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Europe is here, and it's not Going Anywhere (a Mosaic)

I live in 2012. Writers should capture 'timeless' totalitarianism, too. Weary timelessness. They should tell scary fairy stories about eastern European countries enchanted by an evil wizard. The thing is, these 'fairy stories' really happened. And Good did not conquer. Because every Good is infected with Evil.

Days, months, years, lives pass. Every day is trivial and infinite. Yet fateful, too. Every place in the world is a trap: the devil's power is strongest when people stay in one place. If they succeed in making an 'escape', it is an escape from themselves. You're not a winner just because you're gripping a passport. Can it be that even today a denial of humanity is the price of victory? And how can it be that power is abused by its representatives?

Three years ago I dropped in on an acquaintance of mine. At his workplace in the centre of Prague, the magnificent office of an advertising agency. There was a chill in the air. There's been a tragedy of some sort, I said to myself. Someone has fallen ill. Or died. But no: the staff had just learned that the 'crisis' had hit them, too. Instead of Audis, the company would be buying cheaper take-home vehicles. (The fleet is renewed every year.) The world was collapsing around their ears. Panic was breaking out. Back home, I searched the internet for a photo from the 1930s. Men in hats and suits standing meekly in a long queue, each with a spoon in his hand, waiting for a swig of hot soup. I took great delight in forwarding the photo to the staff of the advertising agency. All of them. I added a postscript: This is what an economic crisis looks like, gentlemen.

In 2010 I was in Berlin, not far from Savignyplatz, where I could work undisturbed. Write. Translate. 'Translate' is not the right word: I felt the breath and heart-beat of the text, my mind was awash with images that Herta Müller has attached to the fate of a seventeen-year-old boy in a Stalinist camp, I was working in great spurts. I wanted to stay in Berlin. Before my departure Peter Demetz had told me: "Don't move to Berlin, nothing ever happens there." Berlin is an open city. Democracy is really not exportable goods. I thought of home. It is difficult to establish democracy in countries where there are no democrats. In the Berlin quarter of Kreuzberg, however, not long ago a new mosque was opened, with the condition that men and women would be able to pray there on equal terms. And the world of literature celebrated the ninetieth birthday of Marcel Reich-Ranicki, whom I like for his tenacity. One of the few survivors of the Warsaw ghetto, he did not begin to learn German until he was nine. He has had much of importance to say about my three favourite characters of 19th century literature, Anna Karenina, Emma Bovary and Effi Briest – the three most famous wreckers of the sacred institution of marriage. With them everything was at stake: independence, the chance to live one's own life and to rid oneself of the slave mentality. But one can save only oneself. All three women came to grief. The one-person political party is the only option. Otherwise we will lead one another back into common slavery. And a hasty relocation to Berlin is no solution.

Nationalism? Yes. Racism? Yes. Anti-Semitism? For sure. But today the most damaging thing of all is the rampant egomania of spoiled brats of Euro-American civilisation who consider the rest of the world to be at a lower level of development. The need today is to shine a light on what goes on in multinational companies. The cult of personality rules. It has taken on new forms. From these ingredients we can cook a cheap goulash the masses will jump for and gobble up. Theo Sarrazin, Günter Grass, Václav Klaus. The problem is the 'kobold' in them, which taunts, criticizes, demands attention but solves nothing. They are

highly intelligent but they lack emotional intelligence and social compassion. They find it easy to manipulate others. Solidarity with people who find themselves – often through no fault of their own – at the margins of society, is disappearing. Fellow feeling is on the wane. As is empathy. They are sensitive to one thing only: others taking a swipe at their ego. The invisible hand of the market does not have the answer to everything. The invisible hand of the market calls for the infantilisation of society. Endless growing-up done by grown-up people. And what does this emphasis on individuality mean? Brand-name ‘toys’, gratification, adrenaline sports, gratification, sex, gratification, achievement, gratification. As a result each ‘individual’ thinks, acts, dresses, chews and feeds in the same way. Is not the unfavourable atmosphere in society a result of infantile behaviour? In the eastern part of Europe political parties continue to emerge that are like the personal business plans of immature individuals who in emotional terms have not grown into the roles they have attained. Perhaps the end of the world has come and we don’t know about it. We’re with the kids in the sandpit.

I live among people in a woman’s skin. Spring 2012. I look out on a sea of dandelions. A sea of dandelions in grass of a harsh green. The dandelions push proudly towards the sky. I remember well the moment when I arrived, without regard for the ideas of others, at an understanding of how life should properly be lived and how to declare who I was. At a realisation of who we are; of the need to stop whining, neither to humble ourselves nor to put on airs and graces, not to allow society to impose its rules on us. Discrimination is cunning. Still the world does not make full use of the potential of women – the potential of half its population. And where it does, it demands the male pattern of behaviour – competition and power struggle, economic growth. But life is not a competition. We move about on a stage where roles are divided under the influence of the imprecise identification of the male with all humanity. Rejoice in change. If the path to freedom fails to have the desired effect, they beat their women. Arab countries ... some years ago Gaddafi’s son beat up his wife in a London hotel room. Before he did so he complained at a press conference about how hard it was to win the fight for justice in the world. They lament that their lives have been restricted and destroyed by Nazis, communists, wars, dictatorships. I know no women Stalins, Hitlers or Mengeles. These are men whose task seems to run in their blood, to be encoded in their genes. If they can be dictators nowhere else, then at least in their own home, in control over the body of another – a woman. Perhaps they believe that not even illusions can exist in isolation from hell. “At the beginning it apparently concerned insults, verbal abuse and threats. Gradually behaviour gained in intensity so as to include corporal punishment, strangulation and torture by starvation.” So runs a statement by an independent organisation that helps victims in families, regarding a case where the wife and children had become a burden to the husband. Allegedly the bullied wife ate hardly anything; whatever food she did get, she gave to the children. She was starved to the point of severe malnutrition. In this regard no statuary depicting women can be seen on any bridge. The sainted statues on the bridge are always of men.

