

HISTORICAL UPHEAVALS, FRACTURED IDENTITIES

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In school, we learned to write our curriculum vitae. I can still see the page in front of me, with the title underlined: *Lebenslauf*. Beneath the title were the sparse bits of information that a twelve-year-old life has to offer: born as the daughter of X and Y, moved from here to there, began school, joined the Young Pioneers—and that was all.

Except for our birth, these were probably the least significant events in the lives of a generation born during the war, a generation that grew up during the harsh postwar era and the Cold War. But they were certainly the most unambivalent and secure events in our lives and, therefore, the easiest to name.

The sociologist Niklas Luhmann writes, “The elements of a biography consist of turning points where something happened that did not necessarily have to happen—beginning with birth.” But, once we are born, what *must* in fact take place? That we grow, get teeth, learn to speak, go to school? Is “going to school” part of “what must necessarily take place”? Probably—in any case, in the part of the world where we live. Subsequent “necessities” include growing old and, the ultimate necessity, death.

Those secure, official facts on our curriculum vitae are therefore precisely not the events that make up our biography. They are, in all probability, what was supposed to happen and what did happen. What, however, must *not* happen? And how do we discover whether what transpired did not necessarily have to?

According to scientists, especially in the area of brain research, we are much less free in forming our biographies than we think. The ways that our paths are shaped by our individual genetic makeup and the ways we are accustomed to think in terms of preconceived narrative form are enough to banish any illusions about the power of our will. It is above all during our very first years, when our brain forms essential connections with the world, that we are markedly influenced. It is a process that then progresses more slowly through puberty, by the end of which we are prisoners of our predispositions, coincidental experiences, heritage, and education.

Although we suspect, or even know, how limited our space is to maneuver between fate and circumstance, we struggle desperately for the right to take responsibility for our actions (and inactions), for our achieve-

ments, and also for our guilt, for our ability to construct our biography ourselves. Whether an adolescent constructs their life plan modeled upon their parents' lives or in opposition to them probably depends on the compatibility of their temperaments, on their first loves, and on the ideal-forming influences from the external world. I know some people who, trying to escape from their parents' path, steered around all the dangerous points like a slalom skier, so that ultimately they left behind exactly the same trail, only on another track. Even if they had the feeling that they were pursuing their own life plan, they followed a path that seemed inescapably planted inside them.

But what is a life plan (*Lebensentwurf*)? What can such a thing be? The life plans we adopt as youths can, by and large, only serve us for the first third of our lifetimes, at most for the first half. They usually contain little more than a desired profession and a diffuse idea of happiness appropriate to the individual. We probably have a better idea of ourselves than we do of the path we must follow, and this image is likely to be greater, more desirable, and more successful than we can ever hope to be. Could it be that our first sketch of ourselves functions like a model, or that it only represents an empty space surrounded by unsuitable images, like the negative of a photograph? In any case, unless extraordinary experiences or disasters demand from us an early independence, our first images of ourselves are as the children of our parents, as the students of our teachers.

In order to leave no doubt regarding my suspicion about our freedom to invent ourselves and about biographical truths, I would also like to point out our irresistible urge to give retrospective meaning to our life stories. When that which must happen and that which must not necessarily happen have blended together to form our life, and when we have forgotten our first draft of our life plan or have gradually adapted to our possibilities, we give meaning to the course of our lifetime, formed by the convergence of countless springs, by granting it a causality, thus creating a coherent biography for ourselves.

When the euphoric phase of German unity had dissipated and mistrust and resentment instead of the hoped-for sense of fraternity set the tone for discussions, if indeed they did not prevent them completely, Richard von Weizsäcker urged Germans to recount their biographies to one another in order to promote mutual understanding. At the time, I did not have the impression that there was any lack of biographical communications, although these certainly did not have the desired result. On the contrary, it even seemed like the East Germans' stories of persecution by the Stasi, blocked access to higher education, blacklisting, or just the everyday nonsense that, since it described a monotonous existence, occasionally became monotonous to hear, soon began to bore West Ger-

mans, particularly because they seldom had a chance to speak. It was not only that East Germans clearly enjoyed finally being able to speak openly about the large and small aggravations in their lives, which until that point they had had to bear in silence (or, at best, while muttering under their breath). They rightly expected that the West Germans would be interested, and when their interest seemed too small, they demanded more. Perhaps, as they tried to explain them to the West Germans, their own lives seemed so absurd and, in retrospect, even exciting, especially when transfigured by the glow of the victorious revolution, that the West Germans' biographies appeared to them as uninteresting and of no historical significance. Now that this GDR life was finished and no example of it was left, one could give it the kind of final shape and polish that is usually only possible in old age, when one is near death, the sort of coherence that bridges ruptures and loose ends with the redemptive word "because." By blending into grandiose historic events—the fall of a regime, the achievement of national unity—every small individual life rises to the level of a historically meaningful biography, as long as one can successfully weave the strands of one's life into the larger story.

