

Fluß der Erinnerung (River of Memory)

texts

1. ...he...imagined he had a thousand lives, one in Eschingen, one in the obligatory Ulm, a gilt-edged one (Catholic-Pagan) in Melk, one small life after Vienna in Petronell (alias Carnuntum), in the shadows of Marcus Aurelius, one in Komarom (where his friend had played the dandy in the fifties), one in Szentendre, one on the Mohacs plain where, under the yoke of a wicked, but not altogether unattractive woman, he'd bring up his unruly kids on the banks of the Csele, one life in Ujvidek on one of those boulevards that run down to the river, in a bedsit, embittered, alone, one in Orsova, one in Ruse, cherishing the memory of his former wives (whom following in the footsteps of Nicola Bedo, he had loved to death), one pitiful life in Tulcea, and one at the end of the winding St George arm, originally dug by a dragon's tail and still preserving the memory of ancient battles, in silence, sinking ever deeper into the decaying mud of the riverbank... A thousand lives!

(Peter Esterhazy, b. 1950, Budapest, Hungary)

2. Grown older, but not yet tired of their interdependence, the man and the woman have begun to inform each other not only about themselves, but also about the world, with the help of this playful attitude. By assigning words and phrases to people and objects, associations that seem arbitrary to outsiders but originate in their respective worlds of experience, they seek to bind these worlds together. Perhaps they are retroactively attempting to create an interdependence of their past as well, a past that does not correspond to their real life stories. They have known each other for only six years, yet in view of their age, they lay claim to a mutual past that stretches back much further in time.

(Barbara Frischmuth, b. 1941, Bad Aussee, Austria)

3. I slept, as I have said, on the first floor at the top of the stairs. Opposite my bed was my grandparents' bedroom; to the right was the entrance to the kitchen, behind which, underneath the roof, was a small cubby-hole which we rather grandly called the dining room and in which if my memory serves me, there stood a large bucket of dripping; above this hung strings of onions, etc. There was no electric light, and so petroleum lamps at first played an important role. Then one day we got electric light; my grandfather must have just had an article accepted for publication, for we also got a Eumig radio, which my grandfather installed in the kitchen on a shelf screwed into the wall, as was then customary. From then on we spent the evenings sitting religiously at the kitchen table, listening in.

(Thomas Bernhard, b. 1931, Heerlen, Netherlands)

4. At that time there was no quay and one could go ten or twenty paces into the water without getting in above one's chest. There were little wooden piers all along the shore, and the sail-boats, anchored farther out, rubbed their prows against the pontoons supporting the big wooden bridges. Swarms of Turkish, Armenian, and Rumanian stevedores crossed and recrossed these bridges, which sank a little with their weight and rose again.

At first I watched this world from a distance but I soon made friends with the children of the four or five nations which occupied the town. I liked it best of all when they plunged into the water. . . I even wanted to go in with them, but there was so much fighting and simultaneous ducking that I hadn't the courage. Then one day they brought along a little boy, as blond as I was, whom they nearly drowned, so I left them and watched the boats that were for hire, each with its boatman smoking and humming softly in the lazy sunlight.

(Panait Istrati, b. 1881, Braila, Romania)

5. I have known for a long time now that I am not identical to myself. I was three or four years old when I first felt this, playing train in the hallway that led to the kitchen, dining room, and various other rooms. The engine and cars were empty thread spools my mother gave me. ...I was shoving the brown spools back and forth, whistling awkwardly now and then - it was more of thin cry, really - to announce the arrival of my train, when I realized I was being observed. Someone was standing right behind me, looking on as I, busy with the switching maneuvers of my little spools, eagerly scooted about on the floor. Since there was no one else in the hallway, it could only have been me watching with a mildly sarcastic smile, as I sent the spools, my toy train, off on a journey into the unknown. I pretended to take no notice of the other presence and kept on playing, just as though he were not really there at all.

