

IN SEARCH OF KURDISTAN: THE KURDISH QUESTION IN GERMAN LITERATURE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

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Abstract: The kidnapping on February 15, 1999 of the Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan outraged the Kurdish community in Germany, and the Kurdish–Kurdish conflict was translated onto the streets and schoolyards of a number of major German cities. The local and national authorities turned to the teachers to help them in the battle against racism and xenophobia. Several educators, in turn, had long before anticipated the problem and had written, translated, published books for the younger generation that address themselves to the problem of the “Other” generally; several books have also tried to answer the troubling question: “Where would you find Kurdistan on the map?” For the German reading public this question had been satisfactorily answered back in 1881 by the still popular travel writer Karl May. The urgency of the question, however, has been revived during the last two decades. The authors have written to inform and to rouse the interest and sympathy of their readers; they have also contributed to the inter-cultural and -religious dialogue that the German authorities deemed so necessary.

Keywords: the “Öcalan Affair”, Kurdistan, the “Other”, racism, didactic literature, Turkey, Karl May, asylum, deportation

“Where would you find Kurdistan on the map?” Probably not many schoolchildren – or for that matter, adults – in Europe or America would have been even able to consider the possibility of such a question till the dramatic events of 1999. And, as recent history has shown, the question has remained an urgent problem. Back then, the kidnapping and subsequent trial of the Kurdish leader, Abdullah Öcalan by the Turkish Secret Service was to change all that. The ensuing wave of terror that engulfed for a while especially Europe and duly shattered the political and demographic “innocence” of the international community raised the question again, and many a national government along with its concerned citizens and schoolchildren became aware that “Kurdistan” – though it could not be located on any officially approved map – was to be found very close to home on the streets of many European cities. It was not a pleasant realization.

This was particularly true in Germany with its large number of Turkish *Mitbürger* or “fellow citizens”. Present-day Germany is severely suffering from what can be called the “Other syndrome”; it is a country where the “Other” is almost by definition the enemy, especially if he or she has come from the East. Unfortunately, bloody and lethal attacks of the “Other” on German streets have become quite common events, and almost every German town or village is at heart another burn-

ing Mölln or Solingen.¹ It seems that nobody can stop the xenophobic craze, not even the law-oriented government and the efficient German police.

The media, when evaluating the bloody events on German streets, public squares, and schoolyards that followed in the wake of the abduction of the Kurdish leader on February 15, 1999 in Nairobi, Kenya, almost with one voice declared the moral and ethical bankruptcy of their social and political systems that were not prepared to deal with the Kurdish question.² None of the political bureaucrats could handle the situation either. It had always been difficult to tackle the “Turkish problem”. And now this! Perhaps they had listened too carefully to their Turkish fellow citizens in Germany and their own political counterparts in Ankara who had all along been adamant in maintaining that an ethnic Kurdish minority did not exist at all. Now the peace and quiet and orderliness were gone, and German streets and friendly embassies had been defiled by Kurdish blood and barbaric self-immolations.

The German public, for its part, felt no sympathy for the plight of Kurds anywhere as the polls showed. Though it is estimated that perhaps up to a hundred thousand Kurds – there are no precise statistics available – are living in Germany, it was the general consensus that it had been a great mistake by the authorities to have allowed any of them to come to the country, especially since their presence upset the Turkish element in the population so much. German schools had now become battlegrounds and many teachers had lost control over their German and “foreign” charges alike. This could not be tolerated by any civilized society, especially by one that prides itself of its cultural traditions rooted in the Age of Reason and Enlightenment. Many politicians were upset; though the higher ranking ones preferred to remain shrouded in Olympian ambivalence.

During February of 1999, the “terror” hit the schools of Berlin; there are about 26,000 Turkish students in the Berlin school system, among them several thousand Kurds. Both groups entered the bloody frays in the schoolyards, often ably aided and abetted by their German classmates. It was a scandal. Thus in a moment of despair about the situation, leading educators and politicians remembered that perhaps education could save the day and appealed to teachers nationwide to handle the problem in the good old German tradition, i.e., rationally “through discussion and debate” in the classroom and in the kindergarten as well. While they were at it, they could again look into the general Christian–Muslim tensions, but this was a lesser concern at that point in time.³

Now and then the media remembered that a few individual churches had revived the old tradition of sanctuary and had opened their doors to Kurds in need and

¹ Moelln, Solingen, together with Hoyerswerda – three small towns in Germany – became synonymous with murder and arson, the way local skin heads dealt with their Turkish neighbors, both women and children.

² The German press, generally speaking, dealt with these events extensively and critically. For my research of this paper, I relied on the late winter and spring issues of the daily *Die Süddeutsche Zeitung* and the weeklies *Der Spiegel* and *Stern*.

³ Two of the more recent practical books written for this purpose come to mind: TWORUSCHKA 1999 and HUBER-RUDOLF 2002.

had thus fulfilled their moral duty.⁴ What the politicians and the media, however, suddenly recalled was that Germans, after all, are the children of the Enlightenment, and in this “spirit” almost every evil can be cured with the appropriate type of education. But since the adult world, German or otherwise, could no longer be reached – perhaps the intensity of the rays of the light of Reason had become somewhat dim – they concluded that “something” had to be done.

