

Erica Tell 28.2.1949 – 20.2.2011

HER MEMORY SHALL BE A BLESSING

Way back¹ – about the origins

Rahel said: „she wasn't especially political“².

In Saarbrücken, at Erica's memorial, I commented on something the preceding speaker said: Dear Hans Uszkoreit, feminism didn't begin after 1968. Just to mention a few German dates, "Die Frau und der Sozialismus" by August Bebel, 19. century, and this year the 100. anniversary of International Womens' Day, introduced by Clara Zetkin, the communist chairman by seniority of the German Reichstag. - Erica and I took equal rights and chances for granted.

Erica was born 1949 in Havanna. Her parents, Lisa and Fritz Tell, born 1924 and 1916, Jews from the southwest of Germany, had emigrated from the Nazis. Also Lisa's brother Heinz Geggel, later head of the "West German" department at the Central Committee of the SED*. The three were politicized in exile³.

The Tells returned from exile to Berlin in the early 1950s. They spent 1957 in Montevideo where Fritz served as trade attaché of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), and Erica was home-schooled by Lisa, a professional teacher. For a long time Erica searched for her lost childhood friend Raquel, after whom she named Rahel. In 2008 they re-united in Montevideo. Many of you met Raquel at Erica's party in June 2009.

Assimilated Jews were granted equal rights by the German state, end of the 19th century. – But in the 20th Germany became Naziland. "Assimilation was a chimaera"³ said Uncle Heinz in his interview with the Spielberg Foundation. Central and Eastern European Holocaust survivors rarely had any family to return to, and they had no country they could call home. Home to them and their children are the few scattered family members and life-long friends.

Whoever stayed in Germany was murdered. The ones who escaped never returned. "You want to go to Germany? You're crazy"⁴. When my Jewish mother announced she was following her German communist, my father, to Berlin, her dad said he would not go the country of the Nazis, meaning, how can *you*⁴. And the GDR, well, the only Jews who settled here were the ones who became communists during or before exile. Like the Tells and the Geggels, the Kuczynskis, the Pinkus', the Polaks, the Brecht-Weigels. They, like Erica's parents, wanted to live in a country "where all are equal"². That was what the GDR was supposed to turn into, where your family and class background should not make a difference. - They came to this shattered country and gave their all to bring to life the utopia of communism, a classless society "...where the free development of each is the condition of the free development of all."⁵

Many of us children of the re-migrants never met our grand-parents, they had been murdered or remained in exile. But Erica and her little sister Irene also lost both parents

within a year. The girls then grew up in the family of their uncle Heinz together with the Geggel children Marion, Thomas and Renate. Erica felt loved by her parents and had a happy childhood until their death. Then she longed for family happiness and started her own family early, with her first husband Charles Melis.

When I was nine, my father also died.

Our family histories and the early loss of our parents caused us to identify very strongly with their ideals. Only as teenagers did we start to explore what it meant to be Jewish, about which our parents hadn't explained much. With our roots we stood out as foreign in our German surroundings. So different, so outspoken, so communist, I was very often beaten up by other kids in class.

Then – “Special class for mathematics at the Heinrich Hertz high-school“

The Geggels lived in Berlin-Grünau. Erica joined my form at elementary school soon after I moved away following my father's death in 1958. We met at Christoph Kreuziger's birthday party (a classmate and friend), got along splendidly and immediately became friends.

As 14-year-olds we passed the entry exams and had the incredible luck of joining the special class for mathematics at the Heinrich-Hertz high-school. It was an elite class, 16 boys and 8 girls. We had never been as happy before. Many of the kids had Jewish communist parents like us, so for once there was no alienation. From 1963 – 1968 Erica and I spent almost every day together.

The standard maths curriculum was dealt with speedily to gain time for more sophisticated studies and a computer programming apprenticeship where we learned algorithms and how to handle computers which, in those days, filled whole storeys of buildings, contained fuses and were fed punch cards.