I read an interview with a leading Czech actress. She laid coquettish emphasis on her claim that she wasn’t a feminist – she liked men to hold doors open for her, she liked men altogether. *I’m not a feminist. I like men, too.* That’s got nothing to do with it. This is a matter of fundamental importance. It is about standing up for a group of people who are denied equal rights.

There are countries in which disobedient women are buried alive in the sand. Then concrete is poured into the grave. These women are buried because they break rules set by others. Some may not uncover their faces. Some may not speak with strange men. Some may not think. Some may not make decisions about their own lives. Some have to let themselves be circumcised. Some have to tolerate being bought and raped within walls known as home. They rape their daughters and believe this to be acceptable, indeed that it is normal behaviour. Some serve men now as a microwave, now as a laundry maid, now as a flower in a flowerpot, now as a jewel. She was turned into sand. She was sixteen and had spoken with

boys. Her father and her uncle committed her alive to the earth, and the sand that swirls around the burial place knows no end.

They forge their closer ties in vain. What is up with men? Have they perhaps made an error with today's bigoted and dogmatic interpretations of religions with which Buddha, Muhammad and Jesus would never agree? Has this insensitivity developed under the influence of the imprecise identification of the male with all humanity? Is discrimination against children or women a result of the politicisation of religion and its use for the gaining of power, which – in Europe by now without the cloak of religion – persists to this day? The goddesses in Zeus's circle are said to have learned but one thing: that appropriate behaviour and natural indifference are the course to take even in the most critical situations. Aggression is aggravated by cowardice or resistance. He takes a step back when faced by indifference. But indifference is no solution today. Let the goddesses not be angry with me. But, no, let them be angry. I'm angry with them. One thing is increasingly certain: humans think while God laughs. And sends down crises.

I live in a family. But as Ingeborg Bachmann said, new experience must be lived and not just plucked from the air. Those who have no lived experience of their own pluck it from the air or take it from others. The disappearance of experience is assuming ever greater dimensions, with the development of the mass media – life lived at second hand – to blame. Experience is a teacher that has no pupils. On the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the reunification, Matthias Platzeck, former leader of the Social Democrats and minister-president of Brandenburg, compared the attachment of East Germany to West Germany to the principle of the 'Anschluss'. He claimed that more than 80 per cent of Germans today feel themselves to be second-class citizens. In what sense? Do they not have equal opportunities? This is a clear illustration of the monstrousness of communist thought: the whole experiment in which a family was split in two, one half developed in freedom and the other in a prison of controlled, socialist thought behind barbed wire. A proof of how people are formed by the atmosphere that prevails in society, not just within the close family. A life lived under a lid with the menace of the political police is degrading; it eats its way under the skin. All people who lived behind the Iron Curtain still have a different mentality; they have complexes, are envious and petty, are susceptible to extremist ideas. Post-communist voices justify cooperation with the political police by claiming it to be part and parcel of the work of a party. But there has been no 'Anschluss'. The majority rejoiced in the return of lost sons and daughters. Germany in the last century served humanity as a strange laboratory. For decades the displaced and expelled Germans of Eastern Europe felt themselves to be second-class citizens. Germans from the Reich looked down on them for fear they would take a bite from a slice that was already too thin (see the work of historian Andreas Kossert). Surprisingly they are bothered less by the East Germans than by hard-working foreigners who have settled in Germany and mastered the German language. Memory is a treacherous thing. For the book *Grandpa Wasn't a Nazi: Nazism and the Holocaust in Family Remembrance* Harald Welzer, Sabine Moller and Karoline Tschuggnall interviewed over fifty German families in order to form a picture of Nazi Germany and the subjects' grandparents as maintained by family tradition. The results testifying to the collective memory of the Third Reich are devastating. Again there is a life with two faces – democracy on the outside and something else within the walls of the home. The only stories that survive within German families are of the suffering of family members in Russian captivity and the raping of German women by Russian soldiers. The Holocaust has been suppressed; Jewish schoolmates simply disappeared during the war, while the concentration camps were used for the imprisonment of those who fought against Nazism. No Nazis existed in one's own family. Everyone wants to have been a victim of the regime; the Nazis were the others. The masses serve to confirm the supremacy of psychology over politics and economics. Mass hysteria can threaten the very foundations of democracy. The masses have a liking for to power, and this is responsible for the greatest tragedy of our time. Because the masses desire a leader. In *The Art of Life* the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman affirms that the individual is solely

responsible for the way life is conducted and its outcomes, and that this is a responsibility one cannot escape. We plan our own lives, even though an interplay of planning and chance affects their implementation. And we submit to society (today a fluid, modern, individualized society of consumers), which influences (or determines) how we will be and provides a commentary on our life path. Freedom actually knows no bounds. The freedom to live one's own life. It is important not to send out the signals of a second-class citizen.

