



LITERATURVERLAG DROSCHL

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Iris Hanika

Wie der Müll geordnet wird

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Supported by New Books in German

Sample Translation Page 129 – 144

One

outside

Hullabaloo at the walls of Jericho. On 10 March, 1990 Berlin is a divided city, though less visibly so than before; the border is now a mental one, but everyone knows where it is because it's in everyone's minds. In the East, the final week of five months of anarchy is beginning, in the West there's gold rush in the air; in the East they're rejoicing at the possibilities of freedom, in the West at the freedom of possibilities; in the East they're proceeding towards free elections in a week's time, in the West they have free choice. Berlin still lies in the middle of the GDR. The city is jam-packed with people of all classes and nationalities trying their luck, their long fingers rummaging ever further into the gigantic claim. The carbuncle in the flesh of socialism has burst, and the pus is running over the whole country. We'll buy that now, say those in the West, while those in the East still believe they could now buy anything. Buy and let buy! Or 'suum cuique', as Berliners themselves say, have always said, and always will: each to his own. Everything still seems possible, the mood is still good. The weather is too. The eyes of the world are on Berlin and the two reuniting Germanies are in the process of setting a world record for the longest kiss. Their lips are already parched but they won't let go of each other, they even use their teeth to help – they're assured of victory, but that's beside the point.

Dorothea

On 10 March, 1990, a Saturday, Dorothea Dreifinger arrived at Berlin's Tegel Airport on a Swissair flight from Zurich. She was here to stay. A week earlier she had flown from San



Francisco to Zurich, travelling on to her parents' house in Constance to get used to Germany again; she had left five years previously to teach German Studies at Berkeley while writing up her PhD thesis on the Baroque dramatist Johann Christian Hallmann.

Admittedly, on the West coast of America she couldn't have been further – and not just geographically – from the libraries in Breslau and Wolfenbüttel that were so important for her research area, Silesian baroque literature, but personal reasons (the break-up of a relationship in grand style) had kept her from her work so much that she had feared she would be unable to finish her thesis while those reasons were near at hand. She had needed the distance so badly that, in the interim, she had come back to Germany only once, to defend her thesis and sit the remaining exams. Far from being upset by this, her parents had welcomed the chance to travel to California to visit their daughter.

outside

In Berlin the sun was shining and it was warm. In April it would cool down again, but punctually on 1 May the temperatures would bring a foretaste of August. Thereafter, the ice saints would bestow the usual brief cold snap, the Central European summer would be greeted all the more eagerly, and, in this year of Our Lord 1990, it was to be a burning hot one.

But on this Saturday in March that was still far off, and outside, here on the city's northern edge, there were no visible signs of the cataclysm which had taken place in its centre a few months before. The airfield lay peacefully beneath the expanse of clear, Prussian blue sky, and people were cheerfully dragging and wheeling bags and cases into and out of the small, circular terminal building, some in joyful anticipation of the journey, others glad to be at their destination. Dorothea was the one exception.

Dorothea

She stood at the taxi rank of Tegel Airport and could have puked. Only yesterday she'd been sitting over Kaffee, Kuchen, cognac in the conservatory of her parents' house, being brought up to date with the trials and tribulations of various family members; today all she saw was the bad-tempered mugs of German taxi drivers. Not one looked trustworthy and she decided she'd rather take the bus. But just as she staggered up, swaying under the weight of her bags and dragging a gigantic case into the bargain, the bus driver shut the doors and wouldn't open them again. As they went by, the faces gaped at her as if she were stupid. So she took a taxi after all, looked pointedly past the driver as she got in, shrank into the back right-hand corner, said '30 Handjerystrasse', peered out of the window and still felt like puking.



