WHY HISTORY MATTERS

Life and Thought

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annihilating my people. I was hurt in France because the monuments to the World War II dead did not mention that some of them were dead only because they were Jews. The French have claimed all their Jews as French. I wanted them to recognize that they were Jews, too. But the Germans, even in memory—especially in memory—have retained the racist categories. What is more, they have obliterated our history, so that all they and anyone else remembers is the end, the dying, the murders. They have excised the history of German Jews in such a way that even to well-meaning contemporaries, there are Germans and there were Jews, but there are no Jewish Germans and never have been. Inside Germany, in the heart of Europe, we are as nonexistent as the Cathars. That is the meaning of genocide.

I knew it, of course. I've known it for fifty years, but I've never felt it before. Now that I have walked in the footsteps of the Cathars, I do.

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Living in Translation

Dedicated to my sister Nora

When I came to the United States in 1939 as a refugee from Hitler fascism, I had, like all refugees, a very problematic relationship with the English language. On the one hand, I wanted desperately to learn English and to speak it well. This was my meal ticket, absolutely essential if I was to get work. On the other hand I felt a responsibility to uphold, treasure and keep intact the integrity of the German language which fascism had stolen from me, as it had stolen all my worldly possessions. The Nazis spoke a language of their own—first a jargon of slogans and buzz words; later the language of force and tyranny. Words no longer meant what they said; they meant what the Nazis intended them to mean, and so, gradually, they became empty of meaning. Like banners flapping forever in the wind, they flapped around the skeleton of German speech until all that could be heard was the clattering words pretending to meaning they could not encompass. Seen in that light, it was the obligation of every antifascist German-speaking refugee to uphold the old language, so that some day it might be restored.

I had, in the last two years before my emigration, studied English with a private tutor. The results were pathetic. The book from which I studied must have been more than fifty years old. It operated on the assumption that the manners, habits and customs of English gentlemen constituted a universal norm. One learned some vocabulary and, most importantly, a dozen or so phrases which presumably equipped one to enter into polite British society.

"Will you come and have tea at my home?"

"I shall be delighted."

"May I introduce you to my good friend Roger Forsythe?"

To which the proper reply was: "Delighted to make your acquaintance, sir."

If one were seated in front of someone, it was essential to lean back toward the person behind one and say politely: "Please excuse my back." Or, as the occasion warranted, one might make use of the phrase "Please excuse my glove." Unclear was whether what one was apologizing for was having or not having a glove.

The phrase book, carefully memorized, would equip the German-speaker to navigate through the quaint old-fashioned British village, purchase a few choice items at the greengrocer's (the book was heavy on the use of the Saxon genitive), exchange a few polite phrases at the fishmonger's and return to one's hostelry where the crucial question: "Where's the Ladies?" was never to be asked. One was simply to observe where the Ladies was. With the important distiction between "will" and "shall" obsessively fixed in one's mind one was supposed to be able to announce: "I shall be taking the 8:20 train to London" and instruct the ubiquitous servants to "fetch my trunk from my room."

All of which was worse than useless in giving instructions to a New York City cabbie or in understanding his growling response to any question. Fishmongers and greengrocers refused to make an appearance, and servants, such as could be identified, had no intention of fetching anything without a tip which exceeded the immigrant's means and comprehension. One gestured one's way through the first weeks and learned that a firm "no" and "buzz off" were more valuable than any of the learned phrases.

"Please, I desire a job," was a declaration which was certain to land the applicant in a plastic chair in the employment agency, to wait all morning to be called while watching other applicants get their referral slips.

"Excuse please, lady, your newspaper announcement said there was job as 'lady's aide' and I wait all morning why never you call me?"

"There's nothing for you today. Come back tomorrow."

"Please I desire—"

"You got no references. You can't speak English. You got no experience. This ain't the welfare."

Learning English, the kind spoken in New York City with its multiple

accents, innumerable slang words, abbreviations, elisions, swallowed syllables and exploding expletives, was a bare bones necessity.

I listened to the radio for hours a day, especially to the advertisements, which usually had longer sentences than the rest of the show. One could go to the movies for twenty-five cents, and I spent many evenings studying language at the movies. I listened with intense attention to people's speech and I read my way through the Children's Books section of the Public Library, gradually advancing to Young Adolescents.

