jetzt! / Act now!

Kälte Tod vermeiden / Prevent death from the cold

The last one is so specific (as well as being, in German, concise) it reaches the furthest into one's conscience. A woman in front of me pulls a bottle of red wine from her backpack, a corkscrew, and two wine glasses. She hands the glasses to a friend standing next to her, pulls the cork, and pours. They clink. *Prost*, they say, and drink. I look around. Everyone is taking photos. Mohawked punks with well-behaved kids in tow, old hippies in army jackets and pony tails, young professionals, women in sporty outdoor wear who look lean and strong as mountain climbers, grad students in cultivated stubble—it's a cross-section of the German left, and a mirror-image of the right. A short woman in army boots—she looks like Mother Courage's understudy—walks by, hawking KAZ, *Kommunistische Arbeiterzeitung* (*Communist Worker's Newspaper*). I buy a copy. "*Nein! Gleiches Recht für alle!*" ("No! Equal Rights for all!") reads the headline; this may be about the distinction some draw between economic refugees from the Balkans and those seeking political asylum, and about the perilous social status of immigrants in German society. The photomontage on the front cover shows two giant pigeons pecking at a long line of HO-scale refugees walking towards a gathering spot behind razor wire. I look around. Someone's smoking a joint nearby; I inhale deeply.

A Syrian man has taken the stage and is addressing the crowd in English, his speech translated every few paragraphs into German by one of the volunteers who takes the mic. He describes the situation: the difficulty getting papers; getting vouchers for hostel rooms, the overcrowding; negotiating society without knowing German; the feeling of being overwhelmed by practicalities like figuring out the metro system; the treacherous maneuvering for those in wheelchairs, like his mother, or with other physical disabilities; the sadistic security guards, the sense they give of having permission to mistreat refugees. But he will, he *must*, end on a positive note. We're not complaining, he says. And it doesn't matter where we're coming from, or our situations, whether it's poverty or war, they are both deadly, we're all here looking for a new life ... Thank you, Berlin, we feel like we're home! *What*, I say aloud to no one. Cue Bob Marley's "Get Up, Stand Up." Let's call it a demo. People start milling around with the music. Karsten and I head out to a *Kneipe*. Too few people, I say to him, only a couple thousand, no more than the number of refugees standing around every day at Lageso.

JOSEPH, THE YOUNGEST JEW OF IRAQ

Monday, October 19, 2015

Rabbi Rothschild has sent me an email suggesting that I meet with a Jewish refugee from Iraq who wants to talk to someone about the conversations amongst Syrian men that he has overheard in the German refugee camps, away from Western ears. I follow the e-mail chain, find the address, and send a note of invitation to talk, which is answered instantly. We agree to meet at the Zoologischer Garten U-bahn stop in Charlottenburg, not too far from the hostel where he's staying.

A gray rainy morning. Walking from the station to the *Platz*, I go under an overpass populated by a dozen motionless human forms mummified side-by-side in dirty down sleeping bags. Open *zum Mitnehmen* cartons and foil dishes with half-eaten leftovers mix with newspapers and magazines rescued from the trash bins—even the left-over news can be consumed. A few dogs curled and tucked in between the bags share the body warmth. One must be thoroughly exhausted and desensitized to sleep through the sounds of morning traffic—cars and trucks and busses, and the noise of walking bodies just a foot away from the crowded sidewalk margin of the truly marginal, too truly literal, the parallel society of scrapers-by. A rhythmic crashing crunching from across the street fills the immediate soundscape—some kind of huge construction drill excavating behind a metal fence surrounding the block. Waiting on the corner, Joseph recognizes me—he must've found my face online; we shake hands and look for a café.

Joseph Aish, 34, from Baghdad, is the self-declared youngest Jew of Iraq (there are only about 20 Jewish families left, he says). His father is an Arab communist, his mother Jewish (she died a couple of years ago of ALS). Although his father did not believe in practicing religion, Joseph's mother created subdued celebrations on the Jewish high holidays—silent, except for the preparation of some special foods, especially nice table settings, what she simply called *mitzvah* to mark certain days. While Baghdad has always been a city in which Jews could live in relative peace, with relative tolerance (otherwise impossible in Iraq), the family never felt truly safe. The combination of Judaism and communism in the family, although not publicly or widely known, was a matter of record with Iraqi secret service. In 1990, when the US military dropped a bomb on the Iraqi immigration office, the family realized that it had the opportunity of a lifetime to change its entire identity. They commissioned forged documents and moved across town.

In 2003, Joseph (called Yusef throughout his childhood) was an engineering student at the university. He decided to act on his rejection of Islamic radicalism by trying to help the US military with some advice about how to take control of Fallujah, then under the command of Islamic extremists. He walked up to an officer stationed on the street, which eventually led to a series of meetings with some generals (Joseph says he met with them maybe ten times). The US was approaching Fallujah from highways in the east, but without much success. Joseph recommended taking control of two points on the Euphrates river, running along the western side of the city—the river was the main thruway for supply transports. In addition, he says, he recommended taking control of the smaller city of Amiriyat Fallujah, to the south—that's where the radicals were manufacturing munitions. Joseph thinks this advice helped the US. That's an incredible story, I say. Joseph, in a baseball cap, red and blue but otherwise blank, tips his head to the left in modest acknowledgment. Yes, he says, I don't know if it was me, but I hope so. They did what I said and it worked.

Joseph has learned German, also Dutch, English, Turkish, Aramaic, and he knows a few other Arab dialects. His English is *very* fast, his stories detailed and the situations richly textured. His understanding of the tensions and complexities running through Middle East politics is nuanced; he takes apparent pleasure in parsing the ironies embedded in regional ideological conflicts. His discussion

of tactics and strategies has the verve others bring to sports, but he clearly carries the knowledge with a grim concern for its disturbing implications: the fate of people who are not radicalized at the hands of clever, ambitious, and utterly vicious Islamic fundamentalists.

Growing up, Joseph never considered himself to be Jewish—Arab Muslim descent is patrilineal; but his mixed religious/political background, and his collaboration with the US, put him in danger. In 2004, he went on the international move. In Holland, curious about his Jewish heritage, he made contact with a rabbi. I'm not really Jewish, he told the rabbi, but my mother is Jewish and I'm curious about the religion. Oh, said the rabbi, then you *are* Jewish. No, said Joseph, you don't understand, my *mother* is Jewish, my father is not; I'm not Jewish. The rabbi explained that, unlike in Islam, Jewish descent is matrilineal. Curiosity lead to practice, and Joseph now wears a six-pointed star tucked beneath his shirt, and always carries a kippah (though he won't wear it outside of Jewish places for fear of being attacked). Your mother was Jewish, I say, but you also *chose* Judaism as the faith you wanted to practice, how come? I just feel it, says Joseph. He likes to wear tefillin, he tells me (the small leather boxes containing parchment with torah verses on them that are strapped to arm and forehead during prayer), but he doesn't carry any with him—it's too dangerous. Joseph has only learned a little Hebrew so far, about as much as casual practitioners use during services; but—as is often the case with converts and those new to the practice—he gravitates to the more orthodox congregations. There are more people, he says, than in the liberal congregations in Germany. And, he adds, you *feel it* more. Joseph is gregarious without coming across as pushy. He likes people and big cities; with his smartphone's GPS and social media, he is always finding *Kaffeeklatsch* in neighborhood bars and cafés. Women are my weakness, he says. How do you pick up women, I ask, do you tell them that you are from Iraq, what language do you use? Depends, he says, sometimes I speak English, sometimes Dutch. Then I say I'm from Holland. I don't tell them I'm from Iraq or Jewish until later. They don't hear your accent, I ask. No — you hear it because you're American, but if I speak English, others don't hear it. Joseph has been on the move for the last two years, through Turkey, Jordan, Greece, everywhere, he says. He left Iraq for good in June 2014. He is surviving along the Jewish network in Germany, moving from Frankfurt to Hanover to Köln to Berlin and back and around. He'd like to settle in Köln because, in addition to being a place with open-minded people, it will be easier to find an apartment than in Berlin. He likes Berlin, he says, but he's had more luck with women in Köln.

So speaking of hearing your accent, I say, what are you overhearing in the camps. There are Syrians, he says, who think that Germany is a good place to come because Germans hate Jews. The Syrians think they can be violent against Jews and the Germans won't care. The Germans that hate Jews, I say, also hate Muslims; those Syrians are making a big mistake. Well, he says, I told a couple of people that I thought were open-minded people in the camp that I am Jewish, and then it got around the camp, and some guys tried to stab me with a broken bottle. I went to the police, he continued, and they said it is a religious conflict between refugees, we don't get involved with that. Anti-Semitic crimes, I say, are kept track of in Germany. Joseph's baseball cap tips left in acknowledgment. Maybe because I am not yet a resident, he says. Where'd that happen? The camp in Grosskrotzenburg, near Hanover, he says; I realized then that I could not stay in the camps; so now I am staying in the hostels and paying for it myself. You are a refugee fleeing from the refugee camps, I say. Yes, he says. We both laugh a little. Where do you get your money? The German government deposits 300 euro directly into my account, and my brother sends me 200 euro a month through Western Union. Where does that money come from? From an apartment rental in Baghdad. I'm getting confused, I say, in 2003 you advised the US military by meeting, like, ten times with generals about tactics to take Fallujah; in 2004 you left Iraq for the first time; where'd you go? First, Jordan, we have an apartment there. Then Dubai; there I got a visa. Then in 2005, I entered Europe and went to Holland. I declared my Judaism there, in Holland, and re-did my chemical engineering degree so I can get a good job in Europe. That took until 2010. Then I went to Norway, returned to Jordan, then returned to Norway, and then returned to Iraq because my mother was ill.

But, he says, she had left the country for treatment and they wouldn't let her back in, and she died before I could see her. Then IS was growing very strong and I decided to leave for good. In 2013, our house—we had a very big house—was destroyed by a car wired into a bomb. Who did that, do you know? Yes, the same radical group that was in Fallujah. Who was that? First it was the old Revolutionary Guard of Saddam, then Thoar Al-Ashreen, then the Muhammad Militia, then ISIS—all the same people. He lifts his pant leg and shows me some scars. It was a big house, he says, and we were in the back courtyard, so we survived. But I don't breathe so well, he continued, and I have problems with my eyes. Joseph is holding a damp tissue that he regularly dabs his eyes with. The dust from the explosion, he says. He pulls some drops out of his pocket. These help, but I need surgery after I'm settled here, and it's hard to get medicine when you are always traveling. How's the process going now, I ask. I've been waiting a year and a half, he says, because I'm Iraqi. But a rabbi and a lawyer have been calling the government, and now they say it will be maybe two more months. How long have you been traveling? Since last year: Turkey, then Greece, then Belgium; then I was on a train to Sweden, but passport control stopped me because they have my fingerprints here in Germany, so I must stay here and get asylum status before I can travel again outside the country. Okay, I say, I think I got it now. (Joseph's sense of narrative time is not always chronological, but makes sense to him. Is it, I wonder, a way of storytelling in the Middle East with a different feeling for time than we have in the West?)

So in addition to some Syrians thinking Germany is a good place for Islamic fascists to join forces with Nazis, I say,—which is a big mistake, by the way—that goes back at least to Egypt and the false idea during World War I that German fascists would support the return of the caliphate (everything I know about that I learned from Naguib Mahfouz's "Cairo trilogy")—what else do you want to tell me? When the US left Iraq, he says, that started the current problem. The border was left open to transfer the militias between Iraq and Syria. In 2012, driving from Baghdad to Jordan, you'd see all kinds of weapons, tanks, trucks that we'd never seen before—anti-aircraft, missile launchers—Iraq never had this before IS. I remember, he continues, seeing thousands of Toyota pick-ups in Baghdad—we had never seen that kind of car there. IS was buying directly from Japan, through Jordan military—commanders were ordering them and delivering them to IS in Iraq. The cars would come in a parade across the border.

Okay, I say, where are we going with this? Okay, he says, what happens is that there is a citizen's revolt against the Iraqi government; thousands are killed by Iraqi military. (Joseph often speaks of past events in the present tense, as if we're watching it all play out again in front of us). The radical militias see that people are rising up against the government; a week later the militias move in. When's this? Beginning of 2013. And? The border between Syria and Iraq effectively disappears. Okay, I say, spell it out, I'm kind of stupid. Joseph smiles; he agrees. Between the Iraq and Syria border runs the Euphrates river, he says, and to the west is the desert area of Syria. This area is defined in a prophetic prophecy of Muhammad as the place of the great End War. How do you say it, Arma-jedine. Armageddon? Yes, Armageddon. Righteous warriors will move west and take control of the coast, then they will control the coast below Italy. When they take control of the Vatican, then the war with Europe will begin with great force. The great fight between East and West will take place in the desert regions of Syria—this is why IS is taking control of that area. And that is how they are convincing people to join them. Because this is the mythology. I don't think that's in the Koran, I say. No, but it is their prophetic mythology, and they use it to convince people: they are in control of that region, so the End War must be beginning. "When you see the nations of the West collaborate against the East," they say, "then you will know that we are correct in prophecy." So, I say, it is a self-fulfilling prophecy. The baseball cap tips in acknowledgment.

If I were a US general, I say, what would you advise me to do? (This is the weirdest game I've ever played). Joseph smiles. 420,000 IS fighters, he says, move back and forth between Iraq and Syria

with total freedom. You must break the mythology. Iraq would welcome back US military now. If the US built an airbase at the western border of Iraq, where the Euphrates runs between Iraq and Syria, then the people would see that IS is not in control of the region and that would break the mythology—it would be more difficult to convince people. But, I say, wouldn't an airbase be evidence of the West collaborating against the East? Maybe, but the first fact of the mythology is the IS control of the Euphrates and the desert region in east Syria. How do people view Obama, I say. He is weak, he says, everyone thinks and says he is weak. Why? Because he shows no force. So, he continues, Obama is not showing force *against* IS, then he must secretly be supporting it. That's what they are saying. Obama should demonstrate military force in the region, I say, people would like that. Yes, he says.

Joseph's phone rings. He answers and an animated conversation ensues; Joseph's responses are short and direct. He hangs up. That was a guy I met in the hostel asking me for information. About what? About other people who can help him, says Joseph. What did you say? I try to help in the hostels with translating for people, but beyond that I cannot help. I need to keep my distance. It's a dangerous situation for me, I cannot get involved with people. That guy, he continues, from Syria, I overheard talking to a guy from Kuwait. There are rich businessmen in Kuwait who are funding the movement of refugees to the West. Why? Rich guys, supporting radicals, he says, in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar. They support families from Turkey and Syria who move to Europe, to spread Islam and slowly convert Westerners. Really? Yes, there are three waves. First, Muslims come over; second, they invite other Muslims who can fight; third are those who will try to convert others from the West. When IS is ready, then there will already be people here. A Trojan horse, I say. Yes, like that. The movement from East to West to convert is like Muhammad's immigration from Mecca to Medina. Right, I say, *Hejira*: Muhammad was an immigrant refugee fleeing political assassination. Joseph's cap tips in acknowledgment.

How does the money system work, I say, is it just about funding people in the West? The traffickers are all Palestinian, he says, 100 percent. What happens is this. You call a place in Turkey, and you pay them the money to go across. Then you go to the Palestinians and they take you across to Greece. You don't give them any money. When you get there, you call the place in Turkey and say you've arrived, and they pay the Palestinians. So they're like brokers, I say. Yes, then the Palestinians send the money to Hamas and IS. So they're laundering money through refugees, I say. Yes, he says, the EU is a bit naïve. IS will try to take Rome; when Rome falls, Islam will control the world; then Israel will be destroyed. That's an incredible plan, I say. Joseph smiles and nods. Yes, but that's the plan. I've been talking to some Muslims over at Lageso, I say, they don't seem radicalized to me. Not everyone is, he says, it's not known by all, just the guys who will fight. How can you tell if someone is radicalized, I say. One way is to ask the question: do you think that IS will go to hell for killing women and children? If a guy supports IS, he will say, "I don't know." He won't say yes, and he will not say no. Don't lie, I say, but don't tell the truth. Joseph's cap tips. Be honest, I say, do you need a place to stay?

CHARITY BENEFITS THE GIVER

Wednesday, October 21, 2015

Joseph has accepted my invitation to stay for a couple of nights. He'll check out of the hostel around noon and come to my flat in Scheunenviertel, a fast 10 minute walk from the Hauptbahnhof. He has offered to go with me to Lageso to act as an interpreter. Also, he says, he can tell me things about the people we talk to based on the way they answer questions. He knows I'm skeptical of the conspiracy picture he's painted, but he clearly likes the fact that I'm listening to him closely and appear to be at least half-informed about the situation. And, of course, we're both Jewish.

