

Reisepass

written by Guest Contributor | July 10, 2020



Lately I can't even remember how I got the idea for it. I know that my junior year of college I started sleeping with a woman who had spent the previous year living in Berlin, who came back a mesmerizing dancer with plenty of stories, and that she took a day off classes that spring to take the MBTA to Boston so she could apply for a work visa to return for the summer. I know that before she left, she showed me photographs of the Bergmannkiez room she would stay in while I stayed in Providence, and how taken I was with the room's windows. I knew even then that Sophie planned to go there after graduation, though her German was minimal, and that I thought it was brave of her, to move somewhere so far from her family. Her surname was also German, but her family had emigrated a few generations before mine. We had been friends for a long time and she knew a bit of my family's history, how my father's father left a small city in northern Germany (what was East Germany until 1989) called Schwerin. So you'd assume she was the one who suggested it: that I look into procuring citizenship. But no, I don't think it was her. I think I got the idea myself.

The process was astonishingly easy. I never even went to the German Consulate. My father traveled there one July morning that summer and sent me a *thumbs up* afterwards; apparently everything had gone smoothly, and the people working at the immigration office even complimented the papers my father had collected and brought in. Most people who applied didn't have such robust documentation, they said, such unmistakable records that their ancestors had been (as is requisite) citizens of Germany and that their citizenship had been deprived by the Nazis between January 30, 1933 and May 8, 1945 due to persecution on political, racial, or religious grounds. Under Article 116 par 2 Basic Law, my father and I should have been eligible for German citizenship, as well as, we were informed later on, my children and my grandchildren. Five generations total, including my grandfather's.

Then all we had to do was wait. They said so few people used to apply that

the process could just take a year, but by the time we showed up in 2017, Jewish Brits were applying in much higher numbers, given that they might soon be shut out of the European Union post-Brexit. So the Consulate told us to expect up to 24 months until a decision was made. At 21, 24 months felt like an eternity. I didn't forget about it, per se, but the possibility never felt entirely real to me either. Just a farflung prospect, that one day I might be able to go live and work in Germany, or any other country in the EU, in fact, without applying for a visa. I didn't understand—maybe I still don't—the extent of the opportunities I would be granted through dual citizenship.

Eighteen months later, I was sitting up in a friend's bed across the country when I got a brief email telling me that the citizenship had been granted after all. It felt early, and too early in the morning to celebrate, and the email was so short I still didn't trust it to be true. We could make an appointment to come collect our naturalization documents any day we wanted. When I was back in New York in February, my father and I showed up, always identical in our animated, somewhat frantic energy, one rainy morning when the tops of the skyscrapers of Midtown East were lost to fog. He cried a little—*it's just so weird!*—as the naturalization documents were passed through the counter's sliding box, from the authorities' side to our side, and flapped his hands around. I don't know exactly what he was feeling. And I didn't know how to feel either, though I knew I felt a little giddy. Afterwards, we went around the block for a shitty diner breakfast, the slippery film over the eggs not sitting well with my still-jittery stomach, and my father took a photograph of me. My face shines from the day's humidity. It was one of those momentous days of life where you go around with a little glow inside you, wanting to announce your news to strangers. I carried a small pin of the German flag and some multicolored Gummibärs in my pocket, rubbing them every so often to remind myself it was, after all, real. The man behind the counter had apologized, saying the candies were not Kosher, and when I told my grandmother this story later that week, she practically went apoplectic. *Do you think he was making a joke?* she asked me. *Was it anti-Semitism?* No, I said, I think he was genuinely concerned he might have offended us!