Whoever lives in a dictatorship, even a relatively moderate one, is inclined to blame or credit it for everything that does or does not happen to them, that enters their life without being invited. Career frustrations, wasted talent, failed marriages, serious illness—all are justly or unjustly attributed to outside pressures. If a dictatorship disappears, then people are left alone with biographies they perceive to be inadequate or failed. Some will take advantage of the opportunity and make up for what was previously denied to them. For others, it is too late. And there are those who lose a great deal as a result of such changes: some because they were part of the dictatorship or profited from it, others because they find out that the changed circumstances do not bring all that they had dreamed of. For those people, gaining freedom also means a loss of self-image. But they experience real humiliation when they are robbed of their illusions about themselves. This requires them to activate the self-preservation mechanisms they have retained, which means that, once again, external circumstances are held responsible for anything perceived as a personal failure. They presume to find the same old patterns in the new ones, only in a different guise.

Over the last ten years, I cannot say how often I have heard or read the statement that the capitalist marketplace functions similarly to censorship in a dictatorship. Even if that might be true, censorship and a market economy have nothing to do with one another. If poetry has a hard time on the market, it is not because it is banned, but rather due to the fact that too few people want to read it—even if the result appears the same to the poet who cannot get published.

One of the most persistent legacies of the GDR is that it kept its citizens in a kind of permanent adolescence. I say this based on my own experience. Whoever is denied the possibility to have responsibility for one's own actions or to experience one's contours and boundaries in dialogue with the world will not be able to grow throughout their lives but rather, depending upon their temperament, will take refuge in infantile spite, pointless rebellion, or other strategies of avoidance. One's defensive skills develop to the point of perfection. Whether one rebels against this sort of unreasonableness or tries to escape from it depends, in my experience, less on one's political convictions, or even courage, but once again on temperament. Whoever wound up as an enemy of the state probably started with just an unrestrained outburst at a teacher or police officer and set in motion a process that infinitely repeated the original event. But the level of conflict deepened with each new case, until the recalcitrant individual found themselves outside of the society to which they originally wanted to belong, albeit just as they were.

Two years ago, Wolf Singer, who has done extensive research on the human brain, spoke at a large gathering of historians. He described the reactions of people who became blind at birth due to eye infections and later gained the ability to see through transplants or lenses. Yet they remained blind. As Singer reported,

They now had two functioning eyes, but could not begin to process the information that was now at their disposal. Many patients experienced what they could now see not as visual impressions, but as sounds or as something painful, as something that could not really be described. They did not learn to orient themselves in the visual world, to measure space, or identify objects. Many of the patients who received these late operations became severely depressed because their expectations were disappointed. Most lapsed once again into blindness and wore dark glasses.

The reason for this, reported Singer, is that the visual signals needed to consolidate the corresponding neuron connections were missing during certain developmental phases, and the connections therefore deteriorated. The brain misinterpreted the signals, which in themselves functioned correctly, as meaningless, and destroyed them. This process was irreversible. Despite the fact that I am an absolute novice in the natural sciences, I hope that the allegorical meaning of this case is clear. Obviously the development of our social behavior cannot be described as clearly as our sense of sight. Our social capacities do not reside in one sensory organ, nor are they objective; one person can deny what another

affirms. Nevertheless, I think it is possible that certain social abilities can indeed atrophy if they are not regularly exercised.

A capacity for free speech in public was and still is notably underdeveloped in almost everyone who spent more than merely their earliest years in the GDR. The few exceptions are, as a rule, clergy or scientists: people who enjoyed a moderate amount of space to practice these skills in sermons or seminars. Perhaps for that reason clergy were so notably overrepresented in politics just after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

For my part, even though I have had plenty of practice in public appearances by now, I feel that I can still only speak freely from an oppositional standpoint, never constructively. Only when I am so annoyed that I forget my inhibitions can my thoughts become organized, find the right words, and secure enough breathing room to develop. Because I share this inability with millions of others from East Germany, I no longer think of it as a personal deficit, but rather as the result of an atrophied mental function caused by disuse.