She was horrified by the endless rows of houses, and the cute motorway bridges stretching daintily on their little stilts. Everything appeared tiny, plus it was all so clean, like on a model railway set. The old houses were great blocks, one after the other, but never more than four storeys high, the newer houses had facades like empty trays from chocolate boxes, with people crammed inside, cheek by jowl. To be sure, Berlin was the epicentre of events of worldwide historical significance, and certainly very lively next to Constance, but compared with San Francisco, Los Angeles, New York? Compared with the far end of the world? (For at the far end of the world, the end of the world was far off – the earth shook, but by the time it was on the TV news, the ground was steady beneath your feet once more; a week later everyone was wearing the T-shirt of the geological event. But here – at this end of the world there was nothing to hold on to!)

We have now landed in Berlin.

Dorothea writes a letter

Berlin, 12 March, 1990

Dear Evelyn

I have now landed in this roiling mire of earthly desires, this Columbus' Egg of power, now sent mad by reasonable suggestions. Berlin is no longer a formidable imperial matron, nor a young flapper; neither good German mother nor faded courtesan. Berlin has degenerated into a bourgeois housewife with pretensions to class, an outdated fitted kitchen aspiring to space-age chic. I arrived the day before yesterday, and today I could happily leave again without a backward glance.

Berlin, Berlin, why did it have to be Berlin of all places? AAARGH! I could just PUKE! It's a good thing my field is Baroque literature, at least it inspires me to wild images – otherwise I'd just puke all the time and really would leave again. But I'm regarding the matter *quasi* scientifically *qua* participatory observation, and desperately trying to get something out of being here. I'm right in the middle of the world's stage after all. The nation is raging like a hound off the leash, and once again it has this city firmly between its teeth.

Anyways, I'll tell you everything, right from the beginning, otherwise you won't be able to imagine it at all, this slaughterhouse, madhouse, witches' house – you thrice blessed, in the loveliest city, at the other end of the world (I mustn't even think of it!). Be glad at least that you married Ben, instead of leaving him like I did Josh – leave him, I mean – instead of dragging him to the altar and cashing in my ticket to the brave new world. It would have been OK until the big earthquake, and I'd rather die when the earth rumbles instead of dying here, when there are rumbles of war. No, I mustn't tempt fate.



Right. It's now Monday evening; I've been here since Saturday afternoon and so much has happened already – or then again perhaps nothing – but I want to tell you everything, *ab incipio*. Markus is living in Berlin as well now! His parents told me when I was staying with mine; I haven't phoned him yet though.

I arrived at two on Saturday afternoon and immediately I could have puked. No, *should* have! I should have puked but instead I burst into tears. There I was, just about to get on to the bus from the airport into the city and the driver shut the door right in my face! No way would a Californian bus driver dream of doing such a thing. And the taxi driver was the same sort. Luckily I had my Walkman in my bag – because of the flight with the start in Zurich it was in my hand luggage – and I slapped the headphones on and listened to the Dead Kennedys. 'California über alles'. Exactly.

SHIT! Shit. Shit.

Then I arrived at Annemarie's, and luckily she went off 'on holiday' early this morning, to Cuba. On holiday from what, and with what means, I'd love to know, but for the moment she's away, which is a good thing because she's gotten so German now, and finds everything madly exciting and is trying to get a job in television in the GDR, honestly.

But of course I'm happy that I've got somewhere to live for the time being, even if here I do have to look after a fat tomcat and buy an answerphone, as Annemarie's just gave up the ghost, how incredibly convenient. Annemarie is just the same as ever. But I can take my time looking for a flat, though by all accounts that's a Herculean task because so many people have come over from the GDR in the last year, and besides the place is full of Poles who are somehow of German origin and so are allowed to 'emigrate' here (people from the GDR are called 'transmigrants') and anyway it's always been dreadfully hard to find a flat, and students are sleeping rough and anyway everything is so dreadfully hard but so exciting as well!!! So extraordinarily exciting somehow, when you're directly involved in world history somehow. Annemarie's told me all about it. She still chatters on in exactly the same way as she did years ago when we were taking our Abitur.