But what does that mean? I find this troubling. Why have I invited him to stay and not a Muslim in more desperate straits who likely follows Islam? I know it is because I'm Jewish, a fact I've kept totally under wraps in my interviews with refugees at Lageso. Not that I had a reason to bring it up, but if someone had asked me, I would have said "yes, and I'm against the occupation." And then I would have felt very nervous. The difference of religion is not the issue, but rather my inability to identify the political ideologies of Muslims after talking to them for only a short while, and in their rough English, or my rough German. Where German Berliners might not feel any trepidation bringing a strange Muslim into their house, as an American Jew in Berlin I did, and do. Maybe such initial feelings would change in the course of a larger conversation, in a different setting than the tense grounds of Lageso. I trust my intuitions; but unfamiliar and stressful situations can distort the signal one tries to pick out—too much background noise. Joseph, however, has arrived, in some sense, already vetted by Rabbi Rothschild and Germany's greater Jewish network. And three hours of conversation in a café—a normalizing environment—have lead me to extend myself. But not flatter myself; the evidence of my limitation in this moment is disconcerting. Next time, I hope, *I like to think*, I will find a way to go further. So, I've found a flattering reflection in any case: optimism by endless deferral; that is not an ethics ... (The mirror doesn't lie, we do).

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"First and foremost charity benefits the giver." —Joseph Roth ("Ghettos of the West")

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En route to Lageso, Joseph and I talk more about the situation. What about Russia? Russia, he says, has weakened IS; they are still dangerous, but not as powerful right now. Some of my information is a year old, he continues, so I made some calls to people in Iraq, Syria, and Jordan yesterday to find out the news. This is what they are saying. The guys I talked to at Lageso, I say, don't like to see Putin in the region; they say he is simply supporting Assad. They would like to see Obama fly planes over the region—just the sight of planes, they say, would send the regime underground. Joseph laughs. Yes, that's true, totally correct. Whoever told you that, maybe has some military experience. But, he continues with a shrug, Russia is looking out for Russia, supporting Bashar is only supporting their own interests; they don't care about anything else. And Bashar is bad, but IS is worse. Bashar does not want to take over the world, IS does. (Still, I think, listening to Joseph, the difference in numbers of murdered is staggering; what Assad is doing to his own people is beyond criminal.) And, continues Joseph, IS is even *more violent*. They are smarter than Al-Qaeda, they are more powerful, better armed, and bigger. And yet the US is doing less than they did before, less than they did against Saddam. And this enemy is *greater*. It doesn't make any sense. He changes the subject. We should have a word, he says, that I can use at Lageso to signal that we are talking to a radicalized Muslim. Do you like baseball, I say. Joseph shrugs. Why don't you do something like

touch the bill of your cap, kind of adjust it on your head. He gives it a try. Ja, like that, I say. We go over how Joseph will introduce me—an American writer wanting to tell people back in the States about the situation of refugees in Berlin. True enough.

Approaching the Lageso compound of buildings, we pass the big white convention-size tents set up behind fences and adjacent to the first building that faces the street. The tents are full of people stepping in and out of the cold. Some on the sidewalk converse with others inside the fence. A young boy, 4 or 5, plays with a toy car on the sidewalk, spinning it upside down on its roof like a top. His family is squatting nearby eating apples. Their stroller is full of food, packaged and also fresh produce that's easy to eat raw with one's hands. Five kids. Walking onto the grounds, we pass the food tent—soup and *Brötchen*. There are only a few hundred people today milling about the digital console of amber numbers. Joseph and I walk around observing people. I decide to approach three men and two women wearing hijabs standing around an empty baby carriage.

They are two families. Husam, 23, and his father, Razin, 50, are Palestinians from Libya. Husam has been in Germany for a year, having only recently arrived from Dresden (where anti-immigration xenophobia is spiking with the right organization, Pegida). His father has just joined him. What did you do in Libya, I ask Razin, the father. I was a geography teacher he says to Joseph, who is interpreting. I'm a teacher, too, I say, literature. He gives me a broad smile and we shake hands for a second time. They have been running from radicalized forces that would compel them to join. What was the situation like when you left, I ask Razin. Bombs were going off everywhere, he says. Cars are outfitted with guns. There's no school, no university now for two years. Girls are afraid to go out because of kidnapping. All the young men are armed and fighting. Who are they? All different groups with IS. Who are they fighting? The regime, the oil families. Why did you want to come to Germany? Germany is the best, says Razin, for acceptance and protection. The Arabic world doesn't want us [Palestinians], for 76 years now.

I turn to Fudail, 35, from Aleppo. What did you do in Aleppo? Fudail ran a fish and chicken restaurant destroyed by a bomb. Well, he says, there's still a counter standing there, but no one to cook or serve! He laughs. The absurdity of the mental picture is infectious, and I laugh too and shake my head. Is your family still there? My mother and sister, and the workers from the restaurant. In the course of talking, the two women in concert have stepped back and moved to the side. Occasionally one of the young daughters comes over to us and takes Fudail's index finger in her hand. He ignores her questions but doesn't pull away. Good luck, I say, *shukran lak* (thank you). We all shake hands with smiles. Joseph and I walk away and he weighs in. Those are just normal people, he says. The Palestinians from Libya are exaggerating their situation a little, he continues, there are lots of places to go in Libya where there isn't war. They are practicing their story for the Germans, to get their status. Joseph shrugs. It's okay, he says, that's what people are doing so that they can stay. It's easier for the Syrians than the Libyans.

We approach what look like a couple standing with a third guy, slightly younger. Moonif, 29, and his sister, Rina, 27, have lived in Germany since they were kids; they've been here a total of 50 years between them. They're at Lageso helping their cousin, Elias, 25, get registered. Make sure, says Moonif in perfect German, that you tell people we are not refugees, we are German. Moonif works in a steak house in Schöneberg; he and his sister both live in Neukölln. They are warm, friendly people, spending their free time at Lageso helping new arrivals fill out forms and navigate the system. How many people have you helped so far? 20-35, with the papers, says Rina. I turn to Elias, their cousin from Aleppo. What was the situation when you left? If I stayed, I would have to join the Free Army or IS. What if you joined neither, I say. I'd be killed, he says. The Free [Syrian] Army bombed my house, I can't go back. If it were safe, says Moonif, 80 percent would go back. We say thank you, shake hands, and turn in another direction.

Two guys approach us. They see we are something like reporters, and they want to talk. Abdul, 35, wears a white down jacket that cinches at the waist—otherwise stylish, it shows the soiling of his journey. He speaks with lively eyes; his hips move expressively as he talks; he could be a slim, seductive Spaniard or Italian. He's here with his wife and two daughters, 9 and 14. I am from Iraq, he says to Joseph, from the city of Mosul; I saw the fall of Mosul. Why are you talking to me with a Syrian accent, says Joseph (according to his account afterward). Abdul shifts into his hometown speech—I adopt the accent, he says, to blend in with the others. Before IS entered Mosul, Abdul was working in the government's Ministry of Health. They knew IS was on its way when they were told to stay home and not leave their house for over a week. Abdul was working at a hospital when the civic order was announced; he was stuck there for days. At the time, says Abdul, there were 60,000 soldiers in Mosul, but none of them from the city itself. When 200 IS fighters entered, the soldiers simply dropped their weapons and left their posts. Only the local police stayed to fight, and they were no match. Why'd they stay? They are from Mosul, he says, the others are just there for the pay. They never fought IS at all. Many people were being killed, but the military watches without reaction and simply moves out. (Abdul still has family there; I promise not to use his real name.) IS took my 2014 Hyundai, I hardly got the chance to drive it. And now life there is totally ruled by Sharia: no shaving; no jeans; women totally covered, no bare skin at all; you have to go to the mosque when called or you'll be killed. Any change in your life, and you must get permission, otherwise you'll be taken to Islamic court, and they'll cut off your head. If you try to leave, and they find you, they'll kill you. How did you get out? Abdul describes how he and his family and three other families—a total of 13 people—hid inside an empty oil tank for seven hours. And his movements then? From Iraq to Syria to Turkey to Greece to Macedonia to Serbia to Croatia to Austria to Hungary to Berlin. How have you been treated so far? The police in Germany are very respectful, he says, thoughtful, considerate. Our dream, was to come to Germany, but now I see it is not a dreamland. The routine is killing. I hope, I say, that's only a figure of speech here. He smiles genuinely. Yes, he says, I hope so.

I turn to the other man, Yaman, 45, an oil engineer from Homs. A tall man, he looks aged beyond his years and sways slowly as he talks, but from the shoulders not the hips. His voice is mellow, its softness a rich contrast to the harshness of his situation. He's arrived in Berlin three weeks ago with his wife and his daughter, 10, and his son, 17. I am an individual person, he says, I'm not with the regime or with IS or with the Free Military, I am just myself. The Free Military has come to control Homs by force. They say, "we are here to protect you." (The FSA is made up of many defectors from Assad's regime who refused to kill civilians). "But," says Yaman, "you will draw Bashar to us," we say. "The Koran tells us," they say, "that jihad licenses us to fight the regime." "But we'll get killed," we say. "Or," they say, "you will be killed other ways." When the fighting starts, says Yaman, we hid under our kitchen table. For ten days we were surrounded by fighting. Funny thing, though, all fighting stops in the middle of the day, for two hours, so both sides can eat. Then it starts again. We saw many bodies in the street. The Free Military would throw the bodies of soldiers into garbage cans and write on them: *For Bashar Al-Assad, from the Free Military*. I will stay here if I can, but the process is so slow. How are you being treated by security here, I say. Some are okay, quite nice. Others kick us while we are sleeping. Joseph says afterward, I don't think he's Syrian. No one says, as introduction, "I am an individual," no one—everyone has some affiliation. And he has no accent, Joseph continues, he speaks in a way that comes from nowhere, he has learned to talk like that. Joseph shrugs, maybe he's Egyptian and has lived in Syria for a long time.

We walk to the front courtyard area, where the console displays its lit amber numbers, and hover by the opening of a large tent set up for people to take shelter. Three guys who look to be in their 30s sit on stools by the tent opening. One smokes a cigarette down to its filter and talks quietly to another in hip designer glasses. Joseph makes introductions; is it okay to talk to them? The smoker gives me a dead hard stare for an eternal five seconds. His eyes are steel blades. No, he says, we are not interested in talking to anyone from the West. The West cares only for its own interests. We will

not talk to them. Joseph says, okay; he adjusts his cap, well, thank you very much. We go. Those guys, he says, are totally radicalized; maybe not as much as the guys in the camp who tried to stab me, but definitely those are not just normal people. Will they get sent back, do you think, I say. Probably not, he says. The way the law works in Germany, he says, they can stay: they will say they are against Bashar, which is true, but they will not say that they support IS, even though they do. And as far as the law here goes, being against Bashar is enough.

On our way out, we are stopped by a guy who looks to be in his 20s, in a red track suit and athletic shoes. He is highly agitated and starts talking to Joseph in a voice that grows more insistent and louder with every sentence. I got here three months ago, he says to Joseph (it's clear that our presence has been discussed around the grounds) and because I'm from Iraq they won't accept me. I want to go back, how can I go back? *I'm almost ready to kill myself*. It's safer back there. Even if I'm killed there, it will be better. EU is just accepting Syrians. It's terrible here. So go back, says Joseph, it's easy. Just go to Frankfurt, to the embassy, and say that you want to go back. They have to take you. But I need a paper from the German government, he says. Go to the embassy, says Joseph, they'll help you get the paper. We walk off the grounds. Upset guy, says Joseph, but he's exaggerating his situation.

Sitting over a plastic plate of noodles at the Asian Wok booth outside the Hauptbahnhof debriefing with Joseph over the visit to Lageso. Two girls walk by cloaked in Palestinian flags. I look around for a demo forming, but nothing's happening. Maybe they're on their way to one? A red balloon rolls by on the sidewalk, looking for its string; a grown man stomps, and it pops. The little red lit Ampelmann with his arms straight out signaling to stop turns into a bright green profile in stride. The real man imitates him, walking across the tram lines to the other side.

MAKING SOMETHING OF IT

Thursday morning, October 22, 2015

7 a.m., the flat's buzzer jolts us with two prolonged bursts. My first insane thought: oh my god, I'm hiding a Jew in my apartment!—and (of course) maybe it's me! Bleary, I open the door. The stern Frau Hausemeister is standing at the threshold. We are here for the curtains, she says. *What*. It's not a question. She repeats herself, we are cleaning the curtains today. Two large men in blue work overalls boom out a *Morgen!* and set up their ladders at the windows. We will bring them back at noon, she says.

After breakfast, Joseph tells me he's going to stay in a hostel tonight. How come, I say, you don't like officious Germans banging on the door at 7 a.m.? He smiles, he doesn't laugh. He is planning to go to a *Kaffeeklatsche* he keeps up with in Berlin, where he can meet more people. He doesn't know how late he'll be; maybe he'll meet a woman. We head out together. Where you off to now, I say. Joseph is going to visit the Berlin Wall, or what's left of it. I've never seen it before, he says. No figurative curtain, the Wall was an ideological and deadly concrete border turned over time into a work of anonymous protest art. Have a ball, I say. We make an arrangement to meet later that afternoon should I have any follow up questions for him.

Thursday evening, October 22, 2015

Another rainy night. I take the U-bahn into Prenzlauer Berg, to find the home of Jalda Rebling and Anna Adam, two Berlin-based artists who are also leaders in the Jewish renewal movement here—Jalda, a cantor for the Ohel Hachidusch community, and Anna, a painter and installation artist who works on interfaith community-building, specifically with Muslim kids. They live on the street named after the Gesthemaniekirche (or church), which marks an important location for the peaceful demonstrations that led to the *Mauerfall*. The church itself was a refuge and place of vigil for demonstrators trying to escape police crackdowns along nearby Schönhauser Allee. It was also home to one of the few congregations explicitly open to lesbian groups. Jalda and Anna begin the conversation, as I find so many do, by looking out the window and describing the significance of a specific location in plain view. The conversation in their home—another enviable high-ceilinged flat full of books and music, and the warmth that comes with over thirty years of domesticity—starts with that year, 1989, and moves forward.

The idea of German reunification was scary for a lot of Jews here in the late 1980's—it was a *unified* Germany, after all, that led to the Holocaust. Jalda, one of the founders of Ohel Hachidusch, and its cantor (one of the few ordained female cantors in Germany), came to East Berlin from Amsterdam at the age of 2, with her family—her parents eagerly joined the effort to build a socialist society devoted to peace. Jalda and Anna both belong to that first generation of children of Holocaust survivors. Jalda's mother, who survived Bergen Belsen to become a well known actress and singer, rode the same train car to the concentration camp as Anne Frank. She was the one later to tell Otto Frank that his daughter was dead.

But we were never afraid, says Jalda, speaking of herself and Anna about the inexorable political and social forces that led to reunification. We were open about being Jews. And we trusted our neighbors. (It's very important, she says, that you know who your neighbors are.) We were not sure about the possibility of violence that might result from reunification, and what this might mean for

Jews here. But it never materialized as had been imagined in paranoid fantasies. Yet fears persist around us, says Jalda. When the Gaza war started [between Israel and Palestine], Jews in Berlin bought pepper spray to protect themselves from attackers. It became an atmosphere in which every Arab appeared dangerous. Jalda expresses her perturbation: “Wait a minute,” I would say, “we have Muslim friends.” But those who are scared don’t want to hear it. Jalda and Anna, who are now what they call *bubbes* (grandmas) speak with calm subdued voices steady in their deliberate thoughtfulness. One feels their grounded strength. If you are looking for anti-Semitism, says Jalda, it is always there, it will always *be* there. She tells the joke about the Jewish father of a child who wants to be a violinist. The violin teacher eventually makes his judgment. “Your son plays the violin like a piano,” he says to the father, “he will never be a violinist.” Says the father to the son as they’re walking out the door, “*Another anti-Semite!*” We laugh.

Anna describes one of her main interfaith efforts, the Happy Hippy Jew Bus, an actual small bus that travels around Germany, stopping at street fairs and other locations to teach people about Judaism through performance, dialog, and hands-on arts & crafts. Anna’s quiet firm voice has a liquid softness at its center that’s mesmerizing—I can easily imagine her holding people’s attention, especially children’s attention, with her voice alone. She tells the story of how Ibrahim, a Muslim mechanic she knows, helped her when the bus died by finding a new bus through his uncle, even going so far as to secure new plates for it, with the number BJ1967. “1968,” he said [the pivotal year in German history when the left-leaning younger generation protested against the entrenchment of Nazis in German society] “was sold out; but 1967 seemed close enough.” It was a great story. But when a local Jewish journalist wrote about it, he emphasized that the Muslim mechanic was insinuating a protest against Israel: 1967 is the year of the Six-Day War. When Anna read that, she approached Ibrahim. His response: “The Six-Day War, what is *that?*” He read the story. “Anna,” he said, “you and I are here to live in peace. But Anna, why can’t the Germans learn to clean their own dishes?” They laughed. You talk about the devil, says Anna to me, and he will show up. The work, she continues, is to dispel the clichés about Judaism.