Germans, generally speaking, do not like the Turk in their midst; now they discovered that they had even less sympathy for that “Mountain Turk” of Turkish parlance. It was suddenly of utmost importance to stress again the value of education in the battle against xenophobia and “fix” the moral fabric of the youth. What they had in mind they forgot to communicate. Let the teachers figure it out. But how many modern young Germans take their teachers seriously? Still, the call went out from the media as well as the highest German politicians who were at their wit’s end to the educators “to do something” and “fix the situation”.⁵

Let the teachers be didactic; teachers in the German tradition do not need much urging to live up to this duty. Still, the call came very late, and there is no evidence at all that the effort on the part of the teachers has lessened the seriousness of the situation and has changed the young German generation under their care as far as the “Other”, in this case the Kurd, is concerned. The basic naïve question has remained: Why can’t all those “Others”, be they Kurd or Mountain Turk – who cares about their background, religion, and aspirations anyhow – simply get along with each other and leave us Germans in peace? They are, after all, our guests and should behave accordingly! Many children find such grownup dicta very comfortable to live with; let the teachers lecture what they may. Why suddenly all this rage and hatred? Why should the German child now have to be concerned about a Kurdish classmate when he or she has not yet been able to find all that much virtue in the other classmate, the little Turk? Why should Kurd and Turk, who are both Muslim and therefore should like each other, fight in German schoolyards? This simply was not right! Such sentiments hold a strong power over both young and old. It would take a very persuasive teacher, even a miracle worker, to change strong convictions like these.

Unlike the politicians and the media who often tend to express themselves only to the moment, several German educators, especially those who write and publish books for children and teenagers, had all along been very much aware of the urgency of the burning problem of racism and xenophobia that have shaped the minds of a great number of Germans of every period in history.⁶ These writers have taken a closer look at the young Muslim foreigner, usually a Turkish girl, who has to cope with an alien environment. They had seen the ethical need to “do” something on

⁴ *Die tageszeitung Köln* of May 29, 1998, and of November 5, 1998. *Die Rhein-Zeitung*, January 21, 1998.

⁵ *Berliner Morgenpost*, February 20, 1999.

⁶ Even in the 1970s and 1980s, the German book market was flooded by a great number of well-intended books written for children and teenagers that tried to “educate” their readers about the problems of ethnic discrimination and xenophobia. DAUBERT 2002: 5–9.

behalf of the little foreigner and at the same time widen the horizon of both little foreigner and German alike, i.e., to be fair to both sides. In their usual didactic way, they had tried to handle this extremely complex issue in an “enlightened” manner in travel accounts or novels addressed to the young readership long before the Öcalan Affair rudely awoke the conscience of Europe. Since Germany does not hold the monopoly on such an inter-cultural and -religious problem, writers in other languages had addressed themselves to the same topic as well, and a number of them have found themselves represented in translation on the German book market.

Ordinarily we do not burden literature that is basically intended to entertain and instruct children and teenagers with the problems of religious differences, colonialism, scapegoatism, and the “Other”. In modern critical literary discourse, the term “Other” stands at the center of a lively debate: Edward Said, Franz Fanon, Gayatri Spivak, Tzvetan Todorov, Julia Kristeva, H. K. Bhabha, among others, have contributed to the complexities of the term. Throughout this paper, however, I am using the word in its more general sense without all the ramifications the critics have given it.

Because, as in the case of Germany, of the nearness and urgency of the problem posed by the presence of particularly the religiously-“Other” Muslim child living in what to him or her is a threatening alien tradition – and conversely also by the threat of the “alien” experience of the Christian German child – literature has become the willing handmaiden of these German educators to effect a remedy. In several of the volumes that try to bring the children of the Christian West and the basically Muslim East together, the Kurdish child has also found a voice. These books are interesting but are in most cases not of very high literary quality, yet all of them are written with the best intentions to fight the fear and hatred of the “Other”. They are readily available in bookshops and school libraries. Perhaps this branch of literature could assist the teachers when they are dealing with their hard task, for they do show how two mutually “Others” can try to help each other grow up together. We do have to commend these writers who saw the problem long before the politicians became aware of something amiss in the social and inter-cultural fabric of their countries.

Handling such a serious problem and openly acting as a bridge to bring embattled children and adults together in a literary type of “peace process” is a very heavy task for any genre. There remains, of course, the question whether or not we may approach this type of writing that has its mainspring in didacticism as true literature. Does the discerning reader classify propaganda and the polemic, be it for children or adults, as literature? In most cases we shall be dealing with the type of writing that makes an authority on children’s literature like Joan Aiken despair.

Aiken in her guide for the aspiring writer for the younger generation⁷ does not discourage him or her from “scanning the scene, to be aware of contemporary problems, if possible study them at close quarters, so that, perhaps unconsciously, his mind might begin to work and churn and create ideas on current issues”. Neverthe-

⁷ AIKEN 1988, *passim*.

less, creative artists, and those who write for children should aspire to this position, “are the sensitive point” in a civilization. They can’t help being aware of problems, and their writing can’t help reflecting this awareness. Still, she insists that in the writing of literature for young people “story is the main thing”, the creative “thing that nourishes” their needs and imagination. But she cautions: “Be aware! If you deliberately produce a book in order to point out some wrong that needs righting, you will produce a tract. The book will be journalism. It won’t be nourishing” – and will not qualify as literature.

However, this serious literary question shall remain outside the scope of this paper. Let us remember that the German educators in their zeal “to do something” could no longer worry about aesthetic concerns; the ethical urgency of the situation was overriding any other point. Thus the *dulce*, as so often in German literature, became a victim of the road and the *utile* marched stridently on. This attitude is very much emphasized by the German government that sponsors just one yearly award to encourage the writing for young readers, the prestigious *Deutsche Literaturpreis*.⁸ This award is to further literary quality; it especially is supposed to promote “thought-provoking discussion”.

