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Privileges

by Olga Grjasnowa

TRANSIT Your Homeland is Our Nightmare

Translated by Allison García

One of the greatest privileges in life is the ability to choose who you want to be.

There is a kind of privilege that lies in the discrepancy between you and how you are seen by the outside world—particularly when you don't fit the mold of the majority. I am a part of this: I'm white, typical in every which way, only my name might hint at my own (im)migration story. I haven't been asked where I come from and when I think I'll go back since the summer of 2015. On the one hand, it's remarkably wonderful: so wonderful, in fact, that I didn't notice the absence of that question for a long time. On the other hand, it's also unfortunate: Even with my "foreign" sounding name, I am no longer perceived as "foreign" because, in public discourse, this place is now occupied by another supposed "group": "refugees." These people—according to popular opinion—have thick, black hair (unmanageable for German hairdressers); thick, black facial hair; thick, black back hair; trouble integrating; they harass women; spend their days overzealous in their religion; are uneducated; have expensive cell phones; and cannot behave themselves in swimming pools.

In Germany (and certainly not only here), there is a hierarchy of (im)migrants: from good to evil. The good ones are those whose skin is pale and who claim allegiance to not-so-foreign cultural groups. There are even "good" languages and "problematic" ones. There are private bilingual schools and trilingual kindergartens that cost, on average, more per year than renting a spacious, Berlin *Altbau* apartment. But then there are also parallel societies and third generation integration oppositionists. Some people can supposedly integrate better, others worse. But what does that really mean, integration? Inequality surely begins here: If we assume that we have to integrate someone into society, we then establish that there exists a social norm which is better than and superior to others. The "others" must fit in with "us": integrate themselves. Migration scholar Mark Terkessidis postulates that (im)migrants should receive the same "barrier free" access to opportunities as non-migrants—just like people with disabilities, different socio-economic statuses, origins, genders, ages, or sexual orientations.

My parents immigrated to Germany with my brother and me on January 22, 1996. Officially we fell into a quota for "Jewish refugees," although I cannot really say that we fled. We chose democracy and a more stable system; the CDU might call us "economic refugees," and maybe that's true. We didn't come to Germany because we had a wide range of options. We would have preferred immigrating to Canada or New Zealand, but these countries are usually not an option for those with non-European passports. But still, from the very beginning, we were granted permanent residence permits and were allowed to enter Germany safely and legally—advantageous circumstances which cannot be emphasized enough.

Twenty years later: I have a resident fellowship in Istanbul and a German passport. I'm sitting with my daughter in a taxi. We're stuck in traffic. Children knock on the windows, asking us for money. The taxi driver rushes to assure us that these are Syrian children. He shakes his head and rolls the window down to give the children a few coins. But what differentiates these children from my daughter? It's not their mother tongue, it's not heritage, it's not even their socioeconomic status, or "opportunities." I could be a better mother; the other children's mothers are standing on the side of the road watching them, worrying. But they have no choice. I do. The only difference between my child and these children is a German passport. I received it because my family was nearly exterminated by the German *Wehrmacht* and Jewish immigration was tolerated in the 90s. The German passport—only some scraps of paper with a red cover page.

It's worth mentioning that despite their own ability to travel as freely as they wish, Europeans and passport holders from the US, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand fear open borders. They don't know what it's like to not receive a visa. They don't know what it means to be ineligible for a visa, or to be humiliated at an embassy appointment. It's also striking how it is precisely these same people who—should they immigrate themselves—would not be deemed "economic refugees," but rather, "expats." They are expats in Asia and in the United Arab Emirates, where they move for lower taxes and high wages. They rarely attempt to integrate in any way. It's also not expected of them either.

Take this as a simple example: I received a resident fellowship to study in Oxford while teaching some courses at the University of Warwick. I have a German passport, my husband: a Syrian one. I have two young children. I want to travel with my family, so we apply for a "family permit"—not a visa, just confirmation under European law that I may travel with my husband and two children freely through my German citizenship. The forms we need to fill out are an artless form of harassment. Among other things, we were asked if our marriage had been arranged (I spared myself the labor of identifying similar occurrences in the history of the British nobility), and whether we are related by blood in addition to our marriage. The permit request is rejected, despite the fact that we are not related by blood. The official in the letter wrote that she was "not satisfied" with the nationality of our sponsor—that is, with the University of Oxford. This failure to grant permission is in clear breach of European law. Being allowed to travel to Oxford seems to be a privilege, just like not depending on this job.

But there are also other cases: The son of an acquaintance—she also has a Syrian passport and lives in Turkey—died at 21 of sudden heart failure in London. His parents wanted to travel to the United Kingdom to bury their child. They were denied visas. This process may be legal, but it's still barbarism.

These are obvious privileges, but there are many other inconspicuous ones, at least if you are white. I am not bullied, attacked, or shouted at on the streets based on my appearance. While I was in university, a fellow student always made fun of her husband's "white gaze," despite being just as white herself. I certainly don't want to deny "white gaze," but it is also a privilege to not even once know how it feels to be someone who is *not* read as white on the streets of Germany. No matter what one does.

