

Normal

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Are the rails smoother? Does the train move more easily along the tracks? I press my ear to the window of the dining car and listen. Would I be doing this on a train crossing into Canada from the U.S.? No, but I'm traveling on a very different train, from the Czech Republic into Germany.

The landscape remains constant but everything else becomes more vivid, as if people, buildings, signs, even trees have been given a fresh coat of paint. The Czech crew leaves; the German crew comes on. Is it an accident that the air conditioning begins to function? We ran late in the Czech Republic; in Germany, we quickly make up the time. The Czechs were listless; the Germans are crisp, official. Am I seeing what's there or what's in my mind?

The train is nearly empty at midweek. I'm the only diner in the dining car. The neat tables with their white tablecloths, miniature lamps, and gleaming silverware are far removed from the train iconography of my childhood: dirty straw, cattle cars with slats instead of windows, a bucket in the corner, the SS. I'm being served a hot dinner by a waiter while traveling west, not cold and starving on a deportation east. I unfold my cloth napkin, sip my glass of iced water.

I imagine that normal travelers eat in this dining car undisturbed, gazing out the picture window as the countryside rolls by, noting the landmarks, the weather. Before the war, my parents were among those people. My father traveled to Berlin to participate in the Olympic Games; my mother, to attend the fashion shows. When she was sixteen, she fell in love on this route with an art student who boarded in Dresden and stood with her in the corridor pointing out the sights. But I have only recently retrieved those images -- my father in his thirties suit, my mother a romantic girl -- and they are not nearly as powerful as the bucket and the slats.

I took the trolley to the station, nine minutes from the center of Prague, where thousands of Czech Jews began their journey to extinction. I imagined what they might have noticed on the way: the river and its old bridges; another red trolley passing by; planters overflowing with geraniums, laundry drying on a balcony. Nine minutes. The distance from the center to the station is so short, like the distance between normal and not. "Your parents did the right thing to leave," say Czechs who might have been my friends or classmates or lovers. "You grew up normal."

I grew up in the Czech community of New York instead of the Jewish community of Prague. Everyone in it was a survivor who had lost almost everything a human being can lose. When I was a child, the loss that seemed most obvious was people: I had no grandparents, aunts or uncles. Only later did I

understand the loss of culture and language. My parents were not themselves in America. And even their Czech selves had been bifurcated into before-the-war and after. Almost all -- Jews and Gentiles, men and women, people from Prague, Vienna, Budapest -- had before and after spouses, before and after professions, incomes, relations to law, art, politics, success and failure, God.

They laughed at American measures of status such as houses, or incomes or titles as illusions of naïve people who had not lived through much. They valued practical skills, smarts, the ability to improvise and adapt. Men who had been lawyers were now working as taxi drivers; stars of Prague's literary world were announcers for Radio Free Europe. My father, whose family had owned a factory, now worked in a factory. My mother was one of the very lucky ones: she had been a dressmaker before the war; she was a dressmaker after it.

My parents made few plans for their children. They never ventured to guess what kind of work or what kind of spouse we might choose. At first, they were so immersed in the day-to-day business of keeping our family afloat in America, they didn't think about the future. Later on, they were too tired or they had lost faith in planning or maybe they felt they could not read the culture well enough to advise us on how to compose our lives.

How did I become a writer? I think it was my consciousness of the empowering nature of language: my years of watching my parents read for information as well as solace; and of writing letters to newspapers, government agencies, teachers or the IRS for my active but linguistically challenged parents. I know both would be thrilled that I am taking the Inter-city Express to Berlin on business. For the third time, one of my books has been translated into German and I have a tour scheduled. They would find it ironic that I'm considered a Jewish author and that, as my hosts will tell me, Jews are news.

The night before I travel to Berlin from Prague, I can't find my train ticket. I made my trip to Germany conditional on a roundtrip to my city of birth, where I speak the language and have to stop myself from treating everyone I meet like a distant relative. I spend my last evening there turning over the contents of my small suitcase again and again. Where is my train ticket? I know I feel ambivalent about Germany. It's been 20 years since I left therapy. My parents are long dead. I'm married with children of my own. The war's been over since 1945. When does normal return?

What were your fantasies before coming to Germany? a smart young reporter will ask me and, fooling neither of us, I'll reply, "I don't believe I had any."

There is an African belief that if you allow the name of one who has hurt your family into your body, it poisons your soul. All my life, I have refused to let German into my body, letting the language fall away instead of picking it up. I know I am cutting off the culture that would have been part mine under normal

circumstances, had there been no war, no Nazis. Not only Kafka and Rilke but Goethe and Heine and Schiller and Brecht. I've tried to learn German but cannot properly read a line of poetry nor sing a phrase of Mozart or Bach without mauling the language.

My mother spoke excellent German. She hired Germans after she had vetted them for wartime innocence as housekeepers and seamstresses. She listened to Wagner, even bought some German products although not cars. "I have no grudge against the younger generation," she used to say, "but every German my age makes me nervous. I hate to shake their hands unless I know exactly where they were and what they were doing during the war. I don't hate them. But if they disappeared off the face of the earth tomorrow, I wouldn't care one bit. It just wouldn't affect me at all."

I'm riding in the dining car, eating but not tasting the German food, tuning in the flat German landscape and tuning it out; sometimes voluntarily, sometimes not. My mechanisms of defense are so much a part of my being that I don't always recognize when they've come into play. I've always been handy in a crisis: an accident, fire, mugging. I waste no time on emotional reaction; I numb-out, shut down. Now I'm wondering why I have no reactions to note in my notebook. Is travelling to Germany a crisis?

