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1

‘WHAT ARE YOU REALLY?’

It happened towards the end of October 1958, at a meeting of the Group 47 in Grossholzleute, a small village in the Allgäu region of south-west Germany. I did not know many of the writers assembled there – small wonder as I had only been back three months in the country from which the German authorities had deported me in the autumn of 1938. Anyway, I felt isolated at the conference, and so I did not mind a young German author, with whom I had spoken in Warsaw the previous spring, coming over to me in the lunch break. I did not then know that the prize he was to receive from the group the following day would mark the beginning of his rapid rise to world fame.

This vigorous young man, self-assured and a little rebellious, now engaged me in conversation. After a brief exchange, he abruptly confronted me with a simple question. No one as yet, since my return to Germany, had ever put it so directly and with less embarrassment. He, Günter Grass from Danzig, wanted to know: ‘What are you really – a Pole, a German, or what?’ The words ‘or what’ clearly hinted at a third possibility. Without hesitation I answered: ‘I am half Polish, half German, and wholly Jewish.’ Grass seemed surprised, but he was clearly happy, even delighted, with my reply. ‘Not another word. You would only spoil this neat *bon mot*.’ I, too, thought my spontaneous reply was rather clever because this arithmetical formula was as effective as it was insincere. Not a single word of it was the truth. I was never half Polish, never half German – and I had no doubt that I would never be either of these. Nor, even to this day, was I ever wholly Jewish.

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When, in 1994, I was invited to take part in a series of lectures – ‘Talks about one’s own country’ – I accepted the invitation but found myself in a somewhat delicate situation. I had to start with the admission that I lacked what I was supposed to talk about – I have no country of my own, no homeland, no fatherland. On the other hand I am not an entirely homeless person, a person without a country. How is that to be understood?

My parents had no problem at all with their identity. I am sure that they never gave this matter any thought. My father, David Reich, was born in Płotsk, an attractive Polish town on the Vistula, north-west of Warsaw. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, when Płotsk belonged to Prussia and was at the centre of the province known as Neu-Ost Preussen, a government official was working there: a gifted young lawyer, E. T. A. Hoffmann. Not long before he had held a post as *Assessor* in a larger and more interesting place – the city of Posen. But as he had produced caricatures which his superiors regarded as particularly malicious, he was transferred, or actually banished, to Płotsk.

I know virtually nothing about my ancestors on my father’s side. This is certainly my own fault because my father would have been only too ready to impart extensive information if I had shown the least interest. All I know is that his father had been a successful merchant who had acquired some wealth. He owned a substantial block of flats in Płotsk. He had not stinted on the education of his children. One of my father’s sisters became a dentist, another studied singing at the Warsaw conservatoire. She had hoped to become an opera singer, but did not quite succeed – although she was allowed to appear as *Madame Butterfly* in Łódź. When, a little later, she got married her proud parents acknowledged their daughter’s artistic success by having her entire trousseau, and especially her bedlinen, embroidered with butterflies.

My father, too, was musical and played the violin when he was younger. He must have given it up rather soon because in my childhood his instrument lay on top of the wardrobe. As his ambition was to go into business, his parents sent him to Switzerland. There he studied at a commercial college, but soon dropped out and returned home. So nothing came of that either because, even in his youth, he lacked staying power. In 1906 he married my mother,

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Helene Auerbach, the daughter of an impoverished rabbi. At the wedding reception, held in a hotel in Posen, the bridal music from *Lohengrin* was played, followed by the wedding march from Mendelssohn’s music for *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Among Jews in Poland, at least among educated ones, this was nothing unusual; indeed it was part of the ritual. The young couple’s honeymoon was to Germany: after visiting Dresden they travelled on to the spa of Kudowa.

Had Günter Grass, or anyone else, ever asked my father what *he* really was, his response would likewise have attracted remark. Of course, he would have replied simply that he was a Jew. No doubt my mother would have given the same answer. She grew up in Prussia or, more accurately, in the border area between Silesia and the province of Posen. She only came to Poland when she married.

Her ancestors on her father’s side had been rabbis for centuries. Some of them can be found in major Jewish reference works because they had published scholarly books which, in their day, had commanded great respect. They were concerned not so much with theological as with judicial problems – which, incidentally, was quite common among Jews. Rabbis in the past were not only spiritual leaders and teachers but, at the same time, also judges.

Even though only the eldest of my mother’s five brothers became a rabbi – a post he held first in Elbing, then in Göttingen, and finally, until his emigration just before the Second World War, in Stuttgart – it may be said that they were all emancipated and accepted in the community, even though, in their way, they kept up the family tradition; three became lawyers, the fourth a patent agent. Thus the religious aspect became a matter of indifference to them, apart from the rabbi, the eldest.

