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Diary by Günther Anders**

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Script for an Audio Adaptation of the Californian Exile Diary by Günther Anders

CHRISTOPHER J MÜLLER (SYDNEY), BENJAMIN NICKL (SYDNEY)

FRAMING/CONTEXT

This script is a (to varying degrees) “free” adaptation of the English translation of Günther Anders’ diary “Der Leichenwäscher der Geschichte” published in *Modernism / modernity* in February 2021. It was created in the context of a recording with the actor Edgar Eckert and was specifically prepared for a native German speaker reading the text in English. This adaptation was inspired and guided by Anders’ own writings and his extensive reflections on language, style, and sound. Three main principles guided this work:

- 1) We sought to spell out some of the feelings implicit in the diary and bring them into a form that would communicate these clearly and directly to the listener. An example of this can be found in the entry of the 7th of March and the scene of the Nazi boots, where the addition of the commentary “how shamefully surreal” can help orientate the narrative. Or, in the inimitable words of Edgar Eckert: “was ist jetzt hier der mood?” To add these “signposts” we heavily relied on the emotional landscape of exile and indignation that is communicated in “The Émigré” (and in many other places in Anders’ work).
- 2) We sought to preserve and dramatize the struggle with language – “the experience of living a stammering life” – that Anders comments on extensively in “The Émigré” and in other texts. For this reason, we have at times retained German language elements and selected vocabulary suitable to either introduce or remove linguistic friction.
- 3) We sought to excavate and further develop the humorous elements of the text, and it is here that we at times deviate the strongest from the original translation. An example of this development can be found in the 14th of March, where we transposed Anders’ analogy between the cultural industry and bread pudding into an analogy between cultural industry and cheesecake. Besides heightening the surrealism and introducing a touch of Hollywood silliness, the English connotations of the word “cheesy” (kitsch) bring out additional, delicious, layers of significance.

These core principles underpin our reworking of the text, which at times shortened and often simplified some of the prose to achieve a linguistic performance with a “comfortably different” feel that readings with Helen Wolfenden and rehearsals with Edgar Eckert helped develop. The recording of this script and further information about the project can be found on the [Real is not Real Enough website](#) hosted by the Goethe Institute.

LOS ANGELES, MARCH 1941

Vita brevis? Nobody can make me believe that life is short. It's long. Not because of long hours of boredom, but because of its genuinely long duration. Moving backwards, at least, life is endless. My childhood in Breslau stretches deep into paleontological pre-history. My mind can only persuade me for a few seconds that my erstwhile namesake and I are one and the same. He must have been a distant ancestor.

The house of life may look tiny from the outside.

But the moment one steps through the door into one's own space,
Takes one, two, three steps and looks back,
the door is no longer to be seen,
and the space one inhabits turns out to be endless.

7TH OF MARCH

It appears I've found a job – Even though my papers say enemy alien and unskilled worker. But it's ... a pretty odd job! I am ... washing the corpses of history.

Not to misunderstand! The job has nothing to do with funerals. I now spend my days in The Hollywood Costume Palace! An impressive twelve story building ... where I am part of the cleaning crew.

A strange kind of place, this palace. It's a kind of *museum*, a kind of archive of the history of clothing. But everything is for loan. Hollywood studios come here to hire clothes, outfits, and props for their films. And it is all here: clothes of today, period pieces, costumes for lords ... and slaves ... there's even a pet section! The wardrobe for animals and stately beasts.

From the first clothes to the most recent, the archive spans all of time. Starting with Eve's fig-leaf *gadget*—available in two styles: *modest wax-cloth* and *transparent latticework*—it reaches all the way into the present: to the boots of Nazi storm troopers.

Although these boots are marching through the world, they are here already treated as a thing of the past. They are dangling next to Greek sandals, imperial guard boots and long forgotten, ancient footwear.

I ran away from the originals to the other end of the world. And here I am. In Hollywood. Not Berlin. An unskilled cleaner who could not refuse to polish their copies ... for pay.

