

Berlin Lives - extracts

Introduction: finding a way in

Rachel and I were sitting in Ludmila's bar in Neukölln, central Berlin, late one Tuesday afternoon in February and the *Wirtin* (landlady) was telling us about her attempts to talk to her grown-up son in Russian. 'He understands quite a lot,' Ludmila says, 'aber diese ganzen Sätze, also, das ist alles Karambolage.' Full sentences, well, it's just a car crash. She's amusing talking about her life now – she can poke fun at her neighbours in Lichtenrade, the relatively posh southern suburb she now lives in: professors and company directors, sitting surrounded by all their books and ringing up the landlord to complain when she lets her dog, *ein Mops* (a pug), pee all over the gardens – but it hasn't always been so easy to see the lighter side of life, as we shall see in Chapter 4.

What strikes me here, though, is not what she says but the way she says it: *alles Karambolage*, where did that come from? Other, more common expressions spring more readily to mind to express what she wants to say: *total durcheinander* (all muddled up), *ganz chaotisch* (really chaotic), *völlig unverständlich* (completely incomprehensible). *Karambolage* is borrowed from the French *carambolier* meaning 'collide', originally in reference specifically to the collision between the red ball (*carambole*) and the other (white) balls in billiards: technically, a 'cannon'. This rather exotic-sounding word was perhaps too colourful to remain confined to the arcane world of table-top games played in dark, windowless rooms and it has assumed both a more general application – the violent clash between two physical objects, especially, in media stories, motor vehicles – and a figurative sense of a pile up, a shambles, a mess.

I've translated it as 'car crash' here as I think this currently quite common English idiom fits both the sense and the tone of her remark. It also seems appropriate as actual road accidents figure a number of times in Ludmila's account of her life and because accidental or unforeseen encounters punctuate her story, diverting its course rather like – to shift analogies from one ball game to another – flippers batting the ball in different directions in a pinball machine. But I'll come back to that later. I'm still wondering why she used this expression and not another, and this sets me thinking about other questions.

What else is remarkable about her language? How has this Russian woman in her mid-40s, who arrived in Berlin aged 24 and speaking no German at all, come to speak German the way she does – heavy Russian accent, fluent and effortless articulation, a wide range of idiomatic expressions, extensive technical bureaucratic vocabulary, a mixture of complex and truncated syntax? And then: why do *Karambolagen*, both literal and metaphorical, feature so prominently in her story? Why – out of all the things she could have talked about – does she choose to tell us these particular episodes and in this particular way?

Front building, first floor: Ferhat's story

Ferhat 'assumes' his first language was Kurdish. He's not sure, as he was born and grew up in Istanbul speaking Turkish – his father insisted all the children should learn 'proper' Turkish (*sauber Türkisch sprechen*) – but his mother could only speak Kurdish, the language she had brought with her from their village in the east of the country. So his earliest recollections of home communication are of a pattern common to many bilingual families: his mother spoke to him in Kurdish, he replied in Turkish. Why, then, has he brought up his own son speaking Kurdish – in Berlin?

To understand this, we need to unpack some of these key words in Ferhat's story – Turkish, Kurdish, even Berlin perhaps – and assemble both the chronology and the topography of his life. What complexities are condensed into simple naming terms and what effects does this have on our interpretation of Ferhat's experience? What is the relationship between languages, times and places in Ferhat's biography and how are these features woven together to form the fabric of his life?

Side building, second floor: Hoa's story

Sometimes conversation partners can wrong-foot you with unexpected revelations: talking about criminal convictions, for example, or suddenly referring to a previously unmentioned personal relationship. I certainly wasn't prepared for Hoa's quiet remark, at the very start of our initial meeting, that she had first arrived in Germany in 1955. Really? 1955? So long ago?

Hoa: Yes. After the war against the French. We are a group of 150 children who came to be educated in Germany, you know? In the war we were all so dispersed and we couldn't learn properly. And so they, we were, well, you know, children of the freedom fighters.

Throughout our conversations, Hoa positions herself, quietly, almost prosaically, not simply as a figure in her own story but as a historical actor participating in wider social processes that in different ways bind the country of her birth with the country to which she migrated not once but three times in the course of her life. Historians' First Indochina War, that ended after the victory of the Viet Minh forces in the decisive battle of Dien Bien Phu in the spring of 1954, was for Hoa simply the 'war against the French', at other times in her narrative just 'the war'. She was born in 1943 and so was only 11 when the war ended, but it had had an impact on her in two significant ways. First, the military conflict had made conventional family life difficult and, like many other children, she and her siblings had been dispersed around the country, often living with relatives and family friends, away from her parents. This meant that a normal schooling was impossible and learning was a haphazard affair. Secondly, however, her father's political involvement in the struggle for independence gave her a privileged status belonging to what for her seems to be a self-evidently legitimate category: 'we were, well, you know, children of the freedom fighters'. This, as we shall see, was a double-edged sword.