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Pearl of the Black Sea – Odessa, Capital of Humour, where the poets paint a picture of “their Europe”.

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(English translation by Caitlin Hahn)

Ladies and gentlemen,

This is my first time in Odessa. I've been to the Meridian Festival in Chernivtsi and Lviv before, but until now, Odessa felt mythical and far away. Only poetry, like that of Ilma Rakusa, for example, had brought me to this place.

Or the texts of the young poet Ilya Kaminsky, who was born in Odessa in 1977 and emigrated to the USA with his parents in 1993. Ilya Kaminsky is a cheerful man who laughs a lot, and his poems are declaimed in the near-sing-song style of Brodsky, which is fascinating, since his hearing abilities are limited and he's been reading lips since he was four years old. He remembers his hometown with childlike fascination and the sadness of one who has experienced loss.

A literature festival like this one – where many poets and writers will raise their voices to read from their own works over the next few days – releases a polyphonic echo into the world. We will read the different languages on each other's lips. In the press, I have read commentary on previous editions of this festival and found resounding praise. Odessa seems to have welcomed it with open arms. Our task as guest poets is to express our gratitude for these open arms by telling others about the storied city of Odessa, which opened itself to us, let us in, and listened to us. The poets and authors that live here show their goodness and tolerance by allowing strange voices to echo through these places that belong to their own words, and I bow before their collegiality.

I will take the liberty of saying a few words about the place to which I will take my impressions of Odessa when I leave. Bizarrely, like many places in Europe, it understands itself to be located “in the heart of Europe”. I live in a small city in southern Germany. It's called Bamberg, and it has 70,000 inhabitants, along with up to 3,500 refugees who will be sent back to their countries of origin once they have been deemed “safe”. These women, men, and children stand out in this cityscape. You need to picture Bamberg as a very homogeneous place when it comes to skin colour and income class. The city has money, there's public art, the residents buy tickets to the world-famous Bamberg Symphony, they like to eat well in the narrow streets of this UNESCO World Heritage city, and along with the large university, the excellent schools are a source of pride. Rent prices are high – it is expensive to live in the world of Franconia – there are nine breweries, and the city is flooded with around 6.3 million day-trippers between May and October. Here, temporarily, people who look totally different and clearly have difficult times behind them are seeking contact with the local population, which of course already includes many immigrants from Ukraine, Russia, Poland, Turkey, Italy, and other countries. Associations like

Freund statt Fremd (“friend not foreigner”) provide German language classes and help with bureaucratic matters, and numerous local aid initiatives are being formed. Nevertheless, Bamberg, like all of Germany, continues to view itself as something other than a city or nation of immigrants.

In Germany, we have not developed a sense for this and are thus culpable for failing to establish laws that would provide relief to the immigration process. Our relationship with foreigners – perhaps one could put it that way – is a difficult one. A significant part of Germany’s soul was betrayed, quite literally killed, in the Holocaust: six million Jews – among them millions of German Jews – members of the German people with intelligence, humour, humanity, and diversity.

While the United States of America must endure a president who vehemently refuses to acknowledge the de facto truth of climate change – which, by the way, notable German politicians to the right of the political spectrum do as well – there are some elephants in the room one did not dare name before the parliamentary elections. The refugee policy was one such elephant.

I am preoccupied with this animal because it is very patient, does not forget, and – this we have known since Disney’s Dumbo – erupts from too much irritation and wreaks havoc. In Germany, we are strangely sluggish and expectant when it comes to handling the refugee question. We’re still attempting to adjust and rethink our language. We remind each other that generalising our language leads to rapid de-personalisation: Refugees become little more than grey masses rather than individual destinies that matter to us, all because they represent global processes for which we are partly to blame. In a poem, I attempted to express this crisis of language with the word “Flüchtingsjedermann”, or Refugee John Doe.

As a poet, one is often asked how useful he or she thinks his or her work is. How much politics is in between the lines, how one is revealed through the language and for what purpose, how decisive one considers the fusion of politics and homeland to be. Poets are ultimately political in what they do. Nearly all run along the edges of their worlds, and some of these edges are reinforced with barbed wire or smoulder under one’s feet. In Germany, there is saturation and abundance, hardly anything is scarce. Sometimes, artistic pieces and texts can provoke grumbling among the public, but globally speaking, it’s no more than that. All art is negotiation, the artist negotiating with his or her environment. In Germany, the lack of censorship often seems to nourish the flowers of disinterest. People without a connection to art do not take much of the confrontation or analysis seriously. To them, there is not enough economic or directly political impetus behind it. But the world is a place of culture, not a football field or investment meeting. In Bamberg, I want to speak of Odessa as an example of a forward-looking place, a place that is not smooth and shiny, but resists and, if necessary, allows the changes of time. My former housemate described Odessa to me as Ukraine’s place of longing. As a place that understands the vastness of the sea and relishing life as its coordinates.

