

## Aufprall Translation Impact

We have written this book as a trio because the era which we refer to is one where things changed. Gender roles, social and racial backgrounds, perceptions, feelings, thinking and art developed new forms. This was not only true for people like us who were then in our twenties, but for the entirety of the 1980s world into which we grew up.

This novel is narrated by three voices. There is the feminine voice of a chorus which tells the story of a group of rebellious young people in West Berlin. Then there are the male and female voices of two members of the group, who are bound together by the common experience of a fateful event.

Nothing here is the product of our imagination. Not the events, nor the place. It is only the characters in this performance who are hybrids, pieced together from the personalities of a wider cast. The fiction is true and the facts will confirm it.

## History in the Making

January 1981

We came from the socialist blocks of Vienna, Hamburg's suburbs, terraced houses in southern Germany, mining towns in the Ruhrgebiet, bungalows in Lower Saxony, professorial houses in Heidelberg, idyllic Berlin suburbs, pubs on the edge of West Germany, farmyards in the Bergisches Land, the lower middle-class oases of Oldenburg, Bavarian villages, Franconian hamlets, and small towns in the Saarland. We came together and one moonless night, we occupied a building. Ten inches of snow had fallen the day before but we did not allow this to alter our plans. Time was precious. We had lived in cramped flats before, three to a room and with communal toilets for the whole building, or had camped on the dining room sofas of people we barely knew, sending off countless rental enquiries and sometimes spending nights at Zoo station waiting for the first morning newspapers with property pull-outs. We scrimped together vast sums to bribe landlords, but even that was useless. There was simply no space for us in this huge city. And because we did not want to end up back where we had started, we had to get creative.

One of us (and we no longer remember who) had put out a cryptic ad to look for like-minded people. You could not say that we took much interest in each other the first time we met in the kitchen of a dark, shabby building in Moabit. Inconspicuously, we took each other in. Outward appearance did not concern us – a common denominator brought us together: squatting. As none of us had any previous experience, we thought being as large a group as possible would be useful. This, however, quickly became a problem as there were not enough buildings for the large number of potential squatters in the city. Such a hype had developed around squatting that those wanting to be a part of it felt an urgency to find something. Kreuzberg was the most sought-after neighbourhood but suitable places were becoming increasingly rare there. Over the course of these months, there were a lot of secret meetings as buildings were picked out and plans put together for nocturnal take-overs.

Even prospective revolutionaries can try too hard. Some groups revised for their occupations like students before an exam. They divided themselves into working groups, went to the Land Registry Office, attended Council meetings, asked architects for advice and had already developed plans for the renovation of their buildings before they had even occupied them. They wanted to retain the building stock of the city and to find themselves good places to live. We did things differently.

Protesting against the many empty and neglected buildings would just be the start. It quickly became about more than failed housing policy – it was about creating a new way of living. Our rebellion was built on concrete grievances, but it morphed into a revolt which lacked grand theories. We had had enough of the smug know-it-all-ism of the 1968 generation and the delusional theoretical structures created by their successors. Squatting offered us an open-ended, lived experiment.

The pockmarked friend of some friends gave us the tip. In a gently scratchy voice, he told us that on his way to buy cigarettes, he often walked past a building which had obviously stood empty for a long time. It must once have been very grand but now, standing between two functional post-war blocks, it looked utterly dilapidated. He did not think others had shown any interest in it yet. Despite the fact his words were accompanied by a thin smile, we trusted him and sent out a reconnaissance party to size up the find. Tasks like this always attracted young men, who felt they were predestined for them. They would pick each other out, immediately knowing who was suitable and who was not. A group of six guys like this, replete with the tools of the criminal trade - and our good wishes - set off one night. They came back reasonably upbeat and reported that it had been insanely easy to get into the building from the back, before assuring us that they had been careful not to leave any inconvenient traces of themselves. If the police got wind of our plans to occupy the building, they would immediately post a “bathtub” (slang for a police van with bars on its front window) to stand guard.

The building was in a quiet street and consisted of three smaller buildings: one which faced onto the street, one at the back and one which linked them together on one side. It was so big that there was no way that they could have inspected all six storeys, but what they had seen had been superb!

Grand ensembles of rooms, high ceilings, balconies, heating stoves with art nouveau tiles and a large courtyard awaited us. The decision had been taken. We would occupy the building by the S-Bahn tracks. The “cool guys” from the recce remained relaxed in the face of what stood before us. In preparation, they discussed arrests, breaking in, and prison with other “cool guys.” Then they got on with planning our own occupation strategy. The highest priority was to get into the building without being noticed. If you were caught in the process of entering, the operation would be over before it started and the squatters would, after surrendering their details, be sent home. It was imperative we avoid this embarrassment but we had to prepare for every eventuality, so we filled out powers-of-attorney for lawyers famous for their work in this field. Even doing this gave us a sense of danger. In the days leading up to the occupation, we felt as though we had to bid farewell to the settled lives we had been leading up to that point with no clear idea of where we were headed. This, even though we were to remain in the same city.

We met in the middle of a freezing night. The street was dark. We had been divided into small groups. Some strong members of the group brought packs of coal with them. Some of us had sleeping bags under our arms, others brought tools and beer in rucksacks. A vanguard was formed by some of the braver ones. They broke into the building before one of them crept back to pick up a timider, second group. Finally, he came back one more time to pick up the group of most determined squatters. This order meant that the “timid” group had no way out. We communicated exclusively with gestures. No-one said anything. Some of the first group had already spread out around the building and were keeping watch over the street. One of them waited at the door to the side-wing with a torch. They brought the new arrivals up to the top floor. In our plans, we had resolved to spread ourselves across two rooms, which provided good look-outs onto the street below and S-Bahn yard. We heard nothing. A black night. We had done it.

When the sun came up just before eight, we were able to confirm what we had only suspected overnight: the building was virtually a ruin. Milky January light revealed the extent of the horror. The floorboards had largely been used for firewood, and the timber frame beneath had been laid bare. In

between its joists lay Brandenburg sand. Window panes had been smashed, wallpaper drooped down from the walls in thin strips. There were not many doors left and the tiled ovens were mostly tile-less. They, along with the ornately lathed bannisters, had probably been flogged at the flea market. The walls were damp, pipes had been ripped out, and the basins and toilets had been smashed up. The building gave off a decrepit and decaying feel. We were meant to *live* here? It was filthy and stank to high heaven. No-one was brave enough to say that it was uninhabitable. However, worst of all were our new housemates - the advanced guard had said not mentioned any - but overnight they had made themselves heard. Pigeons. They had had the run of the building in the preceding years and their shit had formed into a crust, several centimetres thick. You could hear them cooing and fluttering their wings all over the building. And their silvery-grey plumage shimmered in every corner. It was horrific. What should we do?

