

REFLECTION

A Canadian Jew in Berlin

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I'M NOT NORMALLY A morning person, but each morning, early, I lock the door to my apartment, walk down three flights of stairs, out of the Gartenhaus, across a small courtyard overrun with weeds and abandoned bicycles, through the main floor of the Vorderhaus and outside, looking both left and right to take in the rhythmic curve of the buildings as they follow the contour of the street. I am on my way to class in the first Yiddish in Berlin Summer Program at the Freie Universität, located in Dahlem, a leafy suburb of the city.

I walk briskly, following the street as it veers left under a traffic bridge plastered with posters, a surprising number of them for concerts headlining American musicians. This leads to another street whose buildings house offices that are still asleep except for the occasional brown-skinned early-morning cleaner. After fifteen minutes, I enter an open square. The express bus pulls in; I climb the stairs and take a seat.

The woman originally from Berlin, now visiting from Ohio, who helped me on my first confused morning, is already seated with her two grandchildren on their way to a summer arts program. She is the only person on the bus who will offer me her seat, despite my white hair and sixty-seven years on the planet. There's never anyone older than me on this morning commute, but at other times I've watched wizened old women and men, their full shopping bags precariously balanced between their legs, holding tightly to a pole as seated youths stare into their cellphones. When I ask a German friend why young people don't offer their seat to us old folks, she theorizes, "Our generation was angry with our parents for their behaviour during the war. We didn't respect old people. We're deeply critical of them. Ashamed actually. Still are. The younger generation has picked up our attitude with no idea of its source."

* Thank you to Dara Culhane and especially Leslie Robertson for their support in preparing this essay, which has been edited and excerpted from a longer essay in progress.

“Their behaviour during the war” is shorthand for the Nazi project to annihilate Europe’s Jews. I rarely forget that I am in the country principally responsible for the murder of six million Jews in the space of a few short years. Horrific images play out in my mind. Janusz Korczak, the great educator and advocate for children’s rights, after refusing sanctuary on the Aryan side, walks at the head of a long line of children from the Warsaw Ghetto orphanage he ran to the Umschlagplatz and, from there, to the trains and certain death in the Treblinka extermination camp. It is the genocidal atrocities against children that I find the hardest to comprehend, the most painful. I work to push away the images, but I do not breathe freely in this country, am never fully at peace.

The students in the 2017 Yiddish in Berlin Summer Program, run by the Medem Library in Paris, include both Jews like me, as well as non-Jews. We hail from a host of countries: from Belgium, France, Poland, Russia, Ukraine, and Israel; and from Germany – from Berlin itself, as well as other from parts of the country. I am the only Canadian. Over and over again, both in Yiddish and in English, the lingua franca of so many international gatherings, we are told and repeat, “*Mir brengen Yidish tsurik keyn Berlin*” / “We’re bringing Yiddish back to Berlin.”

When we sit in class, reading Moyshe Kulbak’s brilliant modernist epic poem, *Disner Tsbayld-Harold*, about the poet’s experiences as a young man in Berlin in the early 1920s, we are restaking a claim to Jewish, and specifically Yiddish, experience in Berlin. My lungs expand, my breath slows. When we read Dvoyre Fogel’s amazing avant-garde experimental poetry, written in the 1930s in Berlin, we are thumbing our noses at the Nazis. Despite your determination, your organization, your brutality, the sounds and syllables of Yiddish will echo in Berlin. Yiddish’s creative geniuses, their lives tragically and brutally cut short (in Kulbak’s case, by the Soviets and not the Nazis), speak again here. I stand more solidly on the ground.

Before attending the Berlin Yiddish program, I assumed that Jews in Germany spoke German, and that there had never been a significant Yiddish-speaking presence in Berlin. How wrong I was. During the 1920s, Berlin was an important destination, true, often merely a way station, for Yiddish speakers leaving their home countries to the east. A vibrant Yiddish-speaking immigrant community thrived in the neighbourhood of Scheunenviertel. And, to quote Ekaterina Kuznetsova, another participant in the program: “So many important Yiddish writers and artists lived in Berlin that it is hard to list them all. David Bergelson,

David Hofstein, Hersh Dovid Nomberg, Der Nister, Uri Zvi Greenberg, and many others spent some time in Berlin ...”¹

Passengers get on the bus; others get off. Some I recognize; others I’ve never seen before. I’m relieved to see the young woman with bright-pink streaks in her hair tapping her feet as the bus approaches. On more than one occasion, I’ve glimpsed her running toward the stop as the bus takes off. In my mind, she reluctantly tears herself away from a woman’s, or perhaps a man’s, passionate embrace to head for a poorly paid office job she doesn’t like. She gets on the bus and takes the seat next to mine. Today she’s wearing an old, tight, black Tragically Hip T-shirt. I smile – a little bit of home. I wonder what she knows about the band. Does she know they’ve played their last concert? That Gord Downie’s life hangs by a thread? I hum to myself, “I feel / Here, here and here” from the band’s 2016 *Secret Path* album and think about Gord Downie. Another creative genius whose life will soon be cut short.