Alongside the image of the *Mauern in unseren Köpfen*, the Berlin Wall that one carries around in one's head, one of the most notable points of discussion related to our difficult unification is the legend of the East Germans who have been robbed of their biographies. Like any claim that is continually repeated, this notion has since been accepted as a kind of undisputed fact. But I, for one, have doubts about it. A person can be robbed of opportunities in their life. They can be blocked by force from creating a biography, locked up in prison, or even killed. But no one can be robbed of their lived experience, even if it would not be entirely unjust to do this in quite a few cases. One can, of course, dispute an individual's exclusive right to the interpretation of their biography, because other people with other ideas and experiences will evaluate this life differently. This may not always be fair, but it is normal. People form images of others without precise knowledge of their inner lives and without regard for their own understanding of themselves. Men form images of women, women form images of men, the English form images of the Germans, Germans of Americans, Muslims of Christians, East Germans of West Germans, and vice versa. Probably hardly anyone recognizes themselves in an image created by another, yet few would claim that they were thereby robbed of their biographies—except East Germans, or at least a portion of them.

As a rule, it was not former prisoners of Bautzen or Hoheneck, nor those who emigrated, nor dissidents who suffered punishments but—aside from the pillars of society—the conformists, and yes-men who made themselves comfortable between their built-in living-room furniture and color televisions, traded tires for batteries, raised their hands high whenever votes were cast, and lined up at four in the morning to get

a spot for a vacation on the Baltic Sea, all the while cursing and complaining but never really fighting. It is not my intention to attack people in those days for a lack of courage, especially because most of what we consider courage is often only the inability to fit in or a fear of cowardice. Anyone who feels afraid and cannot find the power to resist within themselves cannot be obliged to have courage. But why are those people who were quiet conformists in those days now the ones who decry West Germans as the thieves of their life histories? They are like people who live for years in a dark room and keep themselves warm and cozy with blankets and carpets and, when someone finally breaks open the wall and light enters the room, they recognize with shame that they have been living in rather unappealing quarters and even felt satisfied with it—and then blame the hole in the wall and the light for their embarrassment.

The Berlin Wall, at first so incomprehensible that even its supporters could not believe that it would last, became a kind of normality over the years, a maddening, unreal normality. Because no one who lived in the city could bear the absurdity of their situation every day and every hour, one began to accept the Wall as just another obstacle blocking one's way through the city, like railroad tracks or a construction site or a large building, until something came along that shattered the veil of normality and, for a short while, one recognized the madness of it all until it again subsided into a sense of the everyday. Whatever cannot be changed and becomes a part of the preconditions of our everyday existence slowly takes on the form of something normal. We relate to it as our reason dictates, so that we and our children can survive as best we can. When the Wall fell and residents of the city slowly began to recognize the street connections and neighborhood surroundings, the full insanity of this twenty-eight-year normality was again as clear as during the days when the Wall was first built.

The old sense of normality was now as worthless as the old money. In the glare of the new normality, the question was posed—sometimes by East Germans themselves, sometimes by outsiders—as to how and why we could have withstood this. Whoever did not want to put themselves and others on trial could only see themselves as the victim of an unstoppable power machine or, alternatively, describe the circumstances as acceptable, and therefore not requiring resistance. But whoever adopted either view robbed themselves of their biography, for the power machine was not unassailable and the circumstances were not acceptable as long as one had not choked off the slightest urge for freedom within oneself.

Perhaps it is this discomfort that arises from retrospection and the need to find an explanation for one's own conformity that makes outsiders' interpretations of their past so unbearable for East Germans. Perhaps

the discussion of East German biographies would have proceeded more openly and with better results if it had not been treated in the media from the very beginning as an East-West conflict but rather as what it had been for the forty preceding years: an East-East problem. This would not only have made the fairy tale of the deep solidarity and human warmth of all GDR citizens seem ridiculous in the face of a different reality; it would have prevented the PDS and its voters from assuming the role of the sole representatives of the East and allowed a more intelligent and sovereign image of East Germans—the other segment of the population—to emerge in the mind of the nation: those East Germans who had always been aware of the humiliations, the wounded self-respect, and their own deformations, yet had carved out an honorable niche for themselves where their own rules prevailed and the sense of being responsible for one's own life was preserved.

It appears that it required a natural disaster to reveal, beyond the caricatures of East German helplessness and a refusal to learn, another picture: the citizen of Dresden or Pirna, who, just like the citizen of Passau, courageously worked to the point of exhaustion to protect their city from the recent floods. Now that the shops are waterlogged and the factories are destroyed by the water, we learn who has built it all up and is determined to rebuild it again.

It was only in their continuation in a united Germany that East German lives and careers revealed themselves for what they really were, for what had been denied to them and what had been added to them. For some it meant that they lost their self-image, while others found it anew.

When I was in my mid-thirties and once again dissatisfied with my origins, upbringing, and disposition, a girlfriend said to me that, at some point, it is no longer important why we have become a certain way, but only what we do with it... That has been a helpful principle in my own life, even if I probably had less room to maneuver than I thought.

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