How shamefully surreal.

Still. There are things to learn in this new job. It makes one think about *Klamotten*-philosophy, a *clothing*-philosophy? Or is it philosophy of clothes? Hmmm Anyway. We humans did not cover our nakedness because we were cold. Well. Clothing was, no, is used to establish hierarchies. To attract and intimidate others.

The pieces hanging in the Palace are not devices to generate warmth. They are all social instruments. They serve to lend gravitas. Or terrify or enchant or ... put others in their place.

And this truth is hammered into me now eight-hours a day. As I brush, vacuum and polish.

10TH OF MARCH

When I started this job, I of course expected that our imitation antiques, made for the fake world of film, would be totally fake as well. But this doesn't seem to be the case. At least *those items* I am in a position to examine are historically accurate. Down to the most hidden buttonhole.

Who knows, perhaps they're even more accurate than the so-called *genuine articles*. God knows how many times they've been restored by now. And how many are turning into dust in Europe's museums of history and civilization. *If* these museums haven't already been destroyed by the war and consumed by the flames.

The reason for this historical accuracy is highly peculiar. The research staff that is employed here to guarantee the accuracy of the costumes is for the most part European. Mostly Jewish. And they used to work as historians and academics in archives and collections. Hunted by Hitler, it was only here, at the edge of the Western world, that they found peace.

But Göttingen and the Sorbonne have left their mark on them. When these academics were lucky enough to find jobs—and jobs in *their own* research areas—they were *far too* inflexible to give up their old work ethic.

And if they sat together and watched the films created by the industry they work for, they would be *embarrassed*.

There are only so many new things one can learn in a second or a third life. But one certainly can't learn cutting corners.

Still, it would *never* occur to them to abandon their incorruptible precision for the ignorant masters they now serve. When they were still working in the service of pure science across the Atlantic, they were so proud of their expertise.

But should they still be here? Should they not feel doubt ... shame even?

Do any of them realize that they, as refugees, are nurturing the cultural heritage of those who have forced them into exile?

Do any of them realize how they are promoting the culture that is persecuting them?

Do any of them sense how ridiculous and eerie all this is?

Probably not.

Certainly not the *profiteers*, who read academic accuracy as a sign that everything is ... *just swell!*

The *actors*, who will be cast as gladiators, crusaders, cardinals, dragoons, Jacobins, or SS-men, in the historical movies that will be made by Hollywood, can rest easy. They know that no button was sown into their costumes incorrectly. And that none of the ruffs adorning their neck has even the smallest pleat too many.

So this is, now, the world I work in. While, on the other side of the Atlantic, millions are slaughtering each other.

11TH OF MARCH

What I said about the *historical accuracy* of our costumes wasn't quite right. Let me explain. In our age, old things aren't kept. Or at least not in Hollywood. Nothing can be new enough—or shall I say, young enough?—to escape being seen as trash.

Check the label! This rule also applies to the goods we rent out. Every item here has a very recent date of birth. Yes, of course, they are reproductions of the past! But even the costumes from antiquity must be available in the latest style. To stay competitive, satisfy the customer, and not be rejected as outdated antiques, they must be as new as possible: even shabby old things must sparkle.

Imagine a distinguished Hollywood studio, let's say MGM, needed Carthaginian elephant saddles for a Salamambo film (this alarming rumour has been stalking the building): No major studio would be offered the ones I had to clean yesterday. Those dusty big boys were made twelve years ago, in 1929!

Well, they were, probably, still deemed suitable for smaller studios. And so, I was made to attack those saddles with polish, until they really did look both ancient and brand new! But MGM would have to decline products made before 1935: "That's the lowest date we could consider".

It's a question of prestige. Else, MGM will simply fly new old saddles in from New York.

14TH OF MARCH

Last night. Cinema with L.

A historical drama.

Saw *our* costumes in action; an imbecile Madame-Pompadour movie.

Could have been proud of *our* pieces. The costumes, really, were the only thing that was *genuine*.