A month later, New York was in lockdown. I sped across the Manhattan Bridge in mid-March just as the news came, on my way home to my parents' from a weekend with friends in Brooklyn. I felt like I was escaping something nebulous and invisible, and my phone flashed with notifications—texts from friends asking me how we would keep our parents safe, what was going to happen, where we were going to go. In the end, gentrified Brooklyn emptied out, and I stayed right where I had been before, in my childhood bedroom. Suddenly, Germany lay behind a border stricter than I'd ever known a border to be in my entire life. One by one, this became true of most other borders too, including our own. Trump's immigration "ban" has taken the opportunity of disaster, as Naomi Klein has described through her work on *shock doctrine*, to make the borders' existence, both in the imagination and in actuality, stronger, more terrifying, and more permanent. Entrenched during crisis, these policies and the ideas on which they are built will be harder for us to strip away.

For me, for now, beyond the border was Berlin, and Sophie, who had ended up there after graduation after all. I had gone to see her life there the September before, spent long days, dregs of summer, writing and biking purposelessly around her new neighborhood and feeling like I was intruding. I left that fall not really believing we would meet again, but then she came back home for Thanksgiving and we spent two more weeks in love. Those weeks sustained the relationship enough that in February she bought a flight to come see me in March, when she could get time off work.

But that flight, like hundreds of thousands of others, was cancelled when the EU closed its borders. The trip would have been the first time Sophie and I spent together since Thanksgiving, and we missed one another. Not knowing whether there was going to be a way to see one another for months now, and both of us being planners, we started to brainstorm anyway. May? June? When was the soonest I could get a passport? How would I self-isolate upon arrival? The border was open for German nationals, among a handful of other stringent categories. Was a German national really the same thing as a German citizen? The logistics were formidable.

As the weeks went by, it became clearer and clearer that beyond the border also lay a country that seemed to be handling this virus with more poise and urgency than most others. By May 27, Berlin, a city of 3.5 million, had had 191 deaths. By May 27, New York, a city of 8.4 million, had had 16,410 deaths. In other words, in the same span of time, a city 2.4 times the size of Berlin experienced 85.9 times more death.

Thus my new citizenship, those green naturalization documents stowed away in my dad's filing cabinet, seemed to take on astronomically-larger proportions within days of our procuring them. I remembered that on the day we picked up our papers, the woman behind the glass partition reminded us that if we wanted to travel to Germany now, we had to apply for a passport. It was illegal for German citizens to try to enter Germany without one, and we could be subject to a fine of 5,000 euros. Now, I couldn't get into Germany under any circumstance without that passport. People had told me that I was lucky, that one day I would understand that: how a world of possibilities (by "world," I suppose they meant "Europe") was being opened to me. So they congratulated me on my citizenship, and I accepted their congratulations hesitantly, because it was not something I had worked for. Yet it had been just weeks since the citizenship had come through, and already, unexpectedly and within the context of a pandemic, I was beginning to comprehend the luck of our papers, their power and their vastness.

It took one email to get an appointment for an emergency passport appointment. My father and I arrived at the building much too early again, and he drove us around the neighborhood by the United Nations to kill time, admiring the handsome buildings at Sutton Place. We could not stop for diner food because all of the local diners were closed, and it was early enough in quarantine that the sight of Midtown quiet and empty was still uncanny to us. We marveled at how quickly the trip had been. A guard measured our temperatures at the front door, and then we only came into contact with one other person, the same woman who had delivered our naturalization documents that day in February, when the future felt, somehow, much more open than it

did now. She sat behind that same glass partition, so we never even had to worry about wearing masks—which again, at that point, were still novel.

The passports were meant to take one to three weeks, but in the end they took four. I followed the FedEx tracking number during the week I knew they were in transit from the Consulate in Manhattan, and slowly tore open the envelope, labeled “urgent,” when I finally had my hands on it. My handwriting spelling out our address, scrawled down four weeks before and passed back across that counter through the familiar sliding box, was faded on the front of the package now. Inside were two passports and absolutely nothing else. I pulled out my own and felt its weight in my hand for a moment, almost recoiling at it. All this effort, and now it had arrived, and this is what I felt? Perverse? It felt much the way that the first unemployment deposit from the New York State Department of Labor had felt the week before: like I had been given something I wasn’t supposed to have, because it had been ingrained into me for such a long time that I *shouldn’t* have it, or ever desire it. That to accept something like this from the state felt wrong, and that I shouldn’t get too attached, as it might be snatched from me at any time.