Saturday morning. A few old women on the street, taking their dogs out for a walk. They walk past our building without taking it in. No-one has discovered us yet and we could call the whole thing off without losing face. The brave ones are clear that they will not back out. They tell us anyone who wants to should go. We barely know each other, have hardly slept, and are freezing and hungry. We feel numb. Passively, we look on as the "brave" and the "determined" camps take hold of the situation. They decide to hang our banners out the window. One says 'occupied', the other 'dispossessed' and together they signify the transfer of the building to us. It does not take long for the police to drive up in a squad car. It sits in front of the building for a while with their engine running. When they drive off, we know that the pigeon-cote is ours - our occupation has been registered by the police. There are no celebrations. Someone goes to get bread. He comes back and says that the people in the bakery have already heard about us. Almost as an aside, he adds that our building belongs to a Jewish guy. It is the morning of 31 January - the 48<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Joseph Goebbels having tears in his eyes as he watched Hitler become Chancellor. Berlin's ghosts had us by the neck.

## Attacks- Thomas

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Ronald Reagan was on his way from Bonn, where he had attended a NATO Summit. The former actor was on a PR tour for his aggressive rearmament policies. The Peace Movement in Bonn had announced a demonstration there at which 200,000 people had been expected. Everyone - apart from the minor players on the Alternative List, who had got themselves elected to Berlin's *Senat* a year earlier - knew that it would not be peaceful in Berlin. We did not want to make peace with these warmongers. Because the security services believed that the "legal arm" of the *Rote-Armee-Fraktion* was behind the Berlin demonstration, a city-wide ban on protests was issued for Reagan's visit. Irene and her comrades were in their element. The word on the street was that the politically autonomous and anti-imperialist groups saw a brazen provocation in Reagan's cheek in coming to the "frontier city" of Berlin to promote war. On this, we all agreed with them. Ronald Reagan was the brains behind NATO's "war project"; to solve capitalism's political and economic crises with an imperialistic war. This president would not hold back from picking a fight with the potential to escalate into a Third World War. We were utterly convinced that we lived in a pre-war era.

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Our building would never be as full again. The foot-soldiers came in from Amsterdam, Göttingen, Hamburg, Freiburg, Zürich, Kiel, Stuttgart and Frankfurt in order to be there the next day. The "home bar" was packed and the breakfast banquet went on until late afternoon. Love affairs began, new friendships were forged and old ones were cleaved apart. Love before war. You got the feeling that an anarchistic future was being planned in every corner of the building. The atmosphere was almost relaxed as everyone relished the thought of challenging the USA, the imperialist super-power. Our fear of Nazis temporarily evaporated. But if they came... We would not be defeated.

Despite the ban on protests, we began making our way to Nollendorfplatz in small groups in the morning. Later, we were promised a warm summer's day and I had no real desire to spend it

grappling with the police for hours. I would have preferred to have found a spot in Kreuzberg and lain down in the sun daydreaming, but I pulled myself together and went along. “You can’t skive off sticking one to the warmongers”, Jan had reprimanded me the evening before. Of course, Soraya was also part of my reason for going. I was sure that if she had still been alive, she would have been at the very front, and I thought of her enthusiastic support for the rioting at the anti-Haig demos. It seems strange today, but if I had not gone, I would have seen that as a betrayal of Soraya’s memory. I had not thought about Luise for a long time.

Our neighbours hid behind their curtains and on their balconies, or stared out of the window. Nearly all of us were wearing black leather jackets. There was not a skirt in sight. Everyone brought sturdy boots, and lemon juice and a towel to deal with the tear gas. We wrote the number of the investigative committee in biro on our hands: 692 22 22. The activists there would make sure there would not be silence if we disappeared into a remand prison. Some more battle-hardened comrades carried motorbike helmets under their arms or stuffed balaclavas and gloves into their pockets. There was quite a lot more experience in their ranks, and they recognised each other from previous campaigns like the scuffles at the nuclear disposal site at Brokdorf, the Battle of Fraenkelufer, the campaign against a new runway at Frankfurt Airport, or from the demonstrations after squatted buildings were searched and cleared. Irene had given final instructions the evening before, standing on a table in the “home bar”: No drugs or alcohol before or during the demo, leave kids and bikes at home - childcare is organised, do not bring notebooks or address-books along, fill out a power of attorney, make arrangements with friends, go in small groups and don’t lose anyone, form chains, don’t allow strangers to join chains, stay calm no matter what happens, don’t let the cops or passers-by provoke you, throw tear gas canisters back, help the injured, and take care of civilians. She drove the message home that a peaceful demonstration against the global warmonger elite would achieve nothing. And she stressed that the resistance to US imperialism in western Europe had never been so strong or well-connected. Greeks, Italians, the French and the Spanish were all on our side - “if you want peace, prepare for war”.

Much to our surprise, there were no checkpoints at the U-Bahn station or on the street and we were able to get to the square without encountering any police. A rude awakening however quickly followed. "The pigs have fenced us in" someone shouted. As soon as Nollendorfplatz had filled up, they had blocked off its six adjoining roads with "bathtubs". Then, using NATO barbed wire, they kettled us in. The barbed wire was two metres high and was fixed to the tarmac using staples. There was no way out. After a while, a crackling megaphone announcement informed us that the police had set-up access points on the corners to Bülowstraße and Maaßenstraße. You could get out but had to surrender your details on the way. We had prepared for a range of scenarios but not this. They wanted to imprison us until Reagan had pulled off his propaganda show and got on a plane out. Our planned march route down towards Wittenbergplatz was out of the window. We were stuck in the middle of a square which could be easily observed from all sides. All our strategizing had come to nothing. I almost did not care – I had never been set out for life as a street fighter. I just had to think of a way to pass the time because queuing up, showing my ID and heading home was not an option. When I realised that the doors to all the nearby buildings had been locked shut, I began to panic. It was eerie. What did they want? Were we meant to play out Stalingrad with them? Who were the lions to which we had been thrown? Lars, who along with Vroni, Uli and Robert made up my group, could only just hold back his tears. Vroni, who was as bad at assessing danger as men, kept asking what had gone wrong. It was clear that Lars and Vroni were going to become a burden and restrict our freedom of movement. They had to be got out of the kettle as quickly as possible. I took on this task and we began fighting our way through to the checkpoint at Maaßenstraße, walking hand-in-hand like nursery children. I could sense that it would not stay peaceful for very long. The initial shock had briefly been overtaken up by the kind of atmosphere you get at festivals, but had now turned to pure hate and was threatening to break out into violence. Little groups stood about, lurking. Events like this always attract their own kind of directors and choreographers who patiently wait for a moment to spring into action. Rabe was one of them. He had once told me how much he loved this calm before a storm.