English was a simple language, compared with German, French and Latin. The verbs had simple endings, if any; one did not add adjectives and adjectival constructs to nouns in long chains ("The no longer quite youthful, but otherwise still good-looking, pipe smoking general etc."). The beginner learned to rely on the auxiliary verbs—to be, to have, to do. I kept book on the hundreds of meanings of the verb "to do" and learned at least fifty ways of using "to get." Since the finer shadings of syntax and vocabulary eluded me, I thought of the language as blunt and utilitarian, and devoid of subtlety.

Living in translation and lacking both an adequate vocabulary and sense of the rhythm of the language it was as though my adult knowledge had to be transposed into the vocabulary of a six-year-old. It does not take long to learn to get by in English; to master the language takes years.

I began to write poetry in English before I could properly speak or write. Since I wrote free verse in ordinary speech, patterning my style after Bertolt Brecht, and getting effects by sharply contrasting images and striking sound patterns, I could achieve some sort of effect with the most primitive means. Writing poetry was then my way of venturing out into a higher level of language connection, but I deliberately stayed primitive, fearing to make a fool of myself if I tried to be poetic.

For nearly two years, I managed on that level of crude communication, while my thoughts and dreams went on unperturbed in German. I forced myself to read only in English. Whether I read newspapers, magazines or books, I always had a dictionary nearby. I would look up each word I did not know; for a while I kept a small notebook with words and definitions. I was quite aware of the fact I was living a split life, thinking in one language and speaking in another. I could not

find adequate words for the thoughts I wanted to express. I said things, and people rephrased them, translating for themselves. More and more, as I began to move among English-speakers, I lived with an overwhelming sense of inadequacy and frustration.

What made matters worse was that I had aspired to become a linguist in German. I studied Old German and Middle High German in Gymnasium and had done a year's work on my honors thesis, which was a close textual analysis of a dozen German ballads. I was fascinated with languages and had hoped to go to the University to study comparative languages. For at least four years prior to my graduation I had been an acolyte of the writer Karl Kraus, whose every work I had read and reread and whom I considered my foremost teacher.

Karl Kraus was an essayist, satirist, playwright and, in the opinion of many literary critics, the finest poet writing in German in the 20th century. His monumental drama "for a Martian theatre," *The Last Days of Mankind,* written after World War I, was perhaps the outstanding pacifist work created out of that terrible European cataclysm. As editor of the satirical journal *Die Fackel* (The Torch), Kraus held up a mirror to his contemporaries, exposing their follies, cruelties and self-serving hypocrisy in savage, brilliant essays and aphorisms. He regarded himself as the last of the German "Classics" and as the upholder of a humanistic tradition of form, style and language in a world deaf to its own speech and forgetful of its history. Kraus was fanatic about the German language, which he mastered in all its complexities of dialects and intonations. He wrote long essays about two lines of poetry and devoted one celebrated issue of his journal to a 200-page essay on the subject of "The Comma." To read Kraus, study his essays and attend his remarkable "Readings"—performances at which he not only read his own works but put on complete dramas such as *King Lear*, reading all the parts in the play—these were formative experiences for a young person interested in language. Kraus presented a constant challenge—being one of his disciples one learned to watch one's speech and one's writing. Meaning was to be found, as Kraus put it, "by tapping along the guiding rope of language." Young writers coming under Kraus's spell either gave up altogether or attempted to write in his voice, until at last they found their own.

Kraus, a Jew born in Czechoslovakia, then part of the Austro-Hungarian empire, was antisemitic, arrogant, elitist and in the last five

years of his life, politically reactionary. Earlier, he was a savage critic of bourgeois life, of greed, corruption and exploitation. He had excoriated the military, complacent politicians and shoddy literati and espoused the causes of down-trodden workers, exploited peasants and victimized prostitutes. At the time I came under his influence, he had made his peace with the semi-fascist totalitarianism of Chancellor Dollfuss's government which he defended out of disgust with the failings of weak liberalism and corrupt democracy. I was totally opposed to Dollfuss and his government and my politics were more radically left than Kraus's had ever been, yet I managed to disregard his turn to conservatism, even his betrayal of his own beliefs, because of his impact on my artistic and linguistic sensibilities. I attended each of his Readings and his many lectures, read his work and every work he recommended, honed my own writings on his demanding essays on language and worshipped at his feet. In 1936 I attended his funeral and cried bitterly, as though he had been a personal friend. In all my life, no single writer has ever influenced me as profoundly as did Karl Kraus.

