

Ulrike Draesner

Love of ghosts

(on a polyglot poetics)

Origin – Herkunft in German – is a technical word. It applies to buses, trains and ships. To timetables and product lines, to places, to tales. Applied to people though it casts a shadow. A shadow warm and soft, bloody, often enough forgotten yet present; “origin” is dubious, useful, and once more turning into an ambivalent concept in an increasingly globalised world. The shadow of the word ‘origin’ is ‘home’. It has a shape. I was told first stories in Bavaria, where home’s shadow is prone to taking the form of a sausage or a cake or even a Schmarren, and it smells like cheese from the neighbouring village. It has a colour: sky, fields, a tram braking, a brook gurgling. It has a particular light, in winter, in autumn. It has a sound: the wind in the wooden roofs, in the grass. It has a twist of the tongue.

Home as Heimat is a word of the emotions. Half forbidden when I was growing up, rarely used, suspect from the outset – like those half-criminals who populated the newspapers’ ‘miscellaneous’ columns.

Home, for my grandparents, was something lost. Something wonderful, in hindsight. But even that home they’d rather not see again. Too suspect. They could have travelled to Poland. It was brought up nearly every time they met with friends and acquaintances; some left and crossed the border once again, while others, among them my grandparents, stayed put.

Home, glorious, was a thing of the past.

Home, now: a place that no longer resembled itself.

They knew that home was a construct. Home, a luxury. A surplus.

I didn’t know this, albeit sensed that something in that talk of home, a talk that never ceased in this branch of the family, wasn’t right. Was suspect. But that was exactly what appealed to me – the feeling of excess, the authentic inauthenticity. The way x was used to talk about y. Home was interesting, ambivalent: x shone through y, through z.

All of this meant ‘home’.

The shining. The secretiveness. Gaps and gasps.

Home, in itself, meant nothing.

Nearly forty years have passed since then.

‘Home’

For two decades I’ve been trying to write about it. Through fiction, more or less. Hannes Grolmann, the grandfather figure in the novel *Seven Springs*, isn’t my grandfather, but without my

grandfather he wouldn't be Hannes Grolmann. Does that make sense? It's not a metaphor. It describes, very precisely, a condition of non-biographical biography. A way of being rooted in rootlessness, within a field charged with the personal and the political, the historical and the social, within a shadow that is warm, soft, cold. Questions sitting on the shelf mean nothing if nobody asks them. It takes questions and a questioner, questions and a mouth, to take them off the shelf and voice them.

Fourty years ago my grandparents were anxious to share something of their early lives with me. They picked and chose, of course, recounting only the good things. When they told me their story they had been living in Bavaria for a quarter of a century. In their tales they were 'at home', yet in the present, during the telling, they were sitting in Munich. With me. An origin story, tailored, cut down to a bearable size. But my grandparents' faces, their sheer physical presence, the apartment that surrounded us – they always told a different tale. And so it was that the 'Dachshund in the Oven' became my favourite story.

It was about a trick, and it still made my grandparents laugh. My grandfather had bought a Dachshund-puppy against my grandmother's verdict who didn't want to have a dog in her house. Early in the morning of the 24th of december 1937 he stole out of bed at dawn, walked to the breeder, tucked the puppy under his coat and brought it home. Silently he entered the still dark and cold kitchen, put on the oven – lowest level, of course –, nested the puppy onto a tray, closed it, went into hiding behind the kitchen door. He knew that my grandmother would be coming down any minute to start her day's work. And it worked out well: her surprise, his charm, the puppy's trust. The dog had stayed with them, my grandmother growing especially fond of him. Till they had to leave their Silesian home in January 1945. Till my father, aged 14, was charged to bring the Dachshund to the local butcher. Forced migration. You weren't allowed to take pets along.

This my grandparents didn't tell. They ignited a warm Heimat-fire in an oven, they laughed and made me laugh, but the story nevertheless held a second truth: I saw or sensed a dachshund in a dark oven that suddenly grew hot, the dachshund, vulnerable, threatened, placed in a trap, saved or lost in the nick of time – it was my grandparents themselves. It was us. All of us. In the middle of the Cold War.

My grandparents' and my father's history as refugees made sure one thing was clear: origin is no fact, no fixed place. It is always a story, a process, no end.

Groping for words – in the mute

Faced with the emptiness of meaning in the word 'home', it helps to couple it with another word. Work, for instance. Homework was something we did leaning against the outer wall of our

primary school, measuring how fast the village stream flowed. They told us a few local legends about the saints, all of which ended with a cross growing from the head of a deer when it saw the Holy Mother. The name ‘Maria’ was barely mentioned, and in any case I knew it had nothing to do with me.

For that was home number two: Catholicism. My Catholic grandmother spoke Bavarian. In her language ‘home’ was the parental farmstead. It wasn’t much spoken of, it was there. And it was useful.

My sister and I were the opposite: Protestant.

Little devils?

Certainly our Catholic grandmother’s gifts to us were always significantly smaller than those she gave our Catholic cousins (which was all of them).

When I went to school in 1968, they set up a top-stream class for Catholics only. Protestants, by official definition, were stupid. Astonishing, isn’t it? State-sanctioned religious fanaticism in the Federal Republic of 1968.

How do you fight something you can’t put your finger on? Unknowingly, I inherited part of my refugee father’s lineage.

My mother’s homelessness only struck me later.

Then there was home number three, the great land of my father’s family: broad as the mind, the imagination. Behind an iron curtain, which for years I pictured as a literal iron edifice straddling Eastern Europe. I imagined you could burrow underneath it, at least as a child.

