

Spaces, Landscapes

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I was born in a tiny village of Wittgendorf in Central Germany, the region of Zeitz, in Saxony-Anhalt, which lies in the triangle between Saxony and Thuringen and has always been considered the poorest of the three lands. There, at the end of 1943, I came into this world, in my mother's ancient home. The whole village was protestant! The whole village? Back then, in the winter of 1943, the village consisted of seven women and one man who was too old and sick to be drafted. They plowed the fields with cows and grew potatoes, sugar beets from which wonderful syrup came, a little oats. The soil was not good enough for wheat. My grandfather farmed the demesne that belonged to his family since the 1700s. He had two kids. The son, my uncle Werner, was supposed to inherit the farm, and the daughter, my mother, was sent to highschool and then to an agriculture school, as everyone was one hundred percent certain that she would marry a local farmer. She was born in 1908. In the late 20s, she met my father, a lawyer from Koblenz who was four years her senior, he had studied in Bonn, which was a plus for lawyers back then, and was interested in history. In 1933, they were 25 and 29 respectively, eventually they had four kids, I was the youngest. As my father, who was drafted in 1939, did not believe in Hitler's victory, he left me back with my grandparents, where I spent the first six years of my life.

At first the agreement was that Saxony-Anhalt should be taken by the Americans, but later it passed to Russians. My grandfather was driven out

of his property with no court order, but luckily, he was not shot like many of his neighbors. In his farm, he received one room, where I lived with my grandparents, who were now forced to watch their land being worked by people who had no idea about this trade. For me, it was a time of pure bliss, as my grandparents would not let me catch on to how frustrated and depressed they were. They did not rage against their fate, and if they complained, then only to God who had allowed them to suffer such calamity. Not politics, not Hitler, not even Stalin was to blame, but God. Once I learned to walk, I marched over woods and fields with my grandfather, collecting whatever was edible; and I learned that almost everything tastes good if it is well prepared.

There were two books in our room, the Bible and a botanical manual written by my great-great-uncle: *Flora of Germany*. Those two books have remained my favorite to this day. The author of the botanical manual, August Garcke, was a famous botanist who became the director of the Berlin botanical garden after the post was vacated by the German Huguenot writer Adalbert von Chamisso, author of “Peter Schlemihl”. During his trips out of Berlin to these places near the Baltic, to Czech lands and Moravia, Northern Italy and Lorraine, he tirelessly and meticulously cataloged plants in the Linnaean system, describing them in such detail and precision that his rich linguistic expression even today seems astounding. Completely unremarkable roots and most regular grasses deserved as much of his attention as is usually reserved only for objects of love.

In short, the world into which I came upon my birth was small, strictly limited and not at all sophisticated, very modest, maybe even poor, but those two books – the Bible, the Book of Books, and Garcke’s work, truly provided a dimension that even imagination could not surpass in greatness, detail and beauty. Maybe this lesson to discover greatness in small things was also the most important to me, and much later, when I became interested in literature, that early impulse had life changing effect.

At six, I started school in Berlin. I began before the money reform, so at first my school meals came via the air bridge of the Allies. The food came from Sweden, it was called Swedish food, and to my ears it sounded biblical. The idea that my meals are coming on one of those planes that fly above us every day made me proud. It was a rare positive feeling that I experienced in my new home. The school itself was of little interest to

me. Who has once gone to the school of nature cannot be tempted by the ABCs and other kiddie stuff. Besides, I had no gentle feeling for the ruined landscape that I had to cross to get to school, and eventually I noticed how narrow the borders of my movements were. Everywhere there were shields: *You are leaving the American Sector*, and whoever disregarded them had to be aware of the risk of mines. I will never forget the hare that I spooked in a grove behind the grave of Kleist, it ran away from me and triggered a mine which exploded with a boom like I had never heard before. Nor had the hare, obviously. Besides, everyone was making fun of me because of my Saxon dialect. Only DDR bigshots spoke Saxon, a Saxon speaker was a stranger in the West.