One of his incredible accomplishments was to "translate" Shakespeare without knowing English. He had read the several current German Shakespeare translations, the chief one by Tieck, representing a German Romanticist rewrite of Shakespeare, and found them wanting. Having read all the French translations and putting these beside the German versions and then, word for word, comparing them with the English version, he had sensed what was missing: the Anglo-Saxon structure and bluntness of Shakespeare's speech and his poetry, which could not be rendered adequately in the words and rhythms of German Romantic poetry. Kraus undertook his own "translation"—one might better call it an intuitive adaptation in German and it was these versions he used in his Shakespeare readings. I think I have never read Shakespeare in better German than in these free adaptations. Kraus got Shakespeare right. Thinking about his accomplishment and the way he went about it gave me new insights into the art of translation. A translator might get the literal meaning, and yet miss the other layers of meanings, all the resonances conveyed to hearer and reader in the original. She might miss the richness of ambiguity, the force that stretches a word's meaning beyond its formal definition, the pulse and vibrations of tone that resonate over and above mere content. It seemed to me then and it does now, after I have worked for years on translations and

lived for decades in translation, that the overtones and resonances are more significant than the literal meaning. If a choice has to be made, I would chose texture over mere information.

To come from the speech of Karl Kraus to the imbecile stammerings of an immigrant American was a fall, indeed, symbolic of all the rest of it—the loss of economic security, of status, of potential, of opportunity. All refugees experienced that fall, and many, perhaps most, never got over it. They lived their lives in the new land either as temporary exiles or constantly in denial. The world they had lost became more attractive, more worthy, the longer they were away from it. In New York City's Washington Heights they created a small *Mittel-Europa* of familiar shops, coffeehouses and organizations. Their cynical stance toward the USA gave them a sense of continuity; they were and would remain Europeans transplanted against their will into an alien environment.

When I made the decision, in my second year here, to become an American writer, I made the decision to abandon such attitudes, to become, in fact, a voluntary emigrant from Europe. I embraced America with gratitude and fascination, as I embraced its primary language. If that meant suppressing and denying some of my European habits in thought and attitude, so be it. I was young enough to start anew. There are many gains in such an enterprise, not the least of it, citizenship and familiarity in a formerly alien culture. But there is a cost to it, greater than I ever wanted to admit to myself. I am trying to reckon up that cost, at last, after fifty years and more.

In an irony of fate, the very first paid "job" I had in the United States was as a translator of a rather esoteric sort. I had nearly gone under in the first eight months as an immigrant, unable to find work, due mostly to the fact that employers of casual labor and domestic work found me "overqualified," and I was too afraid of getting in trouble with the Immigration Service to seek even private assistance. Then, an orthopedist I had met through one of my refugee friends required the services of someone able to translate from Latin to English. I volunteered and, for five dollars an hour, translated a medical treatise on the hip joint from Latin into English. I earned enough to support myself for two weeks and to regain some sense of self-respect. My fancy classical education, might, after all, equip me for self-support. In fact, it did not, not for another twenty years, when it was finally useful in allowing me to continue my academic education.

If you are forced to give up your mother tongue, what is lost? In a way, losing one's mother tongue is inconceivable—one assumes one can always return to it. But that is not so. Language is not a dead body of knowledge; language changes year by year, minute by minute; it lives and grows. In order to remain adequate it must be spoken and it must be read. When you lose your language, you lose the sound, the rhythm, the forms of your unconscious. Deep memories, resonances, sounds of childhood come through the mother tongue—when these are missing the brain cuts off connections. Language communicates much more than literal meaning. It gives us timbre, tone, a rich undercurrent of resonances and shadings, multiple and ambiguous crosscurrents. But in the early years of speaking the learned language one knows nothing of those complexities; the new language stays linear and flat. Inflection adds layers of meaning to what is spoken, but the immigrant has no ear for inflections. Translating meaning from another circle of culture, she constantly makes mistakes and is given to misperceptions.

German, like most European languages which developed through centuries of feudalism, has a rich variety of dialects and intonations, which mark not only region but also class. British English of the upper classes and the Cockney speech of the lower classes retain that function, but English in America reflects region more than class. Still, there are class markers in speech, but they are immensely complicated by the effect of immigration—the millions of Americans who speak English as a second language have created a number of creolized varieties of speech. In all this the newcomer finds it hard to become oriented.

