Zu den Reiseberichten

2023 A Trip to Krakow

(19 - 23 January 2023)



1: The unclear situation

(2023-01-19, early, On the Fly)

Above the clouds I think of the shattered world, up to the heavens out of joint. The plane passes over a dazzling bedclothes of delicate clouds. Something is brewing. I think the war in Europe is heading for a decision. Towards a turning point.
Ukraine is a battlefield, perhaps this battlefield will soon expand? Who is fighting for what? Is one of the simplistic narratives more true than the other?

„The nefarious Russian, unprovoked scorching and murdering, blinded to believe in an empire owed by fate, only victims always?“

„The diabolical American, cynically setting traps for the whole world in power games, agitating behind bleeding proxies?“

„The weak, disunited European, not defending its own interests, instead wasting and squandering power and influence?“

These stories sound good in the echo chambers, they sound like unquestionable findings there. But is one of them true? Or two? Or all three and mixed?

2: first interlude

(2023-01-19, evening, at Camelot)



The Camelot in Krakow's old town is a sophisticated bistro, a younger crowd of refined people hang out here. At one of the tables are some mercenaries, I assume. The languages are mixed up at their table, German is also there. It is getting louder and louder. They tell each other disgusting stories from their missions here and there in the world. They make vomiting noises and roar with laughter. I hear one of them say, „... and then soon we'll have to put on our helmets to defend Europe.“ If Donald Trump comes to power again, he says. Because Donald would make it escalate, he thinks. And they don't want that, there at the table.
Do these people belong here? Could they be missing?

3: The simple narratives

(2023-01-19, late, Mazowiecka)



The big, simple stories are part of warfare today. A strategic battle takes place in people's heads and minds. People should be made to act - or to doubt. Public opinion is one of the great world powers. Controlling it allows or forbids bombs and annexations, sanctions and overthrows.

And as the weapons they are, these stories are forged into sharp, divisive swords. They are mutually exclusive. They occupy the other story with hatred and anger. With incomprehension, „how anyone could be so stupid as to fall for something so transparent!“.

There are not only these three stories, but many others. Some are local, some regional, some global. Each story claims that you have to decide for it. If you can't do that, you shouldn't have an opinion on the subject and should stay out of it. You have to, you should, and: you are allowed to shut up. And that is a second effect of these stories: they say on an individual level that you don't have to do anything. Because it's all too big and the big players should work it out among themselves. We undecideds must only sweep up the pieces and provide humanitarian aid. Otherwise we would be guilty under one narrative or the other.

In effect, this would mean that the power to act would lie only with the devout followers of the respective stories. The radicalised decide on the course of events, and the deliberators stay out of it, only taking care of the wounds inflicted on the innocent victims.

That... would not be good, in my opinion. It would not be the society in which I want to live and which I consider to be the core of the so-called „West“. The „West“ for me is not the interests of the US, but the „West“ is in the value and dignity of the deliberative choices of individuals. Where we individuals are mainly concerned, we ourselves decide in the „West“. After that, we give a mandate for larger decision-making processes to representatives, in Germany all the way up to the Chancellor. I do not envy the high representatives, because they have to make serious and momentous decisions on our behalf. And perhaps the simple stories play a different role there than for me. But here with me and for me, I can say that these stories are weapons that I do not want to be hit by. The arguments of these stories are perspectives and in that they are both useful and necessary. Intrumentalised as propaganda weapons, I deny that they should have any value in my decisions. What has value in the stories do not contradict each other, but are complementary perspectives that create an overall picture.

When I strip these stories of their terrible exclusivity, I can see more clearly for myself. I don't have to decide for what reasons the war in Ukraine has come about. I see that Ukraine is being attacked and

is to be subjugated, but that the people there do not want that and are fighting back with all their might. I support that. They should not have to die and they should not have to submit.

The big decisions should be made by the high representatives, they should find ways and means to negotiate and solve the conflicts. But in the struggle for freedom that the Ukrainians are waging out of civil society, I would like to participate as a part of European civil society through my support. Not only out of general humanity. But because I belong to the „West“ like them.