In 1953, when I turned ten, one morning in the bathroom my father told me that Stalin died today, and now everything would be better. He provided no explanation. Why would everything be better? Why would Stalin's successors allow my old grandparents to leave, never mind returning their farm? There was no thinking of generosity, but there was hope that the atmosphere would become less tense, as we know, the hope was in vain.

I was thirteen when together with two friends from the Christian youth organization we hitchhiked to Brittany in France during the summer vacation. 150 marks for a month and a half. We ate whatever I could offer and make based on my Saxon experience, and also snails, mussels and sea-urchins. And we set our tent up wherever we found ourselves. Our tent was from the old army surplus, and one night a farmer tore it right from over our heads. Don't we know that our fathers used tents like this to camp in his land? We didn't know. We knew nothing. We were children of the enemy, the Boches. Guilty without guilt.

This memory impressed on me as much as the experience of the landscapes of the Atlantic coast, the freedom, the open fields, the careless life. But the thought that we rode around the country that over the past seventy years was three times attacked and bled by Germany never left me. Once I came back to school, I made my teachers finally tell us the truth, and my father eventually had to break his stubborn silence. Next year, we hitchhiked to Sardinia, near the Mediterranean.

When I graduated from highschool, in Berlin, and later in the rest of Germany the wall was erected and it stood until 1989.

We were trapped. Since you know more about the times until 1989 than I do, I don't have to tell about it in great detail. I trained to be a printer and bookseller, and since there were hardly any publishers in Berlin, I took the first chance I got to go abroad, to England. Back then the conditions to obtain employment in England were as complicated as they are probably about to become soon, after Brexit: one had to obtain the working permit and prove that one had enough funds to live on. The highest requirement was to no way take the job of any Englishman, Home Office was watchful about it like Argus. Since I could no way make a living of my job as a bookseller in a bookstore, I also had to work illegally, and it neatly coincided with my romantic notions of freedom. Among other jobs, I painted a musical club in Soho, owned by a Swiss Jew, and then three nights a week I worked there as a bartender, making more money than ever before. And, of course, I learned something about life. During days, my workplace was the International Book Department at Harrods in the aristocratic Knightsbridge, near Hyde Park, which back then still was the reliably beating heart of the slowly crumbling British Empire, and there I met strangers, people from different religion and culture. Back then, in 1961, Berlin was monocultural, i. e., our school and neighborhood consisted entirely of Germans, the friends of my parents were also all German. The dilapidated house on Camden High Street in London, where I lived, was owned by a Spanish lady, on its ground floor, a Greek tailor worked, he had plans to become rich from the international enterprise of making men's trousers, the cheap restaurant on the corner was owned by Indians, who had on their menu the spiciest chicken curry, the pub where I spent the nights was Irish (in general, the whole neighborhood was run by Irish and Cypriot gangs), the newsagent was Pakistani, and black folks from Jamaica and Trinidad were selling clothes and cheap jewelry at the market stalls. Since you were part of this ethnic mix, no one found fault with your slightly broken English. On Sunday mornings I enjoyed sitting at the terrace of the little Italian cafe and reading fat Sunday newspapers that mostly told about British matters. Europe only flashed in the margins. Europe was south of the Chanel, consisting primarily of France. Germany was typically mentioned only in a few words. When Cyril Connolly, the most famous literary critic of the day, comprised the list of one hundred best novels of the 20th century, he only included Kafka the Jew of Prague. But there were a lot of German