Europe is encumbered by the unresolved traumas and labels of the twentieth century. Totalitarianism has not disappeared. Totalitarianism is not only Nazi or communist; it exists, too, in firms, in families, in relationships. There is totalitarianism in relations between countries. Europe is a family. It is not possible to escape the model of family relationships. Whatever is suppressed in personal life is damaging to the individual and floats to the surface years, decades or generations later. If a society suppresses something from its past, whatever this is the society is an unhealthy one. 'Sibling' constellations, too, play a role, not least between rich and poor relations, in this case France and Germany on the one hand and the countries of eastern Europe on the other. It seems that the only thing that firmly unites Europe is a dark undercurrent – anti-Semitism. Europe is determined by entanglements from the past, the residues of injustices, the division of powers, collective guilt and collective victimhood. And what about the Czechs?

I lived in Czechoslovakia. In common with the Russians we have an aversion for the truth. When I think about the Czech Republic I also have to consider why it is that in spite of all the freedom here, I feel a chill. Logically enough, my thoughts return to years past, as today is their consequence. This is a Czech chronicle swollen with small-mindedness, ruthlessness and vindictiveness, endless meetings, memoranda, cadre reviews, blind adaptation to the Soviet model, decisions made by autocrat ignoramuses, incessant blather, demoralisation at work and the separatist urge of Slovakia (culminating in the division of Czechoslovakia into the Czech Republic and Slovakia in 1993).

This atmosphere originates in the constant feeling that we are some kind of buffer between East and West. But it is also informed by the first mass hysteria: the displacement of the Germans in 1945. I never learned at school that Germans and Czechs lived here together for hundreds of years. (Our educators took the line that they arrived with Hitler so they were rightly expelled.) The Munich Agreement, the separation of the Sudetenland, the application of the Nuremberg Laws in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, occupation, Holocaust, the destruction of Jewish culture and the post-war population transfer provoked by Nazism – all these things resulted in a violent end to the co-existence of Czechs and Germans. Before World War II almost three million Germans lived in Bohemia and Moravia. What prevailed after World War II was an undifferentiated, greatly hostile anti-German mood grounded in the principle of collective guilt and coalescing in a kind of perverse reversal of traditional anti-Semitism that culminated in the expulsion of the Germans. After 1945 the reserve of Czech national culture was supported by the official stance of the Czechoslovak Republic (ČSR). The presence of a Jewish and German element in the culture of the Czech lands was either distorted or concealed, for reasons of nationalism and also of class. This aversion – both declared and latent – has marked the relation of Czechs with German culture at every level. The organised evacuation of a substantial proportion of the German population of Bohemia and Moravia – which took place between December 1945 and December 1946 – was defended by the ideology of the nation state and was in agreement with the standpoint of the victorious powers. But as early as summer 1945 there had been unofficial, so-called 'wild' expulsions performed by local organs of state power and accompanied by the terrorizing and mass murder of Germans, collaborators and others innocent of the accusations levelled at them. These revolutionary excesses foreshadowed political purges among the Czech population after the coup of February 1948. The topic of Czech-German relations would remain deeply taboo in the Czech territories until the 1990s. As a result of the expulsion of the Germans, Germany came to be viewed as a source of revisionism and revanchist politics

(although as early as 1947 the part of Germany occupied by the Soviets was understood without reservation to be democratic and progressive.) The Germans had been expelled and the Jews were either dead or exiled. The many decades of German and Jewish contribution to Czech culture were practically denied. It was paradoxical, then, that Franz Kafka, who wrote in German and was of Jewish origin, should become one of the most important writers associated with the Czech territories. In the early 1960s the works of Prague-born Kafka were among the first by German writers to make a return to presses in their homeland; in the 1990s they became a 'brand' that served as a tourist attraction.

The atmosphere created by the mental suppression of these events continues to serve as a bogeyman for populist politicians. (President Václav Klaus referred to 'revanchists' when he opposed the Lisbon Treaty, which he was the last to sign.) The wild expulsions prepared the ground for other dreadful events. The journalist Ferdinand Peroutka, who died in exile in the United States, said in 1956 in a speech for Radio Free Europe: "The evacuation of the Germans created an atmosphere in which it was possible to remove political opponents without causing any great alarm and to accustom oneself to life without laws and principles. Palacký once said that he would no longer be able to value the nation if the same rights were not extended to the very last gypsy. Now though, since 1945, due process of law has evaporated for hundreds of thousands so that later it may evaporate for undreamed-of hundreds of thousands more. [...] These are the moral consequences of mass displacement that we can recognise already: if it is possible to punish someone for belonging to a certain nation, then later it will be possible to punish him for belonging to a certain social group or political party. The future will take no pride in the moment when the concept of collective guilt was introduced to the world."