And my mother? She did not want to know anything about religion and had little interest in things Jewish. In spite of her origin? No, probably because of it. I believe that her unmistakable turning away from the spiritual world of her youth was a quiet and gentle protest against her reactionary parental home. Nor was she at all interested in anything Polish. When, every year, I wished her a happy birthday on 28 August, she asked me if I was aware of who else had that day as his birthday. She was born on the same day as Goethe. This, she liked to think, was in some way symbolical. In conversation with me

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she was fond of quoting from the classics. If I disliked my food I was told:

*Can I by stamping on the ground raise armies?
Will a lieutenant grow in my outstretched hand?*

Later, when I read *The Maid of Orleans*, I discovered to my surprise that in Schiller's play it was not a lieutenant growing in the outstretched hand, but fields of grain. Be that as it may, my mother's store of quotations came from German literature, especially that which was taught in schools towards the end of the nineteenth century – chiefly Goethe and Schiller, Heine and Uhland.

My father, on the other hand, remained closely linked to Judaism. Did he believe in God? I do not know, it was not something one ever talked about. Probably the existence of God was a matter of course for him, like the air he breathed. On feast-days and on the sabbath he would go to the synagogue, and also later when we were living in Berlin. But this was not necessarily a religious act. The synagogue, to Jews, is not only the house of God but also a social centre. One would meet there to chat, with one's friends and acquaintances, and possibly also to God. In short, the synagogue served as a sort of club.

It was not religion that moulded the life of my father, but tradition. At an early age, like countless other Polish Jews of his generation, he had been deeply impressed by Zionism. He was fond of recounting that he had taken part in the Third Zionist World Congress in Basel. But that was a long time back, in 1905. I never heard of any subsequent involvement with Zionism by my father or of any activity within any kind of Jewish organization.

Unlike my father, who spoke several languages – Polish and Russian, Yiddish and, as nearly every educated Jew in Poland, German – my mother was not a good linguist. To the end of her life, to the day she was gassed at Treblinka, she spoke faultless, and indeed elegant, German; her Polish, on the other hand, despite having lived for some decades in that country, was faulty and rather elementary. She did not know Yiddish, and if she tried to speak it – for instance when shopping at the market in Warsaw – indulgently

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smiling Jewish stall-keepers would observe: ‘Madam comes from Germany.’

In the town where my parents settled, in Włocławek on the Vistula, my mother almost felt as E. T. A. Hoffmann had done in nearby Płotsk – in exile. Poland was, and remained, alien to her. Just as Irina Sergeyevna in Chekhov’s *Three Sisters* yearned for Moscow, so my mother yearned for the metropolis which, in her eyes, symbolized happiness and progress, and where the other family members were living – her elderly father, her sister and four of her brothers – as well as a few of her school friends. She yearned for Berlin.

Meanwhile she had to be content with Włocławek, a rising industrial town which, until the restoration of the Polish state in 1918, belonged to Russia. The German–Russian frontier then ran in the immediate vicinity. In the 1920s the town had some 60,000 inhabitants, about a quarter of whom were Jews. More than a few of these had a conspicuous hankering for German culture. Every so often they would travel to Berlin or to Vienna, especially when they wished to consult some famous medical man or even undergo an operation. In their bookcases, along with the works of the great Polish poets, they would often have the German classics. And most of these educated Jews read German newspapers as a matter of course. We subscribed to the *Berliner Tageblatt*.

There were four Catholic churches in the town, one Protestant church, two synagogues, several factories, including Poland’s oldest and largest paper factory, and three cinemas – but no theatre and no orchestra. The most important feature of Włocławek, to this day, is the fourteenth-century Gothic cathedral with a sarcophagus by Veit Stoss. Among the disciples of the priests’ seminary near the cathedral, from 1489 to 1491, was a young man from Toruń – Nicholas Copernicus.

I was born in Włocławek on 2 June 1920. Why I was given the name Marcel never concerned me at the time. Only much later did I discover that this was no accident. My sister, thirteen years older than me, had been named Gerda by my mother – she alone concerned herself with such matters. My mother had not the slightest suspicion of what she had done: Gerda was considered in Poland to be a typically German name. Yet hostility to anything German was an

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old tradition in Poland, going back to the Teutonic Knights. During the First World War and subsequently, the Germans were equally unpopular. Thus my sister was often derided at school because of her German name: it was not easy to decide whether anti-German sentiments or anti-Semitism played the major part here.

My brother, who was my senior by nine years, fared a little better in that respect. He, too, had been given a decidedly German first name – Herbert – by my unworldly mother but he also had a second name – Alexander. According to tradition, Alexander the Great had treated the Jews well and granted them all kinds of privileges. Out of gratitude the Jews had, even during Alexander's lifetime, often named their sons after him. As a matter of fact, my own son is called Andrew Alexander, though this has less to do with the King of Macedon than with the Jewish custom of honouring dead family members by giving their names to one's children. Thus the daughter of my son is called Carla Helen Emily – the names of her grandmother who perished in Treblinka.

