

Adriana Altaras: “Suddenly There Was So Much Room in the Public Swimming Pools”: A Jewish German and Her Mother-in-Law (2011)

Abstract

In her autobiographical novel, German actress and theater director Adriana Altaras (born in 1960 in Zagreb) recounts episodes in her life and the lives of her parents, who came from the former Yugoslavia. In the process, she describes the less-than-subtle antisemitism that she encountered. What is important is the interpretative standpoint upon which this antisemitism is based. For when non-Jewish Germans understand Jews as “different,” they continue to understand Germanness as non-Jewish.

Source

[...]

“Am I a bad mother or a bad Jew?” I ask my husband one evening. “Jewishness is passed on through the mother, isn’t Jewish motherhood enough?” I say, replying to my own question. Georg grins and cleverly stays out of it. He finds it hard to get through services. He enjoys the cantor’s singing and the rabbi’s speaking. But he doesn’t understand why all the members of the congregation have to talk at the same time during the service. Silence does not seem to be Jews’ strong suit.

Georg generally doesn’t talk much. As if speaking were indecent. In Westphalia they probably confuse communication with prostitution. At the moment he is even quieter than usual. His father died some time ago. Even Germans die. He was a friendly man with a heavy torso that still contained a bullet from Norway, 1943. Every time he saw me the bullet wound bothered him, and he regaled us with brief, jocular episodes from the war. I liked him. He was smart, well read, and he was ashamed. He caught pneumonia during a cruise in Norway and died of it a few weeks later. So don’t tell me there’s no God.

His wife now lives alone in the red brick house with the flowerbeds in the garden. A portrait of her from the 1930s hangs over the piano. A pretty member of the League of German Girls with flaxen braids. Sometimes I try to find out whether she feels lonely. She speaks incessantly, sings, giggles gamely in between, and I fear that her listeners are more likely to go crazy than she is.

“Have you noticed that your mother sings for no reason at all,” I often ask my husband. It has never bothered him. She brought five children into the world and raised them with an iron will. I usually miss the annual family gatherings in Westphalia. I have premieres, an important film shoot, a case of pyelitis... I have had to listen to his accusation, “Your mother has stayed with us for months and you aren’t even coming for Mom’s eightieth!” I wonder why? But he is right.

When I run out of excuses I have to go along. She then babbles with complete naiveté about her youth as a schoolteacher’s daughter.

“Suddenly there was so much room in the public swimming pools, since the Jews were forbidden to swim, but we weren’t ...”

Her stories are completely value-free: “My father never joined the Party—he was very musical...” That’s how it was. Sometimes I wash dishes while she talks. Sometimes it turns my stomach. I am somehow fond of her, but can anyone be that naive?

I have never made an effort to arrange a meeting between our families. I had enough imagination to picture it in the most garish colors: Wehrmacht soldier meets Communist; League of German Girls member meets partisan ... No. As long as they were all alive, we simply pretended that the other person’s parents didn’t exist. As if they were all dead. They would die someday anyway. After her husband’s death she took us up on our invitation and came to Berlin. The children and my husband were looking forward to it—and so was she. It was a disaster. Any food she didn’t like came from “down south.” In this case, the south began just after the Tyrol. “You people are just born nervous,” she told me when I gradually began to lose my composure. Soon I refused to eat a single German stew she cooked for us. Declared stew to be fascist and went on hunger strike. I discovered a whole new side of myself.

The entire thing lasted seven days, then she returned home, to Westphalia. My husband, her son, was silent. What chance did he have between the Mother’s Cross and a Jewish princess? He holed up in his sound studio and for days all I heard out of him was Bach’s Well-Tempered Clavier.

[...]

Source: Adriana Altaras, *Titos Brille. Die Geschichte meiner strapaziösen Familie*. Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2011, pp. 198–200. Reprinted by permission of Verlag Kiepenheuer & Witsch GmbH & Co. KG, Cologne.

Translation: Elizabeth Tucker

Recommended Citation: Adriana Altaras: “Suddenly There Was So Much Room in the Public Swimming Pools”: A Jewish German and Her Mother-in-Law (2011), published in: German History Intersections, <<https://germanhistory-intersections.org/en/germanness/ghis:document-244>> [July 12, 2025].