The police were taking their time to let people out. A hysterical crowd had developed, comprised of crying women with shopping bags in their hands, men with puppies - fear etched into their faces - screaming children and lonely day-trippers, who had lost their groups. They begged, shouted, implored and whined at the top of their voices. The police did not care, caught up in their moment of power. I left Vroni and Lars to their fate and headed back towards Robert and Uli. We had agreed to meet by a bar as we felt our chance of safety was greater there on the edge of the square. A nice idea but it was obviously not quite so simple just to find a spot to hang out on the periphery. We were part of a huge crowd, which was drifting all over the place. "We have been imprisoned" Robert confirmed in a monotone. Run, stumble, fall, stand up, shout slogans, duck, build chains, look for shelter. "Our police work as hard as back in '33", "Reagan, go home". Each time, the same response came from the police "This is the police. This march has not been granted permission. The High Court of Berlin has forbidden..."

The fighters in our ranks were just waiting for their moment. They had come kitted out for an attack and were well prepared. Tightly-packed units in black helmets attempted to break out. 19<sup>th</sup> century warcraft. They marched towards the access points in unbroken chains, "Listen up police: We demand our release". Their comrades further back secured their advance with a shower of cobblestones. Robert, who had recovered some of his old equanimity told me that he had seen John and Irene furiously pulling them up from the street with screwdrivers. There had to be ready supplies because stone showers are only effective if they are torrential. The cops no longer crossed over into the kettle, they pulled their visors down and covered behind their shields. Their counterattack came in the form of tear gas canisters, most of which were immediately hurled back. Those of us without helmets were defenceless in the face of both sides' weapons. Uli, Robert and I stuck closely together. Rabe had covered his mouth with a piece of cloth but we still recognised him immediately. He was in a group who were, with great enthusiasm, removing the plywood barriers from the windows of Roland, a furniture shop. With astonishing speed, everyday furniture - from bookshelves to living room cabinets, sofa covers, armchairs, bedside tables and clocks - was piled up and set alight. Dark

clouds of smoke and tear gas mixed together above the square. Somewhere, I heard a woman loudly shouting “Beirut”. I could not tell if she was excited or in need of help.

The roadblock at Bülowstraße falls. Everyone becomes even more frantic. “Bathtubs” pelt around the square, the police brandish their truncheons and set off on hunts across the square. Smoking tear gas canisters fly around in all directions. Protestors – many of whom are now utterly desperate – dive towards the now liberated Bülowstraße. The hard jet of water cannons drives them back. Police and ambulance sirens wail, while one shower of stones after another falls from the sky. Cars are set on fire. Ambulances try and find a way through the incensed crowd. Photographers and camera teams search for images in the chaos. The injured drag themselves into doorways. The whole thing is accompanied by a soundtrack of explosions and the loud percussion of cobblestones hitting plastic shields and shop windows. It is like a scene from a play. Robert develops an immediate interest in the cryptic stage management behind the violence. Although I am afraid of getting a truncheon to the head or of being arrested, I am swept up in it and join in. All around me there is a seething energy – of which I am a part. The battlefield extends into the surrounding streets. But there is no way through towards the Ku’damm. The independent paramedics have chosen to set up their First Aid station in the incongruous surroundings of the dive bar, Ruine on Winterfeldtplatz. The market stalls dotted around the square are quickly transformed into barricades. When the police briefly pull back, local residents emerge from their flats. They poke around in the ashes in front of the furniture shop. It is a grim image: groups of people, crying from tear gas, digging around for recuperable designer furniture. The message goes around that the U-Bahn has been suspended and that a state of emergency has been declared. We hear that Kreuzberg has been cut off from the rest of the world. CNN’s camera team hoists their cameras up onto the raised railway tracks before training them directly on the kettle. Chancellor Schmidt had hoped for a “pro-American atmosphere” during Reagan’s visit to Berlin. The images of war from Nollendorfplatz will horrify the Americans. They will probably wonder what has happened to the elated Berliners who John F. Kennedy got out onto the streets during his famous visit. We find Marianne, who breathlessly tells us that over 200 of us have

already been “gathered up” – by which she means arrested. As far as she is aware, no-one from our building is among them. There is also a rumour going around that Lummer<sup>1</sup> will attempt to seek revenge today with searches and evictions in squatted buildings. It is thought this will mainly affect buildings in Schöneberg. Nearby, a group of guys is, with evident glee, pushing over a “bathtub” which has got stuck. They help themselves to its Mercedes symbol before setting it on fire. It is a long time before the police summon the courage to pull the wreckage out. The photo of the “bathtub”, lying heavily on its side charred and with smoke curling above it, will become the symbol of our victory.

The whole thing went on for nearly six hours. Afterwards, the square was like a desert; its cobbles largely removed, and shop windows smashed. Stones and glass were everywhere, dotted between half-burned American flags. The chassis of torched cars, barricades of furniture and tear gas canisters emitted thick smoke. There was a horrendous smell of burned plastic, tear gas and gently burning pieces of wood. Somewhere, someone had opened their window and put a Jim Morrison record on. “The End” echoed around the square. Melancholy in the midst of urban warfare.

We came across brilliantly on television and in the newspapers. “The most significant uprising since 17 June 1953. The American President, the world’s most powerful man, left the city an hour earlier than planned.” “We are the Champions”, John laughed and gave Rabe a friendly punch to the stomach.