It was only a few years ago that I discovered that the date of my birth, 2 June, is, in the Catholic calendar, the day of Saint Marcellus, a Roman priest and martyr from the reign of the emperor Diocletian. I am sure that my parents were totally unaware of the existence of this saint when they gave me a name that was scarcely customary in Poland at the time. Maybe the choice of name was suggested by a Catholic maid or nanny. Whoever was responsible – I bear him or her no ill will. On the contrary, I am grateful. Because, unlike my sister Gerda, I never suffered as a result of my first name.

If I was sometimes mocked by my peers as a child, this was due to a trifling circumstance which, however, I have not forgotten to this day. I was five or six when my mother, during a short visit to her family in Berlin, saw, in a department store, some children's clothes with the slogan 'I am a good boy'. She thought this amusing. Without considering the possible consequences, she had these words translated into Polish and embroidered on my own clothes. Inevitably I soon became the object of the other children's mockery – and reacted to it with fury and defiance. By screaming and fighting I wanted to prove to those mocking me that I was anything but a good boy. This earned me the nickname 'Bolshevik'. Could this have been the beginning of my characteristic defiance?

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One day my father, surprisingly, brought home a man with a beard. He had exceptionally long side-locks and wore a caftan, that black cloak-like coat which was the customary garb of Orthodox Jews. This quiet man, who seemed a little weird to me, was to become my tutor. He would, my father explained, teach me Hebrew. But that was all my father was able to say because at that moment my mother appeared and immediately intervened: I was, she said resolutely, too young for tuition. The disappointed teacher was sent on his way with the promise of employment at some future date. This was my father’s first attempt to intervene in my education; it was also his last.

My mother never explained to me why she would not hear of any education in the Jewish tradition. When the time came to send me to school she decided that, unlike my brother and sister, I was to attend the Protestant, German-language, primary school. Was this, possibly, a protest against Judaism? Not necessarily. She simply wanted me to be educated in the German language.

However, there was a problem from the start. I knew too much already. That would not have mattered, but unfortunately I also knew too little. A nursemaid who looked after me had amused herself by teaching me how to read, casually and without any fuss. I learned very quickly, except that no one showed me how to form letters. However, in our apartment there was an ancient typewriter and I did not find it difficult to transfer individual letters to paper. I was soon able to type a short letter to my sister who was then studying in Warsaw.

So my mother took me to the German school. She explained the situation, which she thought unusual, to the headmaster, a particularly strict gentleman who, if I am correctly informed, was executed by the Poles as a German spy during the first few days of the Second World War. He appeared to have encountered such problems before. He immediately tested me: I read fast and correctly. But this was not the end of the matter. A decision would have to be made. He said, not without some humour: ‘Either we put him in the first form, then he’ll be bored during reading lessons, or he goes straight into the second form, but in that case you’ll have to see to it that he learns to write at home.’ My mother did not hesitate for a moment: ‘Straight into Form Two! I have an older daughter. She’ll teach him to write. He’ll learn soon enough.’ When, nowadays, I

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recount this episode to German writers I usually add: ‘And he hasn’t learned to this day.’ Our authors, often blessed with a childlike mind, take a lot of delight from this remark.

My mother never suspected what the consequences of her decision would be. No one in my form was interested in the fact that I could not write. But that I was the only one who already read books and occasionally reported on them during lessons, proudly and boldly, aroused the envy of my classmates. From the outset I was different from them, I was an outsider. I could hardly know that I would always remain one. Whatever school I attended, whatever institution I worked in, I never quite fitted into my surroundings.

But all in all I did not have many problems at that Protestant school, especially since I was treated kindly by one of the women teachers, a young German called Laura. There was a reason for this: my mother used to lend Laura the latest German books, which she ordered regularly from Berlin. I well remember one book which the young woman, whose massive bosom greatly impressed me, was awaiting with such impatience. It was not one of the great literary works of the day, but a novel which had shaken the whole of Europe – Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front*.

There was nothing original about my own reading matter. I read a lot, but more or less the same books as other children. I best remember Dickens’s novel *Oliver Twist* and Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* – both books no doubt in the versions for ‘more mature young readers’. I was even more fascinated by a book of a totally different character – a multi-volume German encyclopaedia. It was mainly the illustrations which I could not tear myself away from. It was here that my liking for reference books of all kinds had its beginnings.