I was always aware of the awkwardness of my position as an immigrant. Normally, I'm quick to a fault—I catch the meaning of what a person says often before the speaker finishes, which leads me to interrupt the speaker with my answer. A very unattractive trait, one that over the years I have tried to unlearn, but it is indicative of the way my mind works. Living in translation I usually could not catch the exact meaning without doing the translation. Therefore, from being fast to a fault, I now appeared slow, if not slow-witted. Lacking the information usually transmitted by dialect or speech patterns and body signals, I had to guess at the whole meaning or rather I had to be satisfied with

an approximate meaning. For a person like me, who is committed to precise definition and precise expression, this was a form of torture.

Living in translation is like skating on wobbly skates over thin ice. There is no sure footing; there are no clear-cut markers; no obvious signposts. It helps to trust in one's balance, to swing free and make leaps of the imagination. I suppose what I am saying is that it is immensely strenuous. Quite apart from being alienating.

Two years after I came to the United States, the country was at war. Speaking German in public exposed the speaker to hostile looks and remarks. I'm a noncomformist by inclination, so public disapproval would not have been enough to discourage me from speaking German. The truth was, I no longer wanted to speak German; I was repelled by the sound of it; for me as for other Americans it had become the language of the enemy. These expressions of mindless patriotism are not sentiments of which, in the abstract, I can approve. In practice, however, they were just what I felt. I ceased speaking German altogether.

By then, I was married to an American-born man and all my friends were American-born. Still retaining enough of my European heritage to think that every child should learn one or more foreign languages, I wanted my children to be raised in such a way that they would easily learn foreign languages. Yet I did not speak German to them, because of the attitude I held at the time. I did sing them German lullabies, because they were the only lullabies I knew. Later, I taught them the rudiments of French.

It took several years before I began to think in English. It was exciting when it actually happened and it made a qualitiative difference in the way I lived. I began to be able to express myself with the speed and precision characteristic of me and most of the time I could find the word I needed without resorting to a dictionary. There came a night when I dreamt in English and after that, I thought I had made it.

But it is one thing to speak and think and even dream in a second language; it is quite another to be able to write in it as a creative writer. My decision to become "an American writer" had been made long before my language proficiency entitled me to such a claim. Nevertheless, I wrote short stories and articles, although I felt quite inadequate to the task. I had great difficulty getting dialogue right; my characters all talked the same way, since I was incapable of creating individual speech patterns. Awareness of my shortcomings was of little help. I felt

like a tone-deaf person trying to compose a symphony. Carrying a notebook with me everywhere, I jotted down the speech fragments I heard. I read books on the craft of writing and on "style." Nothing seemed to help. One of my favorite exercises was to compose a paragraph in the style of a famous writer. That was useful, but I still had no style of my own. That should not have surprised me—I already knew then that form is the shape of content. But it is not some ideal abstract "shape"—it is content as shaped by the creating artist, content filtered through the prism of the artist's entire life experience. And I was then a broken prism—a refugee without language, between cultures, belonging to neither the old nor the new.

I took another translation job which I found quite satisfying. I translated the jacket copy and the texts of a collection of German folksongs appearing on a two-disk LP. The folksongs were all well known to me; to give a poetic and not just a literal translation was a challenge, which in the end I felt I met. I contemplated a career as a translator, but I quickly gave it up. What I wanted to be was a writer.

At one point during this initial apprenticeship I decided to stay with my Austrian culture, to write only of what I knew. My first two short stories written in English were descriptions of my experience in Nazi Germany. In one of the stories, I did the interior monologues of five Nazi soldiers, caught in a tense battle situation on the Russian front. In both stories I avoided having to do English dialogue. Both were published immediately: the first one in a small, cultural journal, the second one in the best fiction magazine then in existence, *Story* magazine. This quick and unexpected "success" spurred my literary ambition but did nothing to improve my language skills. Daringly, I wrote three short stories with American locale and characters—none of which aroused the slightest interest in publishers. Once again, I returned to my earlier decision to write about what I knew best and I began to work on a semi-autobiographical novel. It described the four years 1934–38 in which Austria made the transition from a democracy to an authoritarian clerical government and finally to Nazi fascism, as experienced by a teenage girl.