<sup>1</sup> Berlin Minister for Internal Affairs and Deputy Mayor of Berlin, 1981-6

## Us and God

We missed the “home bar”. For a while, we found old-school pubs interesting where rent activists, “historians” of Kreuzberg and squatters got drunk together, but we had soon had enough of the old soaks and their conversation. So Claudius created GOD. The old workers’ pub on the mezzanine level had been run by previous squatters as “Café Morazan” in solidarity with the revolutionaries in El Salvador. Claudius found their name stupid, “I wanted to have a name, that rises above everything. And I liked the idea of people saying “Let’s go to GOD”. I thought that sounded good.” From Kottbusser Tor onwards, lots of the buildings had “To GOD” sprayed on them. Those not in the know turned up near the Wall and would ask where God was. Claudius laughed when thinking about them, “Past Kotti, then past the kebab towers until you reach the end. Turn around at the Wall and go back three buildings. That’s how you’ll find your way to GOD”.

As a dealer, Claudius had money and it was his many swarming assistants who renovated the place. When it was finished, he gave them 150 DM to stock the bar with drinks for the grand opening. A few weeks later it was full every night. GOD was a place for parties, in an area that had none before. *The Connection Has Been Broken* was the title of a collection of Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault’s writing, published by Merve in 1977. And this would also serve as motto for the bar. What applied to philosophy - not attempting to re-enact the 1920s, not analysing global structures using Hegelian logic, not explaining everything using neo-Kantian categorical explanations – could also apply to nightlife. Punk was about re-barbarising a pop music which had been throttled by excessive aestheticism. People who pogo dance trust complete strangers – long live the amateur. It was mostly the area’s nocturnal scene - finally tired of the O-mile - who came, so the four regulars from the immediate area stuck out. There was the lame neighbour who rode around Kreuzberg with stabilisers on his bike all day. GOD normally only opened after 11pm, and he was nearly always among the first at the bar. He walked as though he had had polio as a child but in reality, it was his boozing which had led to this apparent disability. Always slightly unsteady and with a glass of mineral water in his

hand, he would lean against the bar, and would explain to us night after night that he would be able to walk again by the end of the following summer. There was the Hungarian neighbour. A stocky, sweaty builder with unusually large pores. He was terribly lonely and took strong anti-depressants. It was in GOD, that he smoked weed for the first time. That was it for him. Red-eyed but content in GOD, you'd see him smoking joints there until the small hours. He passed his anti-depressants on to the Hertie Punk. This Hertie Punk was a young guy from Peine who was doing an apprenticeship in the department store, Hertie. His true love was, however, punk. He would come into GOD wearing his work uniform, a blue apron with the Hertie logo, and would go off to work once the bar closed. Then there was the gay neighbour. He shared a small flat with his mother around the corner. A friendly, distinguished man, he combed what little hair he had left over his face as though he wanted to hide behind it. Whenever he went out, he would wear a deeply unfashionable white suit. We knew that an appearance in GOD meant he had been beaten up. Nasty locals who did not like gay people would lie in wait for him. He could not go home to his mother with a bloody face and blood-spattered trousers, so he would stand in front of the mirror in the toilets and attempt to cover up the injuries to his face with his hair. The blood spatter on his flares would be treated with a mixture of Schultheiss beer and dishwater. He would not even tell Thomas, who had befriended him, who had done this to him and would respond to any questions with quiet and evasive answers.

Claudius was a dealer with principles. He did not sell hard drugs. Hash was a cushy business for him, which also had the advantage of meaning he did not have to have any "dealings" with the government. He had set GOD up but it was not long before he no longer enjoyed his own bar. There was too much cocaine. The slow-witted guys behind this innovation were not his kind of punters. They might "do art" but in reality, they were just junkies, and people like this were not on the level he expected for GOD. One night, during one of the Hertie Punk's concerts, the floor under the toilets collapsed. That was the end of GOD.

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It was astonishing how much Luise had been changed by two weeks in New York. Her transformation from a punky squatter, who looked at the world through strands of unkempt hair and un-made-up eyes to a woman who wore miniskirts and no longer left the house without a hat and eyeliner was discombobulating. It was as though she had hidden an important part of herself in trousers, and overnight, she went out into the world changed - her wonderful legs on full display. When she walked down the O-Mile in heels, the baboons wolf-whistled in her direction. We were baffled as to what had led to this change. Was it the influence of the ominous Aunt Diana, or had she fallen in love? The answer was simpler. Luise had decided to assign art the most prominent position in her life. New York had taught her that artists had to put themselves out there, and Luise wanted to be seen as an artist. The punk-art era was over. Idiosyncrasy and individualism were her new mantras. Then came the crash. An artist who squatted in empty buildings and stole cheese from KaDeWe could not get a scholarship in the US. The evening her visa application had been rejected, we all sat in the kitchen. It was like the old days. To a background of loud punk and rap, we cursed the imperialistic USA, which, as Luise's case showed, was an inhuman dictatorship. It was a great, drug-addled night.

Vroni could not get enough of Luise's stories from New York, "Did you go to the Rainbow Room?...Is the sky over New York really that blue?... Does it smell of the sea on Fifth Avenue?... Are New Yorker women really as chic as Holly Golightly? ... What is Little Italy/Chinatown/SoHo, Harlem/Brooklyn like?... Did you go to the carousels at Coney Island/ to MoMA?... What does sunrise over Central Park look like?" Luise patiently explained all that she had seen, and Vroni's excitement grew and grew until one day, she announced that she too would go to there. To get herself in the mood for the trip, she invited the whole building to a barbecue. It looked as though Ronald Reagan himself had announced a visit to our little courtyard in Kreuzberg. The Stars and Stripes hung over the tables and benches and Uncle Sam beamed out from the serviettes, while Frank Sinatra belted our "New York, New York" on an endless loop. Ketchup, Coke and mayo bottles stood all over the place. Thick burgers sweltered on the grill and shots of whisky shone golden in mustard jars. Vroni had dug up a

GI who had gone shopping for her in an American supermarket on Clayallee. In bright red lipstick, our hostess giggled and laughed while speaking the American English of a Billy Wilder film, childlike joy etched into her features. We felt however, that there was something off about the day. Where had Vroni got the money to put all of this together? “Imagine what John and Irene would do if they saw us,” Robert whispered. Were we not putting our reputations as sworn enemies of US power on the line by sitting around under the US flag, lustily chewing on burgers and raising toasts with Jack Daniel’s? But no-one wanted to ruin Vroni’s mood, so we put a brave face on it.