French schoolchildren as well have been educated by didactic literature expressly written for them since they, too, have been tainted by racism. The renowned Muslim Moroccan-French novelist Tahar Ben Jalloun in the discourse with his daughter *Le racisme explique a ma fille*⁹ has presented us a modern catechism that deals with the questions of decent human behavior that serves as a foundation for any meaningful inter-cultural relationship. Ben Jalloun the novelist maintains that the artist should not confuse his or her role with that of a politician. An artist does not state his ethical and didactic purposes openly, instead he lets them speak indirectly and thus most frequently expresses them through story. Yet, when “instructing” his daughter, the novelist himself resorts to the tradition of religious teaching, the question and answer catechism. Meriem, and through her all children, is presented with his polemic. The author, too, is a child of the Enlightenment like those German educators who regard education to be a cure-all. For him, prejudice and racism have their roots in fear, lack of knowledge, and stupidity. It is a serious and complicated sickness that can be dealt with through education; healthy self-respect, a positive self-image, a good sense of humor, the ability to laugh at oneself, and the guidance of good role models – all these help overcome the monster racism. Beware also of irresponsible use of language, he warns his daughter. Especially thoughtless folk wisdom and proverbs and the catchy cliché unquestioningly transmitted from generation to generation have caused great misery and bloodshed. His advice is that of a good man nourished by the humanistic tradition.

French educators were so impressed by the force of Jalloun’s tract that the book soon after it was published in January 1998 was assigned to be required reading in

⁸ VOLL 1991: 67.

⁹ BEN JALLOUN 2000, passim.

public schools. The German translation has also been a success. It is probably the neat and no-nonsense approach of the catechism that appeals to German educators – most of them probably would have a problem with the need for a sense of humor to solve such a serious problem that is eating away at the heart of no less than the enlightened human condition.

In 1997, Catherine Clement, herself an educator and wife to the then French ambassador to Dakar, published *Le Voyage de Theo*, very ably translated into German in 2000 as *Theos Reise: Roman über die Religionen der Welt*.¹⁰ It is a substantial tome of more than seven hundred pages in which the thirteen-year-old Parisian boy has the chance, again in the tradition of the religious catechism, to question leaders of all the major and some of the lesser present-day religions of the world. An avalanche of answers comes tumbling at Theo; answers that deal with the teachings, customs, history, traditions, great leaders, and many other pertinent aspects of all these religions. No wonder he is often mystified and needs help to sort them out. The travel book ends in Delphi where many a spiritual quest has ended, usually in mystification. When Theo finally gets there, he has gained knowledge and tolerance. During his journey that crisscrosses the continents, he has also been cured of his sickness, leukemia, from which he suffered at the outset of his quest.

The book was awarded several literary prizes and, it seems, is another god-sent and useful addition to the inter-cultural dialogue in the classroom. The book is written very much in the spirit of the Enlightenment and will provide many semesters' worth of stimulating classroom discussion. The publishers of the German edition of Theo's catechism have anticipated the usefulness of the book by providing teachers with a study guide; it is free of charge.

Though Theo's voyage into the mysteries of comparative religion and cultural anthropology is very serious and demanding, it is also at times entertaining. The youth and many of his elders and their preoccupations are handled with a good sense of humor. The book provides in addition much knowledge of and sympathetic insight into Islam as well as the other religions that are presented. For me, one of the high points of the book is the section in which the priest, the rabbi, and the sheikh together are guiding Theo through Jerusalem. Theo's questions and comments could teach many of our politicians a lesson in understanding and tolerance of the "Other". The parts of the book dealing with Islam could also serve as a good introduction to a study of the Kurdish problem since the great majority of the Kurds are Muslim.

Another useful introduction, this one perhaps too much in the *dulce* tradition of literature to suit the needs of German educators, is Elizabeth Laird's teenage novel *Kiss the Dust* published by Heinemann in 1991 and its German version *Trag mich über die Berge* in 1993.¹¹ The author was born in New Zealand but has lived and taught English in a great number of countries. For her novel that tells the story of Tara, a 14-year-old Kurdish girl, she received the Children's Book Award.

¹⁰ CLEMENT 2000, *passim*.

¹¹ LAIRD 1993, *passim*.

The book does not openly engage in dialogue and does not raise any religious questions; a partially omniscient authorial voice transports us to the far-away city of Sulaimanja in Iraq. The time is back in 1984–5, during the Iran–Iraq war. Tara’s is not a unique tale; her story of the loss of home, flight into the Kurdish mountains, and into the subsequent horror of an Iranian refugee camp is part of what could be called the archetypal Kurdish experience. Tara and her family are lucky since eventually they are granted asylum in England, though their new liberated life there is a far cry from what the upper-middle-class family were used to in Iraq.

Laird is a very sensitive and sympathetic writer, and she lets the events of the story speak for themselves. There are many episodes in Tara’s growing from a care-free girl into a responsible adult that come readily to mind. I recall the brutal death of the two schoolboys in front of the mosque that shatters her girlhood innocence; her introduction to the Peshmerga connection of her family while she is reading a fashion magazine under the dining table; the night journey through the Zagross Mountains into the “freedom” of the refugee camp; her struggle with the unaccustomed veil to hide her hair from the Iranian guards; the hours of agony at Heathrow Airport while waiting for asylum to be granted.