In a sense, this novel was my apprentice work as a writer of English. It took nearly twelve years to complete it, because I did seven re-writes. Over and over again, I transformed the text from a translation to an original work in English. Even so, the final version still has traces of

German syntax and style. Writing is learned by doing; there is no escaping that. My Sisyphian labor at last produced a book with which I was satisfied, but by then the topic of antifascism, which had been of such paramount interest in the early forties, had become a drug on the market. I have readers' reports from the various publishing houses that could break your heart. My work was compared to that of Thomas Mann and Thomas Wolfe and the readers expressed high hopes for my literary career, but they did not want to publish this book. In yet another ironic development of my career my novel *No Farewell*, in which I had invested all my best effort to mastering the English language, was first printed in Austria in a German translation in 1954. It was very successful there and this success inspired me to take part in a cooperative publishing venture in the late 1950s, which finally resulted in American publication of the book.

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Recently, in trying to think about some of the long-range effects of my refugee status I became aware of something as a problem which I thought was not really a problem for me. I have a German name which is unpronounceable by English speakers and thus is inevitably mispronounced. I accepted that mispronunciation as the proper form of address for me, came to use it myself and have done so for fifty years. I became aware of the disjunction only when I spent some time in German-speaking countries and heard my name pronounced correctly. Each time that happened, it gave me pleasure. That made me realize that it pained me that my own children, my husband, my best friends could never really pronounce my name. I had buried that pain and refused to acknowledge it. It was, so I thought, a trivial matter. I no longer think so, and an examination of my relationship with my only sister confirmed my new insight.

My sister Nora and I were separated through emigration when she was twelve years old and I was eighteen. While I emigrated to the United States, she spent the war years in a school in Switzerland and then settled in England. She eventually became a British subject, but never really felt at home in England. Early in the 1960s she emigrated to Israel, where she still lives.

We were separated by continents, by warfare and finally by poverty. In 1948, when I for the first time after my emigration returned to

Europe, we met briefly in England. By then she was twenty-three years old, independent, self-supporting. I was twenty-eight, married and had a baby and a toddler in tow. Our meeting was difficult, first because of the presence of two overtired and cranky children. We also had trouble communicating with each other—she spoke English with a pronounced British accent; I spoke American English; both of us no longer spoke German. I remember coming away from that meeting with a sense that she had become a stranger to me, in more ways than one, and that she had become "stuck up," different. What I probably reacted to was not a change in her attitude, but the persona she presented to me, that of a young proper English lady. From later conversations I know she had similar feelings toward me.

We met again in 1957, when she came to visit us in New York. We both wanted very much to have "a good visit," to recapture our old intimacy. By then both of our parents were dead, we were the only close family for one another and we sincerely wanted to find a common ground for friendship. We loved each other and showed it in many ways, but our daily interaction was stiff, formal and full of mutual irritation. We simply seemed to get on each other's nerves—and ostensibly there was no good reason for it. From my point of view, I found her mannerisms, her mode of behavior, difficult and in some profound way incomprehensible. The fact that my beloved little sister had turned into a cultural stranger never ceased to outrage me, but I could not learn how to deal with it.

It was on her second visit to New York, eight years later, that an incident occurred which suddenly illuminated our difficulties. We were in my apartment, washing the dishes after dinner. My husband and the children were not with us at the time, and so perhaps we had a moment of quiet. One of us, I don't know which one, began to hum an Austrian folksong, and then to sing it, in German. The other chimed in, and we found ourselves singing in two voices, the way we had often sung in our childhood. One song followed another—from somewhere long-forgotten by both of us, the childhood songs welled up and broke to the surface. We were not doing it consciously; we were not even aware of what was happening, but when we finished we were smiling and hugged each other with the spontaneity that had been missing all those years. I felt as though suddenly all the barriers between us had broken down; we were children together, as we had always been, and what

separated us—the shifts in cultures, the different lifestyles, the separate hard struggles for survival and reconstitution—all of that fell off our shoulders as the common language at last united us.

Nevertheless, during our infrequent visits—about once every two or three years—and in our correspondence we mostly stayed with English. I think this was largely due to my often expressed insistence that I no longer thought in German and therefore could not express anything significant in that language. I lacked the facility, I said. I would often start a letter to Nora in German and give it up after a few lines, switching to English. Nora spoke German continuously with her close friends in Israel, even as she tried to make the language switch to Hebrew, which she found very difficult. So English seemed a mutually satisfactory compromise. I marvel at the fact that even after the incident with the songs, we did not seem to understand the significance of the language barrier between us. It took another incident to make it crystal clear.

