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Amigo Armado

by Osman Engin

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Translated by Tes Howell

Translator's Introduction

In my early fascination with East Germany and the problems of reunification, I had only really thought about German identity in terms of East and West Germans because that is what was presented in my German language classrooms, the German mainstream media, and German mainstream culture. When I moved to Eastern Germany after college in 1995, I continued to hear only about the continued polarization of Germany into *Ossis* (slang for Eastern Germans) and *Wessis* (slang for Western Germans). But that is only part of the narrative. Osman Engin's satirical story "Amigo Armado" about the non-native German's reunification experience destroys the neat and tidy duality of East versus West, echoing humorist Christine Dölle's 1993 statement that "for the Germans, Germany has gotten bigger; for the foreigners, it has gotten smaller." The so-called guest workers and their families—numbering in the millions in East and West Germany combined—should have played a significant role in the public discourse surrounding the reunification process and German identity construction after 1989. They were after all integral to each country's success. But their voices were not heard because, as many non-native Germans pointed out at the time, the boat was considered full for immigrants, though East Germans were welcomed with open arms and 100 German Marks. Even after the honeymoon ended for East and West Germans, non-native Germans were still not acknowledged as legitimate partners at the negotiation table. They were expected to take their modest cash payouts and return "home" to countries which had, in many cases, become foreign to them. These workers, never seen as anything but guests, were not wanted and were ultimately left without a country. "Amigo Armado" draws attention to the complicated German-German-"foreigner" triad in which the non-native Germans had even less status than the ridiculed *Ossis*.

Osman Engin understands the role of the cultural outsider. Born in Izmir Turkey in 1960, Engin spent much of his childhood with his grandmother before following his "guest" worker father to Bremen at age 12. By 17, he was already documenting his surroundings in satirical form, and at 25 he published his first book, *Der Deutschling* (1985), which chronicles his outsider status in both Turkey and Germany. He turned this satirical perspective into a popular, long-running Radio Bremen show, "Osmans Alltag," winning the ARD Media Prize in 2006 for his story "Ich bin Papst" ("I am the Pope"). The poignancy and accessibility of his writing allows him to reach a broad audience, with his books and theater pieces making their way into school curricula from Canada to Germany: German students, for example, analyze and discuss his work not only in terms of German-Turkish relations, but also as a study of satirical writing.

Defying the conventions of genre, Engin refuses to be pigeonholed as a representative of Migration Literature. He lives quite happily in and between German and Turkish cultures and relishes the clarity and privilege of that space. Engin's choice of satire allows him to address the everyday absurdities he witnesses and to jolt the reader into awareness through laughter. Because his literary self "Osman" plays a bumbling but well-intentioned fool, he is able to capitalize on a comic unconsciousness strategically employed to question the powerlessness and voicelessness of non-native Germans in Germany. It also allows him to speak painful truths while claiming to be a fool who loyally allies himself with Western Germans, refusing to believe that he is an outsider in that society.

In "Amigo Armado," the Berlin Wall has fallen and reunification is well underway. Osman calls his friend, Armado,¹ to complain about affairs in Germany and to exhort his assistance in making things run smoothly again. Despite his best efforts at engaging his friend's conscience and pride (as well as his strategy of using Spanish to connect on a more personal level), Osman is unable to persuade Armado to return to the country. His description of the injustices and missteps surrounding reunification pulls directly from the discourse at the time and offers some challenges for the translator. Osman is bewildered by his voicelessness in the two Germanies' decision to reunify: "East Germany has become a colony (*Kolonie*) of Germany. West Germany swallowed up (*einverleibt*) the GDR² without even asking *us*"³ (my emphasis, 35)! By using the word *Kolonie*, he echoes a frequently heard complaint from Eastern Germans that the reunification was not an equal opportunity process, but rather a colonial takeover by Western Germany.⁴ The German *einverleibt* is a powerful word which can mean swallowed up, incorporated, annexed, cannibalized, or even having received Holy Communion; in this case, the reader, while understanding on a lexical level that Osman is referring to incorporation, cannot ignore the symbolic reference to cannibalism, a stark image that links up with the notion of an uncivilized colony.

Despite Osman's frustration with the influx of Eastern Germans, he declares that they must advise and help their German brothers ("unseren deutschen Brüdern"), echoing the rhetoric of socialist East Germany: "Armado, you know that we have no other choice but to help the GDR back on its feet. We 'guest workers' have the moral obligation to stand by our new German brothers. We have so much to teach them" (35). Here, Osman takes on the role of "guest" worker, although he distances himself from the label through scare quotes, demonstrating the false premise of 'guest' workers living in Germany and calling attention to the visitor status of Eastern Germans in the West. Only Osman, the fool, believes in his cause, but Armado knows better. He laughs at Osman and references his gifted moped, an event that emphasized the ridiculousness and emptiness of public ceremony, as though a moped and bouquet of flowers could substitute for respect and social acceptance in Germany. It is laughable to think that two first generation so-called guest workers—those who commanded the least respect among Eastern and Western Germans

¹ Armado Rodrigues de Sá was a real Portuguese (and not Spanish) worker who received a new moped and a bouquet of flowers for being the one millionth "guest" worker.