At the heart of the novel remains the question: Where is Kurdistan? Was it in their comfortable home in Sulaimanja? Not really. In the Kurdish mountains? Her heart grows with enthusiasm at the beauty of the landscape. Kurdistan in spring is a paradise – for a moment. The flowers and life-giving springs are still there, but now they are guarded by guns and sand sacks and fighters. And Tara is reminded of the story in the Koran in which Satan tempts Adam to eat of the fruit. But the need to survive physically pushes this question into her subconscious. At the very end of the novel, when she has already adjusted to life in London and realizes that she is forgetting Kurdistan, her dream provides the answer: “We, our family, we are Kurdistan. Wherever we are, there is Kurdistan. Kurdistan lives in her people, and no one can take her away from us.”

The way to freedom with destination Sweden ends for another teenage Kurdish girl somewhere over the Mediterranean, she tells us in her own words. The book *Helin* was published in 1983 in Sweden and the German translation *In der Nacht über die Berge*, in 1997.¹² The authors, the exile Mahmut Baksi and his Swedish wife Elin Clason, wrote it so that Kurdish children who are growing up in foreign countries will not forget what is still happening in their homeland; in his case Turkish Kurdistan.

Helin in the Turkish village where her father was employed as teacher never enjoyed any of the luxuries of Leila’s Sulamanja, but both families are actively engaged in their respective Kurdish resistance groups. As Helin knows, the Kurds are even more disliked and persecuted in Turkey than they have ever been in Iraq, even though in the West this has been frequently obscured by the media in keeping with the political interest of their respective governments. She chronicles how Turkish

¹² BAKSI–CLASON 1997, passim.

soldiers have turned her Kurdistan into a perfect hell. She will never forget the day when the raiding Turkish Rambos herded everybody, young and old – male and female – into the village square, made them undress and then whipped them mercilessly. While the Turks vandalized and looted the village, the naked villagers almost froze to death in the cold wind. Both parents are dragged away to jail where the father is tortured and the mother is both tortured and raped as, it seems, is the routine in Turkish places of detention. The parents eventually escape, and the family flee into the mountains, cross mine fields, rest in smuggler hideouts. They illegally cross into Syria, then war-torn Lebanon – freedom. It is a melodramatic tale that has often been told; nevertheless it shows the fate of the refugee. And it provides both social and historical background.

Helin is thus a “historian” of the events that displaced and murdered so many of her compatriots; she is also a social critic of the traditional Kurdish way of life. Some of her remarks are humorous, and the reader gets the feeling that a young girl is speaking from her own experience; i.e., when she wants to be included in the ceremony that marks her twin brother’s circumcision. At other times an adult voice is hiding behind hers. This is true when she speaks about the unfairness of the double standard concerning the male-female relationship on which Kurdish patriarchal society is based or the out-dated feudal system and the Koran school that rule and dominate the life of the villagers. The main criticism, however, is leveled at the government in Ankara that oppresses, humiliates, and murders its Kurdish minority.

Why are Kurdistan and its people persecuted by the hatred and ill will of its neighbors? The answer comes to Helin during the flight when the family are hiding from Turkish bombs in a cave. Their hiding place, like Kurdistan, provides no security. In it a fight to death is going on between a poisonous snake and a deadly scorpion. One of the combatants has to die; the cave cannot provide space for both of them. Eventually the scorpion kills the snake, but according to the law of nature it, too, has to die after its poison has been spent. Helin’s uncle points to the emblematic significance of the scene: “Hatred of the other is part of human life. It is really strange how we Kurds resemble these two monsters. We, too, are incapable to unite against those who hate us. If we were not constantly fighting each other, we could confront our enemies.”

These books in translation will certainly engage and instruct both the mind and sympathy of their German readers. Tara’s tale probably will not “fix” any situation, and the material written expressly with the German young person in mind will definitely deal with the task at hand differently.

In order to prepare for the “thought provoking discussion” concerning the Kurdish child, the German teachers, more than likely, will urge their students to read the pertinent pages in Franz Nuscheler’s *Nirgendwo zu Hause: Menschen auf der Flucht*, an encyclopedic account of the various persecutions and genocides witnessed by the twentieth century.¹³ It is very much a thought-provoking book, a book that

¹³ NUSCHELER 1988: 119–123.

jolts and irritates. Nuscheler, an academic writer, like Jalloun, wanted to write for once a book that his own teenage children could read and understand. But how well can he analyze the very complicated “Kurdish problem” in less than four pages? In this short space, nevertheless, he is very much aware of the tragically interwoven genocidal fate of the Armenians and the Kurds that was so perfectly calculated and set up by the respective Ottoman authorities and their inheritors. Despite countless massacres, many Kurds have survived and now they “constitute the most numerous nation that is dispossessed of its own national state” and is despised by everyone. The ups and downs of Kurdish history we read about are at best very puzzling for an adult; what then would a teenager make of them?

The book is written with great sympathy. Very touching is the closing vignette of the Kurdish section: the picture of the hopeless future of the refugee child growing up under a torn plastic sheet on a barren hill somewhere at the end of the world and civilization. It is a picture we have so often seen in the reports of journalists – still, the account is heartrending.

There is nothing new in Kurdish history; such events have from time immemorial taken place “im wilden Kurdistan” – in wild and savage Kurdistan – the author suggests twice in his short account and thus has directly referred the reader to one of the great German educational “institutions” and ultimate authority on things Kurdish as far as the general German reader is concerned. It is the travel writer and novelist Karl May (1842–1914).