Erica was top of the class but never teacher's pet and always friendly to her mates. When she made another brilliant achievement she would shrug it off as if it happened accidentally. Still, she was highly focused and aware this would eventually give her the freedom to achieve what she desired. She was the only girl in the club for higher maths (under the guidance of Lothar Budach, later professor of mathematics at Humboldt University). Thomas Zink and Michael Rapoport whom you may have heard of, were also among the chosen of that club.

Such was the intellectual life among the classmates: we were ever discussing science, philosophy and politics. Ideas counted – little else. We had lots of laughs. Nothing was sacred to the budding heroes of science. The teachers accused us of lacking commitment for the GDR and the SED. My mother was summoned to the school because I wore jeans, the outfit of the class enemy.

During the 11th and 12th grade there were more serious political conflicts. A girl from the next-younger maths class was expelled for writing a composition in support of a

teacher recently fired for political reasons. Then our “FDJ-Aktiv”[§] launched a signature collection in the schoolyard that was immediately betrayed and brought massive intimidation upon us. Some months later our classmate Rainer Schottlaender was also expelled, for “provocative questions” and an insolent quip about the state. We fought back again, were ourselves threatened by expulsion and finally rescued by influential professor parents. And “Schote” was permitted to finish high-school in evening classes. By GDR standards the remigrant kids were exceptionally unruly. Eventually, four classmates went to prison for political reasons and several more left for West Germany.

Erica and I were reminded again of how essential the maths class had been especially for us – about 10 years ago at a school re-union where just two other classmates appeared. One was the former Stasi spy, the other Rainer Schottlaender who as a 50-year old publicised his expulsion of more than 30 years ago, quite justified in the face of some of the same old teachers attending the party.

Later – what followed

So we had learned what the GDR was really like: Teachers who tried to break your spirit, the rest of them too cowardly to show even the smallest sign of support. Not a single one ready to protect us. I didn’t experience this degree of oppression for another ten years⁶. At Humboldt University we natural scientists enjoyed a comparatively (to high-school) liberal climate. And Erich Honecker personally instigated the import of 100 000s of jeans. – But those who studied social sciences experienced repression from beginning to end.

In September 1967, soon after high-school graduation, our class rejoined at Humboldt University. My American mother spent the year in New York, so Erica moved in with me. Every evening – more or less - our friends came over and we had wild discussions and parties and music.

This is how I describe Erica: She was a good and generous person, just and considerate, she did not bow to authority, she was full of ideas, beautiful and fearless. She was sure of her means as a scientist and as a painter. Sometimes she was surprisingly enduring and stoical, but she compromised only for the sake of love.

How did we become friends? We simply were two of a kind and like many remigrant children did not allow separation later in life to become permanent. There was always a connection and a lot to talk about.

Last but not least we noticed parallels in our professional lives. - During his speech at Erica’s memorial in Saarbrücken the Director of the German Research Center for Artificial Intelligence, Prof. Wahlster, paid tribute to a world-class scientist, also mentioning that she had raised 6 Million Euros in funding. And this, he added with admiration, without ever having enjoyed a “comfortable” basic endowment; a revelation. Erica was granted tenure only in October 2010. – So, at various workplaces, we made similar experiences with one hundred percent male establishments that lastly saved us from “rising in a hierarchy to the level of incompetence.”⁷

Miriam Notowicz wrote this poem⁸ that Erica loved:

I've versed myself well,
have grown taller,
more to sea.

Our friend Barbara Honigmann says:
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Notes

1. Captions after Barbara Honigmann „Damals, dann und danach“, Hanser 1999
2. Rahel Melis, 5.3.2011
- * The Socialist Unity Party was the ruling party of the German Democratic Republic
3. Heinz Geggel in his interview with the Spielberg Foundation
4. Edith Anderson “Love in Exile“, Steerforth 1999
5. Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels: The Communist Manifesto
- § The FDJ (Free German Youth) was the official youth organization of SED and GDR. “Aktiv” was an informal group of activists
6. 1976 following the expulsion of the poet and songwriter Wolf Biermann from the GDR
7. Laurence J. Peter and Raymond Hull “The Peter Principle: Why Things Always Go Wrong”, William Morrow 1969
8. The original poem by Miriam Notowicz:

Ich habe mich verdichtet,
bin gewachsen,
sehe Meer.

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