After the film, we talked about some points worth pursuing ...

"No no no no listen! This film had nothing to do with history. I mean, you know ... it was made from prefabricated goods. And ... to create it ... finished products were turned into ingredients.

What this means? Well ... It's like ... like ... cheesecake!

Look. Cheesecake isn't made from milk and flour. It's made from cream cheese and cookies. First ... first the cookies are crumbled for the base. Then, the cream cheese is mixed into the filling. Costume drama is made exactly the same way.

Let me explain.

Costume dramas don't use history as their flour. The makers of such films take existing novels and put them in the mix. Might this be the strange recipe ... the recipe for the culture industry as a whole? There are people, *millions* of people, who only know history from eating these ready-made cakes."

Continued to talk about film.

The production of historical dramas has assumed gigantic proportions.

Agreed that we can't know the truth about our world if we ignore that the business of faking history has become a substantial part of history itself.

Ended by wondering: Has history only ever been the continuum of its own self-distortion?

15TH OF MARCH

I'm surprised at how easy it is to get used to the fact that here, in the costume palace, historical items and off-the-rack clothes are one and the same. It's already normal to me that all items are grouped by country of origin and historical time period, like they're on display in a museum.

But it's also as if they're on sale in a department store. Our items have ... what are they called ... those ... those *tags* ... *labels*. With the size, waistline, and collar measurements.

Of course, this shop display includes medieval suits of armour.

One medieval knight is neatly lined up next to the other. On hangers made of iron. Ditto, for the ancient Spartan spears, and poisoned darts from Polynesia. They are bunched into quivers of ten and twenty and stand there ... ready to be loaned out to star once more in another Hollywood picture.

What I do find difficult to get used to—even though it is a logical consequence of this line of business—is how much value is placed on outshining that which actually was. Hollywood apparently seeks to create the impression that the actual past was meagre in comparison to the inventory on display. If one believes in *progress*, it is obvious that today's reproductions of the Middle Ages and Antiquity should be bigger and better. Perhaps more ancient and more medieval than the medieval and antique originals.

Let's go back to the suits of armour, stored in a part of the Palace I have come to call the "Knight's Hall". Neatly hanging there in rows arranged by degree of splendour, one is more shiny than the next. And all are so wonderfully spacious that the knights back then—known to have *been knirpshaft* tiny—could have played hide and seek in them. Luxurious metal cladding of this kind was nowhere to be found in the actual Middle Ages; its objects have only today managed to catch up with us moderns. Or to be more precise, only we moderns have managed to elevate the Middle Ages to a level that can be tolerated.

An even stranger experience, and this happened to me yesterday, is the task of scrubbing five Ottonian crowns: “tenth century, head size twenty-one to twenty-five, made in 1939”. That’s four crowns more than there were in the modest Ottonian period.

By the way, I did this with the same special silver polish I use for my knives at home. From now on, the brand will be known as *History Polish* to me.

Tomorrow’s strange task. To give a good, deep clean to the three *identical* Napoleons: “year: 1812, Battle of Berezina, style: with a patch of sown-on snow”.

16TH OF MARCH

Today, it’s the three Napoleons. I’m finished with the first and the bottom half of the second, but my feelings about them are starting to change.

Of course, I don’t deny that the three Napoleons have different sizes. Number two is a full hand longer than number one. Number three is half a hand longer than number two. Having more than one Napoleon makes good business sense, as one can never predict the chest and leg size of the next actor playing Napoleon.

But is this practical explanation really enough to explain the existence of these three here? Their multiplication probably has a very different reason: anxiety. The anxiety that takes hold of us when we, *the children of the Age of Reproduction*, encounter a single copy. Something ... unique.

It is an anxiety about absolute loss we almost never feel about today’s products. When standing in front of a car or a bomber-plane, we know that ten, a hundred, if not a thousand, identical cars and planes exist. So even when one car or plane is destroyed, we know that that make of car or type of plane will continue. They can easily be replaced the moment they are lost and, thus, they aren’t lost at all.