As May’s German cultural hero Kara Ben Nemsî during the latter part of the nineteenth century was riding through the declining Ottoman Empire, he fell under the spell of the countryside and the people of the region called Kurdistan. May chronicled these events in the novel *Durchs wilde Kurdistan* (1881),¹⁴ and since the publication of this fictionalized travel book there really has not been in the general German opinion any question about the actual existence and location of Kurdistan on an approved map, no matter what Istanbul and later Ankara might say about such misguided notions. In May’s idealized country, the women are wise and liberated and wear no veil; the men brave and fierce. They are good horsemen and honorable fighters. The children respect their elders and love animals. His Kurds are a proud people with a long and heroic and tragic history. Most important of all: they speak an Indo-European language and thus are not completely “Other”. They are distant cousins of sorts. The German reading public right away took a fancy to these intriguing people. They shared many qualities with the best Europeans, were brave, spoke a related language; best of all, they could be appreciated far from one’s home where their identity and love for freedom did not pose any threat to oneself.

Mutatis mutandis. Economic necessity suddenly brought this picturesque Kurd into the very cities of Europe, and perhaps only few Germans back in the prosperous 60s and 70s of the last century realized that by inviting guest workers from Turkey, Germany, in turn, had become host to many of the problems that plague its eastern

¹⁴ MAY 1983.

NATO partner. All the minorities who somehow have no place on a political map of the Near East but who are very real on the one created by Karl May have suddenly been claiming their rights in Germany.

The enemy from the East, as the Kurd was now termed, was no longer a romantic figure to be admired from a distance, no longer merely a threat *ante portas*, but very much within German society. He had brought with him his pride and hunger for independence and frequently carried on his fight with his archenemy, the Turk, in the streets of German towns. The German public who had appreciated Karl May could no longer view this exotic stranger with sympathy when they saw him up close.

The basic issue has remained: Where can we actually "find" Kurdistan on any type of map? Since visiting foreign countries supposedly is educational, we could follow in Karl May's footsteps. Several modern German and other questers, like him, have convinced themselves that they have located an actual Kurdistan and have reported their exploits, a fact not always appreciated by the local non-Kurdish authorities. Hans-Dietrich Genscher will probably never forget the effort he had to exert on behalf of the ornithologist Dr. Hella Schlumberger with the Turkish government and prison authorities of both Ankara and Diyarbakir. The incident became a long drawn out diplomatic affair and occurred in the late 1980s. Genscher, then minister of foreign affairs representing Bonn, had to use all his diplomatic skills to get her out of the notorious prison in Diyarbakir. The German scientist had expressed too freely on location that she, too, had found Karl May's Kurdistan in reality as well as on the map.

In the spring of 1991, consciously following in the laudable footsteps of the lady ornithologist and Karl May, a group of socially engaged Germans set out like good Samaritans on a journey to help the suffering Kurdish refugees huddled together on the icy slopes of eastern Anatolia in Turkey. In the good German tradition, they will report in writing to their young friends and the general reading public back home.¹⁵ These eye witness accounts written by trustworthy Germans might help "fix" the situation since they are motivated by the best intentions and backed by a number of charitable institutions.

One member of the group is the eighteen-year-old Yvonne whose classmates in Troisdorf near Cologne have financed her "expedition" so that she will record her impressions about a Kurdistan torn by war. On her return, she will share her insights with them and write up her travel notes collected in her diary and present them to the school newspaper. The book is thus very much a journey into the journalistic process: locating a good story, going after it, interviewing, recording of facts and impressions, and writing them down. The author and recorder of all these journalistic activities is Rupert Neudeck, a journalist and well-known German philanthropist who together with the German writer Heinrich Böll brought the charitable institution CAP ANAMUR into being. Neudeck will be the mentor of the young girl, and

¹⁵ NEUDECK 1992, *passim*.

through her rather naïve questions and comments pertaining to the political background of the Middle East and the “Kurdish problem” Neudeck has the chance to instruct and illustrate in the tradition of the catechism and the German classroom. She, in turn, will transmit and filter Neudeck’s views on politics and human involvement when she later reports. The book does not include her account.

Neudeck’s book recreates for us a quest in the old tradition of adventure tales in which a good guide figure will lead a young neophyte. Keeping with the spirit of female emancipation of our times, this is a young girl, and her initiation is recorded in the language of the modern relaxed journalistic style. Of course there are never any actual dangers threatening the travelers; their jeep, their supply of Imodium tablets, the almost ubiquitous presence of official German representatives, and Neudeck’s skill at namedropping will protect them like charms at all times. But the hell they see on the mountains in the Kurdish camps is very real. They hurt with the suffering and dying Kurds, persecuted by both Iraq but more so by Turkey. We cannot accuse either mentor or neophyte to be insensitive to human misery for they are really concerned and burn to help, but the book remains at best a collection of verbal vignettes: observed, commented upon, and then recorded.

Both Neudeck and Yvonne are practical people, and they know how to “fix” the problem as they see it. Naturally it will be through education, and through their imagination they can visualize already a new and regenerated Kurdistan united by a huge chain of schools, all supported and equipped by funds raised by German school children and capably assisted by sympathetic German exchange teachers. What an educational utopia that would be – the German girl is almost carried away by her enthusiasm. Neudeck in a more practical vein urges the reader to contribute financially to the cause of “Suffering Kurdistan”. In an appendix to the book, he has provided the engaged reader with a list of addresses to which financial contributions can be sent. On one level then, the book has turned into a fundraising campaign. Well, money, too, can often “fix” a problem.