speakers in London, and soon I met them. Word was that I successfully sell all the translations from German that appear, so the majority of the emigrants started coming to my bookstore to meet this weirdo who cares about German literature in a place none other than London. They were mostly German and Austrian Jews. In Berlin around 1960, I didn't know a single Jew. My father sometimes had business with the Jewish community and knew their leaders, but there were no Jews in our school or among the boy scouts. Of course, we had a vague idea about what happened two decades ago, but the scale of the crime went over our heads as much as its effect on the German literature and the history of spirit, music and painting, and the German society in general. It was a horrible, but hazy part of our history. And now the people who escaped, or rather, who managed to escape, were standing in front of me, usually highly educated, pillars of the spirit, my superiors in every way, from whom I learned about the history of the German spirit more than I learned from my teachers throughout my school years. Anna Freud, daughter of Sigmund Freud, Elias Canetti, sir Ernst Gombrich, leader of the world-famous Warburg Institute of art studies, Lord Weidenfeld of Vienna, who ran a conservative publishing house along with Nigel Nicolson and was a member of the House of Lords, avant-garde publisher Marion Boyars of Berlin, who published Becket and Peter Weiss, Jakov Lind and the philosopher Alfred Sohn-Rethel, who thought of himself as a representative of the Frankfurt school, Michael Hamburger, English poet born in Berlin in 1924, who became one of the best English translators of the German literature from Hölderlin to Celan and Bobrowski, and his brother Paul Hamlyn, whose *Octopus* publishing house was a competitor to *Penguin's* pocketbooks.

All of them and plenty others not only spoke beautiful German and could recite by heart the whole great German poetry, but had such love for the German culture that made me flush. We had rushed through most of the childhood courses – first the American one with chewing gum, jeans and Hemingway; the French one with Camus, Sartre, film noir, Gauloises and chanson; the Italian one with neorealism, Pavese and Vittorini – and only then, the German one that we were supposed to cover in school. And back then, in London, this German culture suddenly rose before me alive and so rich, deep and beautiful that it made me dizzy. Daily, I directly felt what the Germans led by Hitler did and to what extent was our spirit

shaped by Jews. Today it may sound naive, but in 1960, to my twenty year old self, it was anything but. In the cafes around Hampstead Station, with coffee and cakes, as I listened to the life stories of murder and mayhem, loss and bitterness, humiliations and insults, I immediately conceived of Europe that was more or less a greatly enlarged Hampstead: a huge cafe where next to the Greek tailor, the Irish publican, my landlady Señora Garcia, there was room, too, for the Pakistani newsagent, the chicken curry cooking Indian, the Blacks from the market. All the images that I had of greatness, identity, historical consciousness, origin, homeland and love of homeland gave way to the idea of global society, in which Europe held a prominent, but not central place, because especially after meeting people from the Eastern Europe I became convinced that the marginal situation encourages greater tolerance. The idea that was much later developed by the three great Ks – Kundera, Kiš and Konrad – of the spiritual, not political idea of Central Europe had me as an enthusiastic forebearer. Central Europe with the Jewish renaissance in the center, Germany somewhere on the margins, way further than Ireland and Albania. I can't elaborate here on the crazy ideas that visited me then, anyway, I created strange plans of a new world, but especially new structure of Europe, and they were all born out of my uncertain cosmopolitan existence of the time and sounded so Utopian that I could only tell about them to my stunned drinking buddies in the pub, and the Irish especially looked at me uncomprehending: What do you have against Hitler? they asked.

But I also met the Polish emigrants who welcomed me in the famous Polish club with one hundred various multicolored vodkas, Yiddish speakers who had to admit that after Hitler's murderous marches, the attempt to elevate Yiddish to a language of European culture of its own rank is doomed, there were Romanian poets who published their work in the tiniest exile magazines – and plenty others. It had to be possible to collect all the Christian churches under one umbrella and still have room for Jews, so conclusions had to be drawn from the catastrophe of WWII. So far, only literature had been able to cross borders without a great trouble. I read all the Polish literature available in translations, actually, all the literature of the so-called Eastern Block, I read and read, I consumed books, and in order to do that without guilt, I found an editor's position in a publishing house in Munich, and then became a publisher, because I optimistically

believed that the publishing profession is the closest to my visions of the new Europe. I was forced to leave London, the metropolis where I felt so much at home, because my residence permit ran out. I tried to stay without it, but the police caught me and sent away. I did not want to come back to the split city of Berlin for a longer time.

