Lokal

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Last summer I went again to Berlin. The fit had come over me to hear German, if not to speak it, and I had made all the arrangements with the usual mixed feelings. I contacted my British friend with a German surname to ask if his flat in the Schöneberg district was available. It was. The ticket on Expedia was expensive, but not unaffordable. There seemed nothing for it but to go. As always, I wanted to ask my British friend why he keeps this flat when, living as he does in the north of Germany, he so rarely uses it, but I did not. Some questions, I reminded myself, are better not asked.

There was turbulence in the last hour over the North Atlantic, and the plane bumped along unpredictably. I felt anxious, which was silly since the pilot had radar and in any case the turbulence was mild. I began to berate myself for making this journey, which I knew better than anyone was pointless, but I was on it now and there was no way to turn back. I was lost in these musings when a voice came over the PA to announce that the plane would be late. This, too, caused me a moment of anxiety, which was even more absurd because I knew no one now in Berlin, no one would be at the gate waiting.

As I pulled my black rollaboard up the steps of the U-Bahn and onto the Viktoria-Luise-Platz, I was relieved to see that nothing seemed to have changed. The Viktoria-Luise-Platz is an open green space, or park, in the shape of a hexagon just south of the Zoo, in the Schöneberg district where my friend with the German surname has his flat. To me, the Schöneberg district, is one of the most beautiful in all Berlin. The U-Bahn station is at one end of the Platz, and at the other, a nineteenth century stone arch. In the center, just as I remembered, a large stone fountain was quietly issuing cascade after cascade of water up into the warm, summer air. Small concrete paths radiated out in all directions, with people strolling along. Everywhere people were sitting or lying on the short scruffy grass that covered the spaces between the paths, sunning themselves in a relaxed European manner. As always, I was mildly amazed that sitting on the grass in Berlin is permitted by the local authorities but it is. A soft hum of conversations counterpointed the sound of the water as it rushed upwards, fell back, and then rushed upwards again. I turned my head at the *kling* of a bicycle bell and saw an older woman with hair dyed in the deep henna I have seen nowhere outside Germany on an old-fashioned black bicycle. To my delight, my favorite restaurant with the great schnitzel and sparkling Müller-Thurgau that comes in long-stemmed green glasses was still there. A young woman who might have been Turkish or, more likely, Kurdish, was pushing an elegantly polished German baby carriage, the kind that protects the baby so thoroughly from the outside world you have to bend far over it to see that there actually is a baby.

I was suddenly hungry—it was almost dinnertime in New York—so I took a place—a *Platz*—at one of the outdoor cafes that line the Viktoria-Luise-Platz. Last year, I had gone to Cafe Potemkin, but this time I chose its more elegant neighbor, Cafe Montevideo. In my best although still strongly American accent, I ordered hard rolls with *Butter, Marmelade*, and *Kaffee*. At the next table, three wizened German old men were drinking tiny glasses of dark-colored *Schnapps* in silence. It was ten o'clock in the morning. Above my head, the linden trees were waving their beautiful little green hands at me. The air was warm, and the light was the pale bright light of a northern summer. I gave in to the tiredness then, and then I had the feeling that drives me to go to Berlin again and again: a feeling of having come home and not come home.

I wondered, as I have done on other visits, whether Cafe Montevideo was the sort of restaurant that my grandmother's parents had in New York in the late nineteenth century. I had come from that city, where Nana was born. Her parents were both German, but from her first day at kindergarten, Nana refused to speak anything but English, even to them. In 1911, when she was twenty one, she married an Irishman over their objections—what in those days was called a "mixed marriage." Nana didn't care. She wasn't going to marry a German and have German children. She was going to be a real American. She stopped using her birth name *Wilhelmina* and began calling herself *Mathilda*. She made her life by the sheer strength of her will, which in childhood I admired in childhood and later on came to fear.