This occurred in 1973, in Sicily. My husband had died a few months earlier, and I wanted and needed to be with my sister. We had a wonderful week together in Sicily, and most of the time that week we spoke in German. We celebrated our feeling of closeness by a fine dinner in a fancy restaurant. My sister has never learned to be a social drinker, and at the most will take a glass of wine. That night I insisted on her drinking along with me and between us we emptied a bottle of fine wine. I was pleasantly warm and lively, but she was definitely tipsy. Two middle-aged women in a foreign city, we left the restaurant noisily chattering and decided to rest by sitting down at the curb of the street. We were giggling and laughing and suddenly my sister started telling jokes—ancient jokes which we used to tell each other as children. They concerned a male figure famous as the butt of Viennese humor, a certain mythical Count Bobby. Count Bobby was stupid, arrogant, self-satisfied and endlessly duped by others. He spoke Viennese dialect in the nasal twang characteristic of the nobility and that was the way my sister told the joke. I immediately topped it with another Count Bobby joke, also in dialect and we both fell into a fit of uncontrolled laughter. The jokes were not that funny and we were not that drunk, but, once again, language unlocked the gates and memory took over. In the Vienna of our childhood, we had learned at least three different ways of speaking German—High German, which was school German, the language one spoke to strangers and to parents; the kitchen dialect one spoke to cooks, servants and lower class people; and Count Bobby's Viennese dialect, which was both accurate and a mockery of the real dialect spoken by upper-class people trying to be "just folks." It is just these kinds of distinctions which are lost in translation. Nora and I finally made it home and into our separate rooms, joking in dialect and getting more infantile with each step, but when we said goodnight to each other there was a deep transformation of feeling between us. Nothing needed to be said; we both knew we had found each other, after all those years. What had done it was the mother tongue, the language going even deeper than formal speech, the actual spoken dialect of childhood.

In the years since then our relationship has improved and deepened. Now we speak German almost all the time; in fact, for nearly a decade, my correspondence with Nora and our biennial meetings were the only times in which I did speak German. It would be nice to be able to report that all estrangement and all difficulties between us have ceased with the change in language, but life is never that simple. Our relationship has remained complex, but deeply meaningful to each of us. We have learned the cost to our intimacy created by cultural separation and by language differences. Our lives have been deeply marked by our fate as refugees and by the happenstance of landing on different shores, on different continents. Each of us paid a heavy price for assimilation into a foreign culture and part of that price was that we, loving sisters, were for decades strangers to each other.

Gradually, assimilation was completed; the past drifted out of sight. There came a time when I felt secure in my command of English, in speech and writing. I did the acrostics in the *New York Times* successfully and usually won at games of anagrams with native English speakers. I proudly developed tricky skills, like being able to read a poem or passage in German, while reading it aloud in English. With a little more effort I might have become a simultaneous translator at the United Nations. But my denial of German had by then gone too far. I never read any German books or newspapers and I lost touch with decades of development in the German-speaking realms. As for my reading in English, I had broadened out to a good knowledge of basic English

fiction, poetry since Shakespeare, and modern American literature. I had, by then been an "American writer" for fifteen years, but after that short spurt of early success with the short stories, I had published nothing. Two finished novels and eight or more short stories lay dead in my files, and for the first time in my life I seriously considered giving up writing. Acting in a numb sort of desperation, I decided to take some college level courses and see what would happen.

Looking back on it, there is more than accident in the choice of the first course I was taking at the New School for Social Research. That institution, turned into a university-in-exile by refugee scholars in the late 1930s, is well known for the broad range of scholarship in its faculty. I selected a course in English grammar, taught by a Yugoslavian emigrant with an unpronounceable name. My husband thought I had temporarily lost my mind. As far as he could see I knew more about English grammar than anybody else he knew and why I wanted to take a course in it was beyond his understanding. He kept suggesting other nice courses I could take, but I was unresponsive. "I need to be absolutely certain I know the grammar," I explained lamely. "There are still a few things I'm unsure about and I'm tired of it."

There were seven students in the course, only two of them native-born Americans. The others were one Hispanic and three Chinese. The Americans were the poorest students, while one of the Chinese and I excelled. I enjoyed the course and it gave me a sense of competence and self-confidence which I had lost in my unsuccessful efforts as a writer. In some incomprehensible way it marked the close of one period of my life. The next course I took was in 17th-century British poetry, and after that I decided to resume my academic training and work toward a B.A. This led, by almost imperceptible small steps, to the decision to become a historian and therefore to graduate study. It took me four years of part-time study to earn the B.A. and three years of full-time study to earn the Ph.D. As I now see it, my mastery of the English language had to be followed by mastery of American history before I could truly cease being an immigrant. As a shining reward for all this strenuous effort my writing career began to flourish as soon as I was an academic. It was then by way of American History that I became a successful "American writer."