4: Two women in Krakow

(2023-01-20, Klezmer Hois)



I meet here first with Agneszka, a Polish cultural journalist, and then with Krysia, a Ukrainian resistance fighter.

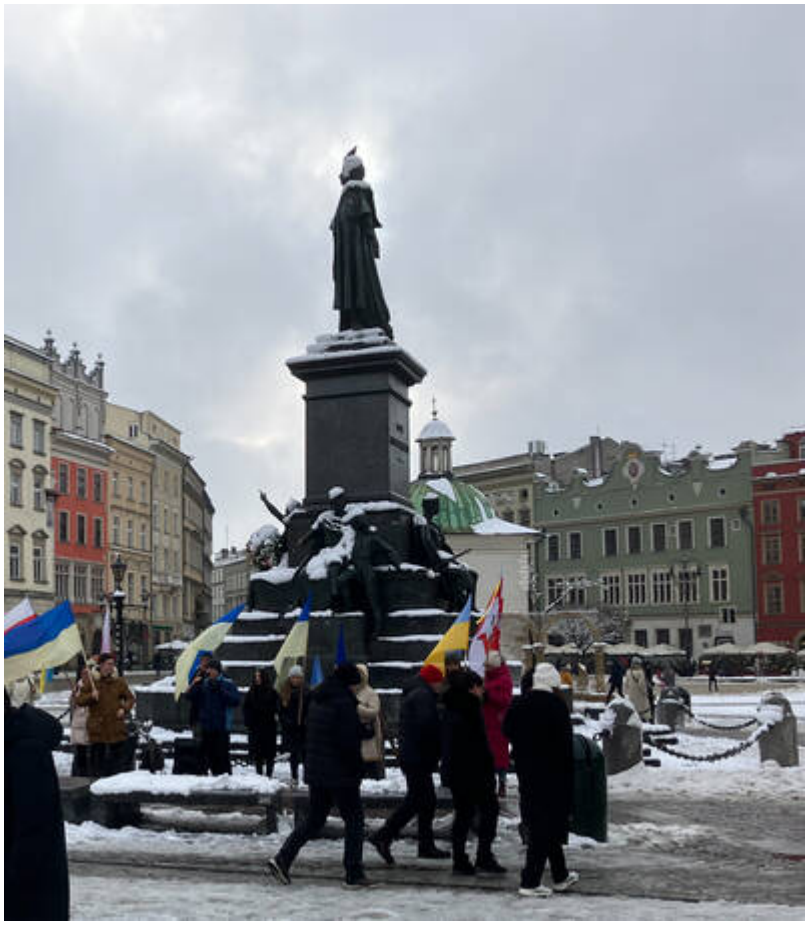
With Agnieska it's about preparing performances of my art project „The East of the West“ in Krakow and Warsaw. It is important that a German artist exhibits in Poland today with such a project.
But, of course, it's also about the war. Agnieska tells me how Polish society is growing together with Ukrainian society. How traditional prejudices are dissolving and past guilt is being forgiven. How much threat, but also hope, lies in this cruel conflict. The threat of subjugation to a lack of dignity. Hope to finally be rid of this threat and to finally be allowed to develop into a free future without it.

Krysia is graceful and deadly like a character in a novel. She tells me about the cruelties of the Russian army. I tell her that after the dehumanisation now, there will be times when we can go back to each other. She does not believe me, but acknowledges my good will. I carefully try to convey to her the messages of the aged partisans from my Northern Ireland trip last year. It was Krysia I had often thought of there. But I see now is not the time for that. Perhaps Krysia will remember. Sometime after the war.

I tell her that we Germans have long been, or still are, the bad guys for the world. The ones you think you'll never be able to forgive. Just as the Russians are for Krysia now. „That's something else,“ Krysia's eyes tell me.