At three o'clock I was at Annemarie's in Friedenau, at four I'd showered and poured myself a cup of coffee, and at five I was... where do you think?... hm? ...You'll never guess. AT THE BRANDENBURG GATE! Oh! Oh! How absolutely lovely. Annemarie gabbled on the whole time, about 'the symbol of the divided Germany and gateway to national unity'. To me it looked more like a meeting place for the international rabble that sells little pieces of the wall there, and has the cheek to sell GDR uniforms as well; the stuff's going like hot cakes. A hammering like in a quarry, they stand there in their hundreds – 'wall woodpeckers' they call themselves – knocking bits no bigger than the palm of your hand out of one of the two structures visible from the moon



(soon there'll be only one), gouging holes in the wall at the Brandenburg Gate where it's two layers thick, and then – they flog the 'historical souvenirs' at exorbitant prices. I mean, long ago, when they used an old castle or something as a quarry to build roads or new houses, that was one thing, but this is systematic homage to the law of entropy. Little pieces of the wall in plastic resin, on wood, with some sort of arcane 'certificate', peddled by people with bad teeth and skin diseases as if they'd just crawled out of a bunker. Oh, Annemarie in her relentless desire to be affirming told me she thinks it's super, 'there's something really honest about it, I mean, like, at long last the people can earn something for themselves.' Yeah, sure.

The reason Annemarie finds all this so great is because she's already managed to sell three short reports about it to the radio, and now she wants to make a 'feature' about it as well. 'Feature the future', that's what I'd say, rather than this pitiless profiteering from something when no one knows where it will lead.

We walked as far as Potsdamer Platz, wasteland, and all the way along the wall it was full of these people. Sure, for someone who until now has lived in the shadow of the wall, who could be certain that it was the end of the world, immovable and plain to see (where do you still have that nowadays, a clearly visible border?), for them it's really exciting of course, for them the whole world is shifting, and with it apparently their view of the world. Everything's turning, everything's moving. But why are people like Annemarie so overjoyed? After all, we're the same age and for her, too, THE GERMAN QUESTION must have been so much CDU-claptrap – she couldn't give two hoots about all that nonsense, any more than you or I did. Our nearest borders were always the ones with France and Switzerland, after all. But you know all this, dear Evelyn. I don't have to explain it all to you; we've spoken about it often enough in recent months. I miss you already now.

And in the evening I met a few of Annemarie's friends ("welcome reception", they finally let me get to bed at three in the morning), real provincials who think they've been transformed into urban sophisticates all of a sudden just because they're living in Berlin, and aren't above coming out with meaningless phrases like 'metropolitan ambience' or 'urban outlook' when they talk about Berlin. They want a capital again (and probably their old Kaiser Wilhelm back) and every couple of sentences they qualify their stupid kitsch notions of the future (one even prattled something about a 'realisable utopia', I could have screamed!) with 'like in the twenties'. Cultural life 'like in the twenties', clash of economy and politics 'like in the twenties', architectural tours de force 'like in the twenties' and so on. The fools. They imagine the twenties as some sort of mega cabaret show, and think the place was swarming with divinely blessed heroes of cultural endeavour, instead of unemployed proles, bashing one another's heads in. One long street battle, the twenties. And no one thinks about what the logical conclusion was. It occurs to me,



incidentally, that these Germans always delude themselves that the most modern, the most advanced state of humanity has been reached when everything is once more just as it was in some hazy earlier time – Germania, the twenties, bullshit. I can't even eat enough for all the puking I'd like to do.

And you, dear Evelyn, have told me three thousand times that I should weigh up all I'm sacrificing in order to get on in my career. I'm almost ashamed of myself, feel I'm no different from Annemarie and her friends who are probably rejoicing at the 'Greater Germany' crap only because they imagine they'll all get some job in some TV- and radio-station, and who would sell their own grandmother for something even remotely resembling a career or at least steady employment, for a tiny scrap of West German luck, a mere crumb of the big cake...

I've tired myself out with writing. More soon. I'll give Markus a ring. Give my love to Ben. And Roselynn and Kenneth and Kimberley and of course 'the one and only Mr Shoemaker'! And Josh too, if you should run into him....No. No soppy stuff.

With hugs and kisses – I miss you very much.

Dorothea.