Another story: I discovered, she says, the power of satire. I was on the metro and a young Muslim woman was surrounded by three neo-Nazi guys who were harassing her. I didn’t know what to do, but I knew I had to do something. Then I saw one of them was wearing Levi jeans. And I screwed up my courage and yelled, “Awwww, that guy is wearing Jewish jeans! Look, Levi, a Jewish name! He is a traitor to Germany, wearing Jewish jeans!” The other two turned on him, she says, and started beating him. The three of us chuckle and pour some tea.

So many more Germans are supporting the refugees, says Jalda, than are against their coming. Last winter I was in Israel, and the Israeli press was reporting the nationalistic xenophobic demonstrations in Dresden; but the anti-demonstrations were much bigger. But US and Israeli media weren’t reporting those. And all the refugees who had come months earlier, she continues, were receiving so much help—the media didn’t report it until the political right set the shelters on fire. But that’s not the atmosphere here, she says. Here are people who feel we have to help. Nobody knows how to solve the situation. In a way, the third world war is already going on. Will it lead to the building of a new wall, she asks, a new curtain? All I know, she answers herself, is that now we have to help these people. The Berlin bureaucracy is crazy, we don’t have words for it. I mean, writing numbers in pen on people’s arms? [This was actually happening in September, but discontinued.] I ask Jalda and Anna if the new spike in xenophobia is the expression of feelings that have always existed, or those born from the crisis for the first time. It was always open, says Jalda, but the media was not in the habit of reporting it. The biggest demos, says Anna, are in Dresden and places in the East where there have never been many *strangers*.

What kind of pressure do you think so many Muslims coming into Germany will place on the Jewish community, I say. They are afraid of something they don't know, says Anna. We are survivor's children, says Jalda, and we have taught our children. There is a survival gene; if you have it, you move in the world *as it*. If we Jews want to be tolerated, then we must tolerate. I work with refugee kids, says Anna, they'll all figure out I'm Jewish; but I can't talk about my religion—that's the law in Germany, everything must be totally *neutral*. But these people I'm helping will know they are getting help from a Jew. Anna then tells the story of a Muslim girl she knows whose parents have passed on the pernicious blood libel of literally vampiric Jews. When they need help filling out government papers, Anna agrees to lend a hand and takes the opportunity to make fun of the ludicrous, vicious fiction of the blood libel. "You see," she tells them, "I am helping you, and I am also not sucking your blood." She makes comical biting gestures with her teeth. The struggle, she says, is to dispel ignorance with the flash of perception: humanity, equality, charity. We can only create a society together, says Anna. It has been a struggle for us to become proud *German* Jews, says Jalda, but that is where the beginning is for us, and we choose to stay here. We are making something of it.

REFUGEES BRING NEW ENERGY TO GERMANY

Friday, October 23, 2015

Karsten Eckardt, the language instructor at Humboldt Universität, and also a filmmaker, has been meeting me in the mornings for a *Deutschstunde*, or lesson; we've become friends over the course of only a few weeks. (When you make a friend in Germany, I've been told, it's usually for life—a fine notion, and something to realize). Karsten has encouraged me to keep speaking German without fear, and to continue to push myself into the refugee situation in Berlin, to try to make some kind of small difference.

He is the best kind of idealist: disabused. Tall, lean and strong, his eyes are always bright with the energy of engagement. Like many great teachers, he finds out about his students, and he cares how they see and think about the world. After our first meeting, I told him my motto for the month was the German verb, *versuchen* (to try, to attempt; *to essay*, one could say); he recognized it as the key word, maybe the word our friendship is now based on.

We meet for a last time in another great old *Kneipe*, Schwarze Pumpe, in Prenzlauer Berg. We ride bikes in a fine rain to get there, and the atmosphere inside has a sweet humidity thickened by big steaming bowls of *Kurbissuppe*. So, Josh, he says, is there anything you've learned about the situation that's surprised you. Everything about it surprises me, I say, because when you're talking to actual people, there's an energy of communication that's part of the situation. The migration of refugees from the Middle East seeking political asylum and traveling, each of them, thousands of miles, is a situation born from a great political explosion building over many years and culminating now. A potentially terrible energy. Just think of the energy the refugees themselves have exerted to get here! But energy is not ideologically fixed. Maybe it can be harnessed to do *something* good? An energy generated by cataclysmic change, directed to become an energy *for* positive change? God, that's too hopeful by half; I'm obviously dangerously naive ... I haven't learned anything, I guess. I'm making connections, I say, but I don't know what they mean, like in a poem ...

I am not so hopeful, says Karsten, I can't be, about the crisis. The problems are permanent because *we are* the problem. I don't think things are necessarily getting worse, but things have always been problematic. Maybe now, however, the problems are coming *closer*; so they look bigger. And we ask ourselves, are we able to change and *move* our minds and grow, or are we stuck. Tomorrow, he continues, I will meet a student, 28 years old; he is on a mission, to become a professor—he is a *Marxist* thinker, really *competent*. He made a presentation to the class arguing for open borders worldwide, and of *course* he couldn't convince *anyone* in the class because we are *thinking* in borders, they are in our mind. How do we reach *ourselves*—that is the question I will put to him tomorrow.

Big ideological sentences can be convincing, Karsten says, but only rhetorically; they are not convincing on an emotional level. On a political level, however, I see no hope. I too was a kind of refugee, he says. I grew up in the DDR, and I fled the DDR and entered the West by way of Hungary. Karsten takes a drink and I break in with something I remember Rabbi Rothschild saying about the triple axis of ironies in a divided Germany: *Germans who shot Germans fleeing Germany in order to enter Germany*. Yes, Karsten continued, I'm coming from a system that broke down expecting the breakdown of another system. We all live in systems. How to build up the human community, the human family—that is the question. But what are we experiencing *individually* in whatever system we find ourselves in—we have to start with ourselves, and that opens the world. Of course there are good willing people in Germany who want to try to open the society; at the same time, we are regressing with extremist violence. But there is always hope, we have to hope, there's nothing

without it. We look for a few seconds into our empty soup bowls. You've come full circle, I say.

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europa 1954

iceland

ireland

england

the netherlands border on germany and belgium

belgium borders on the netherlands, germany, luxembourg
and france

luxembourg borders on belgium, germany
and france

france borders on belgium, luxembourg, germany,
switzerland, italy, monaco, andorra and spain

monaco borders on france

andorra borders on france and spain

spain borders on france, andorra and portugal

portugal borders on spain

italy borders on the vatican, san marino, yugoslavia,
austria, switzerland and france

the vatican borders on italy

san marino borders on italy

switzerland borders on italy, france, germany,
austria and liechtenstein

liechtenstein borders on switzerland and austria

austria borders on switzerland, liechtenstein, italy,
yugoslavia, hungary, czechoslovakia and germany

germany borders on germany, austria, switzerland,
france, belgium, the netherlands and denmark

denmark borders on germany

norway borders on sweden finland and
the soviet union

sweden borders on norway and finland

finland borders on sweden, norway and
the soviet union

the soviet union borders on finland, norway, korea,
china, mongolia, afghanistan, iran, turkey, rumania,
hungary, czechoslovakia and poland

poland borders on the soviet union, czechoslovakia
and germany

germany borders on germany, poland and
czechoslovakia

czechoslovakia borders on austria, germany,
germany, poland, the soviet union and hungary

hungary borders on yugoslavia, austria,
czechoslovakia, the soviet union and rumania

rumania borders on yugoslavia, hungary,
the soviet union and bulgaria

bulgaria borders on rumania, yugoslavia, greece

and turkey
yugoslavia borders on bulgaria, rumania, hungary,
austria, italy, albania and greece
albania borders on yugoslavia and greece
greece borders on albania, yugoslavia, bulgaria
and turkey
turkey borders on greece, bulgaria, the soviet union,
iran, iraq and syria
—Gerhard Rühm
(translated from the German by Rosmarie Waldrop)

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“... the border is an in depth concept, not a line.”
—Jonathan Littel, *Syrian Notebooks*

COMING HOME

Saturday, October 24, 2015

The taxi is waiting for me in early morning dark. I'm on my way home. It feels like it will be a dry day in Berlin after two solid weeks of light rain. The driver and I begin in German, but he's from Thailand, I discover; he shifts into English. He's been living in Berlin for the last 26 years.

Where are the refugees? They're everywhere, he says, a big problem. Yes, but in Berlin, I say, where are they? Oh, you can find them at Lageso and at Bundes Allee, do you know where that is? Yes, I say, what do you think of the situation, should Germany be letting them in? Germany has opened its arms, he says, and it is a nation that keeps its word. The refugees that come here need to learn the language and become German. They need to stay, not just come for some years and leave. But the problem is (he speaks English slowly and carefully, making sure to articulate every syllable fully) that there are some who come and they are jihad, they are being paid to come over here, to bring the war here. Who do you think is paying them, I say. He shrugs. (Did I miss an issue of *Time* magazine or something; is this on an episode of *Homeland*?) The government, he says, needs to check everyone very carefully. It's a lot of people, I say. He nods.

What will happen, he asks, in your presidential election. *Ha*, I bark. I like American individuals, he says, but I don't like American international policy. I'm not so sure, I say, that I always like the individuals. Americans, he continues, are open, direct, candid, friendly, very warm. Who do you think, he says, will be the next president? Hillary Clinton, I say, and she's none of those things. She will get along well, he says, with Merkel. We laugh. I close my eyes.

My family needs me to come home, it's been too difficult to have me gone a whole month. And of course I *can* go back home, whenever I want; that was the first condition of my leaving. I planned to come to Berlin to work on my German, read literature and German newspapers (a fantasy, that last part, newspapers are *hard*), write, reconnect with friends, work on translations, and re-immense myself in the capital, its particular jagged rhythms and the dark psychology of its spaces.

In August, I realized I had to turn my attention to the crisis, it was too big, too encompassing, and happening with terrific speed and violent energy. I was going to Germany in a moment of historical transformation that would affect the rest of the world. I decided to re-learn Berlin through the experience of the crisis, and to try to tell a story that was rather unlike the one mainstream media is telling so dramatically. Mine would be a perpetual crabwalk, personal, a winding detour, like my experience. Returning to the States now, earlier than planned, brings home the awareness of freedom and privilege—with a US passport, I can go wherever I want in Europe, while many I've been speaking with in the last three and a half weeks cannot. They cannot go back, not if they wish to live; and, in many cases, they are also blocked from going forwards. While capital flows freely across borders, bodies—*laborers*—are stopped. To what degree is diaspora a result of global capitalism? We're living with the evidence.

The taxi was pulling up to Tegel Flughafen (airport)—the word for refugees, *Flüchtlinge* (those flying away, fleeing) once again audible, legible, all too apparent. I think of the breaking news about Berlin beginning to house refugees at the Tempelhof airport: no departures, just arrivals, and by the thousands. I can imagine the big white tents inside the even bigger hangars, where the US, for years after the war, landed a plane every five minutes, dropping supplies to aid the reconstruction of the city. After reunification, Tempelhof became a flashpoint for the differences between East and West Berliners—those in the East remembered the airport as a Nazi site; but for the West, it was a site of

renewal, reconstruction, revival.

The division of memory turned divisive and so pronounced that the airport was never reopened for planes, but rather became the most unique playground in Europe: imagine getting to ride your bike on a runway, or run your dog, or fly your kite at a defunct airport. Just this past summer, it was the concert site for Lollapalooza. With unusual foresight, I had heard, the city kept all the porta-potties in place after the festival was finished. The fun-lovers who had to piss between Paul McCartney and Metallica are gone. Those fleeing their homeland will soon turn Tempelhof into a concert of the desperate. Maybe a good time to go, the driver says, reaching forward to pull a lever and pop the trunk, the situation here is a bomb, but no one knows when it will go off.

In the security process, I'm singled out for an additional "explosives" check. The computer cables, external disk drive, and adapter plugs I'm carrying home have set off protocols—the Germans are much more thorough than our TSA. They lecture me about my liquids, and the wand outlines my entire body without missing an inch of seam. A lot of these guys are old Stasi; they know what they're doing.

Half-hour into the flight, I get up to use the toilet. I'm in a row near a lavatory that separates economy from business class. I head for the closest vacancy. A stewardess stops me. Are you sitting in business class or economy, she says. Economy. These are for business class, she says, there are four lavatories in the rear of the plane for economy. But these are all empty, I say, pointing to the folding doors, and I'm sitting right there, I point to my seat, a few feet away. You can walk to the rear of the plane, she says, as if offering a helpful suggestion. I'm permitted to go somewhere else, I say. Yes, you can go back there. That's where you can go.

De-boarding at Newark. Passport control, nothing more than an exchange of silent looks. Baggage claim: a beagle walking with a customs officer points his nose deliberately at the plastic bag in my hand. What's in the bag, the officer asks. Bread, I say. Anything on the bread? What, I say. Seeds or anything? (There probably are—it's a half-loaf of *Alpenstückbrot* that I bought at the Swäbisches bakery where Karsten and I sometimes met). No, I say. The dog is praised, they move on. Newark is chaotic and dirty. TSA guys yell at passengers going through security, and yell at each other for creating havoc with new lines to expedite the process that actually lead to nothing but more confusion and slower lines. *Der Prozess*. The title, in German, of Kafka's *The Trial*. Systems. Borders. Permission. Control. What kind of society do we want to live in? What is necessary for meaningful life?

In the circular theater of gates to commuter flights at Newark, people seem to swim round and round like fish in a bowl, consuming snacks and media. A pigeon has found its way inside and wisely sticks to walking, following its own bobbing path, pecking at the crumbs. Is there animal control at the airport to remove unwanted?

Humans are too busy here moving from one place to another to pay much attention. When it's tired, the pigeon will find a place to sleep, tucked in the crotch of two steel beams. Maybe it will meet another pigeon. They will start a new life together here, flying creatures caught inside the vast structure of a complex system designed for flight.

*

BACK TO BERLIN: "MEETING POINT" AT THE PERGAMON MUSEUM

Wednesday, March 30, 2016

Monday, my first day back in Berlin, I read an article in the *Berliner Morgenpost* about a Syrian woman who works in the Pergamon Museum giving guided tours in Arabic that introduce refugees to the plundered antiquities from their homeland; today, I head off on my bike to find her. Mid-spring in Berlin, the trees still bare, the air still chilled, the rain still intermittent and seemingly constant. Parked bikes have plastic bags on their seats, waiting patiently for inevitable showers and the return of foresighted city pedalers doing their business of living in a dry interior somewhere.

Easter week makes for long lines at the museum, but after an hour I'm inside and immediately disappointed to find the great Pergamon altar closed off for an extensive renovation (come back in 2019). In any case, its massive baroque torsion of the human body in heroic frieze is not what I've come for. I spend an hour or so looking for a tour in Arabic, aimlessly wandering along the intense deep blue tile promenade with its tawny lion frieze on either side that leads to the Gates of Ishtar. I hop up the stairs to see the rooms devoted to Islamic art—perhaps the tour is there ... Nothing. Back downstairs I run into a tour in English, but I hear Arabic among the small group of tourists. This can't be what I'm looking for—the tour should be in Arabic, but the demographic *appears* right. Maybe I can catch the guide in a moment between rooms ...

Several Arabic couples with squirrely kids suffering museum fatigue stand before the guide in front of a wall-sized map of the world; red flags mark the German excavation sites in Aleppo, Damascus, Ammon, Mosul, Samarra, Kashan, Isfahan, Samarkand ... I marvel at the guide's terrifically animated talking, the way she engages the children with her eyes and constantly moving body and expressive energy—a natural teacher. Her massive black mane frames a tiny face lit up with her mission. Germans, she says in English with an American accent, were everywhere in the last century, and most of the archaeological excavations in the Middle East were German. One of the tourists asks about looting. Yes, she says, in fact, one of the unexpected jobs the archaeologists took on was training people at Interpol to recognize looted antiquities. Weren't the German archaeologists themselves looting by removing antiquities from their homelands? The unasked question hangs in the air.

We stop together and follow her into a brilliant red room; a glass wall that follows the room's contours separates us from it. Typical Islamic floral and avian motifs introduce brilliant blues and yellows to the deep burgundy and berry tints that are the backdrop for intricate geometric patterns. Welcome to Syria, says the guide, this is the Aleppo room, a 17th century reception room and the oldest surviving one of its kind, from the Ottoman period. She points out the mix of Christian and Islamic elements, scenes from the Bible and New Testament, and Islamic illustrations and Arabic proverbs.

