



*Photo Credit: Alessandra Capodacqua*

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Midway through our trek in the 60s to interview a number of German poets for an anthology David Young and I hoped to publish as a textbook, we got off the train in Heidelberg. Disappointed we weren't able to arrange visits with more than one woman, we were doubly eager to knock on Hilde Domin's door. We crossed the Neckar to the north part of town, then huffed and puffed our way up

the “Philosopher’s Way” to find her modest house, its clean, Bauhaus lines a relief from traditional architecture.

Surprising us with a firm, double-handed handshake, Hilde exuded a force field of energy to wobble you. Her cheerful, lilting voice kept you from thinking about anything except what might next issue from her lips. She swept us into her studio, where she’d already set out a pot of tea and some ginger-cake I’d read she loved making. “Let’s first replenish you,” she said, cutting us a slab of cake, “then have ourselves a good walk farther up Heidelberg’s famous — or some would say infamous —Philosophenweg, which I can see by your faces has already challenged you. I need to take a brisk walk daily to clear my muddled mind,” she added. “Besides, you want to be able to say, as any tourist would, that you took in the splendid view across the river at our castle in the center of the old town. By the way, it’s the best-selling postcard,” she grinned impishly.

Before we set off, she demonstrated how gowned philosophers from the university still stride along, arms curved, hands joined as if handcuffed to their backs. On cue, we pinned our arms back and waltzed off singing, “We’re off to see the wizard.” Hilde allowed as how she’d wanted red shoes ever since seeing Dorothy’s. When I mentioned they were on display at the Smithsonian, she said that was yet another reason to visit the States.

Relieved to find a bench when we’d just about run out of breath, we plopped down as she laughed. I dusted the place between David and me, Hilde curtsied, edged in between us, and we sat there in solitude for a while. We’d done research on all the poets who’d agreed to receive us, but her past was hardest to access. Born Hilde Löwenstein, she’d gone off to Italy, we knew, with Erwin Palm, whom she’d met when they were students at the University of Heidelberg. Erwin was on his way to becoming a prominent Latin American scholar, historian, and writer. Hilde, who’d earned a PhD in economics in Florence before the couple married in 1936 and settled in Rome, was also on her way somewhere if more slowly. (1) What we didn’t know was why she’d begun publishing as Hilde Domin, so we risked asking her.

Clearly pained, she was reluctant to offer much more than a summary of what were surely momentous, even traumatic times they’d had to endure. The rise of Mussolini, the pall of Fascism over the city choking them, they began frantic efforts to emigrate. After making it to England in 1939, they set their sights across the Atlantic. No surprise in retrospect given what we know of the hideous, immoral politics at the time, their entry-applications to the U.S., Mexico, Argentina, and Brazil were rejected except in a few cases. Worse, they couldn’t afford the monster visa fees a few countries required. As soon as Hilde said, “Finally, the dam broke and the DOMINican Republic

offered us asylum,” we had our answer. What a way to express gratitude!

Her answer to our next question intrigued us as well. Why, after more than a decade of safe, even comfortable years in the Dominican Republic – where Erwin’s work was flourishing, and Hilde began translating and lecturing at the university– did they decide, as few Jews would, to return to Germany in 1954?

“You can’t think, much less write, in a language while exiled away from where it is most spoken,” she said plaintively. I was reminded that Conrad knew he had to learn English or return to Poland. A sudden, far-away look crossed Hilde’s face. She rose slowly and held her arms out akimbo, which we took as an invitation to link ours with hers as she sped along.

“Remind me,” she went on, “what poems of mine you want to ask about so I can start thinking about them on the way back to the house.” When I tore out the page of my journal that listed the half dozen poems we’d chosen, we were relieved she smiled warmly after reviewing them. Although she’d already published four collections, it was her first, *“Nur eine Rose als Stütze (Only a Rose for Support)”*, that most captivated us, as it had legions of readers ever since it appeared in 1959. It had become something of a sensation, given its plainspoken diction and virtual absence of metaphor. To give the reader an idea of what I admire about her ways, here’s one of her most forceful, the title poem of a volume published in 1970.

I want to

Freedom

I want to rough

you up with emery paper

have polished you

(the one I mean

mine

ours

Freedom from and to)

Fashion-Rascal

You’ll be licked

by tongue-tips

till you’re really

(same stanza) a round ball  
on all cloths

Freedom word  
I want to rough up  
I want to fill you with glass splinters  
so it'll be hard to put you on our tongue  
and you're no one's ball

You  
and other  
words I'd like to fill with glass splinters  
as Confucius commands  
the old Chinaman

The square bowl he says  
must  
have corners  
he says  
Or the State will go to ruin

Nothing else he says  
is necessary  
Call  
the round round  
the square square (2)

2

By the time we were comfortably seated back in her studio, we'd laid out the contours of the anthology-project. Our emphasis was on questions we hoped poets would be willing to address for a relatively unsophisticated audience of college students taking upper-level German courses. "Yes, yes, now I recall from your initial inquiry," she said, "how I was taken by that pedagogical slant. I've also been thinking of an anthology of contemporary German poems, whose authors I'd invite to comment on their ways with the material; and also asking literary critics to comment on the poems, side by side with authors' comments." We quickly placed an early order for a copy! (3)

It was clear we overstepped when asking her what poets she might include, though she let slip that “of course, Nelly Sachs, my dear sister-poet, would be a reasonable hunch.” We’d heard that they were engaged in a correspondence that would make poetic-history, as one critic couched it, if it were ever published. (4) Hilde wondered if we were also on our way to visit Sachs. Alas, she never responded to our inquiry, nor had Ingeborg Bachmann, whom Hilde also asked about.