Of course, this doesn't mean I haven't experienced exclusion, as well. But in my case, it was always a bit "lighter," less transparent: never quite so blatant. At the very least, nobody has ever been violent towards me. There was the notion at school that my German was not good enough because I spoke with an accent; another teacher (who taught Latin

and French) said that I would be the very last person to ever do anything with art. So as a precaution, I began studying art history.

Then, contrary to expectation, I became an author and stumbled across the concept of “Migrant Literature.” In Germany, that means literature that is always different, that does not belong, that is not “organically” German [*biodeutsch*]. Incidentally, the alleged commonality between “(im)migrant authors” is not aesthetic or thematic, but rather hereditary: They may come from anywhere in the world, except for Germany. Everyone—really, without exception—everyone who has a strange-sounding name or whose parents were not born in Germany is lumped together under this ineffable term. A term that remains highly questionable, racist, and paternalistic. By way of comparison: In 2014, I published the novel *Die juristische Unschärfe einer Ehe* [The Legal Haziness of a Marriage]; a year later, Verena Mermer’s novel *die stimme über den dächern* [The Voice above the Roofs] was published. One novel takes place in Germany, and the other, in Azerbaijan. One book is by me, the other, by Verena Mermer. We were born in the same year. She, in St. Egidien Steinfeld; me, in Baku. Verena Mermer lives and works in Delhi and Baku. She now lives in Vienna; I live in Berlin. One of the books was published with the publisher Hanser, and the other by Residenz. One book is considered “Migrant Literature,” the other as German/Austrian Literature. When I spoke to students in England via Skype about the term “Migrant Literature,” I asked if they would place Zadie Smith in that category and they looked at me in disbelief.

A term like “Migrant Literature” is racist, paternalistic, and has a lot in common with a term like “World Music.” World Music is always also “other”—even if one doesn’t know why. Turkish and Arabic music are always world music, but jazz and blues are not. They’re universal.

Unfortunately, the career of Berlin Secretary of State Sawsan Chebli provides a perfect example of how the feeling of naturalness in certain spaces is a privilege—one’s conduct or the clothes one chooses to wear. Sawsan Chebli moved up the social ranks out of the deepest poverty. Without anybody’s help. As a matter of fact, Sawsan Chebli should be living proof that our society still works—that all the promises of the democratic state and our education system can be fulfilled. Instead, she’s always surrounded by ensuing shitstorms, teeming with sexism and racism. In a four-year-old photo, Sawsan Chebli dared to wear a Rolex (a modest model by Rolex standards). Afterwards, there was hardly another topic in the media, particularly on social media. Christian Lindner drives a Porsche, Friedrich Merz has assets with the value of at least one million euros and still advises retirees to invest in equities. And let’s not even mention Alice Weidel, with whom I wouldn’t even know where to begin. But she definitely owns at least one Rolex.

Absurd claims about Chebli were not uncommon from the start. The journalist Mariam Lau wrote on February 17, 2014 in *Die Zeit*, “The life of the new Secretary of State is an adventure: In 1948, her parents fled as children to Lebanon from Palestine where they lived for twenty years in a refugee camp.” Describing flight as an adventure is utterly absurd, if not also a malicious insinuation (then again, Mariam Lau, the same journalist, also wrote a text about the rescue of refugees at sea which she titled “*Oder soll man es lassen?*” [Or should we just leave it be?]). The fact of the matter is that there are hardly any articles which focus on Chebli’s actual work. They are always about her origins and the supposed liberties she takes despite her origins—and as a Muslim woman, no less.

Verona Pooth, at the time still Verona Feldbusch, made her career as a singer and moderator much earlier. Although she had a German father and had been living in Germany since she was one year old, people drew enjoyment from her allegedly poor grammar as the daughter of a Bolivian immigrant. Nobody bothered to notice when Ms. Pooth suddenly spoke eloquent German, free of all mistakes. Helene Fischer on the other hand, was—at least according to my research—never labeled an “immigrant.” She only had “Russian roots.” Could that have something to do with her name and skin color?

Non-white immigrants, Muslim immigrants, or immigrants who fit the German image of a Muslim are seldom granted social mobility, and more often than not, men are favored more than women—but only if they prescribe to the “right” ways of thinking—which means criticizing, berating, and warning against Islam in a similar fashion to Hamed Abdel-Samad or his female counterpart, Necla Kelek.

In English, there is the nice expression: “Check your privilege.” An expression which suggests asking yourself what privileges you actually have before you pass judgement on the lives of others. In Germany, however, the concept of *Heimat* [homeland] is once again *en vogue*, and an old man who considers migration to be “the mother of all problems” was recently crowned *Heimatminister* [Minister of the Homeland].

Speaking of, the ability to not fear this ministry is also an uncanny privilege.