We step across to an adjacent ruin, the facade of the Mschatta caliph palace, a desert castle from 8th century Jordan. The guide points out the various animal carvings that sit embedded in the elaborate floral motifs, and pauses before the depiction of a lion and a bull standing across from each other and drinking from the same trough. It is a common Christian motif, she says, to have dangerous animals together.

One tourist in the group asks another to take his picture with me; I agree a little awkwardly; we shake hands afterward. Are you with the museum, he says. No, I say, I'm just an American professor. Oh, he says, we are all professors too: Arabic Israelis here with our families on an exchange

program. So, we are programmatically exchanging pleasantries when I spot the Syrian woman I read about leading a group of refugees into the Aleppo room. At the first chance, I fade from the group of professors and join the Syrians. About ten of them follow the female guide, who is dressed stylishly in a purple Oxford button down, tight jeans, and ankle-high brown leather boots. The women in the group are dressed variously, one in a handsome ochre colored *hajib* and *aba* robe, another in grey sweat pants and a pink knit cap with a pom-pom. A teenager texts on her phone throughout the tour, headphones around her neck, the perennial DJ look. At the end of the tour, I stand back as the refugees approach the guide to thank her personally—each one, with genuine emotion, in turn grasps her hand. I wait patiently, then make my move.

Razan Nassreddine, originally from Damascus, arrived in Berlin four years ago, having earned a graduate degree in cultural programming and management in Spain and France. Since December, she's been running tours in Arabic for refugees, a program she's helped develop through the Syrian Heritage Archive. For me, she says, the first time I ran a tour, I was surprised how many met here—the program, *Multaka: Treffpunkt Museum*, has “meeting point” in its name: *Treffpunkt*. And to see, she continues, how people relate to each artifact; each one finds a little bit of home here. It really touched me, they walk into the Aleppo room, or stand before the Mschatta facade, and say to themselves, “we lived here.” They see a part of their homeland here in this new land, she continues. It gives refugees from Syria and Iraq self-confidence to be here. It is like a bridge between past and present, between two cultures: *Syrian* culture here in Berlin, decades before their own arrival. How important is it, I ask, for you to give the tour in Arabic? In Arabic, she says, there is no obstacle with language; I cannot say it is a point of integration, but it is the first step for letting go of their fears about being here. I can see it in their faces. So, I say, you helped develop this program, this *Treffpunkt*, or meeting point; but why is it important for you, personally, to be giving the tours? For me, the most important thing is to be in *touch* with people. We don't speak about their individual situations *so* much, but we share something from both of our lives. When you interact with people *through* an art object, you are not just a guide or a mediator. There is something for me to tell, of course; but there is also something for me to hear. In the facade, for example, we see damage from a bomb, and we find the connection between Germany and the Ottoman, between the Sultan and the owner of this museum. The Syrian past is *in* the object—she emphasizes the preposition—part *of* the object, and speaks of an earlier relation *between* Germany and Syria. I had one man, she continues, who was an artisan; and when he saw the wood carvings in the Aleppo room, he said, “That was my whole life.” Another woman, from Aleppo, said, “It is very hard when there is the war and one must leave home. I'm not happy here.” These things are important for me to hear, she says, as important as for them to say. Thinking about how IS is destroying antiquities such as the ones on display at the Pergamon Museum, I ask Razan about the paradox—what looks like an agonizing paradox—of caring after objects that have been removed from their situation in respective homelands, but also saved from harm by having been removed. Me, she says, I am happy that this museum protects this culture. Suddenly her concentration is broken. I see that a photographer and film crew are waiting impatiently for her in an adjacent room; the *Multaka* project is now getting a lot of media attention in Berlin. Razan has run out of time to talk.

TEMPELHOF FLUGHAFEN: "THE FLIGHT SOCIETIES"

Friday, April 1, 2016

Tempelhof Flughafen, the Nazi airport turned cold war anti-Soviet airlift turned expansive contemporary city green space, has turned again, this time into the capital's largest refugee shelter. Up to 1,000 people can be housed there for starters, 7,000 when retrofitting is complete. Although I expect that the building is not open to reporters or anyone unofficial, I decide to see for myself. S-bahn track problems force me to approach round about, and I end up entering the grounds from the access point farthest from the terminal. As I enter the first airfield, I can see the building's iconic crescent shape in the distance. The area is massive, over 750 acres (or 8 km from the southeast to the northwest corners). With my mind turned to the refugee crisis, I'm unprepared to see so many Berliners in the park, enjoying the first warm sunny day of spring. As a defunct airfield, the park is unique for having so few trees and no landscaping; it's simply an enormous flat open space, part grass, part tarmac, with different sections designated for particular activities—dog park, community garden, biking circuit—and much of it left blank for making it up as you go along. I walk past frisbee tossers and soccer players; cyclers racing at top speed, the zipping sound of the chain along the gear teeth like loud insect wings; and the intransigent sub-species known as rollerbladers. There's a little car camper with a psychedelic paint job that serves as a *Fahrrad Werkstatt* (bike repair). The community garden across the path from the *Werkstatt* lends the field a hippie air more redolent for the nappers and leisure readers who lounge about in beat-up old armchairs and couches surrounded by wood framed garden beds and mounds of planting soil covered with battered tarps. Once one of the noisiest spots in the city with all of its air traffic, it is now one of the quietest. Like sound at the beach, Tempelhof's airfield acoustics are shaped by wide-open expanse through which breezes carry sounds from far away. Close by I hear a little girl lying on a picnic table face down, humming as her left ankle bobs, keeping time. Far off I hear the sound of a newspaper folding, a foot making contact with a ball, laughter, chalk rubbing tarmac, another bike chain rubbing casually against a chain guard, and the wind rippling some kind of plastic, all punctuated by dog barks. The overall effect is a kind of sound salad made up of finely chopped ingredients and tossed with sunshine—one of the great soporifics of the urban outdoors. Pushing on, I pass beer and sandwiches making scheduled landings in their designated cavities, and faces with closed eyes tilted like sunflowers to the ultimate source. As I approach a cordoned off area, I discover that the flapping sound I heard is a candy-striped plastic ribbon that marks an area protected for ground-nesting birds, such as the corn bunting, tawny pipit, whinchat, and the skylark that breeds in the Tempelhof fields from April to July. Walking through nesting grounds, a posted sign warns, can cause birds to flee the area, abandoning nests and young, which are then left defenseless against cold and predators. The sign's main heading reads, *Die Fluggesellschaften* (—meaning, Airline Companies, but more literally, "The Flight Societies," a deliberate pun)—how fitting for an airport to provide refuge for such avian communities. The irony, though, of the new *Flüchtlinge*, the new human flight societies, gestured at through the rooted serendipities of the German language itself, reveals troubling realities.

Knowing that the refugees at Tempelhof are allowed to leave the airport shelter, I wonder if they make any use of the park. Walking another 20 minutes brings me closer to the terminal by half. I see an Arabic family on a blanket, the women in hajib with children, the man stooping over a can of coals getting hot for a cook out. *Marhaban*, I say, *min fadlik* (hello, excuse me), *Sprechen Sie Englisch* (do you speak English)? The man smiles and says in German, No, only Arabic and German. I tell him in German that I'm an American writer trying to write about the refugee crisis. The children laugh at my accent. Are you a refugee? He smiles tolerantly. No, he says. How long have you lived in Berlin? Oh, he shrugs, 25 years. We look each other in the eye and laugh. I point to the terminal, still in the distance. Can I get in there? No, but you might find people to talk to outside. Maybe, he adds, they even speak English. We laugh again. Saying good-bye, I traverse a field of

taller grass and gradually approach a high white fence made of thick wire mesh. Two hundred yards further is the terminal; a long wall of high white dividers creates a privacy zone behind it. I can hear kids playing in the zone; and in the gaps between sections, I see kids on bikes, and a soccer ball arcing above the wall. A white van drives back & forth along the wall's perimeter. It's another 25 minutes' walk along the white fence as I aim to circle around to the front of the building.

Finally, I make the turn, and I'm on the sidewalk along Tempelhofer Damm—the airport is situated smack in the southern part of Kreuzberg. One pulls up to it right off the street, just like you see in Billy Wilder's comedy, *Eins Zwei Drei*. Walking along its front facade, I'm reminded that this “mother of all airports,” as the architect Norman Foster called it, is reported to be second in size only to the Pentagon. There doesn't seem to be anything keeping me from walking up to the hangars; then I see thickly muscled guards. Official looking men and women with badges clipped to their clothes and carrying briefcases and files go in and out; some hang just outside the entrances smoking and talking. I walk around the front area for about 30 minutes before spotting a group that looks approachable—five or six Arabic young people in their early twenties sitting on a retaining wall and talking. I walk towards them. As their group is starting to break up, I spot a genial-faced guy in a short scruffy beard. *Marhaban*, I say. Hello, he says, in English, and moves towards me.

Omar Jomaa, 20 years old, is from Damascus. He finished his high school degree just shortly before his family sold their car—a Lada Samara, a Russian make, he says, smiling—to pay the human traffickers to get to Europe: first Turkey, then Greece, Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, to Hamburg, and then Berlin. He arrived here five months ago, after two months of traveling. What's it like inside there, I ask, pointing to the hangar in front of us. It's a big hole, he says, 700 people in a box. What's the biggest difficulty living here while you wait for residence in the city? First they said one month, then two; now they say six. There's no logic to the system, he says, I waited only 10 days before I was registered at Lageso; others waited three months. [A German journalist told me that many government workers at Lageso called in sick during the fall to protest the prolonged stress of trying to make a dysfunctional system work—which of course slowed down the process even more ...] The situation inside is a little better now, he says, it was pretty fucked up—excuse me—at the beginning: no showers for three or four months, we were bussed to a swimming pool to get clean; the water was either totally cold or totally hot. The first four months we just had mobile toilets; now they've built some inside the shelter. The hardest thing, he continues, is that they threw away all of my stuff. What? How'd that happen? They were preparing to move us to another hangar, he says. Who? Me, he says, my cousin, some others. And we were not there when they moved everyone. Where were you? We were with friends in Berlin, cooking a meal together in a friend's flat. When I got back, he continues, all my stuff had been thrown away, my friend's stuff, too. These clothes—he lifts the lapels of a casual outdoor jacket—are borrowed. What about your computer, and your phone? I have those, they never leave me, I sleep with them. There's no way to secure anything; they threw away all my papers. They told me after to make a list; I did that three weeks ago; now we are waiting to hear from the insurance office. Why did they do that? I don't know, it was very obviously *not* trash, but belongings.

What did you plan to do after high school, I ask, changing the subject. I always planned to leave, he says, as soon as I finished. 90% of the reason I left is the war, but actually the other 10% is for the education here. It's difficult here right now, he continues, but it's fine, better than somewhere else. It's funny, as a kid, I always thought I would go to America; I love America, I learned English watching movies, I just picked it up. And always wanting to be *there*, and now I'm *here*, in Germany. And I will stay here, probably. How's your German coming along, I say. He smiles. Actually, it's very difficult, not so good; it's hard to study in this environment. He nods towards some official-looking people 25 yards away. They think I invited you here, they don't want us to talk to anyone; later they will ask me about it ...

The way he trails off softly punctuates the difficulty of the physical situation, how the mental anguish of uncertainty and waiting is made harder by the vigilant surveillance. Does he also see why so many Germans are worried, I wonder. A lot of Germans, I say, have become concerned since the fall, and worried about so many people from the Middle East coming here to live; they don't think that the values of Islam are compatible or that they fit with the values of Europe and the West—what do you think about that? I know people in Berlin, he says, and they all think, they all believe, in the right to seek asylum. Well, I think, that is precisely what I've experienced, too. Do you think you'll stay in Germany? For a while, but I want to help rebuild my country, to bring some expertise to help. My mother and father are still in Damascus, near the government center, so they're basically safe for now, though it's more dangerous with the rise of Jaysh al-Islam [a part of the rebel Islamic Front]. I have two sisters in Istanbul, and one sister in Greece, stuck at the border with my cousin's sister. So your family is separated, I say. He nods. It's hard, he says,—a Syrian guy was kicked out of the shelter for some reason, I don't know, and he walked the streets for two days, and then he tried to kill himself, he was so desperate. How? He was in hangar 2, and he went up to that kind of bridge there, he points. He was talked down. Another guy from Afghanistan tried to hang himself. How? He hung himself from some crossbars in the room, people rushed in and tried to hold him up. I haven't seen him since. He opens the camera on his phone and shows me the crossbars in the room. Other people have gotten these things, he says, like scales on the skin. Scabies, I say. No, he says, those are bites. Psoriasis, I say. Yes, he says. (But probably bedbugs, I think, we had them in our flat in Schöneberg; the scourge of global travel, let alone diaspora).

Change of topic, I say, what are you going to do later today? It's nice out, maybe I will cook with friends, anything to stay out of there, he says, nodding towards the hangar. We exchange contact information and shake hands. On the way up Tempelhof Damm towards the U-bahn at Platz der Luftbrücke, a tour bus passes by. *Grenzenlos Reisen* is painted on its side; it means something like "Travels Unlimited"—though the root word, *Grenze*, means "border." "Travels without Borders," one could say, though one could no longer hope to.

SCHWARZE PUMPE: *NACH HAUSE / ZUM HAUSE*

Sunday, April 3, 2016

Back in Schwarze Pumpe, the *Kneipe* in Prenzlauer Berg where Karsten and I had our last meeting in October. I settle in behind a *Schwarzer Kaffee* to work on the *Notebook*, and notice six Arabic men sitting at one of the big wooden tables across the pub; they're being led through a series of German lessons by a woman clearly practiced in language instruction. They are working on the difference between *nach Hause* (*going home*) and *zum Hause* (*being at home*), both of which demand their respective cases in German. One man with a thick beard tries it; the instructor smiles, shakes her head and repeats. Another, clean shaven, gives it a go; she smiles, he got it right. The first man pulls on his beard. *Genau*, she says, "exactly," and with an encouraging look to all of them raises her beer stein and drinks.

CATCHING THE BUS TO DRESDEN: PEGIDA RALLY

Monday, April 4, 2016

A visit to Dresden seems in order. The capital of Saxony, it is also the biggest meeting place for Pegida, the far-right anti-immigration movement whose acronym stands for *Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlands* (Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the West). The city has a long history as a place of resistance—from the revolutions of 1848 that aimed to force Frederick Augustus II to accept the constitution, to the *Montagsdemos* or Monday Demonstrations of 1989 against the totalitarian DDR government. The city also served as a place of safe passage for train convoys carrying East German refugees from Prague to the Federal Republic during that same year. And earlier, by the end of World War II, over 600,000 refugees found safe haven there (though the Jewish population of 6,000 was almost totally wiped out). It is thus one of the capitals of irony in Germany now, an irony that thickens with the far right's appropriation of the symbols and slogans of democratic resistance with intent to validate through historical correspondence a set of ideological inversions. This is why Pegida holds its demonstrations on Mondays—to link to the *Montagsdemos* of 1989 that originally staged Dresden as the place for a people's revolt against an oppressive regime. This is why Pegida has appropriated the revolutionary slogan of 1989, *Wir sind das Volk*, ("We are the people"). East Germany also remains a fertile land for neo-Nazis (who have annual commemorations for those Germans killed in the Allies' fire bombing of the city), a situation that persists with higher unemployment and lower economic productivity than in the west. Add to that a more homogenous white majority, less immigration, fewer foreigners ...

The convergence between East and West Germany is still ongoing, and inequalities persist. With the economic power residing in the west along with the centers of government, resentments in the east live on. And Pegida is nothing if not a movement of resentment, and not unlike the movement that has pushed Donald Trump forward in the current US primary campaign; both movements have focused on attracting people by appealing to their fears while more urgently mobilizing them. The refugee crisis has now added to Pegida's momentum, drawing tens of thousands to the demonstrations last October. And the demos have also been violent—journalists have been attacked; anti-demonstrators on the left have been quick to antagonize; and the rhetoric from Pegida's leaders has been extreme, from calling Muslim refugees "invaders" to suggesting that the government would, if they could, round up Pegida demonstrators and put them in concentration camps. At first, Pegida's official platform was couched in the language of the *reasonable*: approving the right of asylum; demanding an increase in funding for the police and the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees; opposing violent political ideology; supporting sexual self-determination; opposing *Hassprediger* (Hate Preachers). Since the fall, however, it has capitalized on increased fears about out of control immigration, calling for an immediate stop to any asylum and the implementing of an asylum emergency law. (Of course, in the wake of the *Charlie Hebdo* shooting, the November attack in Paris & St. Denis, sexual assaults in Köln, and the Brussels attack this spring, many find this shift of Pegida's reasonable). Part of the organization's strength is its unofficial alignment with the right wing *AfD* (Alternative for Germany), the anti-immigration/anti-refugee political party which grabbed a double-digit portion in recent regional elections, most notably 24 percent in Saxony-Anhalt (one of the poorest states in the German federation).