² GDR is an abbreviation for German Democratic Republic, or East Germany.

³ "Die DDR ist zur *Kolonie* von Deutschland geworden. Ohne uns zu fragen, hat sich die BRD die DDR *einverleibt*."

⁴ Indeed, a common expression in Eastern Germany in the first five years following reunification was *BeeRDigung der DDR* (meaning "burial of the GDR") with the three capitalized letters in *Beerdigung* spelling the initials of West Germany, or *Bundesrepublik Deutschland*.

in 1994—could alter German history and divide what has been reunified. Even within the fictional world of the text it is laughable. Only Osman does not get the joke.

Amigo Armado

“*Muchachos*, Armado, *muchachos*, it’s Osman. Armado, can you hear me? Osman here, Osman here!”

“¿*Qué pasa Amigo?* ¿*Qué pasa?* I can’t understand you!”

“Osman here, Osman here! Hey Armado, here *hombre* Osman from *Alemaña*.”

“¿*Alemaña?* East or West? Werder Bremen or Dynamo Dresden?”⁵

“Don’t be stupid, Armado. It’s *hombre* Osi from Bremen.”

“Wow, Osi, haven’t heard from you in a long time. How are you? Still in Factory 3?”

“No, Armado. I have a career now. After 20 years of piece work in Factory 3 I got promoted. I don’t work as a metalworker in Factory 3 anymore! Now I’m a metalworker in Factory 4!”

“Well done, Osman! All of Portugal – even Madeira – is proud of you! How are things otherwise? And how’s Germany doing?”

“What can I say, Armado? Germany has changed a lot since you returned to Portugal. It’s not the same country that gave you your moped. Do you still remember that?”

“Of course! Don’t ask such dumb questions! You talked about that for days after it happened. I can’t help that I was the millionth guest worker in Germany. After all, I only got off the train first because you were being so polite about it.”

“What do you mean by ‘being so polite?’ I must have miscounted.”

“*Madonna*, you pitched such a fit. You ran around the platform screaming ‘at least give me a bike, you Germans, if I can’t have the moped!’”

“I know, I know! The officials said, ‘Turk, calm down! This isn’t a bazaar. We brought you here to work, not beg.’”

“Oh yeah, *hombre* Osi, and the next day we spat into our hands and increased Germany’s gross national product.”

“Yes, Armado! We made sure that the Germans finally got some decent cars.”

“Right! Without us they would never have had a chance against the Japanese.”

“And the Germans are only so well educated today because of my son Recep, not because of Goethe, Schiller, or Brösel! If he hadn’t delivered newspapers day in and day out, what would they have known of the world, Armado! Nothing!!”

“What do you mean, *amigo?* Do you actually think that the Germans are well-educated?”

“What are you saying, Armado? Are you trying to insult my son? You have to admit that they can thank Recep for not being completely idiotic.”

“I know, Osman. Your Recep works hard. But we’ve got to be honest, and when I look at Germany, I have to say that your son hasn’t accomplished much. Osman, I don’t want to talk about that anymore. Tell me why you’re calling me in the middle of the night. I haven’t heard from you for ten years, not even a postcard.”

⁵ Names of soccer teams. Werder Bremen is in western Germany, while Dynamo Dresden is in eastern Germany.

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“Armado, how can I tell you this? Germany and I have a small problem. We have a new addition to the family.”

“Osman, what have you done? *Bambino!* What’s the child’s name?”

“It wasn’t me. It was this Gorbachev guy. Germany is twice as big now. East Germany has become a colony of Germany. West Germany swallowed up the GDR⁶ without even asking us!”

“They didn’t ask me and the other Europeans either.”

“Which other Europeans do you mean, Armado?”

“Well, for example, my uncle José, Maggie, my aunt Maria Dolores, and Mitterand.”

“Armado, you know that we have no other choice but to help the GDR back on its feet. We ‘guest workers’ have the moral obligation to stand by our new German brothers. We have so much to teach them.”

“What do you want to teach them, Osman? How to lie to the welfare department or the labor department and how to outsmart the insurance companies?”

“No, *amigo* Armado, they can already do that better than we can. But we must build up the GDR. I can’t do it alone. You’re needed here again, Armado. Come back to Germany.”

“I was wondering why you were calling me in the middle of the night. But no one’s going to trick me again into going back to Germany for some stupid moped. *Hasta la vista, muchacho* Osman!”

“Armado, don’t hang up. Come to Germany. Don’t leave me alone. Can you hear me, Armado? I can’t do it alone. Armado, don’t hang up! Armado, come back! Armado ... Armado ...”

P.S. in 1964, the one millionth “guest worker” received a moped. He was Portuguese and his name was Armado So Rodriguez. A few years after returning to his homeland, he died from a work-related illness.

⁶ GDR is the abbreviation for German Democratic Republic, or East Germany.

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