After the communist takeover of 1948 and the Soviet occupation of 1968, due process of law indeed evaporated for further hundreds of thousands. Stalinism thrived in Czechoslovakia irrespective of what was happening in the USSR. It was not just about people being locked up. They were not able to live their own lives. Stalin was a model at a time when it was clear he was a mass murderer. And the generation that had supported him swept everything away in 1968 by saying, "In our youth we made a few mistakes". Behind the plural 'we' many faces are concealed. But they didn't have to make those 'mistakes'; it is possible, too, to not do something. It was a corrupt regime of terror and mass murder, a mockery of any law-based society. It is as though young SS men were placating the world with the words, "In our youth we made mistakes", thus settling the matter of their support for Hitler. Whereas Germany clearly identified these people as war criminals, in Czechoslovakia no one was excluded from public life for the crimes of the 1950s (imprisonments and show trials, the execution of Milada Horáková, children taken from their parents, the nationalisation of property, whole classes of non-communist students expelled from universities, the relocation of families, the looting of monasteries, the destruction of libraries), or the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s (children from the 'wrong' class refused the chance to study, the proliferation of anonymity, denunciations and lies, power still wielded by murderers who by now were secure in their positions thanks to the Soviet tanks at their backs). After 1989 they spilled out into parliament and the business community. And the un-lived, mutilated lives? The victims had to maintain their silence, and even today no one is interested in the testimonies of those who are left. Twenty years after 1989 not once has it happened that someone should be defined by deeds and not words, which change depending on the year – 1953, 1968, 1969, 2010. Whoever once assisted a murderous regime must face up to his crimes. Because otherwise we insult the dead. And also those who were physical survivors of many years in prison but who returned home as nervous wrecks. The trials of the criminals of communism have dragged on and on; no one has been punished, nor will anyone ever be punished, as we refuse to accept our share of the guilt. We are giving a clear message to younger generations: everything is permissible because every monstrosity can be swept away with the words, "In our youth we made mistakes"; the main thing is to get away with it and make sure you live well. Executioners and victims are fused. There are commemorative events in Auschwitz but not in Katyn or Lety or

Jáchymov. There is no hope for the young as they are brought up in an atmosphere where half-truth and prejudice are passed from one generation to the next. In 1989, did Václav Havel not know that the idea of starting from scratch, of drawing a heavy line under the past meant sweeping the past under the carpet, where it would continue to rot? The tanks of 1968 were sent for ex-party members, many of whom had willingly helped Stalin fix up the noose in the 1950s. And they were disappointed when the spring 'awakening' was not joined by those who had spent the previous years in prison while they themselves held meetings, lived their lives, wrote and saw the truth only at the moment their power was taken from them.

In 1989 all this was swept from the table as if it had never been. There has been much embarrassing talk of the case of Milan Kundera, but of those who truly got others into this kind of situation there was no mention. 'The same' memories come around again, perceived differently depending on the context of their time and of overarching information; all they do is raise the power of contemporary blindness. We supplement our own memory from the collective memory, but, by so doing, do we not pulverise the truth of memories? It is impossible to rape, falsify and write over the pages, regardless of how understandable and noble the motives, regardless of whether they concern personal lives or work swallowed up by their time. We should not write it down, we should not experience it, we should not say it aloud, we should not ... And what? Should we therefore erase our memories? Should we not own up to our lives and thus censor them?

I live in the Czech Republic. It is though anyone who lived in a socialist country, under an occupied regime as a vassal of Russia, is unable to live in a different world. In the Czech Republic today young 'party men' are now trying for capitalism 'with a socialist face': the victory of the chosen, with no rivals and no open competition (just as under socialism they were used to disqualifying opponents by political persecution). They have succeeded to the following mentality: I will support not the gifted and the able but the less able, who are loyal and unscrupulous. Everything the parties claim for their support of the arts is a lie. They persist in trying to destroy everything and everyone that shows that the king has no clothes. They have money again. They are interested in supporting only the most commercial, i.e. the most conformist art. This bitter state of affairs has pursued the Czech nation since the last century. The Czech nation may have survived its many years of incarceration – six years of Nazism and forty years of socialism – but, like its people, it returned to the free world as a wreck, able and willing only to grab all it could for itself. Those at the top were not forced to withstand pressure and maintain an intransigence of character, yet they fall upon those who did time in prison, were forbidden to publish or emigrated and defended the right to free expression. Such an attitude serves to belittle and diminish. Those who fear the loss of their well-battered bread support whatever comes along and are indifferent to everything. Before 1989 they waited out the era of planned stupidity in the warmth of their weekend cottages with a glass of Pilsner beer. The maintaining of a weekend cottage was often cited as evidence of a shifting elsewhere of the creative urge. But then as now the majority was indifferent to any kind of injustice.

The craving for party advantages has survived; the position of president is that of a monarch, a tsar – this bacillus of the east has remained within us, and with it a fear of civil society and efforts to take advantage of others, walk around things, act as though we were not part of Europe, as though Europe were separate from us and deserving of ridicule, as the fiasco of 2009, when Czech politicians led the European Union, went to show. This Czech self-isolation – manifested in a lack of interest in what is going on a stone's throw away – is a dangerous thing; Czechs have the feeling that they understand everything best, that they are the centre of the universe, that they'll give everyone a good pasting. *World leaders might say: Yes, of course, how interesting, indeed. But we have our own...* Again and again it's all about property, despotism, violence and arrogance. Lacking are humility, humanity, curiosity and the awareness that life doesn't have to be a competition. Czechs have a tendency to make a show of having the last word. T.G. Masaryk, first president of the republic that