When we look back into the past, at the fire that destroyed the Great Library of Alexandria, for instance, no such consolation can be found. Its flames burned an archive of many unique and irreplaceable items. Used to replaceability and reproduction, we begin to panic the more we think about this loss, because this fire was no exception.

The whole of history was one giant Alexandrian library! Yes, this means the past was one never-ending inferno, incinerating *unique copies, singular items* like books, laws, institutions ... and yes, also humans. Yes, at the thought of all this ash, the panic grows! Even though panicking is futile. But whenever we face something unique, we feel it all the same.

Having only one Napoleon? Inconceivable! I mean, make of Napoleon what you want. But just imagine what would have become of the history of the nineteenth century if something had happened to the guy as early as 1800 or 1801, before he rose to fame. No, I don’t think we would take this risk today. And so, we now copy and mass produce everything to ensure that we won't have to risk such avoidable loss.

I know, nothing happened to the man. Thank God, he did his stint according to plan. But this doesn't prove anything. It was pure chance and doesn't lessen the recklessness of our ancestors.

Sooo ... what about these three Napoleons "with sown-on snow". It's possible that the management of the Costume Palace may have tried to avoid the mistakes of the past by making three copies instead of only having one!

If this is true, I could not condemn their motive of trying to sooth the pain of loss.

In Hollywood, the Berezina snow will never melt.

17TH OF MARCH

Real quality. That's, of course, what our props and costumes are known for. Our imitations are all so sturdy and realistic that the originals must have looked like flimsy copies. Compared to the realism of our Palace, the past must have seemed like a kingdom of make-belief.

This substitution of fiction for fact may not be permissible in this way ... *But*, one is still allowed to wonder. Our swords, shields, and armour are *so much better* than what they had in the past that one asks oneself: what would have happened to history ... and I mean the history of war, had they've had our equipment back then?

Our weaponry is so reliable and so convincing that it might have made some wars of the past totally unnecessary. For example: the Third Punic War. And maybe even the Second, where Hannibal brought his elephants across the Alps.

At the very least, the tedious, hard-fought progression of history would have happened at a very different pace and the present could have been reached much sooner and in an easier way.

The pretence of people in the past is *truly shocking*, to have the gall to insist on being so *ancient*. Why did, for instance, people in the Middle Ages, all have to act *so appallingly medieval*? Unbelievable how proud they were to be amateurs and how they slowed history down, until it could finally reach our level. It is impossible to calculate just how much precious time they wasted.

Let's assume a merciful god would allow us to start over and play the game of world history once more from the beginning, or at least the last two millennia.

Who knows ... we might now be able to complete this stretch of time in a single century.

But, oh well, the past is the past. And nothing can change that ... not even our Palace of wearable things.

20TH OF MARCH

Some costumes kept in the palace are beyond strange. I'm speaking of costumes that don't seem to have *any* Hollywood allure. So it's a mystery to me why they are here. Like the ten Carmelite nuns: "big and very big sizes, made 1930". Incredibly dusty. They made me clean them all day. While I was working on them with my carpet beater, I really couldn't imagine what kind of film could feature ten *such sisters*? Who needs a gang of big, and very big, nuns?

What a pointless question! As pointless as questioning why ten nun costumes even exist. There are unemployed people, so there must of course also be unemployed things! And even an underclass! And in the palace, this underclass of wretched rags just hangs there. A real Lumpenproletariat, made up of costumes that are unworn and unwanted.

What poor, unfortunate items! There's no reason to believe that being unwanted should end their existence. For if lack of meaning would ruin their right to exist, this ruin would have happened long ago

In fact, I believe that, once registered in this place, there is no escape. Such is the iron law of the Costume Palace. It applies to my nuns just as it applies to more fortunate, I should say, more employable costumes. They will have to stay here for all eternity. If one is allowed to use that phrase. The ten nuns can only go the way of all cloth when ten brand-new costumes are supplied to exist in their place.