PS I'm to say hi from Annemarie; she gave me my instructions before she waltzed off to Havana. So long!

outside

At this end of the world, the end of the world was not an ocean; people didn't look over towards Asia. Here the end of the world had been a solid, 3 m 60 cm high wall, that was it. You could, admittedly, look over it and see that beyond the end of the world, it looked exactly the same as before it, yet it was no longer the world, it was its end, and that's a fact.

There was now no longer a wall though, the world no longer had an end, simply went on and on, having become indistinguishable from life itself. Berlin suddenly had a place on the map but was still filled with the fear of slipping off it. However, 'think global, act local' says the money here now, as it does everywhere, and knocks a lot of nails in to protect the city against slipping.

*Dorothea
Frau Klopper*

On Tuesday morning Dorothea went to her future place of work, the Institute for German Literature Between the Ages at the Freie Universität Berlin, but found only the secretary, Frau Klopper, who was surrounded by biscuit plates, soft toys and coffee cups, and doing a crossword.

'I'm at a loose end just now, the bigwigs are all on holiday,' she said in Dorothea's astonished face, giving a superior, motherly smile.



‘But the semester starts in three weeks,’ Dorothea rejoined, like an uncomprehending daughter. At that, Frau Klopper spoke soothingly, calmly, still smiling: ‘Oh, there’s still plenty of time. Classes don’t get going until 16 April and in our Faculty they always start a week later anyway; the intermediate exams are held in the first week, you see.’

‘Ah I see.’ Dorothy feigned understanding.

Frau Klopper was still smiling in a welcoming manner, and took definitive control of the conversation. ‘Do you happen to know what Wallenstein’s astrologer was called? Four letters. I can never remember.’

‘Me neither.’

‘But it’s your field.’

‘True. Let me think.’

‘Alternatively, you could perhaps look it up. Herr Professor Stiller always used to say...’

‘He was called Seni.’

‘Oh yes, that’s it. It’s coming back to me now. S-e-n-i.’

‘Tell me, Frau Klopper, could I just have a look at my office?’ Dorothea asked, in vain.

‘There’s a small problem there. Herr Professor Stiller is now retired, and really his room should go to Herr Professor Mann because he’s directing the institute now, but the room is so dark and Herr Professor Mann’s not back yet, and we wanted to wait and see whether he mightn’t prefer the lighter room where Herr Professor Stiller’s assistant sat – she’s not here any more either – and so we don’t yet know who’s to have which room now, but once Herr Professor Mann has made up his mind, the redecorating will begin immediately,’ answered Frau Klopper, observing Dorothea closely. But the latter remained friendly, too much hassle in recent days, she was tired, and anyway she didn’t want to sour her relationship with Frau Klopper this early.

‘But might I at least just have a look at the two rooms?’

‘Please do. Go ahead.’

This one’s the dark room. The walls are lined with books right up to the ceiling. On the floor stand open crates filled with books. On the desk lie piles of books and journals, and also the mail. On the window ledge two succulent plants are wasting away on pale brown saucers with a dark brown rim. The air here is fusty from a fulfilled life of scholarship, many years’ worth of stale professorial sweat. Outside the window stands a tree, which makes the room so dark.

‘Herr Professor Stiller never smoked,’ Frau Klopper volunteered, ‘so the walls have barely yellowed. I don’t smoke either. None of us here smokes. Do you smoke?’

‘I smoke.’

‘You do?’

‘Occasionally. When I’m working.’



This one's the light room. On the wall are empty bookshelves. In front of it a desk and a chair. Beside the door stand two cartons containing old copies of the Institute's journal *In medias tempora. Provisional Proceedings*' and a coffee machine.

'Frau Dr Schmidt left us that.'

'Where is she now?'

'She has a child now. Her husband's in the Senate. Are you married too, Frau Dr Dreifinger?'

Butt out!

The dark room is quieter. The light one is next to the bathroom and toilet.

'The bathroom couldn't be altered. The state conservation officer saw to that,' explained Frau Klopper.

'How come? Does the house have a preservation order on it?'