But no, this bundle of papers, small and stiff with their burgundy cover, was mine. It wasn’t going anywhere. It looked nearly identical to the *reisepass* that my great-grandfather Franz had carried when he fled to the United States, the very same color and weight. A passport that, for all its usefulness prior to 1936, was worthless on my grandfather’s family’s arrival to Sunnyside, Queens. It remained in a box in a closet, a remnant of a former life that had been irrevocably and irretrievably lost. A life that was not often lamented in my father’s presence. Franz’s passport was intact, whereas I had seen the Austrian one my mother’s father had, the one with that enormous “J” stamped over it. His full name had been Hans Hartenstein, but the Austrian government added a middle name—Israel—to the passport, making it easier for them to identify him as a Jew. My mother took out the document from time to time to show me.

My father’s father did return several times to Germany, and even to Schwerin, where golden stumbling stones are laid into the pavement in front of his childhood home on the city’s pond. The stones bear the names of my grandfather’s family members and the year of their escape. My father and I made a small pilgrimage ourselves to the house on Alexandrinenstrasse last September, that month I visited Sophie, and my father took too many photographs. The last time he had visited was in 1966, when my grandfather took his family to live for a year in Frankfurt while he taught on a Fulbright scholarship. I believe this was somewhat of a radical act at the time. Only three decades had passed since he was forced to leave Germany, and many German Jews would never have imagined returning in this way. My mother’s father, for one, only visited Austria one time after his own escape in 1939. Holding my passport, I felt desperate to ask my grandfathers—either of them—what they thought of it. But my mother’s father died fourteen years ago, and my father’s father’s dementia means he doesn’t hold this kind of conversation anymore. Besides, I hadn’t seen my grandfather since early March, before the pandemic, in order to protect my grandparents from any virus I might be carrying.

That morning I brought my father's passport to him almost sheepishly, not knowing how he would respond. His jaw did drop, and then he started laughing, saying "get the fuck out. Get the fuck out!" He couldn't believe it: to actually have them in our physical possession after a lot of time thinking about them and not knowing, exactly, how we did feel about them, and thinking, or maybe hoping, that their arrival in person would clarify those feelings. Because this was the thing: we weren't sure whether we *shouldn't* have wanted them, whether we should have rejected them outright. My mother had always grimaced when my father and I played around with our beginner's German, and she tended to think that her own father would have been horrified by our new citizenship. I think some part of my father wanted to throw the passport across the room, to get it out of his sight. *My father was expelled by the Nazis, and here I am with this thing!* But should we not have wanted them? Was that the right question to ask, anyway?

Mark Fisher wrote about *the eerie* as the presence of an absence, or the absence of a presence. When we encounter the eerie, it's not that we're encountering something outside of our reality, but we're encountering an object that unsettles us. Like Freud's *unheimlich*, which translates to *uncanny*, it causes a sense of unease. I used the word "uncanny" to describe Midtown during lockdown for exactly that reason: the absence of a presence being the usual throngs of people in that neighborhood. It is absolutely impossible for me to hold this passport and ignore the fact of how I got it, and the fact that the reason I was *able* to get it rests on the deaths of many millions of people. My father and I cannot look at the passports without sensing the presence of an absence. In that sense, although the passport is freely given—it is a gift, is it not—it haunts us, and it will always haunt us. If Fisher's theory on hauntology (out of Jacques Derrida's) focuses on *the thing being here before it is here*, or the persistence of past objects as ghosts, then our passports are hauntological. And I myself am a "lost future": the granddaughter of my grandfather, who spent his first eleven years in Germany, *should* be German. And now, look here, I am.