The language is Russian, of course, but it is also the language of the Odessans that is spoken here – this unique mix of Ukrainian, Russian, and Yiddish. Thus, an Odessan is certainly a person with a multifaceted soul, and in this we are similar. Me, the poet from Bavaria and Switzerland, and the authors, atmosphere, and voices from Odessa.

The Hungarian author and former president of the Akademie der Künste in Berlin, György Konrád, identified the “learned person” as “Europe’s coat of arms”. I quote: “Learning as negotiation means preserving, correcting, and continuing to develop everything that is available. The learned person is capable of remorse and manages to learn from his errors. He becomes familiar with his environment, his terrain, explores his possibilities, faces the consequences of his flaws, wants to achieve better results with minimal effort, fine-tunes his tools, instruments, means, and methods. As a subject that maintains self-control, he learns to have respect for others and for himself.”

These qualities and actions unite us most especially in the arts. In many places, literature is understood practically only as a source of knowledge, not an aesthetic, but actually it is both. Very old themes, the memory of wars and recent conflicts connect us, images in social networks report to us daily on events both here and there. Growing from them is literature that uses history as the essence and language as the artist. The next days will be a testament to these processes. I often think that neither economics nor politics can be the basis for European self-understanding, but rather, first and foremost, artistic expression in all its forms. In it, we mourn, feel, and confer joy, are desperate and show each other the world as a place of life, both friendly and hostile.

Perhaps I may now present to you my text “Vielmals” (Eng. “Many Times”) and the poetry film I commissioned Cindy Schmid to make. The background music you hear is a percussion piece by Philipp Scholz.

The depictions of the hard life on a Swiss farm in the decades when children were made into labourers and sold as serfs and farmhands are described here in the form of a personal portrait.

Many Times

Once, the farmer danced so wildly in the mud he startled the calf

Once, I took castor oil and lost the child

Once, she followed a man who didn’t want her at all

Once, I wanted to shake an apple off a tree and ten tumbled down on my head

Once, a soldier came and when I wanted to shake hands I saw he had none left

Once, the blood rushed to her head when she was made to dance the ländler with the county commissioner

Once, she urinated where she stood to warm her feet on the ice-cold pasture

Once, there was a cake buffet and the house smelled like memories, since she would not be baking any more cakes

Once, he called me by my sister’s name

Once, the farmer was so tired he fell asleep on top of my sister in the stable

Once, I told the teacher the things that happened to us on the farm

Once, she came to visit

Once, and never again

Once, I shook the beds out and the feathers whirled around like in a fairy tale

Once, she said she wanted to visit her brother in the city and the farmer said maybe

Once more, he said maybe

Once more, she asked

Once, I drew a big dog and hatched in its outlines, because it's important to stay unpredictable

Once, a letter came for my sister and the farmer read it to her in her room, the farmer read very slowly

Once, I held a hand in the dark, it was warm and soft

Once, the mother was with us and drank schnapps with the farmers

Once, their hands touched, she packed her bags right away and left without waiting for me

Once, I came home to an empty house, I had never been so happy

Once, a dog fell into the cesspit

Once, the hunter had to come, he drank schnapps too

Once, my sister said she could run like the wind

Once, before everybody was awake, the window was open and the wind blew in

Once, I stood in my nightgown, it was very early, and I saw how my sister ran like the wind

Once, I put milk, bread, schnapps on the table

Once, he touched me, said words I didn't understand, revealed secrets

All at once, I was and remained my sister, replaced one moment and one person with another

Once, I saw the firefly in the jar, became my sister once again

And then, once, my brother: the wind

FILM: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j8EuOSkz9JU>

From my hometown of Bamberg and its depiction as an intact place with a torn-up heart with regard to confronting its European sense of self to a dark place in Swiss history, indeed in the heart of western Europe.

Before I came to you, I spoke to my father, the poet Eugen Gomringer, who has a lecture on the sculptor Reinhard Roy on his desk and who has chosen the concept of “thinking in circles” to describe his works.

In the best case, this is exactly what happens at a festival: contemplating a connection, allowing a community to form, to create a circle that encompasses an idea and includes everyone to the same degree.

To all the visitors of this festival, who are hopefully current and future readers – since it is only by quietly reading the things that are heard at these events that linguistic beauty can be enriched by understanding – I wish you an experience of great togetherness. In the context of a festival, literature hopes to integrate and illuminate, to be a basis for negotiation, and a plane of communication.

I was told that the Odessans are known across Ukraine for their good sense of humour, that we even find ourselves in the “capital of humour”, and that the city sings a song describing itself as a “Pearl by the Sea” (Odessa zhemtschuzhina u morya). Humour and lovingness work well for days of shared conversations and exchanges.

To many amazing experiences!