A few weeks later Vroni had a high fever. Lenny compressed her legs while Michael made Indian chicken soup. When she got back on her feet, she had lost a lot of weight, which refused to go back on. Our worries about her grew. We had by now got wind of how she had got herself so much money, “Vroni flogs her wares in the Turkish brothel”, Jan mumbled to the group one evening. A friend of a friend had recommended she apply for a job as a barmaid in a shack around the back of the *Neues Kreuzberger Zentrum*. She had been told that a voluptuous blonde like her would appeal to the predominantly Turkish clientele who patronised it. Vroni was immediately taken on. It did not however take long for her place of work to move from behind the bar to a back room. She had told Jan and Lynn that this meant she would be able to save up more quickly for her New York trip. Lynn gave the enterprise her feminist blessing – it was an era where we believed that prostitution was a legitimate career choice, and that sex had to be paid for in marriage anyway.

Vroni started telling us stories from the brothel. There were fathers from Hermsdorf and Schlesisches Tor who would sit there, bawling their eyes out and claiming to be in love with her. But there were far more men who despised Vroni and wanted to exploit her. With her, this was no great challenge: Vroni was incapable of judging men. If one was nice to her, she would do anything for him.

We noticed that she was having more and more problems climbing the stairs to the fourth floor and her loud wheezing could be heard throughout the building. She had to stop halfway up for a rest. It was only a matter of time before she would no longer be able to get into her room. We convinced ourselves that she only had a bad case of the flu and that she would be back to normal soon. Michael

alone took a different view. When he learned that she was locking herself in the bathroom for extended periods of time, he asked her what was wrong and whether she was embarrassed about anything. Vroni refused to answer, so the next time she was locked in there, Michael violently broke the door down. A miserable scene confronted him – Vroni sat naked on the floor, covered in sweat, purple spots all over her emaciated body. Michael immediately knew what was wrong. She had AIDS. He went to see Uli and together they persuaded Vroni to go to a doctor. Uli had a friend in the Urban Hospital, who would treat her for free. Despite the fact that Vroni avoided any interaction with institutions, she was simply too ill to turn down Michael's offer. She never came back. We had only known about this epidemic for a few years. Prostitutes were however a risk group and Vroni must have known this. We could all too easily imagine that she had been too nice - or too high - to insist on condoms. She could also earn more money if she let men have sex with her without them, which would have meant her getting to New York more quickly. Gaunt, exhausted and without lipstick, she lay in her hospital bed. We tried to get hold of her stepsisters in Vienna but had no luck.

Vroni remained true to punk to the end. Her final wish was that we would sing Viennese folk songs to her. Everyone came, even Sven who brought "baby Kurt" along on his shoulders. Marianne applied red lipstick to Vroni while Lenny accompanied us on the guitar. It must have sounded dreadful but Vroni, caught up in a plague of biblical proportions, beamed at us. We sang and sobbed. Two days later, she was dead.

## The Shoes- Luise, 1987

It was behind the large “S” of the Schaubühne that I lost my heart to him. Robert had brought me along to an opening night party. I have forgotten what the play was but Luc Bondy<sup>2</sup> was definitely there. Actors, stagehands, friends and guests stood on the roof, and I stood behind the big “S”. Robert brought over two glasses of champagne, “To us, Luise. Back on a roof. What a long way we have come! Where’s our black flag?”, he declaimed before leaving me there, alone. I wandered aimlessly around, chatting to strangers about my youthful reading of Carson McCullers and my more recent discovery of Marguerite Duras. I sank into an ocean of beautiful music, intelligent words and careful touching. And at some point, *he* joined the group and began to listen in, before throwing in an occasional contribution. He laughed, swayed to the music and flirted. “A man who would have appealed to Pasolini”, I thought just before leaning against the “S” and letting him kiss me. It was initially just a short fling, a pleasant way to spend the time, like all my other affairs. But he was not a juvenile, bringing temporary milk and honey. I got a whiff of destiny off him. In felt tip, I drew him time and time again in my diary. He is the seducer. “He knows how to thrill me”. He morphed from lover to beloved, and my heart was prepared to encounter any hurdle for him. My room in the building by the Wall grew dusty. I spent my days in my studio at Anhalter Bahnhof and my nights with my beloved in the suburbs of Steglitz. Working in the bar kept my head above water and I was thinking up lots of interesting ideas for my art. I exhibited and applied for scholarships, but still avoided making plans for a settled, middle-class future. Nonetheless, new, sweetly poisonous thoughts began to establish themselves in my head. I woke one morning with my beloved gently blowing some hairs off my forehead, “Wouldn’t it be great, if we could watch each other going grey?”. That was new. Staying together. I knew, of course, that he had an ex-girlfriend but exes were for the past. Once when we took the S-Bahn to Wannsee, he mentioned in passing that he had previously always got off at one of the stops. The street he pointed at was - despite the nearby motorway - quiet and was populated by trim villas and their grand gardens. I was unimpressed. I had

<sup>2</sup> Swiss theatre and film director. Part of the Schabühne’s directorship, 1985-1988

no doubts about our future. And so, when one afternoon he announced to me that he “had to go back” to his old girlfriend, my world fell apart. He really did put it like that. They had always wanted children and their plans had been ruined by a silly fight. He had coincidentally run into her a little while before and it all came tumbling back. He claimed to be very sorry and said that he did not want to endanger my “artistic existence”. He really said that too. After all of this, he started to cry. Anger about this petty betrayal of love blinded me.

A month after he left me, I resolved never to utter his name again. I took the champagne he had given me to the punks at Kottbusser Tor and I swore not to take the S-Bahn towards Wannsee for a very long time. I had “Empty Bed Blues” – and it was appalling.

My future had been cancelled and I was beset by homesickness. That winter, I felt the pull of Ústí. I wanted to see what I had not been able to while I was in the coma. It was five years since Soraya had died. Five years since I had nearly smoothly slipped from an afternoon nap into eternal sleep. I still felt Soraya alongside me even if the shadow she cast had grown smaller. The decision to go to Ústí was however one I took for myself. I wanted to see where my old life had ended and the new one had begun. This journey was a privilege I felt I - as the survivor - had over my dead friend. Strange though it may sound, it was thanks to the weakness and a numb resignation that had developed in the aftermath of the breakdown of the relationship, that I felt able to return to the scene of the accident and of my coma. My father, who had retained contact with Dr Lípa by letter, wrote to tell me that the doctors in Ústí would be delighted to see me again. I applied for a visa. Although I never discussed this with anyone, it was clear to me that I had to travel alone. I planned to go just before Christmas.

