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Europe, by circuitous routes

Ken and Lo, they are together,
not only since yesterday,
but for a day and ever.

Not like two halves,
like two closed eyes rather,
in one and the same calm face.
Of change, of separation
they never knew nor saw a trace.

They do not know from where they came,
hand in hand they always must have stood.
They carry their habits and their names,
like night carries its black hood.

Beyond change,
beyond pain,
beyond pleasure,
there is nothing to describe, nothing to ask.
For words exist only among parts,
not for a whole to measure.

Nothing to revise, nothing to endeavour,
all is bright and gay.

For Ken and Lo, they are together,
not only since yesterday,
but for a day and ever.

This poem owes its existence to research funding under the Fifth Framework Programme of the European Commission. More precisely, to the project »EUNOMIA – European evaluation of coercion in psychiatry and harmonisation of best clinical practise«¹. Even more precisely, to the

¹ <https://cordis.europa.eu/project/rcn/64754/brief/en>

Hebrew version of the questionnaires used there. In Hebrew, כן (ken) means yes and לא (lo) no.

Since then, the poem has been on my hard drive as if it had nothing to describe, nothing to ask. Until I read a psychoanalytic discussion² of Madonna's video »Die Another Day«³. It is about identity, about displacement and eventually about the contrast between אהבה (Hebrew transcription: love) and לא (no). Here, many meanings can be put into it as well. The core message of the video, however, is taken from the text »Beyond the Pleasure Principle« by Sigmund Freud:

»So through a long period of time the living substance may have been constantly created anew, and easily extinguished, until decisive external influences altered in such a way as to compel the still surviving substance to ever greater deviations from the original path of life, and to ever more complicated and circuitous routes to the attainment of the goal of death. These circuitous ways to death, faithfully retained by the conservative instincts, would be neither more nor less than the phenomena of life as we now know it.«⁴

In his »Letters to a German Friend«, Albert Camus describes France's detours from its rapid defeat against Germany to its ultimate victory: »It is the detour that preserved justice and gave the truth to those who thought.« Camus explains to his former friend why »certainty of the heart is not tantamount to joy of the heart.« Because, he writes: »Justification does not come from every kind of love, this is your ruin.«

Can an insight be gleaned, when I bring together my pseudo-love-poem, that distracted me from research questionnaires, with the silence of the French during German occupation and with the once again uncertain future of the European idea? In all cases, it is the superficial, premature, one-sided cheerfulness that deceives.

And, dear brothers and sisters in Western Germany, in a simple, cheerful and perhaps rash way we people from Eastern Germany were happy: first you sent us parcels with coffee and chocolate, then paid us welcome money and then built new roads that are wider than your own. Thank you, again. Sometimes we loved you for this, sometimes we hated ourselves for our falling for the hedonic treadmill⁵, often both at the same time. We always wanted to travel further and think further than to Flens-, Frei- and Lüneburg. »Where the palm trees bow...«⁶ Common first names in the last generation born in the German Democratic Republic are Monique and Ronny. Fetishism is a Eurocentric concept.⁷ Fine, but it does not always have to be the commodity fetish⁸. How about a sustainability⁹ fetish for a change?

»All this time, while stubbornly and silently we served only our country, we never lost sight of an idea and a hope, always kept it alive in us: Europe. However, we did not talk about it for five

² <https://english.ucalgary.ca/manageprofile/sites/english.ucalgary.ca.manageprofile/files/unitis/publications/1-5916840/Sigler.pdf>

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VlbaJA7aO9M>

⁴ <https://www.bartleby.com/276/5.html>

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hedonic_treadmill

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U02VW62xoBc>

⁷ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fetishism#Historiography>

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Commodity_fetishism

⁹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sustainability>

years. And that is because you made too much fuss about it. Here, too, we did not speak the same language; our Europe is not yours.«

Albert Camus wrote this in April 1944. Maybe as a German I do not have the right to quote Camus on my own behalf. But I do not doubt my duty to re-read from time to time the »Letters to a German Friend«.

In the European Parliament election, I found it a relief to be able to vote European with DiEM25¹⁰, without having to choose one of the German traditional parties. It is becoming more and more likely that the European spirit will prevail not because of, but in spite of Berlin and Brussels. On this path, Saxony might find itself on the side of France, not for the first time. An approximation to the circuitous routes Saxony has taken in European history is given by this article (in German).¹¹ Can the future bring a retrospective justification for some of Saxony's historical detours?

For those who wonder about the tenacious myth of victimhood among Dresdeners about the destruction of their city in February 1945: We quietly know that Prussia bears most of the blame. And now as then, we are governed from Berlin. On the city map of Dresden you can look for Berliner Strasse¹² and Coventrystrasse¹³. These are the proportions here. For lovers of »Beyond the Pleasure Principle«: This is the repetition compulsion here. In Saxony, »British« can be a placeholder for »Prussian«, »right« a placeholder for »left«¹⁴, »yes« a placeholder for »no«. The insistence on the topos¹⁵ precedes the words, just as fear precedes language. More than 100 years after the death of Saxon court president and power critic Daniel Paul Schreber¹⁶, the detours of his psyche are still being analysed.

Obviously, Eastern Germany has a problem with nationalism, more precisely: with nationalisms. Western Germany has its own problem with nationalism and does not recognise it. It insists on saying Europe when it speaks of itself.

Once more Camus: »To you, Europe is that space girded by seas and mountains, dammed by barrages, undercut by mines, rife with crops, where Germany is playing a game in which the only stake is its own destiny. For us, however, Europe is the ground upon which, since twenty centuries, the most amazing adventure of the human mind is taking place. It is that unique arena in which the struggle of occidental man against the world, against the gods, against himself is now reaching the climax of its wild surge. You see, the two views cannot be compared.«

At the end of »Beyond the Pleasure Principle«, Freud quotes the poet Friedrich Rückert: »Whither we cannot fly, we must go limping.« It is a European thought.¹⁷

¹⁰ <https://diem25.org/what-is-diem25/>

¹¹ <https://www.welt.de/debatte/kommentare/article158863339/Sachsen-praegt-ein-Gefuehl-der-Verbitterung.html>

¹² <https://www.google.com/search?q=Berliner+Straße+Dresden>

¹³ <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coventrystra%C3%9Fe>

¹⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/aug/03/returning-to-reims-by-didier-eribon-review>

¹⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spatial_turn

¹⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daniel_Paul_Schreber

¹⁷ <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/explaining-eastern-europe-imitation-and-its-discontents-2/>