Throughout the journey, the travelers feel very much the presence of Karl May, their great guide. Not much has changed since his times; Kurdish men are still fiercely proud and love their gun, and especially the young and educated women, though disadvantaged by the old patriarchal ways, embody all that is progressive and good in the emancipated tradition of the modern womanhood of the West. Best of all, they do not wear the scarf, that badge of slavery that dehumanizes the typical Muslim woman in the eyes of her European sister. The travelers are impressed.

Yvonne will carry back to her German fellow students the moral message: “Here is a task to express our solidarity; here we can accomplish something important; here is no security. Life is a tremendous adventure.” The reader cannot but wonder which “task” is the more important – perhaps the adventure?

The travelers are always at center stage, and the suffering Kurdish children tend to become blurred when seen through the tearful eyes of Yvonne. Still, Neudeck and Yvonne will be able to return with the good feeling that they are doing something in the true spirit of Karl May to help his beloved Kurdistan.

Another great German master is appealed to in Gudrun Pausewang's *Wetten, dass Goethe den Wahnsinn verböte*.¹⁶ Pausewang is one of the better known current writers for young people in the German language. Again we meet a young German girl – Christine who lives in a fair-sized town and who is fifteen years old – who also has the strong urge to undertake a quest journey to “fix” an even greater task than a mere Kurdish problem. Her journey will be over in less than a day, and she will not even leave her town. The date is January 17, 1991. On that day, many German children expressed their opposition to the Gulf War on the streets of their towns. Christine is vaguely aware that she has a Kurdish classmate, but that young girl does not contribute anything to the story. The discerning reader, perhaps not so much the adolescent to whom the book is addressed, does know that behind the events of that war loom the issue and identity of Kurdistan.

The preoccupation of Pausewang's book, however, is Germany itself. The book is a strange mixture of symbolical and allegorical excursions into German history and collective guilt. Thus the “Dead Children of Iraq” of which the posters remind are not so different from all the dead German children of all wars. It is basically a march to commemorate their fate. And therefore the demand: “No more war for Germans!” Some of the bystanders do remark on this point. On this inclement day in January, it is an emancipated young generation of Germans who is demonstrating against the wish of school and municipal as well as government authorities; the activities of the thousands of marching children suggest that they will not so easily follow any leader and go astray as did their grandparents and, once upon a time, the legendary children of Hamelin or those of the Children's Crusade. So the young demonstrators are led to believe and the reader to hope; but will that be possible? It is the great irony of the book that a demonstration to promote peace does so in the name of Death since the march is headed and led by the dressed-up skeleton that was taken by one of the students with a strange sense of humor – or insight? – from one of the biology departments. Naturally it is a properly organized, disciplined, and orderly demonstration; one that is friendly to the environment – a bit strange and unsettling and macabre nevertheless. The purpose of the demonstration and the fact that young people should be involved in international concerns are laudable, only the high seriousness of the opening call to action at the end has degenerated into the ludicrous debunking of the statue of an already obsolete military leader of Prussian times. Then everyone takes the rest of the day off and goes home peacefully to take a hot bath to ward off any possible cold. Nothing new has been accomplished.

On another level, Pausewang catches perfectly the hysteria brought about by the feeling of moral superiority and fear that so many Germans indulged in at the eve of the Gulf War, and how the cause became ephemeral and petered out. In the demonstration not all the students reach the goal. They are prevented by thirst, cold, blisters, or attractive movie ads. Those who do reach the center of town are enthusiastic about the solidarity they are championing. What a morally clean world it would

¹⁶ PAUSEWANG 1992, *passim*.

be if all these committed young German Nancy Drews and Hardy Boys had their way to show this solidarity as they urge each other on. There is, however, a problem: Solidarity with whom and concerning what? This is never clarified. A demonstration does not really suffice to solve the problem of militancy and war.

In the meantime, Christina has the chance to record the events of the day, and this she does with a passion. This young lady takes pictures. Her self-imposed duty is to do justice to her generation; she reflects that “all those who participated today should be able to authenticate their activities to their children and be able to say: ‘Look, here you see me, a youngster, already demonstrating against the idea of war!’” No question, it will be a well-recorded day in German history providing all those who participated with a moral alibi for the future just in case, one feels, something should go wrong again in German history.

One also wonders what Goethe, that embodiment of the German Enlightenment, would have said about Pausewang’s version of the awakening and coming of age of a modern Germany.

Lutz van Dick in *Feuer über Kurdistan*¹⁷ has also put the events of January 1991 and the subsequent war as pivotal point in the lives of two Kurdish–German sisters. It is at that point in time that the fate of their future and their search for their respective Kurdistans is decided. The family history, though, that the fifteen-year-old Avin tells and that is later supplemented by the diary of the eighteen-year-old Leyla begins on March 7, 1975, an omniscient authorial voice informs us briefly. On that day, the government of the US succumbed to the pressure of the realpolitik exerted by its interest in OPEC and the need for an end of the Iran–Iraq War. Washington withdrew its help from Mustafa Barzani, the “Lion of the Mountains” of Iraqi Kurdistan. This betrayal left many of his people with only two options: either face the raging Iraqi army or flee and apply for asylum somewhere in the West. Thus the father, the pregnant mother, and baby Leyla left their mountain home somewhere close to Kirkuk. The authorial voice briefly sketches for the reader the horrors of the life of the refugee about which we have been so often told. The family eventually, with the help of Amnesty International, finds a new home in Hamburg, Germany, where Avin is born. Then the recording voice shifts to that of the teenager Avin.