On Facebook, I find Pegida's homepage and learn that a demonstration will take place, as always, on Monday. Clicking the "about" button, I read statements that defy the "mainstream media;" assert constitutional rights to free speech; reject Islamic radicalism; promote freedom for everyone in Europe; express fear of Germany's becoming a site of "Holy War" between radical factions (such as the PKK and IS); and praise Turkey's modern "father," Mustafa Kemal Attaturk, who insisted on separation of Church & State, and led a Muslim-oriented country into the modern age. I book my

round trip ticket on the Flix bus.

The best time to catch a bus is about 10 minutes before it departs. A slightly nervous traveler, I arrived at Alexanderplatz much too early. The bus won't even arrive for another hour. Maybe I'm a little more anxious than usual because I'm on my way to a demo in a city I don't know. Alex (as Alexanderplatz is affectionately known in Berlin), usually so busy with foot traffic and busking, seems deserted at 9 a.m. The rows of wooden stalls are just starting to open. You can smell *Würste* grilling and hear *Kartoffeln* frying; leather goods are being laid out and hung up alongside growing displays of Berliner knick-knacks. Too early for anyone to sit leisurely at a wooden table in the kitsched-out *Biergarten*, with its windmill and *Drindl*-wearing "*Fräulein*." The *Platz*—usually teeming with tourists, people living in the street, shoppers, commuters (this is one of the city's major metro hubs), partyers on the prowl, aimless wanderers, and the disturbingly focused mentally ill—is subdued in the early morning. Too early, too, for the street performers that will later add to the sticky atmosphere of carnival and retail.

Two people catch my eye, a man and a woman talking in the middle of the *Platz*—not so unusual, of course; but I'm suddenly awake to something anomalous and out of the ordinary about them. The woman, in her thirties, is slender, and dressed professional hip in a black leather jacket, black scarf and black pants that flare widely from mid-calf to heel; she carries a small briefcase-like shoulder bag tucked under her arm. I can hear faintly through the distance that they're speaking English, but for both of them it's a foreign language. Her hands are gesticulating in short intense bursts in concert with her voice. The man, a little shorter than she, is listening patiently, and where there's an opportunity, quietly interjecting. He's calm and relaxed in his posture, respectful, receptive, assured. Although the only black person within sight in any direction, his easiness establishes his place in the *Platz*. But I can see his Air Jordans are starting to break down, his leather jacket has several scars of white paint on its back, as if he had accidentally leaned on a fresh-painted fence somewhere; his black & white checked scarf is wound with a chic looseness. I can tell he's been living in his clothes for a while; the stonewashed jeans are beginning to stiffen from soil and prolonged wear, creased at the knees like an accordion. I take him to be a refugee from North Africa; there are thousands in Berlin now, working out their individual desperate fates. But the interaction between the two of them is not taking the shape of a typical down-and-out solicitation for help. Even at this distance, one senses an intimacy between them. She is trying to make him understand something he clearly already understands. The way he hovers beside her, slightly in front of her, refusing to be dismissed, suggests the persistence of an established relationship. But for his dress, they could be mistaken for lovers in a kind of quiet public quarrel. She is not pushing him off as an unwanted; and his posture is confident, respectful, attentive, not abject. He is not folded into himself with the solitude of a marginalized loner. He stands as one cognizant of his role at the center of a human drama. She concludes, and turns from him, but somehow not *away* from him, and continues walking. He moves with her, says a few words; she responds. They are walking together, talking. But there is a sustained intensity and pointedness to her expressions. She stops and turns to him at the door to the public facilities on the *Platz*. He steps a little closer. She speaks with him insistently for a few minutes more. He responds calmly. She puts up her hand, palm out, turns and descends the stairs. He's been rebuffed. He turns from where she stood and walks back into the center of the *Platz*, approaching another woman passing by. Excuse me, he says in English, looking for an opening; she walks past, picking up her pace, pointedly ignoring him. He angles off in another direction, repeats the manoeuver, and is again rebuffed. He is working the *Platz*. The first woman, in the end, not having offered what he wants or needs, he is searching for a better opportunity, a more yielding target. But now here's the first woman again, she has exited the facilities into which she had disappeared. She walks over and begins talking to him, picking up where they had left off. They are re-engaged, as if she had told him to wait there in the *Platz* for her to return. They walk off, side by side, her hands again articulating volubly. Following from a distance, I can see that he is listening intently, again occasionally gently interjecting. They are having a serious conversation as they approach the

Alex S-bahn station. In front of the escalator to the platform, she turns to him. She could lean forward only inches to kiss him good-bye, they are that close. Again her voice rises with an agitation reined in by the loose decorum of being in public. Okay, he says, okay. She turns, steps, and the escalator carries her up. He has turned a second time from where she left him, back into the *Platz*, his gait easy, without intention, drifting with the little currents of motion in the gathering human sea of Alex. He approaches a woman perched on her heels, balancing on a low-walled garden box and eating a big meat sandwich. Excuse me, he says. She shakes her head and he keeps moving without breaking his stride. And yet he appears not to be heading anywhere. He is on the make, meandering in the multi-directional foot traffic of the *Platz*. But the enigma of his 20-minute engagement with the first woman lingers, a private drama played out in the public square. What did she need him to understand, this man from another country, from another continent, so far from home, trying to survive on the street by his wits. Whatever it was, it was genuine; and for that short time, even as, ultimately, a rejection in progress, the two of them existed together one step from the border between meaningful connection and the economy of the lost. He turns a corner, and I let him disappear.

Finally boarding the bus, I look around. No Pegida types here—but what is one; why am I thinking in types—I see only European and American college kids, probably making a connection in Dresden on their way to Prague. I mull over the warnings that friends in Berlin have lobbed at me: Don't go to the demo. But if you go, don't talk to anyone. But if you talk to people, stay on the margin of the crowd, closer to the police; don't stand in the center. If you find yourself in the center, don't pull out your notebook, and don't take any photos. I pass the time working out in my mind different scenarios I might find myself in, and what I will say, what I will do. The distrust people hold against the political class in Germany, as in the US, has translated into a distrust of the so-called "mainstream media," even as the political right in both countries takes advantage of manipulating the media for its own ends. The police in the east, I'm told, are often more sympathetic towards the demonstrators than they are towards the refugees, immigrants, or left anti-demonstrators.

Alistair Noon filled me in over dinner about the scandalous incident in Clauswitz in February, when 100 angry Germans raged against a bus of refugees that had just arrived in Saxony to be moved into a shelter there. *Der Spiegel* video shows the terrified refugees in tears, stuck on the bus for hours as police slowly arrived on the scene. One refugee woman, who finally reached some kind of internal limit, is shown spitting at the Germans from inside the closed bus, so of course only hitting the windshield that screened her from the mob. So reluctant and scared were the trapped refugees that police had to forcibly drag them from the bus to the shelter. One young teenage boy had to be headlocked by police to get him to move, he was frozen with fear. You can hear men in the mob screaming as loud as they can, "*Wir Sind das Volk*" and "Get out, get out!"

When I discussed my plans with Mario and Tobi, my Airbnb flat-mates for two weeks, they just kind of stared at me. I tell them I'll leave a copy of my passport and Sarah's phone number. In their late 20s, they confess to never having visited Dresden (it's only about two hours away). Later, Susanne laughs when I tell her this. That's so Berlin, she says, people who come here, or who are from here, are completely incompatible with people from Dresden. For me, she explains, it is just *too* German, that region; but it *is* very beautiful. And, she says with a wry smile, the people who live there are known to have the longest life-spans in the country.

I decide on the bus that I will have time before the scheduled demonstration in front of the Dresden Hauptbahnhof—a few hours at least—to take up Karsten's suggestion to make the 10 kilometer walk from the beautiful nineteenth century Blaues Wunder Brücke—the Blue Wonder Bridge—back through the old city center to the central train station. Probably good for the soul to catch a little antique pastoral before the ugliness of the political present ...

Susanne and Karsten (who hails from the East) are right, it's a picturesque city, much of it reconstructed, surrounded by lush verdant countryside. The long lovely walk beside the Elbe river is busy with ducks in the water being chased by swimming dogs, their nostrils flaring with excitement; kids skipping stones and adults picking through them for gems; lovers lying on the bank, with limbs entwined like a human root system; mothers gently bumping gas from the G.I. tracts of infants slung across their chests ... Across the river, plantation-like estates and small farms cascade down slopes to the water's edge. By the time I get back to the Hauptbahnhof, I'm tuckered out. But I have a half hour before the demo to start mingling in the slowly growing crowd.

Unlike the Moabit Hilft demo in Alex, or the Reunification Day anti-immigration march I ran into at the Berlin Hauptbahnhof in October, most of the demonstrators today are older guys, between 50 and 75, with some middle age women, too. But not many young people, at least not yet. Everyone looks heavy, white (including the hair), and haggard. Some younger guys with white armbands that read *Ordner*—demonstration marshals—are standing in variously placed clumps. An early arrival with an anti-Merkel sign: *Die Regierung geht unter, Deutschland niemals!* (“The government is going down, Germany never!”) The suggestion of a setting sun in the phrase “*geht unter*” strikes me as unwittingly ironic, as the letter “a” in the acronym Pegida stands for *Abendland*, a kind of poetic word for “the Occident” or “the West,” but one that internalizes a metaphor in its literal compound: *Abend*-evening + *Land*-country. The West, in other words, is the direction in which the sun sets; and the *Abendland* raises the ancient notion of Europe as the Western-most situated continent. Its antonym, of course, is the Islamic East, and the ideological implication in the metaphor—that the East is on the rise. Istanbul is the bridge between them; the irony runs beneath it like the Bosphorus.

In a slow swim among the other fish in the tank, I hear someone say in German, it's the left that are fascists. This is a common accusation from the right. It matches the slogan I see on a sweatshirt: *Gegen Nazis und für Pegida* (“Against Nazis and for Pegida”). I pass an anti-TTIP sign, a couple of Jack Wolfskin jackets, paramilitary garb in a buzz cut. Two other signs bob over the crowd: Merkel dressed as Hitler in a famous sitting pose of the Führer, the swastika on the armband replaced with the symbol for the euro, €; and a cartoon of a bent naked torso with ass in the air excreting Merkel from its anus. I'm not finding a friendly face to approach here.

The demo area is starting to fill up now with a continual stream of people. A lot of flags I can't identify; especially prevalent is one with a red background and a black cross outlined in yellow and situated horizontally, copying the basic design of the flag of Norway. (Although no one I ask in Berlin can identify the flag, I'll dig it up later that the design is for a new flag for Germany proposed by Josef Wirmer in 1944; in other words, a flag signifying the disavowal of Nazi Germany and the wish for a new beginning for the nation).

Feeling apprehension, I decide to distract myself for a few minutes by doing something casual like eating an apple and some chocolate. I move to what is now the interior side of the rally, along a row of large stone windowsills to a Hauptbahnhof building that can serve as a shelf for my backpack. An older man leans over and says something to me in German I don't catch. Sorry, I say in German, my German is not particularly good. English, he asks. Yes, I say. Who are you and what are you doing here, he says in English. I give him the answer I've worked out in advance. I'm an American, I say, a writer; but I'm not a journalist or reporter. I think the conservative perspective (I avoid using the term “right wing”) is often distorted by the mainstream media—I know it's true in the US, I continue, and I think it's probably true here—so I decided to come and see for myself ...

This statement, I feel, is basically true—political perspectives all along the ideological spectrum are frequently enough distorted in the media, and *by* the media. (The phrase, “mainstream media,” is, in my view, a meaningless term; but both the left and the right use it to criticize what they don't like to

read or hear or see about themselves in the news. I imagine myself looking in the mirror and seeing the white in my hair, my slowly sinking jawl—"mainstream media," I hear myself mutter ...) I'm careful to suppress my antagonism, but also not to say something I don't think is true. Whether or not I achieved the latter, the man nods at me. It's very good, he says, that you have come to see for yourself; the media always distorts things. Well yes, I think, true enough, in a sense; that's a different way of saying what I just said to him; the problem is in the word "always." I instinctively try to gain further confidence by honestly expressing my apprehension. People told me not to come, I say, they said I might get beat up. Oh, no, he says, the violence is always perpetrated by the left. The left, he continues, is full of people who are too young to remember what it was like in Germany 25 years ago. But in Dresden we remember.

Wolfgang Pfeifer, 65, is a Dresden art dealer—Galerie Königstrasse (his gallery, I take it, once I get to look it up) is located in the *Innere Neustadt* area across the river. It's a serious gallery, showing works by German artists such as Richard Müller, Erich Mercker, Herbert Kitzel, and others from the Max Bechmann *Schule*, and with a focus on Dresden art. He moved to Dresden from Frankfurt, he tells me, 15 years ago, because of rent hikes—Dresden is a much more affordable city. He's been attending the Pegida *Montagsdemos* for about seven months, and has also joined the AfD (Alternative for Germany) party. As we talk, I spot a team of "Pegida Medics" in red jumpsuits and first aid backpacks moving slowly through the now sizeable crowd. Islam, he says, is simply *fundamentally* incompatible with European values. We are standing side by side against the building. As he talks, I'm looking at a sign in front of us, a large drawing of a cooked chicken. Over it reads an epigram, *Wer hat unser Land verraten .../ der soll in der Hölle braten!* ("Who betrayed our country .../ should fry in Hell!")

One of the founders of Pegida begins to talk about his visit to Manchester and Pegida activities elsewhere in Europe. From time to time, Wolfgang leans over to translate a phrase or central theme of discussion. The crowd, about 3,000 now to the eye, breaks into a loud forceful chant. Every Jewish molecule in my body is screaming for me to run. Wolfgang leans over. They are saying "Push them out, push them out!" he says, referring, I assume, to pushing out the refugees (—and 45 years ago ...?). People turn around to look at us, hearing our English chatter, and notice with suspicion my writing in a notebook. Feeling more nervous, I confront my anxiety by going further. I boost myself onto the large stone windowsill, and stand to get a good overview of the crowd. The area is packed and rows of people stretch back as far as I can see. I take out my phone and make a sweeping video. A man next to me takes it upon himself to be the applause prompt, and sets the crowd clapping when a speaker makes a point that he approves of. "One thing is clear," says one of the movement leaders, "Power belongs to the people, not Merkel!" Cheers and clapping. "The language of German freedom is Saxon!" Cheers and clapping. *Merkel muss weg!* ("Merkel must go!") Chanting starts: *Merkel muss weg! Merkel muss weg!* And as it subsides, a voice calls out from the crowd, *Und schnell!* Laughter.

After about an hour, the demo shifts into a march. I decide to walk alongside Wolfgang to continue our conversation. My son, he says, is a policeman in Berlin, in Wedding ... Ja, I say, I know that *Kiez*. (Wedding is a predominantly working class neighborhood—I know it mostly because Alistair lives there—that's becoming a new trendy hot spot). When a policeman stops an Arab guy for something wrong, says Wolfgang, they are quickly surrounded by, like, 20 Arab guys. 49 percent of Wedding is Arabs and Turks, he adds. (2011 demographics put the figure at about 12%; no doubt it's grown, even spiked, but 49% sounds rather high). Is that a scary situation for your son, I ask. Yes. A sign floats in front of us: *O, du Ausgeburt der Hölle!* ("O, Thou spawn of Hell!") It's a famous quote from Goethe's poem, "*Der Zauberlehrling*" ("The Sorcerer's Apprentice," of Mickey Mouse fame). "Thou spawn of Hell"—would that be a reference to Merkel, I suppose? My wife, says Wolfgang, was married to a Lebanese man; he was secular. They traveled back to Lebanon,

they saw firsthand how it had changed into a place of religious fundamentalism. Is your wife Lebanese, I say. No no, she's German. A guy in front of us is shrouded in a German flag; taped on the back is a photocopied image of George Orwell, and a famous quote attributed to him, translated into German: "The further a society drifts from the truth, the more it will hate those who speak it." Maybe Trump will be your next president, Wolfgang says with a genuine smile. A lot of people, I say, would like to see that happen. Wolfgang tells me that he disapproves of how America forced Germany to interrupt its economic trade with Russia; and also his concern that radical Kurds will be allowed into the country without visas, thereby leading to a holy war on German soil between Kurds and Turks. I'm not sure how much more of this I can take. The cognitive dissonance of coming up with neutral remarks to make in response spikes with the experience of walking *in* the march, a feeling that peaks again as we pass some Arabic teens watching from the perimeter of the sidewalk this snaking crowd marshaled against them. I make a point of catching their eye to feel fully the force of their gaze on me, and their judgment of me as a Pegida member or sympathizer. There is no anti-demo by the left today, only the eyes challenge the protest with their own protest. Finally, I have to bail, it's too much. I need to catch my bus, I say, I need to go. Of course, says Wolfgang. Thank you, Herr, I say, for talking to me. I shake his hand and slip out of the line.