There were stories to be found there: grandfather as a Silesian hunter. As the heir to a brewery. As a horseman. Grandfather, who, being a hunter, took his dachshund out. The story was told over and over again. As some other – anecdotes. Over and over again, in the same meagre words. My sister and I soon got fed up, tried to flee from it. The babble and stammer of trauma. We didn’t know, we felt. It was ghostly. Bodies, half alive, something “between” seemed to enter the room. Unreal space, half-contained in a shape, half materialized. We tried to fend it off by not listening.

But it stayed on. My sister doesn’t bear to be alone over night. She owes a huge, well trained dog that sleeps in her room, if her three sons and her husband all should happen to be out. Dreams and fears. The story’s end, told by my father, in passing. The dachshund at the butcher’s. The story’s never-end referred to in many sentences, single words, gasps, stammers, broken refrains, chokes, a story never so much as told: the flight.

I felt it my task, my heirloom – my gift – to try to give language, to voice the unspeakable. This lies at the core of my poetry. And, for that, at the core of my writing.

Being in a place, of a place - being a place?

When I knew my grandparents, they were living in a dark ground-floor apartment in Munich. Three rooms, one of them always rented to a student. Living room, bedroom. I was impressed by the large bed that fit grandfather's belly and grandmother's goitre. Stomachs drew men like him taut and held them upright; otherwise they would have folded up like switchblades. Grandmother couldn't lower her head, because her goitre bulged out like a Halloween pumpkin. During the holidays they travelled to Bad Tölz, grandmother wearing the salvaged coral necklace that made her look like she had bloody finger-marks around her throat, and when she met me on the pavement my heart flew. But where?

Grandmother had fled with my fourteen-year-old father and his twenty-four-year-old handicapped brother. They arrived in Bavaria in the late summer of 1945, and now there were only two of them. Before that they had been staying in a small town in what later became the GDR, sheltering with relatives, but had been bombed out. The older brother, injured, weakened, caught pneumonia and died. Grandmother and Father reached a reception camp at Oberwiesenfeld in Munich, today the Olympic Park, then were sent on to a holiday cottage in the country. Their table was one of the suitcases brought from Silesia, which they'd held on to. The makeshift bed was burned for fuel next winter.

Had they arrived?

The beginning of their flight is easily identified: the night between 19 and 20 January 1945. Two hours to pack, it was emphasised again and again. It's always seemed strange to me: seventeen years later, midday on a 20th of January, I came into the world.

Arrived?

But when does any 'flight' stop?

It was Ernst Bloch who said: home is where no one has yet been. The dispossessed, as they're called, like so many others dispossessed before them and so many afterwards, had two things broken off them: first the concrete place, then its language. And with the language, the place was broken once more, in their memories. And with it – also once more – were their own selves. Although many people found it difficult to believe, it was as real and threatening as the bullets shot at their bodies.

Grandfather had never 'fled'. He arrived in April 1945 at a Soviet camp for prisoners of war. I write this without really knowing what it meant. Half is missing, the rest distorted. He came back, not home. His origins now had a kink that veered east. The photo taken to celebrate his reappearance was paid for with apples my father stole from the cloister garden at night. They didn't tell me that, not explicitly – but I understood. The picture tasted of apples and truth, of

mildness and something peeled. It's the photograph where, for me, my grandfather can be seen most acutely as the man he was when nothing sustained him any longer.

Fourteen days after his return he went into the forest.

It too was wrong.

Stony, shot through by a mountain stream. Grandfather plucking belladonna berries from their twigs, shoving them into his mouth. Belladonna, which costs nothing. One after another. They taste sweet. Then handfuls. His green-grey eyes, the leaves' lush green. He was found, and pumping his stomach cost his father's silver pocket watch, preserved from home only with great difficulty. Grandfather with wide, black pupils. Grandfather on drugs. Speechless, his tongue swollen.

In German, 'Heimat' – 'home' – is connected to 'heimlich' and 'unheimlich' – 'secret' and 'uncanny'. To apparitions, spectres, ghosts. The home, the hidden, the box where nobody's allowed to look. But also the uncanny, the gingerbread house with an evil witch inside. That is the shadow of every origin, which always lies ahead of us. Thus home is always double, x and y, the ugliest and the most beautiful of things, one always visible through the other. For 'home' is another word for intimacy – with things, with people – that doesn't gloss over abysses. Twenty-five years after resettling, my grandparents had a clear picture of home. For them, by then, it was simply something beautiful, surgically excised, and everything else was gone. For those born later, it doesn't work like that. Even my father had to deal with his history very differently, and the bits he couldn't manage still trouble him today. For me, third in the chain, home was always nowhere. It had to be, I'd like to think, but that's only half true. Home (1–3) both surrounded me and was absent. My sister and I were the only ones in our eastern family who didn't come from the east (we were born in Munich). In our mother's Bavarian family we were the only ones who didn't speak Bavarian and didn't pray properly, so we never belonged there either.

All told it created a kind 'de-rootedness', by which I don't mean 'rootlessness' but rather movability. Surrounded by roots, but standing beside them. Rootable, yet easily detached. Half rooted down, half elsewhere – and always longing for both. Which in turn means constant motion, tending towards paradox: you're nomadically rooted.

And as for writing? A poetics that considers itself polyglot. Multilingual, even if the first layer of the text seems to be written in a single language. There's always another underneath.

My Silesian grandparents had, as they said, lost everything. But that wasn't true. Their legacy, all of it, was transmuted into stories.

Nomadically overgrown. Polyglotaly poetic. Coming and going, roots and air.