5: second interlude

(2023-01-21, at the Tuchhallen)



The perception of the world and events in it is quite different here, in the Polish East of the West, than in Germany. Here, freedom is a precious, fragile commodity, won in difficult battles and always ready to be lost. If one does not stand up for it. The threat from Russia is evident here, concrete and huge. A few days ago, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov spoke of anti-Slavism in the West. To German ears, this could be something potentially alarming. Polish or Ukrainian ears, on the other hand, hear an enormous Russian presumption. As Slavs, they believe that Russia wants to destroy their special identity and culture - and will, if no one prevents it. Russian pan-Slavism here means a clumsy imperial gesture. That anyone in the West can be made to think about this seems grotesque. „You know so little about us?“, one asks oneself anew here.



Two Dutchmen are sitting at the next table in Café Loża, we start talking. They are here because the shooting ranges are cheaper. Renting weapons, ammunition, material and the fee for the stand together cost less than ammunition alone at home. One of them says he has five guns privately, all Russian-made, and he likes them best. But the ammunition for them has become incredibly expensive. 1000 rounds used to cost about €150, now it's €400, which he finds gross. I say, they are being used a lot at the moment. Both sides in the Ukraine war are using Russian ammunition, which the two shooting sportsmen know of course. I am told about Russian calibres and types of weapons and that Poland is the most beautiful country in Europe. Also because there are not so many North Africans here. The two of them have been around. Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Serbia. I suppose Russian ammunition is shot everywhere there. Otherwise, we only touch on politics briefly: „in our country they say it doesn't matter if the cat bites you or the dog!“

Somehow this fits painfully with my reflections here. What a diverse place this world is!

6: a retrospective

(2023-01-22, Mazowiecka)

My journey to the East of the West began in Budapest in 2017, Doris gave me the idea then to take the Visegrad Group as a new subject for a treasure painting. After the previous one, the „ Gemeindebild“ (municipality picture) had just been finished.

In the meantime, there have been many visits and contacts. Some of the acquaintances are in the process of developing into friendships. Or they already have. I am currently writing in Pawel's small Krakow guest flat, which I am allowed to use for this stay. I see his books, his paintings, hear his music. A foreign person in a foreign world was Pawel for me 5 years ago. Sometimes things change for the better.

At the beginning, almost everything in the East of the West was foreign to me, now I know people there. I know about historical backgrounds, current concerns and hopes. Knowing each other changes a lot. I can see the misunderstandings now. Five years ago I only suspected them, because I felt that even my own thoughts about Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic or Slovakia seemed like unfounded prejudices.

The word „international understanding“ crosses my mind. You can take a step towards what is foreign to you when the opportunity presents itself. Then it ceases to be foreign and becomes a part of one's own. „Understanding“ means changing your point of view, not standing still. I have sought and received these opportunities through my travels and the art project. And I want to create such opportunity with the art project for the people I can address with the „East of the West“.

I think the storage rooms of my inner world are now well filled. The seeds should sprout - and then I would like to harvest the fruits and give them away.

7: turning point

(2023-01-23, on the plane)

The plane is above the clouds again. Our world has turned a little further. In Paris at the Élysée Treaty celebrations, the German Foreign Minister announced that Germany no longer opposes the delivery of offensive battle tanks to Ukraine. This statement was not part of the announcements at the „Ukraine Contact Group“ in Rammstein on Friday. It came neither from the Chancellor nor from the Defence Minister. I see it as a signal to Europe and a downplaying of the importance of this decision. If, in fact, in the background it is a joint decision by the German government.

In Russia, a simple story has superseded everything else. There are no alternative narratives left to make themselves heard, except privately and covertly. That's how it seems to me from here. If it were, Russia would be blind and helplessly radicalised.

The missiles with no warning time are pointed at us. The world will need a lot of luck in the months to come.

Outside, the peaceful white ocean shines and surges. Even if I knew the world would end tomorrow, I would still work on the „East of the West“ today. But I don't know, and instead I can hope that my little apple tree will continue to blossom and bear fruit for a long time to come. (I think of Martin Luther's apple tree word from time to time).

The clouds have opened up now. Below are fields, lakes, towns and forests. What a beautiful country!



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