(Milo Dor, b. 1923, Budapest, Hungary)

6. We ordered calling cards that told everything about us - our names, addresses, and other information the police would need. Mom liked these cards a lot; she would flourish them in the presence of the neighbor women and say: "We're always busy!" Mom also maintained: "You've got to have friends everywhere!" Grandpa replied: "Right, as if all they had to do was wait on us!" Mom saw it differently and was always asking policemen, watchmen, and other people with armbands if she could do something forbidden, like cross the street in the wrong place, for example, or get an abnormally large piece of meat for half price. Afterward she would brag: "When there's a will, there's a way!" - even though she hadn't gotten anything.

(Bora Cosic, b. 1932, Zagreb, Yugoslavia)

7. Everyone lived by thinking about flight. They thought of swimming across the Danube until the water becomes another country. Of running after the corn until the soil becomes another country. You could see it in their eyes: Soon they will spend every penny they have on detailed maps. They hope for fog on the field and fog on the river for days on end so they can avoid the bullets and the guard dogs, so they can run away, swim away. You could see it in their hands: Soon they will build balloons, fragile birds made of bedsheets and saplings. They hope the wind won't drop, so they can fly away.

I didn't want to leave the country. Not via the Danube, not through the air, not with the freight train. We went into the scruffy park. Edgar said: If only the right person would have to leave, everyone else would be able to stay in the country. He didn't believe it himself.

(Herta Muller, b. 1953, Nitzkydorf, Romania)

8. ... it is always wrong to explain what happens in a country by the character of its inhabitants. For the inhabitant of a country has at least nine characters: a professional, a national, a civic, a class, a geographic, a sexual, a conscious, an unconscious, and possibly even a private character to boot. He unites them in himself, but they dissolve him, so that he is really nothing more than a small basin hollowed out by these many streamlets that trickle into it and drain out of it again, to join other such rills in filling some other basin."

(Robert Musil, b.1880, Klagenfurt, Austria)

9. I am a typical mixture of the dearly departed Austro-Hungarian monarchy: simultaneously Hungarian, Croat, Slovak, German and Czech, and if I were to rummage through my ancestors and have my blood analysed—a very fashionable science among nationalists these days—there I would find, like layers in a river bed, traces of Tzintar, Armenian, and perhaps also Gypsy and Jewish blood. But I do not recognize this science of spectral blood tests, a science of highly dubious worth, dangerous and inhumane, especially for these times and these parts—where that dangerous theory of soil and blood merely creates suspicion and hatred, and where that 'spectral analysis of blood and origin' is preferably done in a very spectacular and primitive way, with the knife and the revolver. ...I am, sirs, a German writer; the world is my fatherland."

(Danilo Kis, b. 1935, Subotica, Yugoslavia)

10. A black-eyed, brown-skinned adolescent came in with a child who looked like him, and went to the bar, where he exchanged a large empty wine bottle for a full one. He introduced the child as his uncle and talked about himself. He went to the local public school; the class for foreigners was known as the "color class", not because of the crayons, which are virtually the only teaching aids in use, but because of the different skin colorations represented. The principal, said the boy, is proud of this class; he had even arranged for it to have a special entrance, and the hours are different from those of the Austrian classes.

(Peter Handke, b. 1942, Griffen, Austria)

11. Abraham falls victim to the following illusion: he cannot stand the uniformity of this world. Now the world is known, however, to be uncommonly various, which can be verified at any time by taking a handful of world and looking at it closely. Thus this complaint at the uniformity of the world is really a complaint at not having been mixed profoundly enough with the diversity of the world.

(Franz Kafka, b. 1883, Prague, Czechoslovakia)

12. When the train got under way again and finally crossed that imaginary - but oh so graphically demarcated - line, and with a hoot that sounded triumphant and joyful to my ears, stormed into the clean and colourful-looking station on the other side of the border, it brought back to me the very feeling I had known twenty years earlier. I was free! I leaned out of the window. A young fellow in a white overall was selling Coca-Cola, bananas, oranges and chocolate,

there was a banging of carriage doors and from below the window came the sound of German: the language which, twenty years before, had been associated with the unfreedom whose grip I had escaped; the paradoxical transformation gave me an uneasy feeling.