At the next stop, a man gets on the bus speaking Arabic to his curly haired four- or five-year-old son. I recognize them; they take this bus every morning. In some parts of Berlin, those who aren’t of Northern European descent are so visible, seem to me to be so vulnerable. The term “non-Aryan” enters my mind and I shudder. Has this family recently fled a terrible situation in their home country? What sort of welcome are they experiencing here in Germany? The boy slips his hand out from his father’s and marches confidently to the back of the bus to take a seat. His father follows, at enough of a distance to allow his son to glory in his own autonomy. When they get to their destination, the boy will race ahead, hoping to get off the bus on his own, but his father will take a firm hold of his hand. My heart goes out to this father, vacillating between offering his son freedom and insisting on his protection. This is love and only the beginning of letting go and letting go and letting go.

The morning express bus is my neighbourhood in Berlin, offering me community in a foreign country where my rudimentary German renders me mostly silent. Many Berliners speak English, but my principles stop me from asking them to abandon their language for mine. I’ve built intimate, although admittedly one-sided relationships with many of the regulars on the bus, woven elaborate stories based in my ignorance, dreams, and longings. Breathing in the lavender perfume emanating from the young woman in the Tragically Hip T-shirt sitting next to me,

¹ Ekaterina Kuznetsova, “Yiddish in Berlin / Berlin in Yiddish.” In *Geveb, A Journal of Yiddish Studies*, 6 December 2017. <https://ingeveb.org>.

I lean back in my seat and continue humming. “I hurt/ Here, here and here.”

Glancing absentmindedly toward the front of the bus, I see the words “Mercedes-Benz” tastefully and proudly displayed on the console next to the driver. I am riding in a Mercedes-Benz bus. I stop breathing. Adolf Hitler gets out of a luxury Mercedes-Benz and thrusts his arm forward in a Nazi salute. My hands and feet are ice cold. The man sitting two rows in front of me with the clean-shaven head looks like a neo-Nazi. If he attacks, will he go after me or the Arabic-speaking man and his young son? Do we have an ally on this bus or are we alone? There is no ground under my feet. The images I’ve beaten back play themselves out vividly in my mind. I am in the now and in the before, in the real, the dreaded, the wholly imagined. My eyes land on the young woman sitting next to me, on her Tragically Hip T-shirt. “I live / Here, here and here / I died / Here. Here and here.”

News footage of a young Chanie Wenjack smiling at me from a picture frame in his sister’s home swims before my eyes. Chanie is the “I” who died in 1966, “Here. / Here and here.” His twelve-year-old body was found next to the railway tracks after he tried walking the six hundred kilometres home to Ogoki Post, Ontario, from the Cecilia Jeffrey Indian Residential School in Kenora. Another photograph enters my mind: a long line of Indigenous boys stand at attention in front of a row of beds, their hair cut short, looking dejectedly out at me. It is the genocidal atrocities against children that I find the most difficult to comprehend, the most painful.

Suddenly, unexpectedly, the window in my mind opens up. I am not separate from the genocide against Chanie Wenjack, against those boys in the residential school dormitory. My relationship to genocide is complex. As a Canadian Jew, I carry more than just the cultural legacy of victimization by the Nazis and their helpers. My home in Vancouver lies on unceded territory, though I pay no taxes to the Stó:lō peoples from whom this land was stolen. In what other ways am I colluding with and profiting from the genocide against First Nations peoples, with the theft of First Nations land and wealth, with the attempted erasure of First Nations identity, history, and language? In what other ways do I “sign / Here. Here and here / Here / Here. Here and here / Here / Here, here and here.”

How can I become a respectful and useful ally, the ally that I myself seek on the Mercedes-Benz bus? Through the very air I’ve breathed as a Canadian Jew born soon after the end of World War II, through my

family, the Jewish institutions around me, and my ongoing work as a Yiddish translator, I am developing a nuanced understanding of the experience of individual Jews brutalized by the Nazi genocide. I want to develop the same nuanced understanding of the Indigenous experience of the Canadian genocide.

The photograph of the residential school dormitory returns to my mind. What can I find out about the school? About the innocent children held captive there? Perhaps I can find out about one boy. What can I learn about him? About the fabric of his life and the life of his family, his community, his nation? What name did he answer to? Was he a joker, a thinker, an artist? A leader, a loner? What language did he speak at home? Did his ease in his language survive the punishments he experienced trying to speak at residential school? Are the sounds and syllables of this language finding voice today in the mouths of the old and, more importantly, the young?

How did this boy's family react to the separation from their precious son, grandson, nephew, cousin? How did the community react to the separation from so many of its precious children? Was the boy kidnapped or did his parents agree to send him to school, assuming he'd receive a good education? How did his family and community react to the poor education, deprivation, and abuse in the school? How does the human heart endure letting go under these circumstances? If this boy, like Chanie Wenjack, did not experience adulthood, what can I learn about his death?

In what other ways did and does the Canadian state's brutality against Indigenous people affect this one individual, his family, his community, his nation? How did and do people resist? How did and do they find joy? Who were and are the artists, the leaders?

What are the questions I don't yet know to ask? Where will my questions lead me? How will I reassess my own life in light of what I learn? What actions will I take? What actions will I stop taking? I am determined to stop signing.