To this day, David and I regret never having gotten around to publishing the textbook we based our grant application on, though Oberlin’s understanding president was quite forgiving, allowing as how there “were other fruits” harvested, e.g. the many translations we undertook and published, the stimuli to our teaching, and, “who knows what else might issue down your roads,” he said when we went to confession. Launching *Field*, and the *Field Translation Series* a few years later, topped his list. Much worse, precious few notes remain of all the conversations we had, quite aside from our questions, and answers from the likes of Domin, Grass, Brambach, Eich, Aichinger, Krolow, Heißenbüttel, and Celan. It is to weep...

3

After several hours of back and forth with Hilde, who spoke so fast it would have taxed a stenographer to record it all, she finally said, “Enough already, let’s get you a memorable meal at my favorite restaurant before you depart. I trust you won’t get seasick on the ferry we’ll take up the Neckar a little.”

There on the restaurant’s menu was “Zander,” the name of my high school German teacher. I knew it meant “pike,” not a fish I’d normally eat. When Hilde noticed I was having trouble deciding what to order, she got me blabbing about how I’d started in on German at all, centering on Herr Zander’s spell over me. David sat by so patiently I still owe him big-time. (5)

When Hilde insisted on making her way back to her house alone, we sensed we’d used up our welcome. We parted on a warm note: she would likely be touring German institutions in the States in the near future and joked that’d be pay-back time for her hospitality. Voila, some years later, John Kurtz, the German Department chairman, was able to get the Max Kade Foundation to underwrite Hilde’s appearance at Oberlin. To this day, some students who were present at her reading and I joke about the reading she gave. “Sorry, but you’ve not been listening closely enough so I shall have to recite the poem again,” she said piercingly after introducing the first poem, sending a shock-wave through the drowsy late-afternoon crowd.

When she finished intoning the second poem, someone shouted “Again!” She smiled broadly and launched it again; and continued repeating every poem till she got to the last poem. To thunderous applause, she recited “Nur eine Rose als Stütze” three times. Numbers of us could leave reciting it as well.

At the reception, I asked if she’d had time to look in on Dorothy’s red shoes at the Smithsonian. “Alas, no. But one must always have something to live for.”

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1. Erwin Walter Palm (1910-1988): see Wikipedia for details of his illustrious achievements and awards. Hilde Löwenstein Palm Domin (1909-2006): see Wikipedia for her considerable achievements and awards as well.
2. “Ich will dich,” the title, is not capitalized in her German. It literally means “I want you”, but in the poem’s context is completed by a verb that means “to rough up,” hence my liberty. The ball/cloth image is packed: I think she wants the reader to infer gaming tables, such as billiards, the ball rolling around surfaces covered by cloth. Although Hilde granted permission to publish the poem, I never got around to doing so.
3. *Doppelinterpretationen*, her epoch-making anthology, was published in 1966, a year or so after our visit. Incidentally, every poet David and I would visit on our tour appears in her anthology; and till the end of my days teaching German, it was a required textbook. I also suspect it must have been at the back of our minds, some years later, when we decided to add the “Symposium” as an annual feature of *Field*. However, instead of lining up poets and critics to comment on the same poem, we called on poets to choose a poem to write about by the poet we’d chosen to honor in each fall’s issue. Though we sent Hilde a copy of collected symposia when the volume was published, I don’t recall her responding...
4. The correspondence has been published (2016), albeit ten years after Domin’s death.
5. For readers interested in the “tale,” see my story “The Annual German Banquet” (in *The Language of the Enemy*. Black Mountain Press. 2015)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## Stuart Friebert

Stuart Friebert, winner of the Four Way Book Award with the volume *Funeral Pie*, founded Oberlin's Writing Program and directed it for twenty years, and co-founded Field Magazine/Oberlin College Press. *Floating Heart*, his 13th book of poems, has just been published (Pinyon Press). The *Language of the Enemy*, a collection of stories (2014. Black Mountain Press) and three volumes of translations: *Stomach of the Soul: Selected Poems of Sylva Fischerova* (Calypso Editions); *Puppets in the Wind: Selected Poems of Karl Krolow*" (Bitter Oleander Press); *Be Quiet: Selected Poems of Kuno Raeber*" (Tiger Bark Press).