In my memory, she is very old but still beautiful. In my memory, she is giving a party, as she often did, at the the row house the Irish husband had bought her in Queens. She is wearing her favorite low-cut red velvet dress, proudly exposing the cleft of her now wrinkled Lillian Russell bosom. Her white hair has been done up in short, tight curls by her hairdresser Philip, trained in Hamburg. She is laughing, which accentuates the lines of age in her thin, pink lips but makes her even more beautiful In one hand she holds a Manhattan and in the other a cigarette that she seems to be smoking although actually she doesn't like smoke and never inhales.

In fact, everyone is smoking in the small room, which frequently causes me to choke, since I am a delicate, asthmatic child. My tall, thin father, who is not German is smoking. Also my mother, a small-boned, dark-haired woman who—unlike Nana—doesn't believe in "letting herself go." My mother has a ramrod spine that gives her perfect posture. My aunt, Nana's other daughter, is also small and dark but has a wild, artistic streak. Secretly lesbian, she will one day drink herself to death. All Nana's neighbors are smoking, too. Our real American neighbors: the Kramers, the Bergers, the Kreuders, the Kohlmeiers, the Lübecks, the Nonnenmachers.

Everyone has perched himself or herself on one of the two overstuffed sofas or a nearby chair, each fitted out with a stiff cushion of crewel embroidery Nana has made long before I was born. As the favored grandchild, I am allowed to pass the *hors d'oeuvres* Nana and I have made: herring in cream sauce; toast points with canned sardines; anchovies neatly curled up in fetal positions and skewered with toothpicks; and Ritz crackers covered with peanut butter and sprinkled with bacon—an *hors d'oeuvre* I will never see again outside Nana's house. With

hyperpoliteness, everyone puts these all-American *hors d'oeuvres* on the little trays she has provided and holds them uncomfortably on their laps atop paper cocktail napkins. Still, everyone is having, in their own German-American way, a good time. The floor is covered by a Persian rug with a pattern of large green flowers against a dull maroon background, a style I find unspeakably ugly but when I live in Germany I will discover is regarded in some circles as the height of elegance. Many people in Nana's living room know German, but no one ever speaks it.

At some point someone begins a familiar conversation. Probably this is one of the Lübecks. Bill perhaps who is greatly overweight and works at an insurance company, or perhaps his brother Barney who is even more enormous and has a tiny, bird-like wife named Ida. Or perhaps my Aunt's friend Rosamunda Nonnenmacher, who was a socialst in the 1930s and now teaches fourth grade. (She and my Aunt will live together after Nana dies, but the real nature of their relationship will never be mentioned; people will call them "old maids").

The conversation involves making fun of someone else—not present—who doesn't want to be a real American. Someone who just can't seem to forget the old country. What they call "The other side." "Over there. " Someone like Cousin Otto, who resents having to work in a restaurant on the Lower East Side because he has a *von* in his name. Or Mary Stetzel, who can't just go to Bayville in the summer like the rest of us but insists on taking a cruise along the Rhine.

"They're all like Tante Lina," Nana says with scorn, waving a cigarette in the air like the American flag she puts out before the house on every ceremonial occasion. "Thinking they're too good for this country. When they told Tante Lina she

had to have an operation, she got on a boat and went all the way back to Germany because she thought German doctors were better. And look what happened to her."

I shuddered. Tante Lina had died from what doctors call an "idiosyncratic reaction" to an anesthetic. This was what happened to people whose feet moved along New York streets and whose faces turned toward the Atlantic.

Whenever I heard these stories—and I heard them often—I would be possessed by an irrational fear that when I grew up, I would turn into one of these people whose feet walked down New York streets but whose faces were resolutely turned to the other side of the Atlantic.

Which was of course absurd. I only had such thoughts because, as my father said, I was overly sensitive. My outlook on life was too pessimistic, according to my mother. In any case, it was impossible. I was born here, unlike Cousin Otto. Unlike Mary Stetzel, I didn't have and would never have the money to go to Europe. Still, I shivered with nameless forebodings whenever they were talked about.