The evening before setting off, I put the bag I had packed next to the door. I had my passport and my visa ready and had rarely felt so well prepared for a trip. The train to Prague departed from Lichtenberg in East Berlin at ten the next morning, and I had built in a generous hour and a half to allow for the border crossing in Berlin. This meant getting up at seven. It was ten and I was much too nervous to get any sleep. No-one in the building wanted to go out with me but I was still keen to go

and spend an hour or so in O-Bar. As I knew that you always met someone there, I thought I could go head over and while away a bit of time while still being in bed by midnight.

On the corner of Oranienstraße, I nearly collided with Thomas. It froze to the spot as if having being struck by lightning. We had not seen each other for what felt like several years but I recognised him immediately. He wasn't as lanky anymore. He'd put on weight - which suited him - and he was sporting some designer stubble - which made him look older. As was fashionable for cool young men at the time, Thomas was wearing a suit, "You here, back in your old area? Slumming it are we?", I joked instead of saying hello. He fired something back and then there was a moment of silence before I suggested that he join me for a drink on the eve of my great journey. Thomas did not seem at all surprised by the trip and immediately agreed to come with me. We set off towards Wiener Straße, where we would be able to pick up Berlin's best falafel on the way. Any idea of returning by midnight quickly faded. We began by discussing the journey to Ústí, during which I noticed how evasive Thomas's answers were. The topic made him extremely uncomfortable. I found him quite attractive and briefly played with the idea of bringing him home with me - certain he would come along without hesitation - but something about his manner disturbed me, and I quickly abandoned the idea. When he wanted to change the subject from Ústí, he began to explain how he had recently seen Irene. On a trip back to the north, she and a young boy had sat down at the window of his train compartment. She had not changed much - he said - and was neatly dressed in black. With unexpected friendliness, she had asked him to join them. Yes, she was fine. Excellent, in fact. She now lived in Paderborn but travelled a lot. She worked in IT for Nixdorf, had even risen to management level. The squatters' councils had shown her how to get her way in male-dominated environments. She had reminded him that she had always been interested in computers and the surveillance state back then, and this had led her to get this job. Open-mouthed, Robert had listened to her stories. When he had to get off, she had said to her son "Ahab, say bye to Thomas". She responded to Thomas's aghast expression with her famous malicious smile - Ahab had been Andreas Baader's codename. And this was Irene's way of showing that she was still a supporter of the *Rote-*

*Armee-Fraktion*. Thomas finished his story and downed his beer. For some strange reason, he saw the low-level intellectual existence he had constructed for himself as being endangered by this chance meeting with Irene. Had he been scared that Irene would be able to rile him up and win him over for her movement? Had he forgotten his underhand deals with her? Was he corruptible or was he really just a coward?

After that, we stuck to art. Thomas told me about his meetings with Heidi and Peter from the Merve publishing house. I knew them from parties at Nürnberger Eck and pinball at Ex'n Pop. And I had, of course, read volume 120 in their International Merve Discourse series, *Individual Mythologies* by Harald Szeemann. I needled Thomas by saying that I had been irritated by Szeemann's exclusive creation of aura around male artists, "He's just like all the others. Women belong at the children's table for him." In response, Thomas claimed that I was creating my own individual mythology with my art. Thankfully our views coalesced on the point that we were all born to experience things and that art refers to experience, instead of being about sublimation or self-fulfilment. "Art is Transformation", I shouted before we moved on to another bar. I poured my heart out to Thomas in our final bar, which stayed open until the small hours. I did not tell him about the break-up but I did tell him something, which I had never told anyone up to this point – that I had had a dream in the coma. At some point between the crash at the crossroads and waking up in Ústí. This dream was the only memory I had from those lost days. In precise images, I had dreamed of a train journey from grey, salty Hamburg to the awesome light of Spain. I had never set foot in Spain and the dream seemed therefore to pose me a series of riddles – it was like a near-death experience and there was no-one whom I could speak to about it. I went further and told Thomas how I needed to explore this dream in my work, and that I wanted to use all the funds I had got from Berlin's *Senat* scholarship for this project, which I had entitled "Hamburg-Spain. The Journey". Thomas quietly listened while looking either at my right ear or something behind it. He asked only a few questions and sipped away at his beer and a tequila shot. There was however no question about his attentiveness -my words did not simply glide past him. He did not say much but I felt our mutual connection.

At four, we set off home. Hurrying down Wiener Straße towards Kottbusser Tor, we kept our distance, but at some point, our hands had accidentally linked, my left to his right. As the cold, early morning air - still with the smell of coal suspended in it - crept into our bones, our hands got ever warmer. We did not say anything. It felt as though we were carrying something very valuable to the U-Bahn: everything that had been said and been left unsaid in the hours - and years - before. At the entrance to the station, we parted ways. Thomas leapt down the stairs, only briefly turning around. We shouted goodbye, waved and then he disappeared.

When my alarm clock went off, it was still dark outside and all I could hear was a humming from inside my head. I was seriously hungover. Quick shower, get dressed, a quick coffee, coat on, hat on, tie boots. I took the U-1 away from the greyish pink of Kottbusser Tor and towards the swimming pool blue of Hallesches Tor. There I changed, and the train passed through the abandoned, dull yellow and grey stops under East Berlin until we got to Friedrichstraße station and its olive-green tiles. I raced up the steps to the border crossing. Colour and the bright neon lights were painful to me in my hungover state. I wanted to be a long way from here. With horror, I realised that I might not be able to keep to my carefully planned schedule. I had seriously underestimated the pre-Christmas rush. It seemed that every pensioner in East Berlin was on their way back from trips to West German Christmas markets. At the same time, groups of West Berliners were on their way to East Berlin in search of whatever it was they sought there. We all stood together crammed into one queue. In front of us were a series of closed doors, behind which the GDR's border police sat. These doors opened with agonising infrequency to let the next person in. When it was finally my turn, I still clutched at the insane hope that everything was OK and that I would be through in time to board the train at 10 in Lichtenberg. The border guard carefully checked whether the woman in front of him looked like the picture in the passport. After he had spent some time staring at my tired face, he checked the back of my head using the mirror suspended above me. Then at last, the exit door whirred. I was an hour late.