originated in 1918, under whom it was truly free, feared the mentality of servility that the Viennese saw in us – the mentality of the farmhand who every now and then stands up in the pub and declares loudly what he thinks of his master. This servility, saturated in an Asian mentality, looks about itself for someone to blame, on whom it can work off its sense of inferiority. The events of 1989 were similarly raucous. We act as though we don't see the faces of the murderers of the occupying powers or those who collaborated with them. Where did the members of the state security police vanish to? There is a mood of admiration for the strongest. Victims are humiliated on two fronts: by those who ruined them and by those who reproach them for letting themselves be ruined. How does one explain a lack of character in so many people? Whole generations gathered up in that time. The temptation not to be among the persecuted is of course understandable. We keep acting as though we are someone else. For some people this is a defence mechanism that helps them survive in this country. A country where there is no room for the spirit. The Czech version of capitalism harks back to the law of the jungle: the stronger controls the weaker. But the law of human society should be thus: Let the stronger protect the weaker. It is as though wrongs not righted in a lifetime never happened. Everyone clings to the illusion that everything is somehow absurdly OK. Everyone wants to be a victim. Only the desperate and the cynical never allow themselves to be caught. They stay clear of the lasso of socialism, the lasso of communism, even the lasso of capitalism. The world of the Czechs is eerie and bizarre. It is not like expressionism or horror because people lose neither their human face nor their contact with reality. Things always have their 'regular' contours.

I live in Europe. I do not live only in a Czech world. Europe is a special space. A thrilling one. In Australia you can travel for thousands of kilometres and nothing changes. In Europe you travel several hundred, in some regions perhaps several dozen kilometres and everything is different: the language, the architecture, the dishes and above all the mentality. And mentality is the communicating vessel for nineteenth-century terms such as 'nation' and 'patriotism'. These terms trip us up.

At a discussion on European literature held the autumn before last in New York (for Americans in general Europe is a small space that is necessarily uniform), the greatest passion was provoked by the claim of a French author that Europe amounts to France, with the rest of it made up of strange weaklings. The passion was among the panel, not the audience, who lost their way somewhat in the skirmishing that ensued between individual representatives of France, Germany, Poland, the Czech Republic, Spain and Italy but delighted in the intellectual turmoil. For intellectuals of Susan Sontag's ilk Thomas Mann and Franz Kafka were revelations and European culture was one of the sources of all culture. In this regard Sontag held America to be a colony of Europe. Today everything is different.

A comparison of the EU and the USA is not an apt one: we lack a common language, and by language cultural background and thought are linked. Although our customs posts have disappeared, the borders speak for themselves: mentality and differences in our pasts have impressed themselves on the landscape as well as on people's behaviour, faces and gestures. Human weakness, sympathy and antipathy also play a part. (Gerhard Schröder hated the French and farmers, so presumably he hated French farmers most of all. The making of a list of whom and what Václav Klaus hates would be a pointless and interminable exercise.)

Greece has stripped the problems of the European Union and Europe to the marrow. It no longer tells so many lies. Economics has forced it not to. Economics and the market rule and exact their victims, unlike human rights issues, for example. So we know who reigns over globalised society, secretly and totally. I can compile a list of words and phrases that deceive themselves: democracy, freedom, equality before the law and the same rights for all, solidarity, sovereignty. What is going on? Is Europe, too, becoming a place with no space for the spirit? That's right, for spirituality Europeans travel to India. But they do business with

China. And just a handful of writers signed a petition against the London Book Fair, which in cowardly fashion invited only Chinese writers who were inoffensive to the Chinese regime. The countries of Europe are radicalising, some of them, like Hungary, where no one is interested in the desperation of individuals, energetically and to terrifying effect.

Why does self-identification cause so many of us today so much suffering? In democracies right swings to left with the regularity of a pendulum. In the Czech Republic an interesting phenomenon has bubbled to the surface: instead of choosing from among parties, personalities and ideas, many people today choose between acceptance and total rejection of the political system. The choice is not between political parties but between morality and immorality.

In autumn 2011 I went to Andechs Abbey in Bavaria, whose brewery produces seven types of beer and where a meeting of the Pan-European Union was taking place. Founded in 1922, the Pan-European Union was banned by the Nazis and re-established after World War II. Until his death in 2011 its international honorary president was Otto von Habsburg, while its members have included Franz Werfel, Albert Einstein, Konrad Adenauer and Charles de Gaulle. The whole of the Saturday was devoted to a debate on possible shapes of Europe with Ferdinand Kinsky, Dirk Hermann Voss, Thomas Goppel, Adolf Dingelreiter and Bernd Posselt. On the Sunday I took part in an intense discussion on the theme: Europe – a house without a roof or a roof without a house? A grateful metaphor. Everyone set to work on the sentence and I followed its journey. The world of business was represented by Prince Wolfgang of Bavaria and Bernard Antony, a world-famous producer of cheese from Alsace, a small region where problems of French and German co-existence have been played out from time immemorial. Archbishop Jean-Claude Périisset wanted to renovate the house on Christian foundations. But what will happen when Muslim Turkey is accepted? He repeated some words about the traditional family. But what form does today's family take? Politics was represented by Herbert Dorfmann, Member of the European Parliament for South Tyrol, and the media by Georg Paul Hefty, political scientist and contributing editor of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. And what did I represent? Literature. People. A different point of view. Europe is panicking unnecessarily, claimed Hefty. The crisis that had set in was not a crisis of the European Union but the crisis of one country. In the 1990s he was the first to admit the possibility that a woman could be chancellor; he was the first to use the word 'Bundeskanzlerin' (which would become the word of the year). And it was Angela Merkel who first came up with the idea that a state – specifically debt-ridden Greece – could be 'expelled' from the Union. She brought down an avalanche. For good and all she raised the possibility that any state could be expelled from and any state could leave the Union if, for instance, it was strong enough economically and did not want to 'subsidise' weak countries. It is reminiscent of a train crossing the countryside, its passengers getting off and on depending on how comfortable and fast the train is. But Europe is here, as is its landscape, countries and people. It's not going anywhere.