After Nana's dinner—standing rib roast bought at enormous cost from Bruno, Nana's butcher; boiled potatoes; broccoli flowerets in cream sauce; fresh peas boiled with a pinch of sugar; and layer cake made with sweet German chocolate—we all file back into the living room. There, my Aunt, whom I called *Tante*, gets out her violin and I sit down at the piano, and we all sing real American songs together like *Ach, du lieber Augustin*. To end the evening, the grown-ups drink a *Bier* or have a *Schnapps*.

And I suppose I, too, thought of myself as a real American. I certainly didn't think of myself as "German" the way that I thought of the Salerno family down the

block, who came from Sicily, as “Italian,“ or my school friend Zoe, whose parents came from Athens, as “Greek.“ Still, I never invited any of my school friends to afternoon milk and *Schnecken*—almond cookies—at Nana’s. Many of my school friends’ parents had fled various countries in the 1930s, and some had changed their names to real American ones like *Brown*.

When I was twenty-seven, I went to live in the Rheinland. I did not want to go. My then-husband, who came from a German family upstate, was offered a job in the Rheinland too good to turn down.

“Why do you want to go over there for?“ said my mother said when I told her. “It’s stupid. There’s nothing for you over there.”

Taking a Marlboro out of a gold lame case, she held the cigarette between her lips, which were thicker and redder than Nana’s. Her head shook in a rage with which I was all too familiar, and her little black curls shook with it. Nana was dead now. We had not been speaking when she died because she had disapproved of my marriage.

I left with my then-husband for the Rhineland in September. All was damp and sunless. A chill mist rose off the narrow, polluted river and off the cobblestones in the old city. I could understand nothing any one said. But everything else was familiar. The restaurants smelled like Nana’s kitchen: plates piled with *Sauerbraten*, parslied potatoes, farmer’s omelettes, root vegetables ruthlessly overboiled, then smothered in cream sauce; chocolate cakes with whipped cream, cherry filling, shaved cacao. People looked like, dressed like, Nana and *Tante* and the Bergers and

the Kramers and the Kohlmeiers. Apartment owners were required to clean the hallways of their buildings weekly, just as *Tante* had scrubbed Nana's floors every Saturday with a horse hair brush and a soapy bucket of *Spic N Span*.

Unlike in America, knowing English was a marketable skill in the Rhineland, and soon I had a job. For the first time in my life, I knew the thrill of making real money, money of my own. I bought a suit of dark blue wide wale corderoy, soft to the touch as Nana's velvet, with a long skirt and a single pleat down the front. I bought a narrow wale corderoy suit of ochre, a rose-colored suit. A high-necked white satin blouse, two silk blouses, a black low-cut blouse with a complicated tie.

By the second year I found a hairdresser better than Philip who cut my long American hair and showed me how to use tortoise-shell combs to show off my new curls. At first I was afraid to drive the *Autobahn* in the car I bought used, but soon I was in the left lane going a hundred and forty kilometers an hour, blinking my lights at the slower cars ahead so they would get out of my way.

Afternoons I had coffee and poppy seed cake at Cafe Strauss, where each stall in the ladies' room came equipped with a white porcelain ashtray. I needed them—I now smoked small, thin cigars. I went to the sauna once a week, which Germans told me was a good prophylactic against the colds of the damp Rheinland winter. All the saunas were mixed"—men, women, and children—and everyone was completely naked, but it wasn't embarrassing. Everyone sat quietly together, keeping track of the time. Now and then someone would get up and ladle a thick dark green liquid over the hot stones until they fizzed, filling the air with a scent like the live fir tree

with real candles at Lüchow's restaurant in New York where we had always gone at Christmas. It was pleasurable, and a bit unreal.