But does being replaced by something identical really mean salvation? Would this really mean that ten new costumes are taking over? Or, have the same old ones simply come back again?

Sorry!

Inquiries about their ontological status are so delicate that they cannot be handled by an unskilled employee. They can only be answered by the board of directors.

This is what worries, tragedies, problems and hopes look like over here. While thousands upon thousands are slaughtering each other across the ocean. Distant, but real.

21ST OF MARCH

Read the previous entries. On the 11th of March I noted: all our antiques must be current. When Napoleon costumes or Hannibal's elephant saddles get too old, they are thrown away. Not quite satisfactory. Is only half the truth.

True, in the Costume Palace new old things are made. And for this, there's a whole army of employees who are called *creators*. They are like gods ... but their power comes from electricity. And so, these employees ... these ... these Vulcans with electric hammers, these Penelopes with urrrmm ... sowing machines ... continuously churn out more splendid and ever more antique textiles and swords.

Day in day out. Their work fends off the West's decline. It ensures that its heritage survives and ... even swells. What more could one want?

There is, however, something I hadn't yet considered: every brand-new item is also made to look worn out. Else, it would appear inauthentic and unconvincing.

Of course, no suit of armour, helmet, or crown is made to look brand new. They are already given cracks, frayed edges, and their used feel, at production. But this primordial wear does not stand the test of time.

As the months and years pass, wear begins to look shabby too. If not to say: worn. No surprise, then, that specialist workers are retained here who have the sole task of maintaining the *required used feel*. They continually ensure that *the wear* that would already been worn off tomorrow looks nice and fresh.

All this activity happens in a separate room, not quite as large as "The Knight's Hall". Those who work in it, they call it: "The Conservation Room". A name they say with pride. Hmm, well, that's their name for it ...

I call it: "Make-Up Room", a ... "*Schminkraum* for Things" ... where make-up is not applied to beautify, but to make objects look *nice* and *old*.

Those who work in there, are listed as conservators. So, it's easy to understand their pride. As if the *peculiar* things they do in there are *the same* as restoring Correggios or renewing faded Gobelin tapestry. What troglodytes! Conservation work requires true expertise and skill. But to be a *specialist*, here in the Palace, no prior training is required. And ... there's another reason why the name "Conservation Room" is misleading. True conservators save damaged antiques. Ours are busy saving the damage!

Anyhow ... the first time I stepped into the "Conservation Room", this is what I saw. In the corner by the door, a row of women fully absorbed by their work. I'm told there are former *Bauhaus* students among them. What a sham! Perfectly educated for unskilled work, they were renewing faded blood stains on *antique garments*—on shirts of Roman legionaries and the likes. Their hands, eyes, faces, bodies ... revealed a fanatic dedication that seemed absurdly inappropriate to their task. When they finished with the blood, they stacked the pieces *neatly* ... as if they were freshly ironed shirts.

On the other side of the room, five older gentlemen were reviving artificial Verdigris on Etruscan shields, and on armour that had become a bit too battered.

That small artist colony was led by the Berliner R., even though he is the youngest. Just five years ago, he was a promising student of Kokoschka.

Incidentally, I had a passing acquaintance with R.'s ailing mother in the 1920s in Berlin.

A much more commendable person than her son. It almost makes me sick to think how she suffered to give her only child the chance to be a Rembrandt.

She had conceived him during the first World War, but was a widow by the time he was born. And even when suffering from tuberculosis, she kept working to support him.

Yes. They predicted him to have a great future as an artist. And here it is: greatness! Her sacrifices gave her darling the opportunity to be a foreman in God's own country and oversee the renewal of Roman bloodstains and chipped Verdigris.

So much for: "The Meaning of Life". What an idiotic phrase! And yet, it once was our "profound" answer to everything. I hereby vow that it shall now only pass my lips under duress.

Sic transit gloria mundi.