But my most enduring impressions came from music. My sister played the piano and I frequently heard Bach and, even more often, Chopin, in our apartment. At the same time I was enthusiastic about another instrument – the gramophone. We had a lot of records, chosen by my father who was much more musical than my mother. In addition to popular symphonic works, which were modern in my father’s youth – from Grieg’s *Peer Gynt* suites to Rimsky-Korsakov’s *Sheherazade* – there were operas such as *Aida*, *Rigoletto* and *Traviata*, *Bohème*, *Tosca* and *Madame Butterfly*. There was also a Wagner

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record, just one – Lohengrin’s ‘Grail Story’. I never tired of hearing the same arias, duets and overtures again and again. My slight aversion to Grieg and Rimsky-Korsakov goes back to those childhood experiences, as does my indelible love of Italian opera, mainly by Verdi but also by Puccini, to which I have remained loyal to this day.

In the spring of 1929 all kinds of things happened in our family. I observed the tears of my mother and the helplessness of my father, I heard them lament and complain. Their anguish and despair increased by the day. We were all heading for a terrible disaster – even we children sensed this. The catastrophe occurred soon enough. It had two causes – the economic slump and my father’s temperament. He was reliable and undemanding, kind and lovable, but he had not the slightest commercial talent. He was a businessman and entrepreneur whose businesses and enterprises usually yielded very little or nothing. Of course he should have realized sooner that he had chosen the wrong occupation and looked around for another job. But for that he lacked all initiative. Application and energy were not among his virtues. His life was unhappily marked by weakness of character and a passive disposition.

Soon after the First World War my father had started a business in Włocławek – presumably with his father’s money – a small factory manufacturing building materials. He was fond of describing himself as an ‘industrialist’. But in the late 1920s there was less and less building in Poland and bankruptcy could no longer be avoided. The fact that this was nothing unusual at the time was small consolation to my mother. If her husband had manufactured coffins, she used to say, people would have stopped dying.

My mother suffered a lot at this time. She was ashamed to walk in the street because she anticipated the sneers or contemptuous looks of neighbours and acquaintances. These were probably exaggerated fears, since my mother enjoyed great popularity in the town. People admired her quiet, distinguished manner, which they attributed to her origins in the world of German culture. But perhaps she feared not so much the contempt of her fellow citizens as their pity.

Needless to say, she was entirely innocent of the disaster. No one could blame her for having failed to recognize her husband’s

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incompetence. But one thing is certain: whatever positive qualities my mother had, she was – in this respect very much like my father – totally impractical. No doubt, when the crisis arose, she found it difficult to do what needed doing to avert the worst consequences of bankruptcy and thus to save the family. Money had to be found. And there was only one source. One of her brothers in Berlin, Jacob, was a particularly successful lawyer, the wealthiest member of the family. Overcoming her reluctance to telephone him, she implored Jacob to wire a substantial sum of money. He sent her half the sum she requested.

I was nine at the time and, naturally enough, did not understand what was happening around me. But there were too many tears being shed for me to be unaware of the family tragedy. My father's failure was both deplorable and pitiful, but this cast less of a shadow on my youth than did the economic consequences of the collapse in the longer term. Later, as a teenager, I was all too aware of my parents' dependence on the relations who were helping them. Fear that I might one day find myself in such humiliating circumstances influenced many a decision in my life for years to come.

Initially, however, this catastrophe worked to my advantage. Amid the dramatic and fateful consequences of the disaster, my mother's long-standing wish was suddenly fulfilled. As there was no future for our family where we were, it was decided to move to Berlin. There, my parents were hoping, it would be possible to make a new beginning, even though, as emerged later, there were no definite ideas about my father's future occupation. I was sent ahead to Berlin and was to spend the summer holiday with the family of the affluent Uncle Jacob – he had three children of roughly my age – at Westerland on the island of Sylt.

Before leaving, so my mother believed, I had to say goodbye to my teacher, and I shall always remember the words with which she sent me out into the world. Fixing her gaze on the distance, Miss Laura of the billowing bosom announced seriously and solemnly: 'You're going, my son, to the land of culture.' I did not quite understand what this was about, but I was aware of my mother nodding approvingly.

Next day, under the supervision of an acquaintance of my parents who also happened to be travelling westwards, I found myself on the

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Berlin train. Strangely enough, I had no fear of what was awaiting me in the unknown city, nor was I scared of the relations whom I had never met. Was this a child’s recklessness or a lack of imagination? There was, I suspected, something else. I had heard such a lot about Berlin – the trains there were alleged to run under the ground or up above the houses; buses, so I had been told, had seats on the roof; there were endlessly moving staircases on which one only had to stand to be carried up or down.

It was a long journey and it would be evening before I reached the fairy-tale city which my parents had described, the dream land they had promised me. With great curiosity I awaited the end of the journey – and it was this curiosity that displaced all doubts and fears. Thus, feverish with expectation, I thought of the miracle I was about to experience – the miracle of Berlin.

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