It took until 1989, when what might be considered the epiphany of the idea of history ending finally happened: the Berlin Wall fell. The good news found me in a castle-like writers' home near Bratislava, where the various minorities of the Czechoslovakian writers' union quite amicably labored at their own thing and drank in unison. As the news arrived, we drank even more. I still remember how on my way home, when suddenly everything became nice and easy, and the customs officers stopped using their grave intimidating tone overnight, I started creating my plans of new Europe. I talked, for example, about marine Europe, meaning the Mediterranean, one of the cradles of cosmopolitanism with the great cities of Venice and Genoa, Barcelona, Thessaloniki and Alexandria across the sea, where all religions thrive and all languages are spoken, where Armenians, Lutherans, Orthodox Serbs and Greeks, Jews and Muslims live together in spite of history; about the Atlantic open to the West, reaching from Africa, past Portugal and Spain, France and England all the way to Iceland and providing innumerable millions of people with fish ever since the Early Middle Ages; and about the Baltic Sea, *Mare Balticum*, that connects Rostock and Danzig and Königsberg all the way to Klaipėda, Tallinn, Riga and St Petersburg, and finally Helsinki, Stockholm and Copenhagen. Before my eyes, the old roads rose again, like the amber road from here to Rome, the old trade roads of land and water; I dreamed that one might think about Europe of rivers; all those rivers – from Rhine and Donau to Volga – somewhere must decide which sea they desire to join, they are the great watery bands that hold Europe together, even though they have been watched over by the pedantic border guardians who desired to separate democratic fish from communist one. I at least, a brat from the village of Wittgendorf, was highly euphoric!

It will take a few years to fulfill the great freedom, but with good will and effective and non-corrupt organization, we will succeed: Europe will, like in the Renaissance, take step after step to become a working laboratory of enlightened reason, and the digital revolution that was just about starting

and observed with fear by some will provide the tolls that will lighten the load of the people on an essential scale. All that we learned from the anthropology of Arnold Gehlen about lightening the load through progress and technology, but never felt in reality, now will appear in life as tangible changes for the better. God knows, I'm not one of those optimists who allowed themselves to be blinded by euphorias of the philosophy of history, but the prospect that was pictured back then after 1989 seemed so tempting that it induced dreams. I can still see before me the fat headlines from the elite of the internet about drams of digital superbrains that will employ algorithms to manage the streams of good and people that flow over the united Europe. The fantastic French idea of the Encyclopedia, of making all data and all knowledge accessible, which should bring the humanity to happiness, suddenly seemed within reach. Were there any better dreams after the brief and calamitous 20th century with its wars and millions dead, turning the lands of Europe to bloodbaths? After the sad record of hectabombs and horrible means of destruction that the terrifying union of barbarianism and scientific rationality employed to destroy any hope of peaceful coexistence?

But in spite of every theory, the man is the only living creature who always does something instead – as put briefly by the German philosopher Odo Marquardt. He plans everything possible and then does the opposite. And even if we bear in mind that not always everything that we have planned is successful, and that sometimes a second and a third attempt is required to define worthy goals, we were still shocked to see how slowly the idea of united Europe took root and what unexpected difficulties arose in the attempts to replace the old privileges of nation-states with the common goals of Europe. Europe has become a centipede whose brain has failed to synchronize all of its legs. Why has it been and still is so hard to establish relationships of acknowledgment which would encourage us to limit our own usually egoistic interests? If acknowledgment means “comprehension of interdependence”, as Axel Honneth put it, it should have been possible to curb the pretenses of sovereignty for the sake of common European good? Social democracy, which was responsible for harmonizing the interests from Scandinavia through Germany and Italy to Austria, said goodbye and became a minority party. Now the right-wing or even radically right-wing parties feel responsible to provide the solutions, and

the civic majority has so far avoided them because their solutions are too simplistic. But that must not mean that the idea of social democracy is dead! “Everywhere, we encounter the phenomenal and structural, obvious and latent social democracy, one that is manifest as a party, and one that is more or less permanently established in the definitions, functions and procedures of contemporary statehood as such,” says writer Peter Sloterdijk.