There is sometimes widespread disenchantment with the attitude of the young to the European Union, with the claim made that they consider it an association generated by economic need. They give no thought to *being* Europeans. They study and travel and make friends across countries and continents. It is about common interests, not unity. In this the Pan-European Union does not deviate from its principles; it continues to promote a union based on democracy and friendship, with a spiritual dimension and (sometimes too) conservative values.

In the train on my way home (but I was at home already, I was in Europe) I turned to more general topics. For centuries the face of the world has been determined by the games of men, political games of power. Be that as it may, there is a single course for us to take, a course that is ages old and the hardest of all – respect and the effort to understand and think about others. In the end there is but a single border – the one that stands between person

and person. Perhaps it is time to change the metaphor. Not a house, but small houses that respect common space and each other's privacy.

In April 2012 Herta Müller came to Prague. She had to face a storm of negativity. Apparently she had been given the Nobel Prize not for her literary art but for her political themes. She was not unsettled by such effrontery. Nor by the accusation that she had changed since receiving the Nobel. She hadn't. It was her surroundings that had changed. She guards herself more closely. Who else could she be expected to guard?

Herta Müller's programme was so tightly scheduled that time out had to be stolen. We hurried off to get some dinner. We argued about the colour of the moon over Prague, a moon that was not yet whole. About politics, too; we were fighting back the fear. Not only of anti-Semitism, racism, totalitarianism. She is fragile in her looks, age and commitment. "You must endure it all," she said. Why? This I must find out for myself. She had just moved to a new apartment in Berlin and she was at a florist's buying flowers. "Where are you from? From France?" "No, Romania." "I see. Well, don't worry about it."

I get the same reaction. "And where are you from?" "The Czech Republic? I see. Well, don't worry about it." I might repeat the words of a cabinet-maker from the work of Herta Müller. "It is unendurable," he says. "No one could endure it."

Such a sorting of people is passed on in homes and in schools from adults to children, so the vicious circle cannot be broken. It is important to grope around for a space we can think of as the soul. People are so designed that they consider their own perception of the world the only possible and right one, while much experience is non-transferable, as human adaptability is not made of wax. Literature confirms that there are countless ways of 'perceiving', that the words in which we think can be washed and used 'differently', that freedom to produce and forms of being are boundless. The fight for freedom and for free, critical thought is difficult in every age, nor does it ever, ever end. The notion of collective guilt and collective victory is perverse. And nationalism today is more perverse still as it spits but a single question: "And where are you from?" Let us put a different, more fundamental question: "Who are we?" The main thing is to endure it.

I live among people in a writer's skin. Writing about Henry James, Ezra Pound states: *Artists are the antennae of the race, but the bullet-headed many will never learn to trust their great artists. [...] This multitude of wearisome fools will not learn their right hand from their left or seek out a meaning. It is always easy for people to object to what they have not tried to understand.* Writers feel the wind even when the air is still. Everything has been written but nothing has been understood. The twentieth century is not over yet. I'm stuck in it. I write about it. I keep thinking about it. Why? I wrote the following in my notebook in 2009/10, as I was planning and writing a new book.

"The double-novel *Kobold* is a book about violence in the family and the indifference of society, about racial intolerance and social injustice in our time. Several themes grew upon my tongue. For me this is a metaphor: how does totalitarianism work in general terms and how does our behaviour influence powers that are difficult to grasp in everyday language? Violence within the microcosm of the family is a metaphor for totalitarian regimes, with which the 20th century was saturated. This saturation took in my country, too. Somehow it has left its impression on people's behaviour and gestures, on the mentality of the nation. How can it be that the majority allows the minority such incredible things in such a short time? I wanted to show that it has inconspicuous beginnings. In search of short-term benefits people give up the most valuable things they have. And these are freedom, pride and self-respect.

"I've been thinking about this for some time now – since my book *The Devil by the Nose*. *Kobold* is a kind of culmination of my thinking on the place where I live and where a lot of

taboos remain. All of my characters try in vain to free themselves from the system of the present. What troubles me most about the present day is that when someone ends up on the margins of society through no fault of their own, solidarity and a sense of togetherness in society suddenly disappear. Indeed, such people are criminalised and society pushes their misfortunes away so as not to become infected by them. Instead of helping them. Yet society is prosperous in spite of all the problems; we live in peace-time, there are no wars, everyone's basic needs are covered. I have the feeling that we are cooking up big problems for the future. There is sympathy in words, but not in deeds, nor in people's behaviour. Take a look, for instance, at the shamefully light punishments in my country for child abuse, the worse crime of all. (And this is assuming that cases even make it to court.) So I asked myself this: what is truly going on in the society I live in?