There was one problem, however. I could not seem to learn German. At least not well enough that shopkeepers' faces wouldn't turn away as soon as I opened my mouth. Every day I bought the local newspaper, the *General Anzeiger*. Slowly an painfully with my new Langenscheidt's dictionary I would wind my way through the labrynthine sentences of the lead article, unaware that the style was convoluted and the vocabulary archaic. I bought a used radio like the kind people cluster around in 1930s movies and spent hours trying to catch a word I understood, like *Bundeskanzler Schmidt* or *der Americanische Präsident Jimmy Carter*. Every day I memorized five new words: *Blumenkohl*, *Fahrraddieb*, *Einbahnstraße*, *Staubsauger*, *Fehler.* Cauliflower, bicycle thief, one-way street, vacuum cleaner, mistake. For I needed to speak it, every day. To buy food, train tickets, take the car in for an oil change, take clothes to the cleaner.

In the end I had to accept that my adjective endings would never be correct except by random chance. My *Akzent* would always be strong and recognizably American. I stopped trying to speak high German and imitated the people I heard in the streets, in the shops. I gave up trying to make the glottal sound that is German for *I*. It stuck in my throat and sounded funny when it finally emerged. I began to use the Rhineland *Issh*. Now I could, as the linguists said, "make myself understood." *Issh möchte drei Pfund Birnen bitte*. Three pounds of pears, please. *Eine Karte nach Köln, bitte, hin und züruck.* One round trip ticket to Cologne, please. There and back.

In the third year I took a German lover who gave me a *Jugendstil* ring, a William Morris-like affair of five small enameled stones set in a shiny brass that I still have in a safe-deposit box. He was the only man before, or since, I ever loved who—like Nana, like the Lübeck boys—was overweight. Once I dreamt that he grew even larger, larger and larger until he turned into Nana, he became her, they merged into one. I woke distressed at the strangeness of the dream, but also happy.

One day in late August, I was driving out in the countryside with my German lover in his pristine new convertible. The wind was whistling around my ears, and a sweet smell of cut grass came up from the newly stubbled fields. We passed a village of small, red brick postwar houses, all neat as a pin. This placid landscape was now more familiar to me than the commercial catacombs under Times Square. Why shouldn't I be fully one of them—the Germans, that is? Nana was, even if she wouldn't admit it. Of course if that were to happen, I would have to really learn German. The best way to learn was from—as I was called at work—a "native speaker." My lover, however, had always spoken English to me.

I mustered all the courage I could and said:

"*Könnten wir nicht mal Deutsch sprechen*? *Issh*—"

Can't we speak German? I—

His wrinkled up his nose.

"Linda," he said, not entirely gently. "That's not how a person such as yourself should speak. *Issh* sounds like a Rhineland fishwife. The word for *I* is *Ich*."

He made the sound again, more slowly, his Adam's apple moving up and down.

I-i-i-ich.

The decision to leave was not easy and took a long time. One day I gathered up everything I owned—the corderoy suits, all my *Jugendstil* jewelry , the dictionary with its thoughtfully rainproof cover. I hurled all of it into my suitcase and three yellow cardboard boxes I had bought at the Post Ofice and put together myself only with great difficulty.

When I got to New York, I walked out of the terminal in a daze. Before me I saw a confused swirl of cars all old and dirty to me compared with what I was now used to. It was September, when the Rhineland sky was dark and gray, but above me the sun shone mercilessly, the sky was cloudless and unbelievably blue. The smells of gasoline, diesel oil, and rotting garbage assaulted my nose. The English all around me sounded odd, used as I was to an English spoken by people who were mentally translating word-for-word from German. My dark blue wide wale corduroy skirt felt odd, too. It was much too long, grotesquely formal. I twisted the *Jugendstil* ring around and around on my finger.

It seemed I was still in exile, although from which country I wasn't exactly sure.

On my second evening in Berlin, I decided to go over the the former East to eat at a restaurant called *Lokal* that had good reviews on Yelp and an interesting menu. As an adjective *lokal* means "local," but as a noun *Lokal* means "a neighborhood restaurant; a pub."

I went there hoping to speak German, since *Lokal* is the kind of old-fashioned place where you have to sit at long wooden tables with strangers. A familiar rain was drizzling as I got off the tram and picked my way along a cobblestoned street. Far above, the gold dome of the old Jewish Synagogue, once the center of a vibrant community and even today only partially renovated, towered over the *Mitte* district—an unintended testament to how far Hitler achieved his goal of a Europe without Jews.