Still ... R.'s Verdigris job is not entirely without glory: *his work supposedly does require special skill.* In short, R. is part of the Palace elite, or at least he belongs to the elite amongst the employees. And his special abilities earn him considerably more than my cleaning job. A job *I do* already master perfectly. Even though I can build on no prior knowledge.

And, at every possible occasion, he lets his status show. This became evident this afternoon when I strayed into the vicinity of his exclusive crew. I was struggling with my assorted cleaning equipment and fighting with the metal snake of my vacuum cleaner.

He glared at me, and his look gave me to understand that he didn't know me *and did not wish* to be recognized.

Clearly, the poor fellow was mortified that he might have to admit an association with someone like me in front of his subordinates.

I felt no desire to add insult to injury. The gap between who he now is and who he once wanted to become, seemed like punishment enough. So, I granted him the favour and played the total stranger. Even though I was now practically cleaning beneath his feet.

These are the joys and woes of this place here, while over there, at every moment, hundreds of thousands are slaughtering one another.

23RD OF MARCH

What if the Costume Palace were to become the only surviving record of the Europe that once was? What if everything in Rome, Florence, Paris, Chartres, Nuremberg, Cracow ... was reduced to rubble and ash by the war? Would this destruction not immediately turn the palace into something new? Transform it ... into a museum? Its fake antiques ... into edifying cultural artefacts, an exhibition of originals, even?

Of course, it would.

It's naïve to think that each historical object can be picked up, sorted, and placed into one of two boxes: one for authentic items, one for imitations. How childish to believe that fake is fake.

Things have always moved back and forth between these two boxes. And this is still happening today.

Yes, many copies have turned into originals. And this has happened even when they were handed down in multiple versions. Or only as clumsy reproductions. Whenever an original is completely destroyed—not just simply lost, but also forgotten—one of its copies can become the original.

So, *originals* can be copied ... and *copies* can also *become original!* When a statue outlives its source of inspiration, it can itself go on to inspire. Yes, this statue may have started out its life as an imitation. But, as the centuries passed, it was still able to grow up and blossom into a *genuine* expression of artistic spirit.

“As long as the parents are alive, their children cannot thrive.”

But, long-dead parents can also suddenly return from the grave. For instance, when a long-lost original is suddenly found by the shovel of a road worker, or in the net of a fishing boat. This reappearance of a long-forgotten past reveals the imposter. It turns the misjudged *original* back into a *copy*.

The faster that Europe is laid to waste by war ... the more systematically its originals are buried by rubble ... the more valuable the fool's gold here becomes. Who knows, perhaps the best years of our costume palace still lie ahead. As a home of genuine articles. I might even see that happen in my lifetime.

It all depends on Hitler, on what he spares over there.

I can already picture the palace as a kind of Louvre. How teachers are trying to marshal packs of school kids and toddlers into it! I can hear the shushing ... the calls for respectful silence as groups are introduced to these *hallowed halls!*

Just as we fell silent.

Back then in time immemorial. Was it ... Breslau? ... or ... Berlin? ... As we stood at the threshold of the hall of antiquities. For the first time. Where Greek sculptures were awaiting us. Sculptures that were probably chipped plaster-casts made from Roman copies.

26TH OF MARCH

Read the previous entries.

Still not satisfied.

On the question how the old relates to the new, two paradoxes complicate things further ...

In America, nothing is older than *good old progress*, because this country has a long history of only looking into the future. The pride Americans feel for the newness of their new world goes back generations. But there is no tradition of looking back. Interest in the old world, the Middle Ages, is only very recent. History is still undiscovered. Here, the past is something new.

So, when a museum, let's say the Metropolitan Museum, acquires an *old artefact*, this is usually put on display as a *new acquisition*. But for *true Americans*, it is *new* in a very different, much more concrete way, than it is for us Europeans. It's not just a new museum object, it's also a newly acquired *past*. One that their parents had not yet known about or seen.

And on top of this, the past stirs very different emotions in Americans than it does in us. Many feel deeply suspicious about things that belong to a past age.