I need to eat something; I find a place in the old city to have a *Schnitzel* and a beer before boarding a late bus back to Berlin. Walking to the Hauptbahnhof, I pass the old Kreuz Kirche, the Church of the Cross, in the square; I stop to read the historical plaque outside the building. *Wir Sind das Volk* it begins, and tells the story of how the church served as the site for the demonstrations against the DDR government in October 1989 that led to the revolution and the *Mauerfall*. However cynically the Pegida leaders are working to attract and mobilize people, I leave Herr Pfeifer with the feeling that he is not, himself, a cynical person. But he is willfully overlooking the aggression and violence of the right in his legitimate concern about the government's inability to deal with the crisis, the fear that what sometimes looks like an insurmountable bureaucratic challenge will become a dysfunctional impossibility. It may already have. Is his concern for the nation and the Enlightenment values of Europe—as fractured as they now seem to be—leading him to becoming a "good German," one who overlooks atrocities on the ground in the name of an abstraction? How and when do I assume the authority to question his personal moral responsibility? He joins Pegida in rejecting submission to the legitimate authority of Merkel's administration, as if it were she who is a Nazi. The twists and inversions of the ideological maze are not puzzling—that's business as usual; it's the breathing particularity of the individual drawn to the political right that leads, for me, into disturbing deepening darkness ...

HIDDEN POCKETS

Wednesday, April 6, 2016

Last night, on my way by bike to Wedding, I lost my Jack Wolfskin fleece, a favorite, with its giant paw print stitched on the back—it somehow fell out of the trap on the bike rack, probably when I was zooming down Osloer Strasse, one of the few real slopes in the city. When I tell my flat mates, Mario & Tobi, they shake their heads. No, says Mario, you didn't lose it; it was stolen off the back of your bike at a red light. Happens all the time now, says Tobi. Later, I relate this all to Susanne. No, she says, I don't think so; it says more about them, that they are thinking this way—no one needs clothes, so many clothes are given away all the time, there's an absolute glut. But there *is* more theft, she says, more than once someone has tried to reach into my bag, on the train platform, or in a line. But no one is stealing clothes, she says. That afternoon, at a café, Susanne shows me how she's refashioned her backpack by cutting a slit in the exterior back panel to create a hidden pocket where she can hide her valuables. There is a band of Romanian gypsies moving through Berlin right now, she says, many people are getting ripped off.

A KREUZBERG EXPERIMENT

Friday, April 8, 2016

Weissensee (or White Lake), where I'm staying, is a sleepy locality in Pankow, a large *Kiez* in Berlin, and farther east in the city than I've ever lived before. The neighborhood is one of the least populated, and the feeling on the street is "zero tourism." One advantage of staying in a flat here, in addition to getting out of the tourism stream, is proximity to the Weissensee Jüdischer Friedhof, the second largest Jewish cemetery in Europe—it contains over 115,000 graves, and is currently waiting to join the UNESCO world heritage list. Although notables from the world of German culture, science, and industry are buried there, I'm not keen on a pilgrimage, I just want to walk around this morning; and I discover it's only a kilometer away—I'll have just enough time before my next meeting.

As I walk through the archway entrance, a man asks me if I'd like a kippah to cover my head—typical observance—or maybe he's telling me it's required. I don't think I've ever worn a kippah outside before; I usually only plop one on before stepping into the sanctuary. It's a gorgeous morning; the cemetery, except for the early groundskeepers, is still empty of the living. Spring has only just hit Berlin two days ago, but you can see the buds getting ready to burst into leaf. I imagine the canopy of tall deciduous trees, growing here for generations, must turn luscious with fall colors.

Built in the 1880s by Hugo Licht, the footpaths make various eccentric patterns of circles, squares, and octagons; and one notices that the usual Jewish practice of using plain unadorned stones is conspicuously mixed with heavily adorned art nouveau styled stones erected by turn of the century assimilationist Jewish families (the majority of stones date from the 19th century). Solitude in cemeteries deepens with the feeling of silent community, a special kind of aloneness, rivaled only by the feeling you have when you're the only one awake in a household of sleepers. My walk takes me to the far perimeters, where I find empty manicured acreage ready and waiting for future departures.

But now more visitors have entered, and my meditation walk among the German Jewish dead is interrupted twice by people asking me for directions. Mistaken for a grounds-worker, I guess; I have to wonder if my red jersey resembles Berlin laborer color-coding, or if I simply look like I'm at home here. I spend some time at the Holocaust memorial stone and the surrounding stones for the concentration camps, each one bearing an infamous camp name.

Back on my bike making the 40 minute ride from Weissensee to Kreuzberg (it's 30 minutes according to the map app, but I leave time to get lost, because I always do), I realize I'm still wearing the kippah—it fits well, resisting the wind-drag created by my heavy pedal-pumping. I'm on the way to meet Alexandra Kinga Fekete, a Hungarian photographer who has lived in Berlin for the past 13 years. She's recently moved from a cool historical flat in Mitte to a large contemporary building in Kreuzberg, the most popular *Kiez* in Berlin. Alex, 46 years old, still has the hot body of an athlete ten years younger—(I promised her I would write that, and it's true!) She also has a wicked wit and a delicious irreverence toward every kind of piety. As soon as we sit down she looks at me skeptically. Do you have some questions for me, she says, because I'm dying of hunger. She bites a cracker.

I'm interested in Alex's experiences living in Berlin as a Hungarian, and specifically if coming from Hungary gave her a different perspective on the refugee crisis in Germany, but also on how Hungary has been portrayed in the media. But because she is herself devoted to the creation of media

through the *use* of media, I instinctively start with her own vocation, the medium of the photograph.

Alex Fekete came to photography seriously as she was abandoning a career in law (she only practiced as a lawyer for a year, in the mid-1990's). Her first real works are not photographs she shot, but a series of intricate and mesmerizing large-framed photographic collages she constructed from the photographs her father took over the years of his many female lovers, clothed and naked. She keeps them in a portfolio, but pulls them out for me to see, as well as the box of original photographs her father took, protected in little envelopes he made himself and dated meticulously. The answer to the riddle of her self-discovery as an artist may lie in this case somewhere between Nabokov and Lacan, but the photographic evidence is arresting, even if mysterious. Fekete's instincts for the image of revelation through portraiture led her to develop photographs that, although highly staged, with conscious and sometimes even artificial positioning of the human subject, hit hard as instants of self-expression: not of the photographer, but the expression of the subject. At the same time, the high stylization, which is the photograph's visual gesture, fuses the artist's identity with the photographic subject, so that each image is simultaneously objective and subjective, biography (subject) and autobiography (artist).

Although Fekete makes her bread from high-end fashion, advertising, and other commercial gigs (*Rolling Stone*, Air Berlin, Absolut vodka), to her own artistic projects she brings the same intensity of composition, the same degree of perplexing artifice that defies naturalism and gives us something more idiosyncratically personal. I always go for the strongest image, she says. Her latest project is called, "My Body Is My Gun." She's not kidding around.

We discuss her work and her process for about 45 minutes, an angle of approach illustrated, as we talk, by the many large photographs she's taken that hang on the walls of her flat. The conversation is less about the technical aspects of composition, and more about the ethical issues that float around any intentional representation one makes of another person, another ultimately unknowable subjectivity. This, of course, is an issue for the *Notebook*, as well as for many of my own poems: to what degree can one assume to have captured in a work something essential of another person's existence; to what degree should one make the distance between oneself and another as evident in the work as the proximity one hopes to stage. Essential questions.

Slowly we shift to the issues of the refugee crisis as it became acutely felt last summer; we turn to the initial drama of Hungary's response, which was first—after Merkel had announced that Germany's borders would remain open to refugees—to try to control the number of people moving through the country on their way to Germany. There was, and is, of course, no matter where you stand, the fact of double standards—that countries such as the US and UK, which would never allow for open borders, were part of an international brouhaha over Eastern European countries concerned about allowing undocumented persons to enter the EU and make their way free of bureaucratic accounting and security checks. Even as Denmark, for example, was holding fast against the new migration wave, Hungary was bearing the brunt of criticism because of its geographical role in the diasporic pattern.

I don't agree with the Hungarian policies, says Alex, but Europe at that point [in the summer] was looking for a scapegoat. And Hungary was painted black; the refugees didn't want to stay there; they were openly rejecting food and water and aid because they wanted to keep moving, to get to Germany. But even as the Hungarian government was balking at letting so many people move through, she says, there were other Hungarians who were actively trying to help the refugees, but this was not much reported. At the same time, she continues, everywhere else in the world you have to register with the government, why should this not have been possible and required. Of course,

she says, the Dublin Regulation protects the countries without accessible coasts. The refugees don't want to get stuck, and those countries of entry don't want to get caught. But now, as a result, we don't even know who is here in Germany.

Sometimes, she says, Germany is a place of such extremes. Now we are dealing with an extreme kind of progressive idealism. Of course we need to help as much as we can, but I don't always trust this feeling of, on the one hand, the big idea of Germany as a refuge for asylum seekers, and on other hand, the very local feeling of many Germans that they don't really want too much actual proximity to migrants in their day to day lives. I mean, look at where you find Turks in German society; [originally invited to Germany as guest workers to help rebuild after World War II, they were never fully integrated nor given the rights of citizenship]—they're not really represented in positions of authority or prestige, she adds. So, I'm a little afraid of this liberal idealism. Other countries, she says, are exercising much more caution. I mean, why would you think that these problems that we're having right now *wouldn't* happen? And some refugees are showing up with the attitude that Germany can easily support this situation full on. And now, on the other side, she continues, people who have risked everything to get here, some of them are facing the absolute *mega-horror* of being sent back. There is a kind of naiveté at work here; I know I have it, too. And all of this is happening without the government having established a clear integration policy. And really, it takes years—some say up to seven years—to educate immigrants in language, culture, profession, sexual education, and civil rights.

Alex's mentioning of sexual education and civil rights raises a question I haven't asked anyone yet, about the problem of integration and the different expectations within Islam of the role women play and the place they have in the society in terms of civil rights: self-autonomy, equality, and legal recourse. And the question of how Muslims from Syria and the greater region view women extends, then, to other issues of gender and sexuality. Alex is the mother of two pre-teen girls. Of course I'm concerned, she says. We discuss the recent sexual molesting of two teenage girls by two Afghan asylum seekers (one 14 years old), at a pool in the northern state of Schleswig-Holstein; and also the earlier sexual assaults on New Year's Eve in Köln. Of course the men are not all rapists, she says, that's just a vicious right wing idea; but Muslims do have different ideas about women. And the real issue here has to do with women's rights in Europe. Do we now have to have separate pools for men and women? When gender orientation is itself such a big question for civil rights? Women have fought hard for civil rights in Europe, and those are values we need to keep, and even to extend.

The scope of this problem is quite large, I say, and its intricacies are complex—I'm wondering if you've had any personal experiences with tensions or conflicts that are sexual or gendered out on the street here in Berlin. Have you felt this problem, yourself, in your experience? Alex pauses and thinks. She then tells me about a hotel nearby that has been turned into a shelter for refugees. I was walking near the hotel, she says, and I found myself walking behind a Muslim family—a mother in hijab, and a father, with two kids, a stroller. I was wearing a short skirt, and just a shirt [meaning no bra, a European commonplace]. And as I approached them, I became very self-conscious. I anticipated them looking at me, and becoming uncomfortable with how I was dressed. And *I* became uncomfortable, not because I would be a spectacle, but because I would become the source of *their* discomfort. I did overtake them, finally. And I was planning to sit down on a bench I saw a block away; but then I decided not to sit down, but to keep going. I didn't want to become a source of their continued discomfort. Alex pauses. You know, she says, I've traveled in the East—Israel, Jordan, Dubai, Morocco ... In Morocco, we had the best time; the Moroccans were the nicest people I have ever met, and they were amazing with our girls, so kind, so *sweet*. And there, you are aware that you are in another culture, another society; and you dress differently, you *behave* differently. You respect the society and the environment. But here in Europe, in Germany, I don't want to feel

that I have to behave differently because I may be making someone from somewhere else feel uncomfortable. We've fought so hard for these rights and for this development in European society. We can't give that up. And this is not a right wing idea, she says, this is the idea of liberal, tolerant, enlightened European culture. Maybe the biggest challenge for European liberalism, I say, is to figure out how much intolerance a tolerant society can tolerate. It's difficult to discuss, she says, without instantly becoming labeled. This is a big challenge for the left, she says, to come up with real solutions by looking at the situation with clarity and awareness: we have to find a way to stay in touch with our ideals and to let go of our naiveté.

Leaving Alex's Kreuzberg flat, I decide to go farther into the *Kiez*, to walk through the Friday Turkish Market and neighboring Neukölln. I have read that these boroughs, in which concentrations of immigrants have lived for generations, have become even more densely populated now with new immigrants; and, correspondingly, I've heard, more dangerous—more petty theft and property crime. Also more physically dangerous for Jews (especially in the area of Kottbusser Strasse, where I'm heading). Once I hit the Maibach Ufer (or bank) that shoots off Kottbusser Strasse and runs along the Landwehrkanal, it takes me a while to find a fixed pole to lock my bike against—they're all taken. This is the area of the outdoor market, and it's packed with people slowly moving along the pedestrian current circulating the street that runs alongside the canal banks. In a somewhat perverse impulse, I reach into my pocket, pull out the kippah I accidentally lifted from the Jüdisches Friedhof, and put it on my head.

Why? What do I think will happen? Do I think I will be physically or verbally attacked? Never having worn a kippah outside the synagogue, never having walked the streets of any city while outwardly signifying my being Jewish, I have to wonder at this new impulse, but also at my own small subtle personal suppressions. Putting on the kippah here in Berlin, in a neighborhood known for its Muslim population, is not just an impromptu social experiment about the situation in Berlin, but something more about myself, my own social existence, a quiet act of public self-identification. If circumcision for Jewish males is a mark of the covenant, then adopting the kippah in public is another act of making that covenant differently visible and unmistakable—in a sense I've circumcised my head. The fact that millions of Jewish men wear the kippah out in the world makes it not a big deal; the fact that I've never done so makes it, in a sense, a new intentional personal utterance. Actually, I feel like I am silently screaming.

Entering the human stream, I pass Berliners, visitors & tourists, eating food from the market stalls—grilled corn, grilled fish, falafel sandwiches, fruits, candy, cheeses, flakey filo dough pastries. The tables display cheap household goods, handmade soaps, crafted kitchen knives, stacks and stacks of rolled textiles, cleverly designed tee shirts, cheap toys. The fruit and vegetable sellers call out their daily deals as they weigh and bag; children plead for treats; women in hijabs compare prices and gossip as they shop. At one spot, an expansive wooden platform accessible from the market sidewalk hangs out over the canal; young people in their 20s and 30s in tank tops and other light clothes sit there to soak up the sun and chatter with each other, drinking beer and eating. Some young Muslim women in hijabs sit among them, a part of the scene and yet separate from it, furiously texting on their smart phones. A middle aged guy on the side starts an electric funky relaxed solo arrangement of "All Along the Watchtower." Walking through the crowd, my self-awareness of the kippah rises and fades; I never quite forget it's on, but most of the time I'm thinking of other things, making mental notes of observations outside myself. Occasionally I see someone notice the kippah on my head—it could be a halo or a set of horns—the look on the observing face won't say which because it doesn't really matter, no one cares, no one gives a shit; the market walkers have their individual missions, or none at all, and are happily distracted by their preoccupations, passive in the afternoon shuffle. I transact some small purchases, buy a coffee, go into some stores; I make small exchanges of words; I plant myself conspicuously on benches and stretches of canal walls.

After a couple of hours, I retrieve my bike and head further south and east, into Neukölln, where the population of Muslims is even heavier. For several hours, I ride around and walk my bike through crowds of people, passing hundreds of Muslim women dressed in head coverings and robes, and hundreds of Arabic men walking or sitting, and hanging out in cafés, or outside *Friseur* shops (barber shops), owned and operated, it seems, exclusively by Turks. (It occurs to me that, were you inclined to hassle or even attack someone for being Jewish, I'm probably not the first person you'd pick out to assault). In the six hours no one has said anything to me in reference to the kippah or my being Jewish—well, one man, who, as he passed by, wished me “Good Shabbes.” But I'm sure he was being ironical. Was he? My reaction is itself sadly comical. And really, what does it prove, I think, pedaling the 40 minutes back north to Weissensee. It proves nothing one way or the other. Wearing the kippah is nothing but an act of self-reflection, a personal exercise in confronting my own Semitic paranoia. Nothing more than an afternoon passage into the discomforts of my own fear of being Jewish.