Was that the only reason I felt so bad, holding this small bundle? I recognized some guilt in myself, wondering why I could leave behind this fucked-up country, especially now, and others could not. On the other side, too, what gave me claim to German soil when so many people who have been there so much longer than I have—for generations, working, guest laboring; people who have come to Germany for many decades looking for a better life that I have never had to search for and yet have simply been handed because of my ancestry—have no such claim?

This passport is a form of reparations, plain and simple. I am doing what Article 116 par 2 was created for me to do. Yet it feels viscerally bad to capitalize upon this compensation because it somehow seems overly generous—even if only when put in relation to other forms of meager or nonexistent reparations that are extended to most other people who have historically been expelled from their homes or who are still being expelled. But perhaps it is just this relation that is important here.

In an act of purposeful but cautious extrapolation, I see how people from

countries in Central America, for instance, are forced to seek out lives in the United States in large part because of the damage the United States has inflicted upon their nations—descendants of people immediately affected by decisions the U.S. made that have caused it to be so impossible to build happy, healthy lives in other places. The same holds true for francophone Africans attempting to migrate to France or Belgium, whose ancestors were colonized, tortured, and conscripted. Because of those same histories of colonization, migrants already speak the major language of those two nations, and relocation would be even more feasible. Yet the United States, France, and Belgium offer no similar avenues to the one that allowed me to get my passport.

Even within my own home, my mother will never get Austrian citizenship, because Austria has no such retroactive law. They present their role in the war as coincidental, rather than instrumental. Meanwhile millions of descendants of displaced Palestinians get nothing, meanwhile millions of Guatemalans and Hondurans get nothing, meanwhile millions of descendants of American chattel slavery get nothing. H.R. 40, the bill to commission the study of reparations in the US—to *study!*—has gained some momentum in the last year, but its future remains uncertain.

In the absence of state reparations, people have risen up in scores of American cities in the past several weeks, sparking rebellion following the murder of George Floyd by police officer Derek Chauvin in Minneapolis on May 25th. In New York in early June, a protestor scrawled across a shop window that had been boarded up to prevent looting: *D.I.Y. reparations*. And all the while, the call has grown for white Americans with proximity or access to wealth to donate to anti-racist organizations, Black-owned businesses and Black-led organizations, and mutual aid funds that are doing the work the government has been unable to do for communities on the ground. But some of those donations have come across like paltry pocket money: two days of young people flooding social media with screenshots of small donations that seemed mostly self-serving, matching fifteen dollars here, twenty there. In response, activists with longer-term commitments to dismantling white supremacy have called out the inadequacy of those donations and pressed class-privileged people to create monthly reparations, digging into their earnings and savings in new ways, ways that make them not satisfied but perhaps deeply uncomfortable as they part with hoarded wealth and extra financial security. This fundamentally includes white Jews who have benefitted from systemic racism and from their own history of assimilation in the United States.

Committing to those kinds of individual reparations is one potential way of ensuring that privilege does not result in aimless guilt. I'm personally not interested in allowing a natural mix of emotion to stagnate in a purposeless or silent outcome. But this step—individual reparations—ultimately hinges on the recognition of present complicity. Because the truth of the matter is that I do not identify as a victim, and my bad gut feeling arises when I hold my German passport because I'm being labeled one by the German state and have to claim that label for myself in a way I'm unfamiliar and uncomfortable with when I use it. In a recent piece for *Jewish Currents* called "Against

Analogy," Ben Ratskoff writes that "activating our white Jewish family members' and peers' identification as victims—even if only in historical terms—can, counterintuitively, make it *more* difficult for them to confront their role in the maintenance and perpetuation of white supremacy." Ratskoff urges against the use of analogy and parallel by progressive Jews "to mobilize their communities into solidarity with other minority groups." Maybe Ratskoff would argue that there's no way to draw a useful parallel between the reparations I have received and the reparations that have failed to materialize across the globe *without* invoking perpetual victimhood. But in my mind, it is just these "successful" reparations by Germany that indicate how different our situations really are, and which energize me to do more. So although I performed this act of extrapolation, I think it's right to follow Ratskoff's exhort that "White Jews in this moment should resist the impulse to highlight the similarities and instead amplify the differences" in order to properly mobilize.

