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A Summer Evening in Berlin, July 2009

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A Summer Evening in Berlin, July 2009

The consequences of the fall of the Berlin wall, the fall of Communism and then in 1991 the outbreak of war in former Yugoslavia, which forced me to flee to Switzerland, preoccupy me, though it might sound absurd, at an existential level. It drives my writing and my life. I can hardly offer explanations, or write user guides on how to approach the present based on the reason and lessons of the past. I feel the shock, the wounded astonishment which lived in the eyes and hearts of my parents' generation and which was passed on to us. They lent us the war wounds of the twentieth century. I am no political commentator but like most of us an object of political delusion, a product of so-called humanitarian catastrophes. A woman fleeing. Borrowing German words, I write about the Other. The languageless.

There are more than 100 books about the wall, the reunification of the German nation, but a novel, a big novel is still waiting to happen, the writer there to explain reality.

That's the reason I'm going to take you on a little visit to Berlin.

It's mostly American tourists who board the tourist bus at Kurfürstendamm in the early evening heat. I buy 10 black and white souvenir postcards. Frozen moments. One is of Checkpoint Charlie, where in Friedrichstrasse on October 27th 1961, ten American and ten Soviet tanks stood facing each other, building the wall. By February only white rabbits were crossing the barbed wire to mate. Another postcard: a mother on the ladder with her young son waving across the wall in Friedrichstrasse. 400 people were shot in attempts flee. Kennedy said in 1963 that the wall was a thousand times better solution than war. November 10th 1989: the collapse of the wall within 45 minutes. 20,000 people had come, a mass of people hugging next to the ruins of the wall, rejoicing. Walking in the Zoological Gardens, finding the place where the socialist Karl Liebknecht was killed in 1918, close to the iron sculpture with the list of 46 names transported to Auschwitz, I take photos of the names of Jews on the asphalt of the Berlin sidewalk. In the evening at Kreuzberg, eating, drinking with Utz Rachowski, poet, imprisoned for the ownership of forbidden books – arrested and convicted to 27 months in prison for “subversive agitation” (duplicating and disseminating his own texts and those of Jürgen Fuchs, Wolf Biermann and Reiner Kunze). In 1980: denaturalization, exile to West Berlin. Now he lives in his Vogt home as an advisor to Stasi victims. 200 years ago it was Schiller's birthplace. When *Kabale und Liebe* was staged, whole rows of audiences fainted at once, entered into discussions that lasted into the early hours of the morning. Today that only happens talking about Michael Jackson's death.

Utz's father was a Pole armed for the SS. Günter Grass only admitted after he had won the Nobel Prize for literature that he succumbed to the Hitler illusion----back then. Today, Utz is somber, sobered. In his novel *Likvidation*, Imre Kertesz, the Hungarian Auschwitz survivor and Nobel Prize winner, wrote that the best way to survive a dictatorship is to continue your life in the next dictatorship. With the breakdown of the Hungarian dictator, Kertesz's hero killed himself. His hero's only homelands were literary texts.

Everything changed when no-one cared any more about what used to be, what's the point of living in the vacuum of a free market economy...dreamt freedom tastes different but how... Utz Rachowski says he feels like he is in the wrong place in the wrong country. We remember Socialist slogans, brainwashing, Mayakovsky funeral for 100,000 people, he was constantly observed by the KGB, the avant-garde split up, perhaps promoted says Utz..."Do you still have a persecution complex?" asks L, amazed. L is an American Germanist. "I don't understand that you can't accept the present but wander around in the past like a ghost." Utz looks at the table. His friend Sally explains to me that we Yugoslavians had it easy and then went mad. I should explain the war in a single sentence...have another drink. He was in Bosnia a few years ago, it's unimaginable how destroyed everything is, God-damned nationalism, how could the unimaginable happen, he asks whether it all depends on language, Serbo-Croatian, Bosnian, how is that we do not understand...you were free...!!!!???? I am silent...I think language problems are the last possible reason for starting a war and am ashamed how people again and again succeed in looking for sensible reasons for wars. L. is writing a book about the women of the ruins of Germany who had to rebuild both the land after the Second World War and their husbands once they were released from imprisonment in the USSR.

"Economy mistook itself for democracy," declaims Utz, and looks L. in the eyes as a representative of all of America's politics, all of her people. The men keep talking about the commercialization of the book market and the speculative greed of the West. We women try to move the conversation to love, yes love, "simple love," we say almost as one voice and Salli and Utz remember all their lost loves as if women were a type of pastime between political activities. I and L. get up and wobble on unsteady legs through the lively Kreuzberg streets, slightly tipsy. We realize that we hardly spoke about how we see the world through women's eyes.

We decided that it was like Christa Wolf's novel *Kassandra*. The role of women today is still to heal, warn, feed, kiss, to make love, somehow. It's outrageous. I talk about the beginning of the war in former Yugoslavia. The women were persecuted first, writers and journalists deemed to be witches, the ones who opposed the national delusion. Raping women as a systematic war method ... ethnic...cleanliness. Now we are in a united Europe, barricading itself up with bureaucratic statutes as a fortress against the refugees. Role model USA. The green card is coming soon.- Turkey's membership, a country where according to surveys every third woman is beaten by her husband, is controversial - both in the EU and in Turkey. Back to fundamentalism...it's the irrational foundations that seem so tempting, from Hegel to Marx from Hitler to Stalin, L. says we are both...feeling, reason and more. We laugh about that and more. "Look how proud I am of America now thanks to Obama's election."..... "God knows," I say and catch a glimpse of a woman in a headscarf wearing high-heeled shoes. "Tell them about how both my brothers terrorized their families since they returned from the war," L. says. 3.5 million American soldiers have post war traumatic syndrome and shell shock, her brother was in Iraq. I live in Switzerland as a refugee. Now we are talking about love, whether it is somehow learnable.... a long silence, actually we know everything and are always poverty stricken - a

direct result of this mass of unused knowledge. I get in a taxi and drive to Hotel Europa Park Inn. Japanese tourists are sitting outside and I cannot understand a single word, not even whether they are fighting or having a normal conversation. In my room a phone call, my mother worried – "don't go to America," she says, "it must be particularly hard to live there, I saw on the TV how the hurricanes sweep everything away and students go on shooting sprees and people fall out of windows like dolls." I say, "Mama, it's a miracle a miracle what a human being can go through and keep living, unimaginable, yes, Mama, I'll take care of myself," I say and stare into the darkness, writing, a couple of sentences for later, is this necessary I ask myself. But of course said Friedrich Hölderlin, who wrote to his brother in 1793: "but I love the immense, beautiful disposition of deteriorated people too. I love the generations of future centuries..... our grandchildren will be better than us, freedom must come one day, and virtue will flourish better in the holy warming light of freedom than under ice cold despotism...that is...I nurture seeds now in our time that will ripen in another." Before the Berlin bed makes me unconscious I read a line of Hölderlin: "It is also always a death to our silent blessedness when it is forced to become language". That was about the love of his life....and I...how to live the blessedness, writing? Despite everything, somewhere.

Translated by Zahra Mani