The story should close with this happy ending, but it does not.

In 1984 I was invited to participate in an international congress of

women historians held in Vienna, my hometown. I accepted with many mental reservations and much anxiety. One aspect of it concerned language. I had been asked to offer two papers, but I felt so incompetent in German that I hired a student in the German department of my university to translate my speeches into German. These translations I read from the podium, feeling somewhat like an impostor. My conversational German seemed equally inadequate, since I lacked most of the vocabulary of my recently developed field, Women's History.

In 1986 my book *The Creation of Patriarchy* was published in Germany in translation. My contract with the publishers specified that I had the right to make editorial suggestions in regard to the translation. My editor and the translator were most generous in interpreting this right, and so it came about that I carefully edited the German version, first in manuscript and then again in galleys. The process was very difficult for me and renewed all my insecurities about my knowledge of German. I felt totally incompetent in the academic languages of the various fields on which the book is based—paleontology, anthropology, Ancient Near Eastern studies. Similarly, most of the words for concepts in feminist discourse of the past twenty years were unknown to me. So I sat, once more, surrounded by dictionaries, learning my own mother tongue all over again.

Yet there was something else happening. My "feel" for the language was quite intact and manifested itself in an uncanny sense of style. I always knew when something was wrong in a sentence, but, often, I did not know enough German to fix it. I worked closely with my patient and skillful translator, and I learned a lot in the process.

The publisher invited me for a two-week-long promotion tour in Germany after the book came out. This time, emboldened by the translation work, I decided to attempt to speak about my book in German. I did so with trepidation, and prepared for it as though I were lecturing in a foreign language. Every speech was written out in advance and I mentally prepared answers to the questions I expected would be asked. I always prefaced each public appearance with a statement, which served both as an explanation of my refugee status and as a hedge against linguistic failure. "You may wonder at my peculiar accent, and often at my choice of words. Although I am a native German speaker, I have not really spoken German in fifty years, and I have never before lectured in German." The audience response was good, even though

there were moments when I had to use an English word and ask the audience to help me with the translation. After one lecture a woman came up to me and complimented me on my German. I thought she was merely being polite and demurred, but she insisted. "Of course you speak a competent German, but what I admire is that you speak the purest German I have ever heard." "Pure?" "Yes," she said, "uncorrupted by Nazi language and by all the abominations of modern usage." Rip Van Winkle, being complimented on his "pure" speech. How odd . . .

After that lecture tour my interest in German was revived. For the book on which I was then working, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness,* I made use of many German sources, a few of them in medieval German. As I worked over these sources my old proficiency returned. After all, what I lacked was only the vocabulary of the past fifty years. By the time my work on the translation of the second book started, I felt quite adequate to the task. Now I had many more suggestions for my translator and most of them concerned style. The content was right, but the style was not mine, but hers. We worked on that and corrected it. When my work on the translation of the second book was finished I felt I was truly bilingual.

My new confidence found expression during my second book tour in Germany. While I again carefully prepared my lectures in writing, I soon felt free enough to answer all questions without preparation. In a three-week intense teaching situation in a German university, I taught with only an outline of notes in German, and finally, looking at some of my American teaching notes in English, I lectured in German from them.

The Nazis robbed me of my mother tongue, but the rest of the separation, of the violent severing of culture, was my own choice. My writing, my intense drive to become an "American writer" had pushed me into leaving the language of my childhood behind, never counting the cost. Through my writing, I had found the way back, but now the cost seems enormous. The return of the mother tongue has brought some healing of the other losses, but memory is different now. Before, what was lost, sank into a deep hole of oblivion—one covered it up and built anew forgetting the cost. Now memory includes what was lost and what

it cost and what might have been had I been able to be a writer in my own language. Healing the split between feeling and thought, between the conscious learned faculties and the rich vibrations of the unconscious, I might have "tapped my way along the guiding rope of language" and found a richer, more poetic form for what I had to say. In translation, one becomes a trickster, too clever by far and too concerned with mastery. I envy those who live in the power of their own language, who were not deprived of the immediacy by which creativity finds its form.

There are works that cannot be translated. There are wounds that can never heal.