I had missed my train to Prague. Instead of getting there in the afternoon, I would arrive in the evening. What should I do? Dir Lída was meant to pick me up and would be very worried. There were three telephone boxes in the post office by Lichtenberg station but you had to register the calls first. I queued up and when I got to the front, the woman behind the glass told me that I was not allowed to call Czechoslovakia from East Berlin. I was also not allowed to telephone West Germany. The only option I had was West Berlin. My first thought was Thomas. He would be able to call my parents. Luckily, we had exchanged numbers at the beginning of our long evening. The woman wrote his number down and assigned me a cubicle, where a phone would ring as soon as she had established the connection. I waited in the musty cubbyhole by a telephone with no keypad. All of a sudden, it rang shrilly and I picked up, holding the receiver up to my ear. The endless ringing made it seem like I was calling another galaxy. Finally, he picked up. Thomas was just as hungover as me and somewhat querulous. For a moment, I thought he might turn down my request to call my parents to ask them to tell Dr Lída I would be late. After I had dictated the number to him though, he mumbled “have a good time” and hung up.

It was already dark when I got to Ústí. The thin, narrow platform, on which Franz Lída awaited my arrival was only illuminated by one neon light. We faced each other, me in my chic, Kreuzberg finery and a much smaller version of him than the one I had remembered. He looked fragile in his blue anorak. We slowly descended the stairs to ground-level and he led the way to the hotel, through a network of dark streets. He was short of breath, an old man. In what sounded like an apology, he told me had given up smoking after fifty years. At the entrance to the hotel, we said our goodbyes and arranged to meet the next day at the hospital.

I entered the lobby of this “Westerners’ Hotel” in which my parents, my siblings and Thomas had stayed. When I mentioned my name at reception, the ladies greeted me like an old friend. It was so heartfelt that it seemed strange to me. I felt like they meant someone else and had mixed us up.

The next morning, I walked around the town in the freezing cold. Most of the buildings were cubic post-war blocks. These were interspersed with elements of run-down 19<sup>th</sup> century grandeur and

some examples of the socialist interpretation of international brutalism - clunky concrete buildings with slits like those in bunkers. The air smelt strongly of sulphur and the people around me coughed and spat on the streets. Suddenly, I found myself on the riverside between two iron bridges. The Elbe here looked completely different from how it did in Hamburg and Dresden. Thin and pale, it charted its course between rocky wasteland on either side. On the other bank, a chemical factory emitted gas into the air and a red broth was channelled into the river from a canal. There were not even any ducks to feed. It briefly occurred to me how depressing and sad a town this was. Then I set off for my meeting with Lípa and the others.

The hospital was surrounded by a thick wall. As I crossed the site, I was aware of every step I took. I was not being carried this time. I was using my own feet.

Dr Lípa had given me a detailed description of the building I would find him in. Standing in front of it, I remembered the façade immediately. I counted the number of steps between the entrance and the reception and committed the number to memory. While I waited, I pictured my parents arriving here in the middle of the night. The receptionist sent me along a long corridor towards the rear of the building. This was where intensive care was housed. I rang the bell and Dr Lípa opened the door. Again, I was surprised by how small he was. He was wearing his trusty white coat. In the daylight, I could see how much he had aged in the intervening years. He led me straight into the ward's staffroom where a large group of people were waiting for me, including all the doctors I had got to know during my last visit. Dr Kolo, the medical director and amateur opera singer opened a bottle of Crimean sparkling wine. Dr Den spoke to me in French and Dr Maly used his limited German, but both expressed their pleasure to see me again. I had become their mascot; a piece of living proof of their artistry - and I had come back. The photos I have from this meeting are tinged with the colour of the East and show me sitting with the doctors, all dressed in white, on a colourful sofa with decorative wallpaper behind us. Dr Lípa has his arm around me. The other doctors are strong, young men who look almost boisterous. Dressed in black, I form the focal point in this group of men, with my slightly chubby cheeks and a vaguely nervous smile on my red lips. In reality, I was quite

overcome with joy at being able to look into sets of eyes with which I had once fallen in love. We raised toasts to each other, before clinking glasses amidst much laughter. Then - out of nowhere - the medical director brought me a green apron and a white hood. Someone helped me put them on and did up my belt. I was not sure what I should make of it and I had a slightly queasy feeling, with no sense of what the director wanted to show me. He gestured that I should follow him and so I strode out onto the ward, sparkling wine in my blood and my heart in my throat.

In the first section, all the beds were empty, including the one I had occupied. I walked past the office with its tinted glass and looked out of the same window as I had during my stay. The red star on the building next door was still there, blurrily protruding from the grey background of sky behind it. Dr Kolo beckoned me over to the other side, where he had briefly disappeared behind a screen. I followed him. Standing by the bed, he placed his right hand on a flat, white metal box. This was the respirator. He patted the machine tenderly and his eyes shone as he tried to make himself understood. In a mixture of Czech, English and German, he told me that I had been the first to be linked up to this machine. I stood there in a green apron that was too big for me with an unshapen white hood on my head, and peered out from underneath my punk-black eyeliner at the patient who had taken my place. She was blonde, slightly older than me – perhaps around thirty, naked under a thin sheet with the tube from the machine going into her throat. Her legs made jerky, uncontrolled movements. She seemed to be only semi-conscious, utterly enveloped by drugs. She looked over to me, stared into my eyes and began to cry. I had had enough and mumbled an apology before hastily running away from the machine, from the crying woman, from the doctor's pride, from the empty beds and back to the others who were still sitting there, champagne glasses in their hands. I only mustered the courage to ask Dr Lípa about the woman later. No-one in the hospital knew if she would make it. He told me that she was in an unhappy marriage and had tried to take her own life. She had drunk a litre of bleach which had burned through her fat tissue and caused her lungs to collapse, but she had not died.

Even though he was retired, Dr Lída went into the hospital every day. On top of that, he still taught for a few hours a week and translated articles from English medical journals – a service vital to his colleagues. He told me that he was incapable of sitting around at home. It was too sad for him there and he could not live without his ward. One evening, I visited the Lída family. We sat on a sofa in their living room, drinking wine under large prints of a Piero della Francesca and of “Portrait of a Boy” by Pinturicchio. Franz Lída’s wife, Jitka, was friendly but could only speak Czech, having completely forgotten her English. Their second son, Matyas, was a musician. He told me that he dreamed of having a real Parisian Selmer Saxophone. I did not dare to ask about his elder brother and years later I learned that he had committed suicide. Their grandson did not say anything. He was a boy of seventeen and was so ashamed of his falsetto voice that he refused to open his mouth except to whisper things to his grandparents. He played me something on his keyboard during which he shot me a shy smile. The atmosphere in the house was amiable if cautiously melancholic.