(Ivan Klima, b. 1931, Prague, Czechoslovakia)

13. But everything is all right. The mirror has been dragged out of the darkness (it was covered with a Persian carpet), and the workers are placing it carefully on a cart, and in the mirror raised above this gigantic flea market there is a reflection of an adyllic summer landscape, of greenery and light and a fragment of bright blue sky, with clean white clouds floating, as in the paintings of the Flemish masters. The descendants of Noah, in their innocence, are going off to their deaths, as the Pharaohs went into the silence of their magnificent pyramids, carrying all their earthly goods with them. Carpets, tapestries, dressing tables, marble-topped tables, precious antiquarian books in leather bindings, thronelike Biedermeier armchairs, couches, ottomans, dressers, dishes, glassware, crystal, flowerpots with rubber trees, flowerpots with oleanders, with geraniums...Next a porter brings bowling balls, holding them cautiously in his palm like duck eggs just laid and still warm."

(Danilo Kis, b. 1935, Subotica, Yugoslavia)

14. Aunt Walburga is in the kitchen peeling potatoes. Aunt Mirli is preparing a cream soup at the tiled stove. On the table stands the green and white fumed bowl, ready for the cream soup. Aunt Mirli is just turning from the stove in order to take the green and white fumed bowl from the table when something in the yard catches her eye through the tiny kitchen window. A man is coming across the yard from the road towards the house. The man is tall and very thin, and dressed in a battered and somewhat tattered uniform, He is walking across slowly, he seems exhausted, he must have come a long way.

...Aunt Mirli hasn't so much as noticed that the bowl has slipped out of her hands, she looks out of the kitchen window to the yard, her lips are quivering, with a great effort she opens her mouth and says quietly: GEORGE.

(Ilse Tielsch, b. 1929, Auspitz, Czechoslovakia)

15. I call my mother to ask whether she remembers anything about stocking up for the War. What should I buy? She hesitates a little, not because she doesn't remember - she does - but because such a precise question confronts her with the new reality of our lives. Then she recites: oil, flour, salt, candles, potatoes, bacon, sausages, pasta, rice, tea, coffee, soap... "But I don't have a place to store it, I tell her in despair. You have to make room, store it in your bedroom, she says as if it is normal by now to keep potatoes where you sleep.

(Slavenka Drakulic, b. 1949, Zagreb, Yugoslavia)

16. A few days ago, on a lonely evening bicycle excursion along the Danube, I really missed you. What an ineradicable air of loneliness those banks have. I remember having experienced it once five or six years ago, on a Sunday, as I had been sitting in what one would call genial company at the Klosterneuberg monastery, in the large garden with the view of the mountains and the meadows. How it came up from the depths of the water, the loneliness, which obviously represented something completely different than one usually thinks. By no means the opposite of sociability. Perhaps one only has the right to feel lonely among people.

(Arthur Schnitzler, B. 1862, Vienna, Austria)

17. It seemed as if he enjoyed life the more because it still continued beyond his own time, and as if he enjoyed each day, each evening, each meal that heaven granted him with the pleasure one derives from unexpected and unearned holidays.

...He had not grown old, it was just that the world had become new, as if he had lived a thousand years. .. the pains came like muffled noises, the pleasures kept a respectful distance, delights he already experienced in the past even as he tasted them, like their own traces left behind years ago. They were recollections of delights.

(Joseph Roth, b. 1894, Schwabendorf, Slovenia)

18. A park...many people, strangers, not too close and not too far off, all of them in the mild light of late summer, some lying down, some standing, some sitting or walking , all alive beneath a warm sky, no one is shouting, no one is fighting, everyone comes and goes freely, alone or with others, with whomever he pleases, and everyone can stay as long as he wants without making anyone feel oppressed or saddened. It is as if people were free to enter paradise with no obligation to remain there and no danger of being expelled for any sin whatsoever.

(Elias Canetti, b. 1905, Ruse, Bulgaria)

