

Fatherland by Christoph Ernst

In 1990, briefly after the wall had come down, Peter de Francia was invited to Berlin by the German academic exchange service to stay a few months as an artist in residence. I helped organize literary readings for the 'House of World Cultures', an institute dedicated to the presentation of non-European cultures.

It was at a reception after an opening, one of those stand-around jobs where people cling onto glasses and try to impersonate their less boring selves. My boss had asked me to be one of the hosts, so I bravely put steel in my smile and was tightrope walking between just enough drink to anaesthetise myself and reeling off the rail.

The apparently British gent with the full head of white hair didn't require any sedatives, though. His conflicting attire - blue workers jacket colliding with a silk scarf - had the understated edge of a Bohemian, while his posh accent indicated the joyful violation of class barriers. He looked at least as much out of place as I felt. A few sentences down the line it transpired that he was an artist himself, and we spoke about the crème of Berlin-Dada, Neue Sachlichkeit, George Grosz, John Heartfield and Wieland Herzfelde. Grosz and Heartfield were belated heroes of my youth. The stranger from abroad not only professed to admire Grosz, but also to have known the brothers Herzfelde, who, like Grosz, had been driven by the Nazis into exile.

He asked me how I felt in regards to the political transition, the atmosphere in the rump-pieces of the former German capitol, the two separate cities, which had lost their respective identities overnight and were now forced to reinvent themselves as one.

I liked the wording of his question. So I gave him an honest answer.

It was clear that the fall of the wall, that murderous wall which to me had seemed like a monstrous reminder of ghetto-walls the Germans had had built in Warsaw, Cracow, Lublin, Lodz and countless other places, meant the end of the post-war era. Berlin was still in a state of shock, but the paralysis would soon end. The whirl of joy, bliss and awe had already passed. Carpetbaggers and profiteers were getting ready to seize the spoils. Yet for the time being - since the unthinkable had just become reality - anything still seemed possible.

With the forgotten tram tracks resurfacing near the Reichstag the demons of the past crawled out from under the rubble and history suddenly became alive. Not just a mild nostalgic whiff, its stench, and the swastika painted on the gravestone of Bertold Brecht, the caption reading "Jewish pig", heralded burning refugee homes and the renewed agony of German shame.

The past is as much a museum of utopias as of future nightmares, though it usually is up to us to choose what we care to see, in places with fractured identities split open like Germany in 1990, it is not just a question of perception. Generosity, grace, beauty, hope, strength and all the other good stuff might be there, yet the echoes of triumphantly marching stupidity remain roaming at large, and with millions seeking salvation in consumerism, the vile of the past slogans may soon grow tempting again. As full mouthed promises of blooming landscapes are bound to dissolve in grimness, the losers having fooled themselves yet again are likely to swerve to the right and slaughter scapegoats.

So we stood there, musing clueless, sharing mixed feelings, trying to comprehend.

History doesn't repeat itself - just as a farce. Still, even a farce can be bloody, and who needs a bloody farce?

You want the terror of the state-security to end, the shooting at the border to stop, you want people to be free to go wherever they care to. But who needs unification? Did nationalism ever do the Germans any good - or anyone else?

Go to any small town in Poland, go to Belsen, Buchenwald or Neuengamme, see where your fatherland buried itself, cry about it, if you wish, say Kaddish, learn to pray in Russian for the millions of Soviet POWs starved to death, for their mothers, children and wives, for the tormented war-heroes like your father, who began killing at age of nineteen, for the countless nameless displaced, bombed out, uprooted, raped, mutilated and forgotten.

Care for a refill, a personal taste of the ashes of glory, a ride of Valkyrie through an orgy of destruction, to then afterwards squat and howl over mountains of dead?

As a German, and certainly not out of hatred for Germany, I'd rather decline. Peter could relate to my discomfort, and thus I could relate to him. Thanks to his curiosity, irony, and a peculiar quality I could not quite name then.

It seemed like a familiar form of forlornness, the forlornness of somebody who has burned too many bridges to make it home, a broken warrior maybe, or a veteran in exile.

Later, speaking about his origin - I learned that he was French - Peter stated that my "fellow countrymen" had driven him out of Brussels in 1940 and forced him to flee. He didn't go into details, just gave me a few dates and left it up to me to guess what it had cost him.

So that's it, I thought.

I also learned that he was born in the same year as my father.

Strangely or not so strangely, speaking of his youth and war experiences my old man chose a similarly laconic tone when referring to personal tragedies, a way of self-distancing, allowing to wrap the unspeakable in semantics without being mangled by the content.

With him it was the guilt of the survivor - paired with the lasting incredulity of having survived. I don't know if that's true for Peter. But I suppose certainly the war shaped him as much as it shaped my father, and although their biographies differ and I don't want to mix up cause and effect here, their vitae mirrored similar trials and traumata, and I suspect they were haunted by similar ghosts.

Later I saw this confirmed in Peters paintings, paintings to which George Grosz or Otto Dix could have been spiritual mentors, depictions of the human condition as an outcry for the remainder of humanness, or its swan song, the essence of the blues on canvas, as horrifying as aesthetic, and horrifying in the playful unveiling of the aesthetics of the horror.

The encounter with human abysses otherwise covered formed his later visions and concepts, defined how he reflected about himself and his brethren, turned him qua experience into an existentialist, at times seemingly cynical, so as to stave off any impulse of self-pity, while simultaneously making him furious when faced with what he perceived as injustice, indolence, oblivion and self-righteousness.

A character not always easy to stomach for those born after, those who've always enjoyed drinkable water coming out of the wall, but certainly rich in experience, at least according to the Chinese curse "*may you live through interesting times*" - and in a way a paradoxical blessing. As it was the very likeness of his invisible scars to those of his former enemy was my key access to him: the cord he struck, the familiar feature behind the often bitter wit, old man's pride and the reservoir of his resilience - the compassion, curiosity and warmth.

I asked him, if he could walk. He laughed. What do you mean? Of course I can walk. Fine, I said. If you want to, I'll show you Berlin.

That's how we met.