Stefani Engelstein: HOW TO WRITE AS AN OUTSIDER ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS TO BE GERMAN

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First as a student of comparative literature with a focus on German and then as a professor of German Studies, I've been traveling back and forth to Germany for three decades, almost exactly the age of the reunified German state. I have stayed for weeks, for months, or for more than a year at a time. I have lived in Leipzig, in Cologne, and in Munich, but I have spent by far the most time in Berlin, a place that I have come to consider a second home. Throughout that time, Germany has changed enormously, both demographically and attitudinally. In relation to diversity in general and in its relationship to Jews.

It is 1992, the gates of the Weißensee Jewish Cemetery are locked. In the window of the gatekeeper's booth is a hand-written note instructing visitors to ring the bell of an apartment across the street. In exchange for a passport, the gatekeeper brings the heavy metal key down from his home and lets us in. A small portion of the cemetery near the gate has been in use by East Berlin's Jewish community. Behind this patch, a vast forest has sprung up within the walls. We wander alone among a strange undergrowth of aging gravestones and nettles. The paths have disappeared. Is the cemetery haunted by those who were buried here or by those who weren't? Placing pebbles at a relative's or friend's grave is meant as a sign that the buried have not been forgotten. And yet now those pebbles, left undisturbed for half a century and covered in cobwebs, have become a stinging last trace of the unnamed visitors who placed them here—visitors who, in many cases, faced a violent death without burial or gravestone. Thirty years have passed since this visit. Today, in 2021, the cemetery has regular open hours and steady foot traffic. The forest remains, but it gives the impression of tending. Paths between the graves have been cleared. The German Army cares for the section laid with graves of Jewish soldiers who fell in World War I. And the many new graves mark the life of a new and different Jewish community.

German views on their history and their future have evolved. During this time, I have been an observer and a conversationalist. I like to talk and to listen. I strike up conversations with people at bus stops and in train stations, in bars, in cafés, and in universities. I invite near-strangers to lunch. And I haunt cemeteries, Jewish and non-Jewish, wherever I travel. But what do I *know* as a result? Do my experiences allow me to say something about how a country that is not mine thinks about its identity? Do they allow me to say something about those in this society who are not me, those who exist on the ever-shifting margins of German identity in ways that I do and do not share?

Professionally, I am an interpreter of texts. I write scholarly books and articles on literature and on the history of science, often together. The period that I investigate stretches from the Age of Goethe into the twentieth century. I do research in archives, although

increasingly my sources are digitalized and available online. I am not a social scientist. I don't put polls in the field. What is the status of the feeling I have for a country from my own lived experience? Is that knowledge? What is the evidentiary value of a memory? Is it something I can write about, and if so, how?

I collect experiences like postcards. Like one used to collect postcards, once upon a time.

It is 1992 in Leipzig. The Jewish community that shows up at the last remaining synagogue for the High Holidays amounts to fewer than 30 members, all over 60 years old. To find out the address of the synagogue, which has no street-facing windows and no sign, you have to persuade an employee at the city information center that you have a legitimate reason for asking.

It is 2000 in Cologne, the city of Germany's oldest Jewish community, and I am welcomed to a Passover Seder at a synagogue that has been re-built and re-opened since 1959. I also visit an archeological site: a Mikvah, a Jewish ritual bath built in the eighth century. The first mention of Jews in Cologne dates back to the fourth century.

It is 2003 in Berlin and I am summarily called to account by a stranger for Israeli politics. A country I visited once, as a child, for two weeks and where I cannot vote. In what worldwide conspiracy has she imagined that I participate? And yet, it is true that Israel claims to act in my name too. What kind of responsibility do I therefore have and who is allowed to invoke it?

It is 2014 in Berlin and I am assured—not for the first time—that Christmas is not a Christian holiday, but is universally celebrated in Germany regardless of one's religious background or identity. I have never seen a woman in a headscarf at a Christmas Market.

It is 2018, and a fleeting acquaintance defends the decision of the Hessian Court (upheld in 2020 at the federal level) that bars women wearing headscarves from representing the state in legal proceedings, even as interns. The head coverings would undermine the appearance of impartiality required to inspire trust in state institutions. I explain that in this extremely diverse country, a justice system composed only of people who look like my conversation partner himself radically fails to inspire me with trust in its courts' impartiality. He remains polite but unpersuaded. He understands his own appearance as an absence of difference rather than as the presence of a particular identity.

In 2021, I listen to Deutschlandfunk. A guest is introduced as *Jewish*. Instead of as *of Jewish background*. In my experience, this is a first. The pleasure I feel is palpable. I am thrilled to visit a *winter market* and to be greeted in my multiethnic gym by a sign celebrating a *beautiful wintertime* instead of a Merry Christmas. Both are also firsts. Such little things. Such huge things. But I also visit a Christmas market. Where else in Berlin will I find the potato pancakes that are traditional for Hanukah? First, I try Gendarmenmarkt—where I stand in a long line to have my Covid vaccination checked—but, alas, no Kartoffelpuffer this year. So, the following week at a conference in Bonn, my friendly host brings me to his favorite Reibekuchen stand at the local Christmas market. They are delicious.

The same year, a friend tells me about precautions she takes before leaving the Berlin city limits to visit Brandenburg. Her German is excellent. She is not wearing a headscarf. It is also not her skin color that is responsible for potential conflict. It is attitudes towards her skin color on the part of Bandenburgians that are the problem.

It is not only Germany that has changed drastically over the past thirty years. My own country has changed as well, and I have changed too. The ways that I have changed are not independent from the ways that Germany or the US have changed, but intertwined with my experiences of them. Does that make my interpretations even more partial? What would it mean *not* to be partial? To be *complete*? Is that what a judge should strive for in judging? What scholars should strive for as they formulate critical perspectives on the world? Or is it our very partiality, our wounded edges, that allow us to make sense of the world, and to convey it?

As I embark on my current project, I embrace the fragmentary nature of experience as a valuable kind of knowledge, one that differs from the knowledge gained from sociological and historical scholarship. In *Reflections from Germany on Diversity and Violent Pasts: An Essay in Six Cemeteries*, my goal is to use memories as stepping stones for reflections on how society imagines itself, where boundaries are set, and how inclusion and exclusion function. What I write is, I hope, not just a memoir, but an exploration of how the social fabric in Germany is expressed. The project is also, necessarily, an account of my ever-developing perception of my own changing country. Recently, in the United States, there has been talk of using German *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* regarding the Holocaust as a model for facing our own history of slavery. While each of these national crimes is unique, there is in both cases a need to face the past and to recognize the way it continues to inhabit the present. My position in these two constellations is distinct. Since my vantage point in each country is partly derived from my knowledge of the other, *Reflections from Germany* will necessarily also set up an interplay of reflections between the two. What will emerge from this interplay remains to be seen.

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