The usual answer is: the world has become too fast and too complex to be able to formulate a single narrative, complexity has become the buzzword. What does that mean? The sociologist Armin Nassehi says: complexity means acknowledging that the situation is affected by more factors than we are able to control. The nation state helped tame complexity, the civic form of life created an illusion that the citizen is in charge of his or her life. The illusion of control lasted almost up to the beginning of the millennium. But now it is faltering. We talk about complexity as currently something is coming to an end. The structure of the institutions to which we have been used is feeling the pressure. After WWII the autarkic industrial state of the West for a while managed to project an image that the world may be controlled, the risks and conflicts may be limited. There have been well-organized fights between the capital and the workforce with strong labor and employers’ unions, there have been normal courses of life that have made life sort of quantifiable. There have been great institutes of insurance that in an economic and cultural sense manage to handle existential care quite deftly; all those are wonderful things that have helped reduce complexity.

Today and probably in the future, those things are probably already lost, and that’s why the populist parties are so frighteningly on the rise. Not responsible for suggesting essential solutions, they provide simplistic ones. America first, Hungary first, Italy first. Close borders, control markets. Everyone knows that this is no way to eliminate the problem. The best example is the climate crisis: if and only if all the global participants really offered a solution together could the humanity’s greatest crisis be averted. But not just America, Germany too is not sticking to its own rules. The country with the most sophisticated automobile technology has demonstrated that it is capable of bending those rules if it employs all the criminal means at its disposal. And my impression is that the refugee crisis was

very convenient for the government as it drew the attention away from this environmental scandal. As long as we can sell our cars, we tolerate damage to the environment.

Where are we headed? Where is Europe going with its flying sails? “Flying sails” sounds too poetic to measure the speed with which we are dragging ahead. Technology is off the leash, it is driving us all and dragging along those who would prefer a slower tempo, all those skeptics, melancholics and cautionary talkers about untamed progress, and it can only be leashed by common will. “When the farthest corner of the globe,” writes the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, “has been conquered technically and can be exploited economically: when any incident you like, in any place you like, at any time you like, becomes accessible as fast as you like: when, through TV ‘live coverage’, you can simultaneously ‘experience’ a battle in the Iraqi desert and an opera performance in Beijing: when, in the global digital network, time is nothing but speed, instantaneity, and simultaneity: when a winner in a reality TV show counts as the great man of the people: then, yes, still looming like a spectre over all this uproar are the questions: What is it for? Where are we going? What is to be done?”

The question is: how do we stop this and is it at all stoppable? Are the global conditions under which governments function today at all conducive to essential effect? Thus we arrive at the problem which makes large parts of Europe so very unsympathetic at the moment: refugees who come to us from poorer regions. Rhetorical figures used in almost all European countries not so much to describe the plight of the refugees but rather to charm it are so unbearable that one feels ashamed to be European. The Italian minister is glad when a refugee ship tips over and the people on it drown as then he doesn't need to care about them, the German minister of interior from Bavaria was proud that on his sixty-ninth birthday, exactly sixty-nine people were deported. Europe is building walls, as if it needs protection rather than those who are running to us. Not they are suffering the plight, but we, as we need to protect ourselves from them. *Die Zeit* reporter Volker Ulrich recently asked whether this could be the primal European fear of retribution: if they do to us at least half of what we did to them, then we're done for. Each crime committed by a refugee is front-page material, the message that 140 thousand refugees found work and have been paying social security over the past year is in the “miscellaneous” column. The

refugee crisis, according to the Bulgarian commentator Ivan Krastev, has become our September 11th.

But the refugee crisis remains just a pretext to cover up the principle problems of Europe. Europe relied too much on the USA and now stares wide-eyed at the loudmouth president who refuses to comply with the quietly made unwritten pacts. No one wants to talk to Putin. England wants to try its own luck alone. One rubs one's eyes upon learning that the German government has decided to establish stronger collaborations in Africa in the future. In the very first Charter of the united Europe, Robert Schumann wrote that our first interest must be helping the African states to establish a solid popular economy. For our own sake too, of course, but also because we are indebted to Africa after the centuries of colonialism. Damn bitter is the historic irony that the first national museum in Senegal was built not by the French and Europeans, but by the Chinese.