Ultimately I don't want to laud Germany in particular for the quality of its reparations for Jewish people. In traveling or living there, I also don't want to steal away to a nation that seems idyllic to me simply because it provides for many (many, not all) of its residents a system of social benefits that can be rivaled in few other nations on Earth: free higher education, good pensions, and most of all, health care. I want those things for the country where I was born, too, where I have grown. I still think I'm willing to fight for those things for my friends and for my children, if I have them. As Bernie Sanders always posed it, I'm also willing to fight for someone I don't know—so that they can have those things too. On January 1st, my friend and I sat at the edge of a frozen pond, our boots skimming the ice and snow that accumulated below the dock, and in the darkness of the very first few hours of 2020, we made a wish that Medicare For All would pass this year. We howled into the night as the bangs of fireworks echoed through the woods, and then we were silent for a long time.

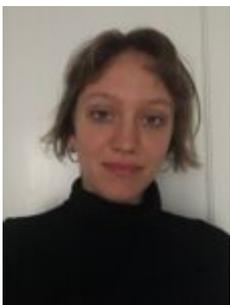
Yet everyone knows now that that was not the story. It is only July, and the country of my birth is, to put it lightly, in shambles. Medicare for All might have saved some of us, but it is not coming right now. When I saw my friend this weekend—my first visit to the pond since that prescient January night, where those same woods have now erupted into green, where the lilacs and wisteria are in purple bloom, where the bullfrogs are croaking loudly and redwing blackbirds and downy woodpeckers are flying in unprecedented numbers—we lamented our old wish together at a six-foot distance.

Not even seven months have passed since we made that wish, which strikes me as so trusting and young now. In the meantime, the U.S. has collapsed in just the way it was built to, revealed itself to be just as precarious as it always was: in its cruel capacity to cast aside and to invite the harm of those who are most marginalized, and to expose vast swaths of our society to unfathomable suffering and death through planned and unplanned negligence. If holocaust is destruction or slaughter en masse, there is little doubt in my mind that the mass death the world is witnessing of poor communities of color, particularly of Black Americans who are at risk precisely because of

the stress and burden of racism, precisely because they do not have the safe housing, the clean air, the access to proper care that could have sheltered them—precisely because, in effect, there have still been no reparations—then this is a holocaust. But it has always been one.

The thing is about history happening in front of your eyes like this, at rapid speeds and incomprehensible proportions, is that this country can't actually "go back to normal." I don't even mean that in a political sense, like there is a choice and that we have to choose *not* to go back. No, I think that some people—people for whom the system has always worked—can hope and long for "normal," but no one is going back to it no matter what else happens ahead. Normal was never something to hope for in the first place, even if it felt realer than the seemingly-unfamiliar simulation the pandemic first felt like to me. There's no going back because the eerie has this way of showing means of exit: its unsettling quality allowing us to tear away the fabric and to glimpse beyond, towards other alternatives and other ways of being. The fabric, the veil, has been shorn now. The memory—another presence—of what is happening now is not going to disappear.

I used my German passport for the first time this month. I didn't do it to escape the U.S., to turn my back on it because there's something that seems better 4,000 miles away. I went so that I could visit the person that I love. I knew I'd use the thing nervously, that I would hand it over to passport control with uncertainty, that I would be haunted when I did it. I'm not asking for forgiveness, to diminish the complications that I carry around when I carry the passport. I don't want it to ever feel *normal*, or even good; I don't want peace of mind. I want it to always feel eerie, and to remain wading through just this ambivalence. Because I think that's the only way for it to remind me not only of the past peeking through all the time, but also of that means of exit: that there are other realities I must try to create for myself and for other people. That even in times like these, these times which will no doubt continue, there are whole other worlds possible.



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