"Prosperity can lead to social apathy. This is a strange, aggressive kind of apathy and mass indifference which means the sudden disappearance of fundamentals that make us human. These are fellow feeling, empathy, basic decency and a dialogue in which each listens to and is aware of the other. This is not a pretty scene. The labels we carried over from the last century – such as collective guilt and collective heroism – have stayed with us. To gain experience you need time, but in my country there seems to be no willingness to deepen experience by going beyond a certain point of recognition. What remains is the labelling of people according to the colour of their skin or whether they were born in the skin of a woman or a man. Instead of our feeling at last and with clarity that borders truly exist only between one person and the next. All other labelling comes from without.

"The overarching plot concerns the story of Michael Kobold and his family within the history of central Europe, where the changing framework of society and the fatality of the human soul play important roles. He has a daughter, two sons and a stepdaughter. I follow the lives of these people from birth to death. In the course of the writing the story of the stepdaughter demanded more space and detached itself from the main flow, which is like water. The book is called *Kobold (A Surfeit of Tenderness)*; its subtitle is *About Water*. I've lived in Prague for a long time and tended to walk along the Vltava River without paying much attention to it, so I said to myself I would dedicate a story to it. It is set on the river bank and under the surface, and it begins on the Charles Bridge. An eccentric loves the statues on the Charles Bridge, and because he is afraid they will crumble and doesn't want rain to fall on them, he makes them coats. During a fight in the 1920s one of the statues is broken off and it falls into the river. Only at the end does it become clear who has actually 'drowned' and whose spirit has sunk to the river bed. The language and the text as a whole are conceived as a river that rushes, stammers, flows by. At times it is translucent or motionless, but in its depths there is always something going on. For the narrative of the second book *Kobold: (A Surfeit of People)*, whose subtitle is *About Fire*, I used agitated language that scalds like fire. Both elements are fundamental; I respect their logic on every level; they are connected but at the same time they repel each other. I used the word 'Kobold', which is of German origin, not only as a surname but as a designation for a certain type of person. A 'kobold' is a mythical figure that emerges from the deep but also the model for a particular type of person, who is highly intelligent but lacking in social intelligence and a stranger to social conscience. The true fellow feeling. This type of person finds it very easy to manipulate others. Kobolds rise quickly to positions of power and leadership at all levels, in companies and elsewhere. They are managers and politicians. In this way kobolds determine the rules of society, as they know very well how to manipulate others and get things to work in their own favour.

"I view this behaviour of manipulation as a prime mover in the origins of totalitarianism. I'm surprised by how many forms of domestic violence exist in a Czech environment. We fail to notice it only because it goes on in 'good families'. Neighbours, the community and society do not intervene in the affairs of these miniature concentration camps, even though the cruelty is against children. This is horrifying. As a society we do not stand up for our children. Or for our women. This is another indication of how democracy in this country is failing. What

goes on in this small area can be compared to totalitarianism. It begins inconspicuously; of course at the start there is love and everything is done for the benefit of the other. The hell has insidious beginnings. It is often not till the arrival of children that the 'victim' understands what is going on. She is cornered, and even if there is no one on the outside to help her, still she has no strength to help herself. Because manipulators are very clever at what they do. Truth and untruth are the same to them. In public they appear and act like decent, respectable, agreeable, successful people, but as soon as they close their front door the hell begins. I wish to uncover and show this principle through the microcosm of the family; it functions in exactly the same way throughout society. Dictators of all times and in all places exploit the same situations and apply manipulation against which the majority – if it is incapable of critical thought – cannot react. It is actually quite clear and simple. In *Kobold* I bring together the two levels: the social – i.e. the space in which I live and into which I was born – amid the transformations of the 20th century, and the personal level of the characters with an understanding of their deeper psychology. Only after this comes the silence around the soul, which art tries in vain to portray.

“In the second part, dedicated to fire, I was inspired by a real event – an attack on a Romani family in Vítkov. Because I was taken aback by the reaction of people and the media, which played down the whole thing. This is but further evidence of how sick our society is. In general, whether we're talking of domestic violence or violence founded in racial intolerance, our society is set up so that the victim deserves what they get, regardless of what actually happened – and so on and so forth. This cannot be our reaction in the 21st century. Violence – racially motivated violence in particular – must be named and punished. It is an immature society that gives rise to *kobolds*. There are a great many skeletons in the cupboard. And I take them out one after another and cast light on them in a stylized work of fiction. As society would not wish to see them. As with my novel *Money from Hitler*. What I was interested in here was a model of behaviour that is practised all over the world. All my books are works of anthropological research. If I was in Cambodia, I would use Pol Pot. But as I live here, I chose a local backdrop. I'm interested in why it is that so few people are guided by a steady, solid system of values that means that they would never do certain things. The majority need laws, structures, checks, to walk a well-trodden path. Then something happens of historical importance, something which puts everything out of joint and shakes everything up, and suddenly they are capable of anything. And by this I mean the very worst. And this is what scares me. Because today, too, we must emphasise that it is monstrous to judge someone by the colour of their skin, by their appearance, by their nationality, by their religion. There is actually just one thing I want to say by my books: I'm not bothered about whether a person is Czech, Italian, American, German, Jewish, right-wing, left-wing, a communist, a Nazi or a dissident. I'm not bothered! What interests me is the *person*. The only border is that which exists between one person and the next, expressed by how people behave. I'm not interested in labels. At the same time no one can make the excuse that it was or is because of the time we lived or live in. The guilt rests with people.