What about art? Never in Europe has there been so much art and never has it attracted so little attention. Even when it no longer looks like art, it can still be art, one can't escape it. Even the top storeys of the state are now speaking that art – however it is understood – may be the only thing capable of resisting the speed and decay. All squares, all larger buildings and in front of them are full of art, art market has long outgrown art criticism. No one knows why the medium-sized and mediocre painting by Gerhard Richter costs five times more than a very good painting from the Dutch golden age. The smart and unscrupulous art market is manipulating the prices of the most expensive artists so that the demand and the supply may be controlled. Any smart art salesperson will advise you to not sell your Andy Warhol today, because the market is flooded with them, it will be better in two years. So you are forced to keep the painting over your couch for another two years, even though you're already sick of it.

And literature? Based on apocalyptic numbers recently announced by the Börsenverein des Deutschen Buchhandels, indicating that the sales of books have lost eight million readers over the past decade, the efforts to find the reader are increased yet again. But the truth is bitter – less and less readers want to read a book. Most readers do not manage to focus for so long, their ability to focus lasts for maximum eight minutes per reading unit, after that it drops suddenly. The idea the reading a book is *obligatory* has become a nightmare to most people.

But of course, and thank God, those depressing data are no reason for a single publisher to stop trying another year. It means: more books in smaller print runs are published every year. The writer belongs to a minority which, as is proper in a cultured nation, is more or less dependent on the state: he or she lives not at all or only partly on income from book sales, but primarily on prizes, stipends, sponsorships, positions of writers supported by cities (as is usual in Germany) and similar.

As newspapers and magazines face great challenges and suffer a constant loss of the numbers of readers and advertisers, there is no hope of rescue from this direction. The best, long-established literary and culture magazines that we have in Germany – *Die Neue Rundschau*, *Der Merkur* or *Sinn und Form* – hardly ever exceed the print run of three thousand copies, and if you remember that half of these print runs goes to libraries and cultural institutes, you'll imagine the scale of the growing poverty.

In other words, the writer and his or her literature cost the state a lot of money which he or she, thank God, earns from our taxes. Such funny genres as poetry or essay, for which we have been famous since the time of German Romanticism, are facing extinction, even though the number of students keeps growing.

But it would be a mistake now to fall into cultural pessimism and talk like the nostalgic decorators of the past. It was definitely not better before. Positively speaking, we are experiencing a shift in the concept of culture, and we don't yet know what will become of it. I believe this is true about Europe as a whole. And each generation, including the coming one, must roll its own rock up a hill like Sisyphos of the Antiquity if it does not want the rock to roll over it. The totality of the world, the faith in its strength has crumbled. Will our new way of perception be melancholy, acedia, the black bile? And are such so-called politicians as Trump or openly fascist Turkey a symptom of the dusk of Europe, or just temporary signs of temporary crisis? Crisis, after all, is nothing more than transition, crisis is never constant, it is not durable. If this were only a crisis that overcame us because we were too quick and too resolute to liberate out of the pains and chains of the 20th century, then maybe something new will emerge. The question is, should we wait for the triumph of border-transgressing neoliberalism that would submit all and sundry to its own way of thinking, or will we manage to give a different meaning to our fragile existence on this ever more fragile planet,

which was not meant for ten billion people and is struggling to carry them even today? One thing is certain, if the latest Noah's Ark will be built at all, it will not be made of wood.

All that we do speaks against us. We poison air and pollute the seas, we torture the earth and the living things; we are essentially busy reducing the harm that we do with newly harmful means. No technologies or rationality can stop us, as we are digging our own grave. Europe does not deserve this. The story that began among the three seas surrounding the most mutable face of this earth, should not and may not run out after the first attempt to unite in solidarity. The citizens of Europe must withstand every attempt to silence that united voice. They are the sovereign. If Europe falls apart because of cynicism, boredom and political vanity, it will not get another chance under current global conditions.

Is it possible to imagine a movement of citizens that is not flush with nationalist sweat, that would again stand up to defend Europe not because of an ideological interest that is considered above all and not against the interests of others? A civil movement for the variety of the European culture, for its landscapes and spaces that transgress all borders? Anyway, the dissatisfaction, indifference and stubborn aggression are not a fertile ground for a new Renaissance.

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