'In part. The façade and the bathroom. Typical of a late 1920s Dahlem villa. And that's coming back into vogue.'

You said it.

The air is good in Dahlem. She could cycle here from Annemarie's flat. In the garden, a swimming pool, half-filled with greenish water, is peacefully stagnating. That big building behind the garden fence, what is that?

'That's the Yanks' headquarters. At five o' clock they sound the retreat. On the dot, you could set your watch by them. That'll be gone soon I expect. We won't be needing Yanks any more, now we're reuniting.'

Well, who knows.

outside
Dorothea

It's peaceful in Dahlem. Three sorts of people live in this part of the city: the well-to-do, students, Americans. Everything is ship-shape, and not only is there a timetable for the buses, it's also observed.

In the electrical shop in Forum Steglitz, Dorothea said 'I'd like an answerphone, please.'

'What kind?' the sales assistant asked.

'Any kind. Just one that works.'

'With postal accreditation or without?'

Is that important?'

'How much did you want to spend?'

'How much do these things cost?'

'That depends on whether you want a postal accreditation or not.'

'Does that make a difference?'



'Yes,' said the salesman. 'Without is cheaper.'

'Then without,' said Dorothea.

At the supermarket the shopping trolleys were chained together so that none could escape. Everyone always gathered in front of the same shelves. A few GDR citizens, recognisable from their cheap clothing and brightly patterned nylon shopping bags, thought they were in the Museum of Ethnology and were carefully studying the thirty varieties of toothpaste on sale here. Two Poles bought a hundred and twenty cans of beer. There was an awkward silence at the checkout as the cashier counted 4.76 DM for sausage and rolls from the purse of an old age pensioner who was virtually blind.

Dorothea was heavily laden on her way home. Fearing to be caught out by the trading hours she had bought as much as she possibly could, groceries for the entire week as well as cat litter and ten tins of cat food.

Finally home, and an ancient jazz song was straggling from the radio, Tommy Dorsey's Orchestra, the voice of Frank Sinatra and a small backing group, *I'll never smile again unless I smile at you*, slow with weariness and brassed off that it was still being played on the radio a good fifty years after it was recorded. (This song was broadcast on *Jazz for the Asking* on the BBC World Service. Arthur Stumps from Durban, South Africa had requested it for his brother George Stumps in Yorkshire, England.)

Annemarie had studied Romance Languages and Journalism and had been trying for years to make a living as a freelance journalist, usually unsuccessfully, which is why her parents subbed her: for a washing machine here, car repairs there, and sometimes just because. Her flat was large and beautiful. Beautiful because it was newly renovated, and large because the building was owned by an uncle of Annemarie's and she didn't have to pay rent, only running costs. Dorothea was occupying the guest room, and the cat had Annemarie's living room, study and bedroom.

The cat's name was Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer but was known as Mister Fritz. He was gigantic, ginger and very fat and came fawning round Dorothea the whole time she was trying to fix up the answerphone. The cat was supposed to be slimming and therefore to have only half a tin of Kitekat per day; that had long since been eaten, of course. The answerphone flatly refused to work. It blocked the phone so that Dorothea couldn't get a dialling tone. The cat was simply hungry. She gave it another half tin of food, considering it cruelty to animals to keep cats indoors and then not even feed them properly. Finally both answerphone and telephone were working, and she recorded her greeting. In reality she had no idea whose calls she didn't want to miss, but an answerphone was just part and parcel of modern life. In order to be able to work undisturbed, she would always have it switched on.



Annemarie had once had a letter case, it occurred to Dorothea, as she tried to work out why she didn't like the flat. It was a dolls' house, so clean and tidy, so impersonal. But that was why the guest room was perfect for her, it was like a hotel room. She took down Vincent van Gogh's Sunflowers, and the motto above the bedside cabinet ('We kill the things we love'), and pinned her little picture of Kafka to the wall; she'd cut it out of a magazine when she was sixteen, covering it with transparent sticky-backed plastic to preserve it, and still pinned it to the wall in every room she stayed in, not in a very obvious place but just where her gaze fell when she looked up sideways from her desk.