Franz Lída did not have a car, so at the weekend Dr Maly took us on a long drive in his Skoda with his son, Pavel. We passed through villages situated in the hilly landscape between Litomerice and Teplice. By contrast to Ústí nad Labem’s harsh urbanism, the villages seemed inviting and intact. Dr Lída pointed out a grand villa on one mountainside, which belonged to the hospital’s chief surgeon. He explained that he was a functionary in the higher echelons of the Communist Party, and had been a thorn in Lída’s side. I wound my window down. The air outside was soft and damp - it smelled of snow. Suddenly, Dr Maly parked on the edge of the road and we all got out. We were at the scene of the accident. Dr Lída was very agitated, and excitedly swung in arms around, in order to show me the positions of all the different vehicles. I realised with surprise that he must have been here often. My hands deep in my overcoat pockets, I paced to and fro over the whole area. I had no sense for this place at all. Before, I had had a very precise image of the place in my head and I suddenly realised that this had nothing to do with reality. I had imagined a road that could have been in a computer game, dead straight and wide. The grass on its edges was much greener in my imagination and a huge black military lorry had buried our small silver Merc in the middle of the crossroads. I was

however standing on the fork between a lightly curving country road pockmarked with potholes and a very narrow road with prickly bushes on its sandy edges, which, barely perceptibly, sloped away.

“This could be anywhere”, I thought, almost with contempt. I was not at all impressed by *this* accident site and did not even bother to take any photos of it. We got back into the car and continued our drive. When I lay in bed that evening, I realised with astonishment that I was going to stick to my artificial images. The real pictures would probably never return to me.

Thirty-two years later, my brother Tobias sent me photos of the car after the crash. He said he had completely forgotten about their existence, and had only stumbled across them again when moving house. They show the Merc, completely squashed, sitting in the back garden of one of the few houses near the crossroads. My father, my mother and my sister surround the wreck, aghast. It seems inconceivable that any of us got out of that alive. In the photos, the three of them, the smashed-up car and the house seem completely alone in the world, surrounded by a huge void. I had not known about the house until seeing the photos, and I could also not remember seeing it during my drive with the doctors. The house gave me new clues in my own search for the crash site and it was a shock to find myself driving the same roads using the satellite images from Google Earth. I found the house from my brother’s slide. Because I had only used paper maps up until this point, I was under the mistaken impression that the road had been swallowed up by a new motorway junction. Now, I was able to see that the crossroads had been converted into a roundabout. The junction was further west. This amended my carefully constructed vision of where the accident had taken place, and with horror, I realised that it had been just after a turning for Terezin – you only had to turn the corner and you would see the former concentration camp. Why had no-one told me this? When I had stood at the crossroads thirty-two years earlier with Franz Lípa, Simon and Pavel Maly, they had said nothing. This, even though, as I learned from a letter from his brother after his death, Franz Lípa’s parents had been deported by the Nazis first to Terezin and then on to Oświęcim (Auschwitz). There, just like Dr Maly’s parents, they were sent into the gas chambers by the National Socialists. Franz Lípa and Simon Maly had prioritised the story of a young German above this.

The evening after the drive, I dined alone with Lípa . He had reserved a table in a restaurant, where we ordered a Czech beef speciality with thick dumplings and drank large glasses of Pilsner beer. In the huge room, we were somewhat lost as we spoke about the past. Franz Lípa was not interested in the future. He was not in good health and had to take deep breaths after every sentence. He told me about his defeats in his daily battle with the communist power system and the story of his loss of faith in communism. Whenever he said “Jewish” or “Jew”, he would lower his voice and glance around. It occurred to me that he had once assumed the role that Soraya had played for me. The philosophical questions and meditations which Soraya and I had discussed at the kitchen table were the same ones which he and I had pondered at my hospital bed. Many years had passed since then and his face had developed deep furrows. There was something different about this evening too. I was not a patient anymore, reliant on his visits for distraction, and I was no longer the young girl who had turned to him for knowledge and a sense of direction. He was surprised and almost shocked by my Kreuzberg finery, he later wrote. Sometimes he absently stared into his glass, his expression darkening. He also did not speak about the present, a topic I knew he could hardly bear. Sometimes he would point at his old-fashioned trainers, “Look at my shoes”, he said quietly and almost secretively, “I can’t afford new ones. If I get invited to a grand party, I simply won’t be able to go. I would be too ashamed of my shoes”. It sounded bitter but the old shoes were a symbol of his failure in the world.

The next day, I said goodbye to everyone and boarded a train to Prague. I had been afraid of going there but also had a clear desire to do so. My plan was to walk around for a few hours and then catch the night train home. Again, things did not go to plan. I went into one of the busy, tiny bars in search of distraction over a black Bohemian beer, spent too long there and missed my train home. The next evening, I finally took a train to the West.

I got to the border station at Cheb after midnight. We had already been through the border checks and yet were still sitting in the middle of nowhere. The train was almost empty and unheated. I opened my window onto the empty, yellow platform. There was no sign with the place’s name, no

conductor, no announcements. It was no colder outside than in. I watched my own breath and entertained bleak thoughts. I was stuck between the borders. Released from one country but not yet arrived in the next. Luckily, I had a bottle of Becherovka with me – a present from Ústí, which warmed me up in the miserable, cold train. I had just observed the border guards sending their Alsatians under the train's carriages while they slowly and ominously walked alongside. They listened with great care to see if their dogs were attacking any refugees crouching under the carriages. The image of this hunt remained the most unpleasant I ever had from my journeys between East and West. After a while, the bottle was half empty and my tongue felt slightly fuzzy. I no longer cared how long we waited there. I looked out of the window, expecting to see ghosts: to see one of the old women in their black capes, who boarded trains at the border to the East in order to give free coffee to people coming back from trips behind the Iron Curtain. These unforgiving, dark women unsettled me. Characters like these were a sign to those of us born later that the post-war era would never end. But what did that have to do with us?