AN INTERVIEW WITH YASMINE MEREI

Saturday, April 9, 2016

I hear about an event in Berlin on the subject of the refugee crisis, with Yasmine Merei, a Syrian journalist and activist affiliated with Reporters Without Borders; but I can't make it. Luckily, a contact comes through, and one or two e-mails later we've arranged to meet late on Saturday night, my last one in Berlin on this trip. I'm eager to speak with her; I think she will articulate a point of view that may add definition to the interviews I've conducted with Syrian refugees so far, some of whom struggled with English, even as I struggled with German. We arrange to meet at the S-bahn station of the Hackescher Markt, a touristy spot, but close to her neighborhood—Yasmine is on the fly between visiting friends in Leipzig and returning to Lebanon, where she needs to jump through some bureaucratic hoops at the German embassy in order to return to Berlin and apply for residency. (She was at one time living in Lebanon, where two of her brothers are living still). Other immediate family are stuck in the south of Syria.

Yasmine, a Sunni, is 32 years old. She fled Syria because she was wanted by security forces there, for doing relief work with refugees. Originally from Homs, she left with her family to Suwayda to avoid being killed by the bombing. In 2012, her father was arrested, tortured, and murdered; two of her brothers were also arrested, but escaped; (they are the ones in Lebanon). Yasmine's own escape routed through Damascus, to Beirut, then to Istanbul. Recently, she's been living in Berlin. I didn't know it at the time we scheduled the interview, but Yasmine was also interviewed for the *LARB* last December, by Louise Steinman, during a residency at the Villa Aurora, in Los Angeles. This serendipity helped ease our introductions as we walked to a quiet restaurant tucked inside a courtyard off the busy intersection of the *Markt*. I'm confident that the developing situation in Europe and the Middle East won't make ours a redundant effort. (And, in fact, the two interviews work well together). Yasmine is an immediately impressive woman; she speaks with an urgency and seriousness tempered by a warm humor. She is quick to add details to stories, quick to make new points, to introduce new considerations. She has something I recognize immediately when I meet another creative person, a drive and a focus. She can talk to you all night, but her hands never leave the wheel. I feel certain she will be one of the Syrian refugees who makes a difference in Germany.

I start by asking her what she'd most want to tell Germans regarding the particular difficulties Syrian refugees are experiencing. The interview takes off immediately and, for an hour, there's hardly a pause.

Merei: So, in 2013, when people started coming here from Syria, they still had a stereotyped idea about life in Europe. People thought, okay if we go to Europe, we will get houses, we will get salaries, and it will be like heaven; and the reality is not like this, especially when hundreds of thousands of people are moving here to Europe. Now, when I arrived in Germany, I met some friends here in Berlin who I know from before the revolution, and I had the feeling that they are very upset; they are like helpless, they feel that they can do nothing but wait for the decisions by the German government, to get residency. Also in some cases, it's so difficult to learn the language, especially for women who are mothers. A woman who is 35 or 40, and has 4 or 5 kids, you know, where are they going to find time to learn German? The other thing that is so difficult for people in the camps is that there are some real indignities. And when you say, what's an indignity, what do you mean indignity, it is something maybe very specific for Arabic people. For example, for men to take orders from others; or the feeling they have that they need to control their wives' and daughters' every movement; that they must accept any kind of job, any kind of food; these small details are related to the feeling of indignity. Add the travel from Turkey, which costs them almost everything they have; so they feel that they are losing their dignity more and more. And when they come to the camps,

and see that at first they have to live together in what are really only very big holes—there's no privacy, and this issue of privacy is a very difficult thing for Muslim people; even people who are not Muslim but are from Syria care a lot about the privacy of the family, it's part of the culture. So all of these details make people hopeless; they lose confidence; and they feel that they are only second or third class citizens in the new community. These problems require solutions from both sides: we need initiatives from the Syrian people, as refugees, to say okay, please understand us, we have these customs and ways of thinking. *And* we need some initiatives from the Europeans or the German people, to learn more about Syrian culture, so that they understand the Syrians and what these people need. It is more than just shelter.

JW: But that was true in the summer; it was true in 2012-2013; it was true in the fall, in October when I was here and it was clear that the German government was overwhelmed and there were many problems with the bureaucratic process. There were many problems with perception on both sides: expectations of refugees, not just Syrians, about what the prospects would be like, with the numbers as high as they were; and also problems with expectations that the Germans had, that their government would be able to function in a way adequate to the numbers of the refugees arriving. And there were also problems with how Germans viewed refugees coming from the Middle East. So, are all those problems still present; or have they changed, grown; or are there new ones now?

Merei: Ja, there are new ones, of course. The decision by the Europeans that they will not receive more refugees is a big one: so the person who arrived here and who is waiting to bring the rest of his family, and now cannot, that is a big problem. People who are stuck in Macedonia and Greece, that is also a big problem. People who moved to Greece or Macedonia, they don't want to go back to Turkey: if the situation were good in Turkey, they would not think about moving to Europe; so this is a very big problem. And it is not only about the economic situation or social situation, but also the situation of security in Turkey. So you feel that okay, you left your home, you are looking for a new life, to escape the violence at home, and you are still facing the risk of violence where you are; so that's a big problem. And there's another thing: you know in Turkey, it is not possible to escape an Islamic atmosphere; yes, people are liberal in one way or another; and yes, Istanbul is totally different than Gaziantep [a Turkish town close to the Syrian border], where I was living first, after leaving Syria; but in the end there is an Islamic regime even in Istanbul; they want to say they are secular, but in fact, in deed, they are Islamic. There are a lot of Syrian people who are not Muslim; and even with the Muslims, they're many who are secular, and they are looking for an open life. I feel people have the right to change their lives, their way of life; but people here now are afraid that they will not be allowed to bring the rest of their families over. That is a huge humanitarian issue, maybe the biggest one for people who are here now. And Syrian refugees have lost any kind of trust in the negotiations, in the legal system, or the coalition of the international community. They feel that here is no hope, and yet they are not thinking about going back to Syria. They are stuck. When I left Syria, I escaped to Lebanon; and I had the feeling I'd be back in 10 days, a month, two months maximum; now I cannot think about going back to Syria for maybe like 10 years, maybe never.

JW: The refugees I spoke with down at Lageso said something similar. These were all guys—I didn't approach any women, I talked to some, but they were with men—these guys I spoke with were in their late 20's—27, 28, and early 30's—and they said, yeah we want to go back to Syria as soon as we can, as soon as the war is over, maybe in 10 years, or 20 years, or 30 years; that was the time frame they were thinking in. And one guy said, we have to think about our children. And I said, your children? I guess if you're lucky to stay—one of them had residence and had been here for two years—but their children will be born here; they will be residents; they will learn German; and they will make their lives here; how are you imagining your life returning to Syria with your families after they grow up here. It was amazing to hear them imagining ahead, in that time frame:

some of them will be in their 60's by then. The feeling though, is very strong, and they convey great fortitude.

Merei: There is a very important thing to remember: that we have a lot of conservative families that moved to Germany; and they don't have the feeling that they will be completely German because they have difficulties learning the language; and they have a lot of psychological problems because of the journey. So you feel that people are trying to look for a kind of identity, especially after what happened in Paris, Brussels and Köln: some want to be very far from Islamic identity; and some want to be very close, because what other identity do they have. So the European governments need to think about this—it's important and, if neglected, also dangerous.

JW: Dangerous in what sense?

Merei: Let's talk about France. Some reports said those who did the bombings in Paris are Algerian, but in general they are Arabs and Muslims; they were born in France and grew up in France; and they did this bombing because of what, because they don't feel they have French identity. So it is also about their sense that they are not part of the political or social system of France; they don't feel French. This is not justification, but it is part of the reality. Ja, but also here I think, in another way, not about violence, but because of the cultural differences—for example, about the relationship between male and female; you know, these taboos in our communities: people in Europe cannot understand it, but to move from one side to another, it takes time.

JW: You mean to move from the Middle East to Europe.

Merei: Exactly, and when they think about their children, I can imagine there is a Syrian father who cannot think that his daughter will wear shorts in 5 years, it makes him crazy; or his daughter will marry a German man and their children will not be completely Muslim, it is a very big problem. We don't think about these human topics; we don't think about it because this is the natural way of life in the Middle East. Only intellectual people who travel to Europe who think in terms of a global framework, or are Christian: they can integrate more easily into Europe. But I really understand this community, I understand the fears and the challenges that stand between them and integration.

JW: What do you think Europeans should do to encourage integration; because the cultural differences you're describing are very strong, and are not necessarily differences that people from the Middle East, that men from the Middle East coming here, want to give up.

Merei: Okay, so I believe that it is *their* responsibility, the responsibility of people who are moving to Europe, to help make integration more possible. So some Syrian intellectuals, educated people, should create initiatives to introduce their culture to Germany; because otherwise some Germans will say okay, we don't care if the Syrian people are integrated or not, we are living in our houses, we have our jobs, let them go to hell. I know for sure they are *not* saying that, but they could ...

JW: Well, some are saying that!

Merei: But if I decide to move to Germany then I should, I believe, learn the language, learn the culture; not that I should stop believing in my principles, or I should turn away from the culture I grew up in; but I need also to feel that, okay, I can be part of this community, too. If you look at the Turkish people here in Germany, there is a community *inside* the community, they are totally isolated. Also when you think about women especially; maybe men will be better able to move; but when you think about a woman who will not have the opportunity to learn the language; and after

two years her kids will be totally integrated; and after a while she cannot talk to them in Arabic and she cannot speak to them in German; it will be a big problem inside families. So I think we need to build big bridges between the Syrian and German people. And, yes, for that to happen, Syrian men who come here, for example, need to adjust their view of what is okay for women to do or not to do, of how to dress or not to dress; maybe not for women in their families, but certainly for other women who live around them. You know, I hear from friends about young Syrian men who think that, okay, they can have a relationship with a German woman, but they cannot think that their sisters can have relationships with German guys; or maybe a relationship is okay, but definitely not marriage.

JW: This is a common double standard, maybe even in every society! [I tell Yasmine the story Alexandra Fekete told me, about discovering her own discomfort as she walked past a Muslim family and became suddenly self-conscious of the way she was dressed, seeing herself through their eyes.]

Merei: You know, the most important thing is not to generalize about the behavior of someone on the other side; and maybe if we think of other religious groups, like Jews, that can help us, to keep us from these generalizations: there are some Jews that cover themselves even more than Muslims, or at least as much; you cannot see any part of them; there is a religious point to the practice. But I think Middle Eastern men, especially Muslims, need some time to deal with the idea of a secular modern way of seeing women, that it is a normal way of thinking; because they are not used to looking at women this way; from their perspective, that woman in modern dress, in a skirt, is a naked woman; it is not normal in our societies. We have women, of course, who do wear clothes like a modern German; but in the traditional Muslim neighborhoods, they don't wear clothes like that; so I think they need some time.

JW: Do you think people in Syria may be worried about the mental adjustments and attitudes about women that Syrians, who are here as refugees, and who may get residency, will make; do you think there is a concern in Syria that those who travel to Europe will be kind of "Europeanized" in a way that is a danger to the values of the East, that will infect the culture of the East? Here, for example, some people are concerned about the "Islamization" of Europe; are people in Syria concerned about the "Europeanization" of Islam?

Merei: In this situation people are only thinking about how to survive. They are not thinking about whether or not their mentality will be changed. Sure, they are concerned about the future for their children, especially concerning religious topics; but anything else, they don't really care about.

JW: This would be true, I think, for any group fleeing violence ...

Merei: Even if we talk, for example, of a diplomatic employee of any country, even if you are a European or an American, and you move to any country in the Middle East, for sure you will feel afraid about which school you will send your kids to, and in which neighborhood you will live; because it is really a different culture; so I think it is the same. But in the situation of war, and what is happening in Syria, people don't think about these points; and people who are very religious, and are afraid of coming to Europe, they don't come! And the other thing is, until recently, I think people in Europe were afraid because of the stereotype of Islamists in Syria; but we have a lot of Saudi Arabians and even Europeans who are a part of ISIS; when we think about ISIS, only about 4% of them are Syrian. We must think about the Syrian people as people; they are not terrorists, they are not radicalized.

JW: One of the concerns that people here, Germans or Europeans, have expressed, is the sense that,

unlike some parts of the history of immigration to Europe or America, where there was a desire to make the move, and that motivated immigrants to integrate, the situation now with Syrians and others from Greater Syria, the situation of needing to flee your home because otherwise you're afraid you'll be killed—that situation does not create the best mindset for adapting to a new place. Now, although people have expressed this to me, it doesn't entirely line up with the history of immigration to Europe—for example, Moabit, the *Kiez* in Berlin where Lageso is located, is an immigrant neighborhood founded by Protestant Huguenots who fled Catholic France, fled because they were afraid of being killed ... I'm wondering, in your experience, what you might be hearing from Syrian refugees who have fled because they were fearful of being killed in Syria, fled to anywhere they could get to in Europe: what are their attitudes towards the huge project of integration?

Merei: So also to be frank and honest, I know there are a lot of Syrians that now have the feeling that they want to wait and get everything ready ...

JW: They being Germany, or they being the refugees?

Merei: Ja, they feel they can get everything and it should be ready ...

JW: What are we talking about?

Merei: For example, some of them don't want to learn the language, and it's a problem. Some of them feel that, okay, we can make it as long as possible, to keep getting this financial support from the government; this is also a problem. But I think for young people now, they are really trying to learn, to start studying again; so, as I told you, we cannot generalize.

JW: This corresponds with my feeling, having spoken with the people I did in October and even more recently at Tempelhof; these were younger men. And it will be hard, I think, to become a lawyer in Germany, as some of them have expressed wanting to do, when you're 27, and you have to learn the language with such precision; but maybe if one is super motivated, and *relatively* young, of course it may be possible.

Merei: Ja, I think it's not easy for people. If I wanted to bring my family here, and we lost our house, the only thing that we own—and by the way they are not educated—if they want to come here as normal people, it would be so difficult for them to start thinking about how to be integrated. For example, my mother doesn't read or write; she cannot think about learning German now, it will be impossible for her. Or my brother, he cannot imagine his wife will go by herself to the school to learn anything; it's a cultural thing, it's hard.

JW: There are two levels of need; and the first level of need is safety ...

Merei: Exactly.

JW: Getting out of a situation in which your life is in imminent danger, and getting somewhere that is secure; and you'll do anything it takes to get there; and you'll say to yourself, I'll adjust however I need to, I just need to get out of here and to safety. And then there's a second level of need once you reach safety, which is, okay, how can I live here; can I live here; how's that going to happen ...

Merei: I think it needs time at the beginning. And also there is the problem of privacy; when people live together, they cannot think about anything, they feel that it is not a life for us, how we are used

to living. I think it would be a problem for anybody, to live in a home with 50 people, and when you lay on your bed, everyone is looking at you; it is a problem.

JW: After World War II, in Europe, there were so many refugees living in camps; and sometimes these people lived in camps for *years*; they would be on a list, and after three years, the government would say, okay, there's a little village out 500 miles from here; there are no other refugees there, but they need a doctor; you're a doctor, that's where we're going to send you. And that would be your chance to leave the camp ...

Merei: You know, in Syria, people struggle to collect money to buy a house, or build a house; they struggle to buy a car. The government offers no support of any kind to anyone; so when you have lost everything, you have nothing; and you have to wait for the decisions of others, who control your fate. It's not easy.

JW: No, it's hard.

Merei: And I think for women, it will be even more difficult; and hopefully we, as Syrian people, can do something to help them find a way to make it easier to integrate.

JW: [I tell the story of Razan Nassreddine starting the Multaka Museum Meeting Point, to introduced refugees from the Middle East to the antiquities at the Pergamon Museum in Berlin, where she gives guided tours in Arabic]. It speaks to this word that you used earlier, too, the idea of *the bridge*, that it's possible to build. One of the things I'm thinking about, listening to you talk and knowing a little about the work you've done already, has to do with the rights of women globally, and certainly back at home, in Syria. There are rights which we could call the natural rights of women, as citizens, in a kind of Enlightenment way—what we would call the rights of man, the rights of human beings. Do you think, do you have hope, that it is possible—that one benefit of this situation, if there can be a benefit, if something good can come out of the situation—is a greater political awareness of both women and men in Syria about those natural rights? If so, that could be something that the people of Syria, let's say, would take from European democratic culture ...

Merei: Definitely.

JW: Is that desirable? Do you think that the situation could provide that, or in some way make it easier for that to happen; is that something that you're interested in?

Merei: For sure, since the revolution that started in 2011. Who are the people who started the revolution? They are people who think this way, people who are thinking about human rights, and freedom. But the problem is that 90% of these people have left Syria; the others are in jail, or they're dead. But these people really thought about changing Syria, not only politically, but also socially. All of us are thinking about how to change the constitution in Syria, how to give more rights not only to women, but also to men; no one has human rights in Syria.

JW: Is there a way that you imagine that happening, now that the revolution has collapsed?

