

## European Literature Days: A Diary by Brittani Sonnenberg

October 24, 2014

### *Going to School*

In old photos, you see yourself at ages 4, 8, 13 smiling – a maddening stranger. Diary entries are even worse: you recognize the handwriting as your own but can't tap into what you meant. Or worse, it seems like the same damn thing you're writing now. There's no way to ask your earlier self the urgent question: how did you feel, then? And: what do you make of me, now?

This morning, I headed up the cobblestone streets of Spitz to the town's Hauptschule, where I met the gracious Annemarie Denk, who led me to a classroom of her pupils: thirty thirteen-year-olds. We stared at one another. I had an urge to squeeze into the back, nestled between the two nicest-looking-girls, and wait for Frau Denk's instructions. But I couldn't; I was there to speak. I spoke. They listened, kindly.

I asked them questions: had they also lived overseas? Did those who said yes feel torn between countries? But I felt I botched it: I wanted to talk about how normal it is to not know where you're from, to be at sea; but instead I singled out those who were from other places, asking them questions that are hard to answer at all, let alone in front of a crowd. It's like demanding someone give you their wallet when they left it at home. And they're like a) why should I give it to you? And b) I swear to god, there's nothing in my pockets. But the students volunteered where they had come from (Armenia, Iran, Romania), although one girl murmured, when I pressed her, that she didn't know why her parents had left their home country; and one boy did not put his hand up when I asked who had lived outside Austria until everyone shouted that he should.

I read a little from my novel but felt I was stumbling over the German sentences and that asking them to pay attention to a chapter in the middle of my novel was like your grandmother forcing you to sit on the sofa and watch the second half of a soap opera episode with her. So I gave up and asked if they had any questions for me. They had a few. Then we had a group picture, and someone handed me a frame to put around my head.

They split into groups. One group interviewed me. Some questions I could answer: are you married? Do you have kids? Which authors inspire you as a writer? (No, no, Ha Jin and Alice Munro.) Some I couldn't, like: What's your life philosophy? Hm, I thought. What *is* my life philosophy? I shrugged apologetically and they moved on to the next question.

Then they delivered very capable presentations about *Heimat* and refugees and overseas jobs. There was a powerpoint presentation by the boys that had interviewed me, and I saw a slide explain me: Brittani Sonnenberg is not married. She does not have children. She wants to fly to South America. She would like a dog. Then we ate apple cake and sandwiches that some of the students had made. It was delicious. I sat across from five girls. I wanted to hug each of them like they were my younger cousins and ask them to whisper whatever they were feeling but of course I

couldn't, so I just ate more cake and smiled in what I hoped was a friendly manner. Frau Denk walked me outside and I left all of the students' swelling, private thoughts, wishing I could have asked all the right questions, for them and for me.

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### *Recess*

Afterwards, I jumped into the woods for the next hour. I wanted to fall into fall, since I'm spending October and November in Hong Kong, where it's 30 degrees and bears none of Europe's murky moodiness this time of year. I walked up a hill, got lost, walked back down, asked directions, and walked back up. I tasted an apple from the ground and a grape from the vine.

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### *Reading Parlor*

Then I was in a castle and literature was being discussed. Specifically, social/digital reading, in a panel led by Rüdiger Wischenbart. There we received the disturbing announcement that books are going the way of Spotify, along with the seductive notion that today's hyperlinks and comments echo Medieval rubrics and illuminations. A lively debate ensued, first among panelists Leah Tether, Veia Kaiser, Felix Wolf, Beat Mazenauer and I, followed by many other voices in the rest of the room. Everyone wanted to know: what am I supposed to do with the waterfall of negative comments that sometimes follow the writing of a newspaper article? Is it good if we know what the market desires? And what are we to do with the market's insistence on immediate commentary and a winning online personality? Or do we have more control than we think? Should we feel good about 'discoverability' or run for the hills? All of these questions and more were fervently debated, with split conclusions and a mix of nostalgia for pre-Internet publishing and excitement about our current era.

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### *Evening Readings*

The reason we create and consume literature is to feel suddenly seized by story. It's never a given. But during the evening's reading and discussion (with Marica Bodrožić and Andrey Kurkow, moderated by Rosie Goldsmith) I felt wonderfully seized, by both authors. Bodrožić spoke about writing her last book, *My White Peace*, about how an outer journey urged an inner journey, and how the space between countries can serve as a threshold, where one can lucidly observe, and witness, and write. She spoke urgently, unequivocally. Kurkow half-shouted wonderful stories, his eyes bright and laughing. Shrewd, subtle, hilarious: he related eerily predicting the future in fiction and getting it all wrong in fact, the Russians'

love of Stalin and Ivan the Terrible versus the Ukrainian disgust for leaders the second they enter office. Goldsmith moderated fluidly and spryly, gently drawing the authors out. The event concluded with a line from Bodrožić that hit my body as a prickling truth: “*Es ist viel leichter für etwas zu sterben als für etwas zu leben.*” It is much easier to die for something than to live for it.

October 25, 2014

*The Inferno: A discussion*

This morning began with the tricky topic of War in World Literature. Sigrid Löffler delivered a lecture lambasting German-speaking authors for sticking to family instead of taking on the more consequential topic of conflict. She pointed to several non-European texts that dealt with war, from “veteran” narratives to “reflective” literature.