“I'm a danger for Czech readers in that I deprive them of the myths we like to tell about ourselves. Of course we are better than the others ... This attitude is particularly prevalent in *Money from Hitler*. It caused a storm because I describe Czech greed and the cruelty of Czech post-war gold-diggers who appropriated the property of Jews who had ended their days in the ovens of Auschwitz. The book's central figure is a strange one: Gita Lausmannová is a fictional character in a heavily stylised metaphorical tale who has absorbed the essence of a given time. But the book speaks about the present, and I chose for it a vivid and emotional form. It is a model world of a woman in a man's world. Gita has features in common with characters of classical drama, which I like. She was born into a German-speaking Jewish family in Bohemia. And she loves Bohemia. As she was living in an assimilated family she had no idea she was a Jew. Then, still a child, she finds herself in a concentration camp, where she is given her first label. She goes home to find there is no home for her to return to. She is given her next label for having spoken German – she is

marked out as a Nazi. And so it goes on for the whole of her life. She is ensnared by political and social dogma but most of all by the irrationality of human existence. In spite of all this – and this is what makes her a positive character to me – she never gives up. Her whole life long she believes that hope is waiting around the corner, that everything will change and conciliation will be achieved. In *Gita Lausmannová* I wanted to show that nothing is black and white, that lives are complicated, that people change and must be able to confess what they have done, how much the memory fails. Indeed, we all fumble our way through our lives, ignorant of what is in the mix, of what was important twenty, thirty years ago. Everything is a question mark. Gradually we ‘amend’ the story, so that we might breathe. How, then, can we be sure of the constructs of historians, constructs about other people? What is truth? The essence of an era and truth itself can be addressed only in fiction. It is paradoxical that the truth of the novel is the most comprehensive, embracing as it does the essence of human existence from birth to death. And there is a crucial thing I want to point out. We argue that in children there is hope, but this is not actually the case. Children are brought up by parents and these parents pass on to them their prejudices and clichés and ideas about the past and the world and about how life should be lived; they tell them the only ‘right way’ of doing things. And only the strongest individuals, those with the courage to shed a different light, whose minds are open and who are capable of critical thought, can get at the truth. It is easy to accept the version that casts us all as victims or heroes. In this country we have a tendency to say that we know everything best, that those around us are in the wrong, that we are always the victim. Of course, every society tends to make such claims. But there are also societies that have succeeded in coming to terms with shameful periods in their history and apologised for them. All it takes is to give things names, to face them unflinchingly, and to apologise. Only after this has happened is a society a healthy one. In *Kobold* I want to make a further point: if within the family and the life of the individual disagreeable information is suppressed and kept dark, it will always return. And it is the same with societies. If something is suppressed and brushed under the carpet, it will decay and society will sicken and be unable to move forward. As *Money from Hitler* showed. It was a Litmus test. It is literature! So why the belligerent, mean and hysterical reactions that came from all possible angles and all kinds of groups, some of them anonymous? Suddenly you see that nothing has been processed. Nothing has been named, because if it had been, such hysterical reactions could never have arisen. There is nothing at stake here but the essence of a particular time and particular behaviour. It was as though I had plucked at a string in these people’s subconscious, or had held out a mirror. That book is about the present.

“The nonsensical claim is still made that we should be proud of those who gave their lives for this country. But nobody doubts this! We know who started it, we know about all the atrocities that the Nazis set in motion. But this does not mean that we should blacken out other pages telling of behaviour and history. As an author, I must watch over it all. I will always be on the side of the victim. I’m not bothered at all about which group the victim comes from. If there is a single thwarted, innocent life, then on this thwarted life I must dwell. Sufferings simply cannot be compared. No one ever won a war. There are no victors in wars. I examine the action over such a great expanse of time and in a highly stylized manner, and still this is how people react. I’ll always take notice of such things, wherever in the world they happened. I have long wondered what went on at the end of the 19th century while the 20th century was incubating. What the British governor of India did that meant 30 million people had to starve for it! Food was available, but of course this was about politics. I think about self-isolation. I say to myself: If only people could feel empathy and respect for whomever! But how to achieve this? All I can show by literature is that we are here only for a while, that no one stays around for ever, that we must take notice of one another and work together.”

I live. Conflicts concerning life’s guiding concepts will always exist at a social and a personal level (Susan Sontag’s marriage foundered because her husband wanted a large family and she wanted a large library). Sometimes politicians wish to make of the natural order – a living thing that is as various as life itself – a (totalitarian) system (which in art, for instance, is

always a route to hell). We are ensnared in a falsified history of the twentieth century and the first tenth of the twenty-first amid prejudice and nonsense about racial superiority; the snare has produced Norway's mass murderer Breivik. Until the knot has been disentangled, we can never be free. Above all words must not cheat themselves. The reducing of life to business in the name of democracy is a dangerous thing. I am glad for the European Union. It urges us to think about others. It has been shown that one situation can be given markedly different narratives. It is important not to withhold one's own.

Translated from Czech by William Oakland

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Picture by Milan Malicek