Merei: We are feeling that every day. Since we left Syria, and also during the period that we were inside Syria, going to demonstrations, and saying *No* to the regime. But once you leave, you feel that you *cannot* go back; you reach a level of feeling your humanity, and you cannot go back there,

it's *impossible*. So if the situation stays as it is in Syria now, I think all the people who moved to Europe to be more free, they will not go back.

JW: Part of me has felt, since last fall, that the greatest and most effective thing that the West could do to combat what they call radical Islam would be to accept peaceful Muslims everywhere; that to decrease the apparent ideological space between the East and the West would be a huge blow to the Islamic radicals who want to widen that space in order to create a bigger and bigger breach; and this closing of the space that divides East and West could create a greater sense of opposition to the radical vision of apocalyptic holy war, and the cynically motivated radical fantasy that ISIS uses to attract and mobilize people to their cause. So I wonder about that: can the West open its borders to the East, to anybody who wants to come over peacefully; open its own democratic values to be as inclusive as possible ... But I know this is just like a dream, if it could ever happen, or something like it ever happen. There's a huge problem in Europe for democratic liberal humanism; the problem is a paradox; the paradox is that there's a limit to how much *intolerance* a tolerant society can tolerate; because it's not possible to be limitlessly tolerant of intolerance. And the limit is defined by the freedom of the individual; one person's freedom can't impinge on another person.

Merei: You know what, Joshua, there are also two other points, especially for people who come from Syria. First, when you feel that you are afraid in your country, and also you are afraid in any other place, you become aggressive. In Syria, we have the feeling we will be killed or jailed, so we have to escape; but when you come here and you feel that because you are Muslim, there is a possibility you will be thrown out, you become aggressive; or you are like jailing yourself inside yourself, or your room. The other thing is, when we talk about democracy and the democratic atmosphere in Europe, Syrian people have not known the meaning of democracy for 50 years. We have the presidential election only every 7 years; and we have one nominated person, who was Assad, and then Bashar [his son]. So you go to the election; and you have the ballot; and you have one circle that says yes, and is green, and another one that shows red. And you have to say yes or no, you don't have two names to choose from; and for sure you cannot say no, so you go to elections and say yes, or you stay at home. And in this case, people who go, 99% of them will say yes, and the result is that they have elected Bashar by 99%—so no one really understands the meaning of democracy.

JW: In other words, "Democracy is just the name for a rigged system." Syria is not the only place where people believe that!

Merei: What kind of democracy do we have in Syria, there is none. They say it is a republic, but it is not. So people need a lot of time to learn to understand their political rights.

JW: You clearly see yourself in a position now to maybe be an influence in some new way. You are about to start a creative collaboration with the choreographer, Sasha Waltz, with her dance company here in Berlin. Do you see this as an attempt to try to do political work creatively, imaginatively, in a new way?

Merei: I cannot talk on behalf of Sasha; but for myself, if I want to talk about what I am thinking about, then, ja, for sure I want to learn more about others, because it so important to let go of stereotypes, which are not real; you have to understand reality, how people really are, it is important. The other thing is that, sure, political issues are a part of the project that we want to do, if we want to build a bridge between the two cultures; and Sasha is really open, very smart, and very much interested in creating something very honest, to bring people together.

JW: And are you still involved with *Sayyidat Suria*, the feminist magazine you edit from Turkey?

Merei: Actually it is not a feminist magazine, it's a *women's* magazine

JW: Okay, but I was thinking of it as being political ...

Merei: It's not only political. We focus on women's issues in general in Syria; so we write about what is going on with women inside Syria, and also in the camps; and we spotlight the issues that have not been discussed before. Sometimes it's difficult because not all the women understand at the same level; but we give them information, and if they don't understand it today, they will understand tomorrow; so it's step by step.

JW: So after your collaboration with Sasha Waltz, what do you see yourself doing, what are your plans?

Merei: I'm continuing for sure with the magazine; but actually I have a project here now that I'm working on: it will be called the "Syrian-European Women's Initiative for Integration;" but it is still a proposal.

JW: Okay!

Merei: I'm waiting till I get residency so I can register the association, then I will move forward.

JW: You will try to get government funding.

Merei: For sure it will be some kind of governmental work. You know what, when I moved with my family from Homs, you know I was veiled, I understand the mentality of the veil; when we moved to another city in Syria, it was difficult; I can understand the problems that come with moving to a different community; you are afraid of being a member of it, how the others will deal with you. But I believe that people who move should have their initiatives. Do you accept me, or do I have to do something differently to be accepted—these questions need to be addressed; and we need to introduce ourselves and clarify who we are, and not just stay and wait for the other to come forward to us.

JW: You obviously are thinking about what needs to be done next week, or next month, or next year, or what can we do in two years; how far ahead do you think?

Merei: What I am thinking of doing now, the first step will need a year ...

JW: So you must be hopeful that you can start it, and do it; and I guess part of this question has to do with the degree to which you anticipate or perceive difficulties in putting into practice or into place these initiatives, and to what degree you see opportunity and support ...

Merei: That's right.

JW: And you must be more hopeful than pessimistic ...

Merei: When you feel that you want to change something, you don't want to live only for yourself,

you want to do something for others, you should be hopeful; without hope you cannot change anything. Hope, optimism, and patience.

JW: That seems like a good place to end; and also, tomorrow maybe, a good place to start.

GOING HOME AGAIN

Saturday, April 10, 2016

I'm flying home. Again. Waiting on Greifswalder Strasse for the M4 tram, I'm trying to read a six-foot Easy Jet ad that pictures a happy, beautiful, lively Middle Eastern-looking boy, about 10, long curly hair, doing a high five with a steward. *Mit denen macht mir Fliegen Spass*. That must mean something like, "With them, flying is fun." I'm not really sure, and my pocket dictionary is buried in my backpack, a few pounds heavier with some irresistible German books I've picked up along the way—new poetry by Jan Wagner; Ferdinand von Schirach's new play, *Terror*; a refugee integration manual in German, Arabic, and English, titled, *Wir schaffen das* ("We can do it"); *Pünktchen und Anton*, a colorful classic kids book by Erich Kästner that maybe I can read; and a volume of late poems by Nelly Sachs. Added to that is a half-wheel of dark *Wiener Brot* that weighs as much as all the books put together. These are the bourgeois objects of a kind no refugee on the fly could indulge by carrying. In 12 hours I'll be home. I imagine walking in the door of my house in DC Zoe, our miniature schnauzer, will spin around and around my ankles in spastic joy; Gus, 14, maybe taller and quickly gaining on me, will give me a big mock reluctant hug; and I'll hold my sweetheart in my arms again. I'll put down my bags. I'll unpack.

I close my eyes as the plane takes off. For no reason, I hear in my mind Tom Petty singing his song, "Refugee." I can feel it burrowing there as we level off, becoming what Germans call an *Ohrwurm* (an "earworm"), a catchy and tormenting tune.

*Listen it don't make no difference to me baby
Everybody's had to fight to be free
You see you don't have to live like a refugee
Now baby you don't have to live like a refugee*

Typical anthem-rock generalization, it sticks around because of Petty's voice—rough, edgy, unprofessional and thereby an acoustic image of the real, on its way to burnout. You can hear it straining when he sings with signature clenched throat. I can't help turning over the rhyme, the hidden craft of working the correspondence, not only between single words, but whole phrases: "to be free / like a refugee." The small genius of the lyric lies in how the phrases connect, not through positive attraction, but rather by virtue of a negation, an opposition that holds the idea in place: to be free, *not* like a refugee. The rhetorical negation wards off the schmaltz called up by the rhyme. Still, the simile belies the social conditions of its composition—safety, comfort, a freedom that Tom Petty, actually, never had to fight for; that he, like many Americans, has been privileged to take for granted.

So what am I constantly running from? Not having lost my home, my way of life, is it therefore somehow difficult to recognize, to fully inhabit?

Once on the plane, I pull out the smallest of the books I purchased, having to do with the crisis—*Wir schaffen das. / We can do it: 99 Tips and Facts for Immigrants and Locals*. The title, of course, echoes Merkel from last year; but isn't it also the propaganda booster graphically bursting out of Rosie the Riveter's mouth, circa 1943, as she pops a bicep? *We can do it!* And what's with the 99 theses, is that like a Martin Luther thing? Or is having one fewer than 100 somehow a grade less overwhelming? The two authors—a German and a Syrian from Aleppo—have, between the two of them, formal training in marketing and something called "visual communication"—there's probably some business algorithm about the efficacy and appeal of avoiding rounded out numerical figures. I

have to wonder, though, about the opening page. An epigraph from Aristotle reads, in German, Arabic, and English, "Hope is a wakening dream." The whole book is tri-lingual, which seems smart and tactically on target; but the English translation is not quite right: Hope is not *wakening*, but rather "a waking dream," the dream of waking consciousness that finds itself in the phenomenal world of edges, points, the resistance of gravity, the bombardment of particles. Above the quote is a silhouette of a human figure standing on one leg, with the other raised higher than the hipline and parallel to the arms splayed in a Y reaching out and up to the sky. The human figure is standing in the center of a barbed wire circle. It's as if a peace sign had raised its limbs up and out of its imprisoning circumference. Reading through the short book, I find these tips & facts for integration do seem more like theses implying an argument than instructions for living. I can't help reading between the lines and wondering about the ideologically screened point of view, as each positive tip or fact implies a corresponding negative assumption about the reader, who is, supposedly, a refugee. Perhaps I'm more sensitive after my meeting with Yasmine Merei, but I find myself immersed in reading the book that *hasn't* been written, only insinuated. A quick summary would include the following, where each tip or fact suggests something *unsaid* about the reader:

The assumption that, for every refugee, creating a new life depends on individual character and a determination not to dwell on the past; and that, as a refugee, you're prone to reside in the memory of a former life. That in your country, religion is controlled by the state; and that religious groups are at war with each other, which consumes you still with thoughts of revenge and hatred. That the administrative process in Germany will test you severely. You will be inclined to buck the rules; and that being scared and frustrated, you will slip easily into loops of negative thinking that can lead to aggression and depression. You will have difficulty learning German; and that this frustration, exacerbated by others, will lead you to follow hearsay and rumor. You will develop outsized expectations that will not be met, and you will become passive in your waiting. You still think Germans are Nazis; and that, in Germany, Jews are still considered pariah. You assume women do not and *should not* have equality; homosexuals and ethnic minorities *should* be discriminated against. Children are often exploited where you come from, and that's okay. You aren't punctual; you come from a place where nothing runs on time. You're a slacker at work; you come from a loose educational system that has not prepared you well for the workforce. In your country, teachers physically abuse children at school; children have no rights, anyway. You're used to living in squalor, and don't take care of your home. You come from a cash-based society with an insecure financial system. You don't pay your bills. You don't have much experience with physical mail. Where you come from, children play in street traffic. Cops are crooked. Seeking psychological help is shameful. You disrespect service people. You don't know what it means to have a general practitioner for a doctor. You come from a society without protection of free speech. You will be seduced in the marketplace by cut-rate retail, and this will lead you to spend past your means. In your homeland, men are free to sexually harass women. You come from a place without much variety in fashion, or the idea of fashion as a form of individual expression. Lying is common where you come from; haggling is the norm there. You are not really interested in local or national culture. You come from a place where people like to drop by unannounced. You are not concerned with ecological issues, and don't understand how recycling works. You throw dirty toilet paper in the trashcan, not the toilet. You have poor phone manners. You consider people who work for you to be your property. You are apt to follow stereotypes. You don't know how to live with pets. You will be prone to isolate yourself. You wouldn't choose to ride a bike.

My favorite juxtaposition is numbers 67 & 68:

67

Please be aware about some differences in the communication culture between your country and

Germany. For example in Germany expressions such as “Why not kill him?” are not perceived as humor but easily taken literally. This can cause misunderstandings.

68

Unfortunately, Germans are not world famous for having the best sense of humor. Don't get frustrated about this stereotype and try to relax and enjoy life anyway.

Where does one begin with that? A transatlantic flight is too short ...

Eight miles above the earth, number 28 gives me something to really think about.

28

Personal time management is a big challenge for many immigrants in Germany as Germans are known for their punctuality. In Germany it is very important to be in time.

The error (“in time”) is not grammatical, but idiomatic; it is like a signpost that I've never seen before. In Germany, it is very important to be *on time*. Being *on time* is an administrative issue, not an existential problem. To be *on time* is to be in synch with the social world, its expectations, customs, and demands—by definition known to all. To be *in time* is most simply to have arrived with adequate expediency; more complexly, to exist in continual relation, writes Martin Heidegger, with one's eventual non-existence, one's death. If the political context of this philosophy, of Heidegger's own dark collaborations with Nazism, is itself perniciously murderous, one hears in it, too, Hannah Arendt's intuition about the *figure* of the unbounded Jew's relation to time—is it possible that, in some metaphysical equation, to be a refugee from Syria now is to be made, in some sense, *momentarily* Jewish, forced from a native relation to one's land?(The paradox is too rich to leave unstated).

To be *in Time*, then, is to be not distracted by the mundanities that drive people to be *on time*. *In Time*, one is time-bound for the outer boundary, a no-place, the final territory, an ultimate inside without enclosures, borderlands, or the struggle for sovereignty that defines them. The human beings that have left their homes, their native lands, must now adapt to a foreign standard of life, a new social manner of being, *on time*. They have fled in time, *just in time*, to escape with their lives the destruction of their country. Now their lives are what they have; now they must reinvent a way of living. But to live at all meaningfully they must reestablish, in a new land, that more primary relation that knows no nation, of living, first, *in Time*. Yes, in Germany now, as elsewhere, it is important to be in time; for where else can one live, let alone make a life?

CODA

Having tried to move more deeply into the problem of the crisis, I see that I have committed a kind of extrapolation, if not a metaphysics. Strapped-in musing on temporality can only be a mild distraction from the *realpolitik*. I can start with the uncomfortable recognition that my questions to Yasmine Merei all stem from a presumption that Western liberal democracy expresses universal human values that everyone everywhere wants to adopt, if only they can rebel and riot and revolt effectively enough. This is obviously not true. Some refugees who maybe hoped for democratic reforms to the authoritarian political system in Syria are, perhaps, happy to have made it to Europe, where people feel compelled to argue for those values as inalienable rights; but even so, there may be a cultural divide wider than any do-gooder can bridge. The idea of incommensurate differences arises from political realities as well as other kinds of needs and desires. Still, liberal notions about relativism and tolerance have a limit just as the borders themselves de-limit a geopolitical space, what we call a nation. Who makes nations? Who made—one can put a point on it—the nations of the modern Middle East? The West, by helping to create the modern Middle East, is not *so far* outside the borders it created.

In his book on the crisis, *Against the Double Bind*, the philosopher, Slavoj Žižek, argues against sentimentalizing the notion of universal values, those mystical ties that we think connect us, that we continue to tell stories about in order to prop up our sense of ourselves as subjects of history. “One should therefore cut the link,” he writes, “between refugees and humanitarian sympathy, in which we ground our help to refugees in our compassion for their suffering. We should, rather, help them because it is our ethical duty to do so, because we cannot not do it if we want to remain decent people, but without any of the sentimentalism that breaks down the moment we realize that most of the refugees are *not* ‘people like us’ (not because they are foreigners, but because *we* ourselves are not ‘people like us’)”.

“By the simple exercise of our will we can exert a power for good practically unbounded.”—That’s Conrad’s Mr. Kurtz, rationalizing his intentions before *Heart of Darkness* swallows us completely in its riddling ambiguities, its twisting “ethical” path to Mr. Kurtz’s final resolve, “Exterminate all the brutes!”

It’s not yet the eve of the next US presidential election, and summer evenings will stretch out interminably between now and then. As capital cities in Europe face rising floodwaters, and calm seas float more refugees embarking from the northern coast of Libya (and with the Aegean passage shut), I wish I could tell who is wearing the mask of Mr. Kurtz. I keep touching my face to make sure there’s feeling there.

Washington, DC

June 7, 2016

About the Author

Joshua Weiner is the author of three books of poetry: *The World's Room* (2001), *From the Book of Giants* (2006), and *The Figure of a Man Being Swallowed by a Fish* (2013). He is also the editor of *At the Barriers: On the Poetry of Thom Gunn* (all from Chicago). He has been on the editorial staff of *Tikkun* magazine, where he serves as poetry editor, since the late 1980s. The recipient of the Witter Bynner Fellowship at the Library of Congress, a Whiting Writers' Award, and the Rome Prize from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, he held the 2013 Amy Lowell Poetry Traveling Scholarship, and he was Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellow in 2015. His poems and essays have appeared in *Best American Poetry*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The Nation*, *The American Scholar*, *Harvard Review*, *Poetry*, *AGNI*, *The New Republic*, *Brick*, and elsewhere. He is professor of English at the University of Maryland, and lives with his family in Washington DC.

www.joshuaweiner.com