I was grateful to learn of the authors, and respected them for delving into these modes, but I chafed at the notion of war being “indescribable” and felt that the authors Löffler presented, such as Arkady Babchenko, exhibit a controversial style of “war writing” that begs for a closer analysis of the motives and methods behind the composition. I would have preferred a more trenchant critique of the writers presented than a swift summary of their novels.

Lukas Bärfuss, who has written a novel about the conflict in Rwanda, *Hundred Days*, also took issue with Löffler’s presentation; namely, her method of categorizing authors writing in German, her complaint that not enough of these authors were writing about war, the “indescribable” nature of war, and the notion that soldiers are victims. Soldiers are murderers, said Bärfuss, an outlook that I do not wholly share.

A war, albeit polite and absent of blows or ammunition, ensued. Löffler defended herself and said Bärfuss had misunderstood the lecture. Marica Bodrožić sprung in and suggested a lens for regarding soldiers and perpetrators that held them accountable but also held them in empathy. Others chimed in, reminding participants of the two meanings of “victim” in German (someone who offers themselves as a sacrifice, and someone who is the victim of something), and Peter Zimmerman, the moderator, asked what responsibility the colonial powers, whose arbitrary line-drawing has led to many of the conflicts described, should bear.

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*The Tango of Death: A Reading*

Once the dust had settled from the debate, Jurij Wynnytschuk and Andrej Kurkow took the stage for a reading from Wynnytschuk’s work, *The Tango of Death*. Wynnytschuk, speaking with a straight face, told tale after tale of mischievous, subversive activity, from inventing poets and publishing their “translated” works, to writing poems making fun of political figures, who subsequently came after

Wynntschnik in court. "I survived 30 court cases but lost all of them," said Wynntschnik. "But my newspaper had to pay the damages." The novel excerpt exhibited Wynntschnik's famous black humor: a dire situation revealed in a rollicking manner.

*The Short Trip: A Ferry Ride*

After lunch, the group gathered for a boat ride. We boarded the ferry in sudden sunlight and headed down the river... to the other side. Once there, we headed back, some of us ducking into one small cabin to check out a piece of art by Olafur Eliasson. The excursion was shorter than most of us expected; it resembled many things in life, which you expect to last an hour or perhaps several decades or even a lifetime, but only last for fifteen minutes. Perhaps the trip was meant as a metaphor, one that we will see, albeit with slight variations, showing up in several European novels throughout 2015 and 2016...

*One more time, with feeling: Three Readings*

I love giving readings. It's one of the best parts about being a writer. You've already written the book or story, so the creative pressure is gone. All that is required is reading a passage out loud with a great deal of enthusiasm. Then people clap. Sometimes they ask interesting questions, which lead to new thoughts and insights, or they share a way they relate to the text, which is powerful and affirming. On Saturday night I had the opportunity to read no less than three times, which was like a dream come true, although I felt bad for Karl, the vineyard owner whose exceptional 2011 Neuburger was introduced at my reading, and for Rosie Goldsmith, who generously moderated the reading and translated Karl's introduction, since Karl and Rosie had to listen to me read the same passage three times. And since we were drinking Karl's exceptional vintage as the evening progressed, the third performance was decidedly under the influence. Lukas Bärffuss and Judith Kuckart also read, and I was sad not to be able to sit in on their performances, but I heard from multiple witnesses that the pieces that they read were wonderful and wonderfully read.

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*Illuminated Manuscripts, Hyperlinks, and Informal Conversation over the Literaturtage*

After the readings, everyone gathered in the cellar for more wine sampling. I've skipped over the meals and coffee breaks and walks to and from the *Schloss* in my diary description, but these casual liminal moments were often where the loveliest conversations occurred. I am writing this now on the plane to Paris, en route to Hong Kong, but I can easily summon the talks that moved me and continue to make me ponder... about a dancer learning how to sense her presence in a room, or whether a romantic partner can constitute a homeland, or the glory of

form announcing itself during creative composition, or how to hold on to our own taste and memories of what texts and music move us when they're no longer CDs and books, but bits of condensation in "the cloud"; or the steady assurance of working with small presses; or the levels of purgatory as an expat; or how to cultivate patience and integrity as a working artist; or the mystery of voice, or the trembling political pressures in China, Hong Kong, and Ukraine.

Some of these conversations came about independent of the festival's events, but often they hovered around the themes of the readings and lectures, analyzing and reflecting on the ideas propounded in the formal setting, asking further questions. In this way, the entire conference was much like the Illuminated Manuscripts of the Middle Ages that Leah Tether spoke about, which is to say, the conference also resembled today's digital texts, with springboards and side panels and loosely connected illustrations that referenced other stories. These leaps, from panel discussion to talk over coffee, to dinner speculation, to musing over wine, felt wonderful to me. I work alone and coming to such gatherings helps give me the energy to return to my desk, reassured by the image of my new acquaintances from Spitz alone at their desks, across Europe, taking sips of coffee, sighing, and trying to dig deep inside, write the next thing, believe in the scene unfolding in front of them, on laptops in different languages across the continent.