The parents are grateful to their adopted country; the father has had the chance to get a degree in engineering and a good position. Their way of life very much resembles that of any of their middle class German neighbors. The children hear at home not much about their roots, and their parents do not teach them Kurdish. This is very strange; such an omission by an actual Kurdish family would amount to something like cultural suicide, for we know the Kurds, especially in Turkey, have fought to the death to be allowed to use their language. Their language represents their national identity. Neither do the parents stress religion. The best that could happen to the girls, the father feels, is that they integrate themselves and become good citizens of their new country. They sound, dress, and behave like any other

¹⁷ VAN DICK 1991, *passim*.

German teenage girls. Avin is sure that till the time of the demonstrations her classmates were absolutely unaware of her Kurdish background. The mother, a licensed sales woman with a respectable job, has naturally never worn a scarf. It is a closely knit traditional family, yet the daughters date and stay out late without upsetting their father. This is a very strange behavior for Kurdish fathers of daughters anywhere in the world. Even up-to-date "respectable" Kurdish fathers very much at home in a modern German city will certainly not accept the possibility that their young teenage daughters pay their boyfriends a midnight visit in their rooms. Avin is never scolded for such activities. The family's adjustment to their new life bears out the commonplace with which students of American society usually illustrate the archetypal pattern of any refugee community in the new world: The first generation denies, the second generation forgets, and the third generation rediscovers its history, its roots, its identity. In the case of this Kurdish family, the process is speeded up, for the settled life of the two sisters is suddenly jolted by outside events. Boyfriends and the news of the war have intruded and changed the direction of their lives. Therefore the girls, the second generation, assume the concerns of the third generation as well when they themselves rediscover their language and go off in search of their respective Kurdistans.

In their home, the girls have been told of an almost mythical Mount Ararat and a lost country that is theirs; at school it is a different story. The teachers deny Leyla her identity and accuse her of lying when she tells that she was born in Kurdistan. Such a place does not exist. Avin is luckier; her kindergarten teacher located Kurdistan for her on a fairy-tale map. This "truth" has a very strong hold on her; for her Kurdistan does not become a political force that will demand her unquestioned allegiance. After all, she was born in Germany. The search for her identity will take the older sister Leyla, together with her Kurdish boyfriend Farhad, back to the country of her birth. There the young couple will join the Peshmerga fighters in the mountains. Avin, in turn, will more than likely settle down with her German friend Tom Fischer. She is too integrated into the society of her adopted country to try to translate some nostalgic longing for roots into the life of a freedom fighter. Tom can appreciate the decisions of both sisters, and he is sympathetic to the Kurdish cause – he has supplemented his education through reading Karl May's novel, as he tells Avin. Naturally, the couple will visit liberated Kurdistan sometime in the future, riding his motor cycle. Avin definitely is a no-scarf girl.

Yet the search for Kurdistan in Avin's life does become something of a mission. The girl who has no notion of any ethnic identity till the sisters meet Farhad suddenly becomes the spokeswoman for the rights of the Kurds. When she now speaks – the greater part of the book is written by Avin – it is no longer the voice of the teenager. The lecturing voice of Lutz van Dick, a teacher and educator by profession, has taken over. The reader is thus presented on a number of points in the book with a rather detailed survey of events of the Gulf War, including excursions into other atrocities of war such as the gassing on March 13, 1988 of Halabja during which most of Farhad's family died. There is also a pictorial documentation of the war included in the text. And Avin is not shy to comment, often cynically, on the leaders and

events of the war. It is certainly not the language of an average young teenager when at one point she comments that the audience in the Kurdish Club cheered the televised speech by the then President Bush “frenetically”. Other examples abound. It is not the persona of Avin who is reporting; the choice of words and the involved syntax of these political “lectures” and commentaries are reminiscent of the type of writing that is found in news magazines like *Der Spiegel* or the more popular *Stern*.

For Leyla, the search for Kurdistan becomes self-consuming. During the first week of March 1991, she and a small group of future Peshmergas leave the safety of Hamburg to join the freedom fighters in the Kurdish mountains. Their German and Kurdish fellow students and friends admire the couple’s civil courage. A letter and eventually Leyla’s diary – written under the most melodramatic conditions – reach Hamburg. It is her account of a brief nostalgic reunion with the remnant of their once large family; the final destruction of their homes and town by Iraqi soldiers; the flight into the mountains; the bravery of the fighters; and the accusation of German industry to have made the horrors of this war possible, an issue that was also a reason for the demonstrations in Hamburg. What happens to Leyla? Will there be poetic justice to let her carry on the good fight somewhere in Iraq? It remains an open question.

Avin copies her sister’s diary, and so we are not spared to see the atrocities of war once more, this time first-hand and recorded to the moment with freezing fingers. Leyla, handling a gun for the first time in her life, becomes initiated into Kurdish womanhood when she has to defend a maternity ward. The casualty rate of the babies in the incubators that day is very high, and Leyla reports a similar version of the raid by Iraqi soldiers on a Kuwaiti maternity hospital during the war, an event that the news-reading international public had seen sensationalized by the media, an event that, however, turned out later to have been Kuwaiti propaganda.

Avin does not have the making of a future Kurdish Jeanne d’Arc; her search will be more down to earth and practical. It is she who participates and contributes information to class discussions about the war; she who organizes exhibitions and fund raising programs to support the cause. It is Avin who breaks down the distrust with which even the most open minded of her fellow Kurds meet the German “Other” in a type of reversed colonialism.¹⁸ It is she who feels sad that she has failed her fellow classmates by not showing them that she is “Other” because she tried so very hard to be like them. Very modestly she is aware that she does not have the charisma of her admired sister, but that she has contributed something to the cause. If now anyone in her school asks her about her native country, he or she will know at least where to locate Kurdistan.