I was unable to imagine it. Or maybe I refused. How could I imagine the encounters I will actually have in Berlin: the long taxi ride with the Nigerian married to a German for 25 years, with two children who have never seen Africa. He likes to chat with Americans because, he will say, Americans, unlike Germans, are curious about people unlike themselves.

His Mercedes will roll down the broad avenues laid out for tanks rather than automobiles as I wonder at the smoothness of the road. My driver will point out the historic sights -- the Brandenburg gate and the remnant of the Wall -- and I will open my ears but shield my heart as he tells me: "I find myself thinking about the Jews. An auslander is attacked here every day. I have been attacked and insulted. Sometimes passengers refuse to pay. But none of what happens to me compares to what happens to the Turks. Last week they chased a Turkish man until he ran into a glass door and when he fell down bloody they trampled him nearly to death. Now the man is blind. What will happen to his family? How will they live? The police do nothing. There are candlelight marches, letters to the newspapers --but always too late. The damage is done.

"I have lived here more than half my life. Each time there is another attack on a foreigner, I ask: Am I experiencing what the Jews experienced in the thirties? Am I not seeing the writing on the wall? I have a house in Nigeria. I am only waiting to see if democracy will hold. But what will my wife do in Africa? What will my children do? Then I ask myself: What will happen today? Will I have

waited too long?"

The Russian taxi driver who will wait for me in his Mercedes behind the police barricades at the Jewish Community Center, will explain that the smartest Russian Jewish emigrants skip Israel and come straight to Berlin. "In Israel I worked fifteen hours a day to make the same money I make here in eight. Is it normal to have to work fifteen hours a day to live? Is it normal to live in a state of war? The Germans don't like Jews. You know they wish we weren't here. But they don't shoot us. It's not allowed anymore. They are cold but correct."

I have had neither of these conversations yet but after an hour in the dining car, I decide to tune out Germany. I had wanted to measure out the territory, experience the hours, but find I am experiencing nothing but boredom. I push away my plate and take out my letter of invitation to Berlin -- which I have not bothered to look at. I notice that its directions match neither the information on my train ticket nor the minute-by-minute itinerary of my train.

There are four Berlin stations, each with its arrival time. Ostbahnhof, the one printed on my ticket, does not correspond to Zoo, my destination in the letter. A German travel agency issued the ticket. Do they make mistakes? I recheck the stations and times of arrival. Two names, two stations. Someone made a mistake.

Did I have any fantasies? No, I had a plan: It will be dark when I arrive in Berlin; I will get off at the first station, run the length of the platform to see if there's someone there from the Jewish Community of Berlin; hop back on and get off at the next station. I have no German money; all the banks will be closed. If there is no one to meet me, I will go to the police, identify myself as a Jew, and say I need help.

In other countries I'm an American; in Germany I'm a Jew. Jews were once numerous, now they are rare. Jews are news. The police will see it in their interest to shelter me much as they would a kangaroo. I have three minutes to get off the train at Ostbahnhof, run down the platform looking for a representative from the Jewish Community, then get back on the train and ride to Zoo. No point worrying. If there is no one to meet me, I will turn myself in.

What were your fantasies?

Okay. I am stepping up to the podium to read from my new book and I dissolve into the frame from the movie Nashville when the woman singer is shot dead by a bullet from the audience, but this time it's a neo-Nazi skin-head who has slipped in with the philo-semites.

Or: I am stepping up to the podium, it becomes an auction block and I am open to inspection, curious people examining my eyes, my nose, my mouth, my breasts, my legs.

The train pulls into Ostbahnhof. I feel spooked by the sign, by the empty platform. I leap off the train with my suitcase on wheels and run the length of it.

No one is waiting. I hop back onto the train. I will turn myself in to the police. I reread the itinerary. We are exactly on time.

Why have you not come to Germany before? an interviewer will ask and I will blurt without thinking, "Why would I want to see concentration camps?"

My answer is true. It comes from the deepest part of me, the place from which I answer to my name. Of course I know that Berlin is filled with museums and parks and concert halls and interesting people like my interviewer and I am embarrassed by my answer because not so long ago I was a reporter much like her: serious, well-prepared, professional. She is dismayed by my answer. She tells me she'd like to be normal; she'd like for Germany to be normal. But it isn't. Every time she travels, she sees the way people react when she says she's German. English people, French people, the Danes, the Dutch, the Czechs. Sometimes she passes for English or Dutch. Do I think that to be German will ever be normal?

I let her question hang in the air between us. It will stay with me long after I leave Europe and return to the United States. What is normal? What is that state of ordinariness we both wish for? Does it -- did it ever -- exist? Multicultural, trans-sexual, cross-disciplinary, post-modern have exploded the idea of normal. Psychology with its dysfunctional people, families, societies have made it obsolete. When I think about it, I give up on normal. But in that place where I think of Germany as a collection of concentration camps I am startled to discover that I need to believe in a normal that is "not-Auschwitz." But all these conversations have not yet taken place. As the train pulls slowly into Zoo, I peer out the window. The platform is empty. Isn't this a metropolis? Shouldn't there be crowds? I see a short, round woman with a shawl over her shoulders and a scarf over her hair who looks like she might be a character in an old Yiddish story. Is she waiting for me? I blink a few times to check if the woman I am seeing is really there. Then I take a breath and ready my suitcase for a dignified descent from the train. I am really here. I have arrived in Berlin.