To my disappointment but not surprise, the couple next to me, a rock musician and his lead singer who was also his wife, spoke better English than my waning *Deutsch*. Born in East Germany, they had bought an apartment on this street in the early 1990s when the neighborhood was still "sketchy." Later on, they learned that this was the Street of Tears along which in the Middle Ages the condemned were led to their deaths. Earlier in the day I had walked over a plaque in the sidewalk by the Philharmonic that serves as memorial to those executed between 1938 to 1940 as “unfit”—the blind, the deaf, the old, the ill. I thought, and not for the first time, how in Berlin history is everywhere underfoot.

Lokal follows a new global trend according to which everything you eat should have been grown no more than 50 kilometers away, so its menu was heavy on root vegetables. After some deliberation, I chose the beet soup. Pale pink like a carnation and of a smooth, silky texture, it was by far the best beet soup I have ever eaten.

As I sipped at it slowly to prolong the pleasure, the conversation with the rock musician and his wife continued, largely on the stereotypical subjects of travel, rock music, politics, and so on, but with a real warmth on both sides. When I got up to leave, the lead musician's wife rose and shook my hand with one of the fiercest handshakes I have ever known. I tried but was not able to equal her grasp. The whole time she looked into my eyes so directly that I felt unconditionally accepted, an experience I have had with strangers only in Germany. She had such a strong sense of self and a forthrightness—two qualities I prize beyond anything when I am lucky enough to meet them—that I liked her immediately and was sorry I could not be her friend.

As I left the restaurant, it was already dark. I heard the familiar creak of a tram turning a corner and then the little tram bell, but it was a pleasant summer night so I walked up to the Haekescher Markt, where I would have a choice of four trams to get home. The streetlamps glowed yellow and luminous, and the peacefulness of the neighborhood—noise in Berlin is tightly regulated—was broken only by occasional low voices or a bicycle bell. I toyed with the notion that perhaps Nana's ancestors had come from this city, which fascinates me the same way New York does, but then I remembered that last conversation I had with my mother just before the end of her life where she had answered the question I had never asked.

She was sitting up in bed, tiny and white-haired among the pillows. I had just put a silk bedjacket around her shoulders that had been Nana's and would soon be mine. I had made tea for her in one of Nana's china cups and put it on a bedtray that had also belonged to Nana.

My mother tried to sip at the tea, but it was too hot. She put it back down and bristled with an all-too-familiar anger. I braced myself, but it wasn't directed at me.

"You know, some people from Nana's family came over in 1935 to visit," my mother said. "They were all big supporters of Herr Hitler. They told Nana that if we had a Herr Hitler in America, her son wouldn't be unemployed. *Their* sons all had jobs now, they said. They didn't say, their sons were working in the munitions factories. Nana told them to pack up right away and get out."

She looked down at the tea, which was still steaming.

"What they said about the Jews— it was terrible. I had never heard such things before in my life."

Then she spoke with great vehemence, as if she were expressing a thought no one had ever had before, and I found myself liking her as if she hadn't been my mother.

"You know, it wasn't *right*," she said. "It wasn't *right*, what Hitler did to the Jews."

I didn't ask her where Nana's people came from, what were their names.

Soon—was it too soon?—the visit to Berlin was over, and my plane was touching down on a runway at Newark. A glistening shimmer of hot air moved towards me, dervish-like, then disappeared.

What was the name of that poem Heine wrote as he lay dying in Paris, the one where his fatherland kissed him *auf Deutsch* and spoke *auf Deutsch*?

Ah yes. "*Es war ein traum*." "It was a dream."

Outside the terminal, the taxi drivers were talking on their cell phones in their own languages. I got into the first taxi I came to and fell back into an American self. I thought about how only a few differences in sound separate the word *relief* from the word *regret*.