¹⁸ In the literature of colonialism, we do not often see this reversal. “Reversed colonialism” is founded on the same fears and notions of superiority as the “Other syndrome” and is as unpleasant. However, there can also be a humorous side to it as in the case of the “*odar* syndrome” and the “*odar* anger” (“*odar*” in Armenian means other”) which are described in *Black Dog of Fate* (BALAKIAN 1998: 124f).

Awareness of and involvement with the “Other” have been the concerns of the books so far discussed. Elke, the main character of Klaus-Peter Wolf’s *Die Abschiebung – The Deportation* – translates these concerns into personal action.¹⁹

During one of those inter-cultural affairs that Avin could have organized, Elke, an eighteen-year-old high school student, meets Mahmut. She is an idealistic teenager, and when the young Kurdish asylum seeker tells her of his problems with the German authorities and that he is to be deported to Turkey where he more than likely will be executed, she feels she has to do something to help. In a moment of self-effacing empathy, she consents to marry him so that he will have the legal right to stay in Germany. She is not really interested in him as a person, and the marriage is a formality only on paper as far as she is concerned. She will carry on with her life and boyfriends as usual. Having done a good deed makes her feel happy and elated; of the consequences of her action she has not thought. The book examines how this one unselfish act to “fix” a desperate situation almost ruins a whole family.

The story is set in a fair-sized town somewhere in Germany. The father – a teacher in one of the public schools – is a man of integrity who has great faith in the German way of handling things and the mother – a full-time housewife with a passion for her home – are surprised at their daughter’s decision. But they definitely also are children of the Enlightenment and therefore accept the “Other” into their house and respect their daughter’s choice. They are good people who will go to great length to help. They have made a serious mistake by trusting the integrity of the German system in its interpretation and execution of the law and thus are appalled when they find out how people, alien and native alike, are “handled”. Men and women with the best of intentions become worn out in the process of facing up to such an established bureaucracy; they either succumb or are destroyed by the process. This is born out by Elke’s story.

The fate of Kurdish asylum seekers in Germany is sad indeed, but the book does not sentimentalize their lot. There are few scenes, outside the police department of course, that show the xenophobia of the ordinary German citizen. The reader can feel the anger of both the father and the author when Mahmut is treated as a unperson in the café in which the father meets his son-in-law for the first time. Yet life in Turkey is much worse, but we do not see this. We hear that Mahmut’s family is on the wanted list, i.e., the death list of Ankara, as are so many other Kurds. Yet we are not exposed to any orgy of suffering as we are in the story of Leyla and Avin.

The “Others” are present throughout the novel at the margin of the German family whose life and very existence they shake to the foundation. They invade the family’s living room, the house, and fill them with their noise and smoke, the smells of garlic and raki, all in the tradition of the cliché and to the dismay of the mother – and with their loud political demands they have brought modern Kurdistan into the midst of German life. In their innocence of the intricacies of the German language they are about to ruin the father’s professional life. He showed sympathy for their

¹⁹ WOLF 1984, passim.

plight, and the next day he finds his name in the local gazette as openly sponsoring their cause against the German bureaucracy. This spells great trouble for him because in Germany a teacher in the public school system is a government official. He is stiffly reprimanded by his superiors.

Die Abschiebung then is not so much a book about the lives of Kurdish asylum seekers as it is an indictment of a system that has created laws that show little respect for human dignity; laws which, in turn, are administered and executed by blindly efficient bureaucrats. The parents slowly begin to realize that their trust in the German way of handling things has been built on a delusion. Rational dialogue about a topic that the authorities have not approved of is impossible. In their records, Kurdistan does not exist, though they might have enjoyed at one time Karl May's book. The endless waiting in police corridors and offices, the countless court sessions during which the accused does not know what the charges are; the exercises in perverting the truth – we have all been there before when we read Kafka's *Castle* or *Trial*.

Where is Kurdistan and who are the Kurds? The mother had to consult an encyclopedia; the father as a geography teacher often had to answer the question before when enlightening his Karl-May-reading students. And Elke? It was a romantic notion, a possibility to do something positive by getting involved. That turned out to be not such a good idea. German society and the legal and political systems do not allow this. She is betrayed into believing by her German boyfriend that through annulling her commitment Mahmut will be granted asylum. When she realizes that she had been duped, Elke will confront the authorities once more. But by this time Mahmut is already dead. He was bundled off by the German police into a Turkish airplane and shot by the military on arrival in Ankara.

The authors through their respective Elkes, Avins, Leylas, Christinas, Helins, Taras, and Yvonne have contributed to the inter-cultural dialogue that the German authorities deemed so necessary. Perhaps similar books in the future will put a greater emphasis on the role of the boy or young man in the crossing from culture to culture. In the books we examined, the burden of inter-cultural dialogue and encounter was squarely put on the shoulders of girls. Perhaps girls are more sensitive and patient than boys? The authors have written to inform and to arouse the interest and sympathy of their readers; not always as successfully as they might have been; nevertheless, we can only hope that writers of children's stories and novels in the future will follow their example. Often by looking at the "Other," they found the "Self" instead, though they did not always realize this. Does this shortcoming matter? Knowledge of the "Self" is, after all, the basic prerequisite for a meaningful encounter with the "Other".

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