In a way, the suspicion they feel is identical to how our farmers feel about *the latest gizmos and gadgets*, the things that are *too modern*. This reaction signals that Americans embrace the new ... but distrust the old.

Back in Europe—as is well known—right-wing politics explicitly try to glorify the past ... or at least their version of it. But here, young *intellectuals* who decorate their flats with reproduction Giotto paintings or archaic art aren't viewed as conservative. They are actually treated as avant-gardists, perhaps even as traitors. Traitors against the *good old* American frontier spirit, which only looks into the future.

Buying music older than Bach is a recipe for suspicion. It makes one a questionable American: too continental and undemocratic. Perhaps it even gives one a whiff of communism.

This seemed to be true for the FBI men who stopped me on the street today. To ask me if I always carry bombs in my trouser-pockets or only on special occasions. To do so, they simply asked me what kind of books I own. "Do you read stuff by a certain ... Hegel? Or what do you call him?!"—to explain, in so-called *intelligence circles*, "Hegel" means Marx, and reading Marx means "being personally bribed by Stalin".

In the States, interest in the past is proof of a desire for subversion and revolution. Those who don't recognise this paradox will never be able to understand the anti-intellectualism that reigns here. This attitude towards genuinely old artefacts also shapes how Americans feel about the rummage we keep here in the Palace. To us Europeans, it's just fake costume jewellery. To them, it is so much more. A gateway to the most fashionable, the most recently acquired past.

But ... wait ... things *are* changing. The past *is* becoming all the rage.

Look. Since I first came to New York six years ago, some *antiques shops* have been shooting up here and there. But the heritage industry that could serve the masses is in its infancy. It will take time until it can churn out a daily supply of fresh history. Who knows how long that might take. Especially in times of war.

Here, in the New World, the past still lies ahead. Though, by the time the demand for it reaches fever pitch in America, I hope I'll have returned to Old Europe. Provided, of course, Europe still exists. Or will ever exist again.

4TH OF APRIL

Walked home with B. yesterday.

I let slip a few nervous remarks about my miserable job.

“I’m the wrong port of call for this kind of thing”, he interrupted me straight away.

I looked at him in astonishment, so he added: “I have no sympathy for your situation at all”. And then he really got going: “Those who chose the right wife squander the opportunity to gain experience. Those who find *their* calling, never leave the comfort of *their home*. Fingers that play exclusively on custom made pianos no longer learn anything”.

I eloquently replied by saying: “Ahhhh?” “Yes: Ahhh!”, B. immediately exclaimed.

“Only what doesn’t fit, only *what wasn’t made for you*, only what is too short here or too long there, only what is wrong ... *is right!* This alone creates experience! This alone is the world!”

There was no trace of irony in his voice.

“Really,” he continued, “you have approached your life in a *terribly wrong way*. What have you been pursuing? Only ever what was right, only ever what fits. Only ever fulfilment. And now and then, and by chance, you even had the misfortune of finding it. With this woman. With that friend. With that occupation. Or when engaging with this specific subject. In random pieces of world that looked to you as if they had been made to measure, *just for you!*”

“My dear fellow”, he kept going, “if you ask me, the time where you found your preferences ... what you wanted ... were the most erroneous parts of your life. Only the hard times in between were right. The years filled by coincidences. The jobs you cursed. If you have acquired some small quantum of experience, you only have those times to thank, the time you believe to be time lost”.

With this, he gestured toward a group of Mexican workers who were laying the road surface in front of the house.

“Don’t you think these people had *preferences* too? And talents suited for things other than tarring roads, in South LA of all places? Didn’t they feel a *vocation* for a line of work that fitted like a glove? But they had no choice. These people had to do something they felt no calling for, something that didn’t suit them and simply came their way.

In short: the wrong thing.

And who knows the world? You? Or them?”

SOURCES

Günther Anders, [Washing the Corpses of History: the Hollywood Costume Palace, a 1941 exile diary by Günther Anders](#), trans. Christopher John Müller. In: *Modernism / modernity* 5(4), 2021.

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