

Writing in Not-Your-Mother Tongue

By Meike Ziervogel

Although I grew up in Germany, my adult language is English. I came to this country when I was 19. Of course, I speak German and I read a lot in German. Does that mean I can choose between languages when I come to write my novels?

Eight months after arriving in the UK in 1987 I decided to study Arabic at university. I was interested in the Middle East. But I have always wondered if there was more to that decision than meets the eye. Why did I put myself through the pain of learning a third language when I hadn't yet mastered the second? Why did I remove myself twice over from my mother tongue and my cultural background?

Firstly: To escape the noise.

As children we internalize a lot of phrases and utterances from our parents - even if they mean nothing to us. We hold on to them and as adults we use them as if we are really expressing our own selves, as if we really believe what we say. And often we internalize these empty phrases so deeply that we become what these sentences stand for.

When we start to speak another language, initially we don't have any ready-made sentences. Everything we say we consciously formulate. It might sound simpler, but it is our own. Eventually of course you acquire all sorts of phrases, but because you are an adult you are more able to decide which ones to internalize and which ones you prefer to keep at a distance.

Secondly: To escape the silence.

I grew up in a family that took refuge in silence. The silence without words, and the silence with words. When words are merely used to disguise a hollow emptiness. As a child and teenager I felt this silence like a wall.

I believe now that in our family - like in many other German families - the silence stems from the war. My grandparents never spoke about their personal experiences during the war and my parents were too young to develop a language of their own to hold the horrors they witnessed.

Removing myself from my first language and my first culture, enabled me to pierce that silence. I created a space where I could find ways to express what I mean clearly and without the risk to disappear into a hollow silence or meaningless noise.

Magda was not an easy book to write. With *Magda* I allowed myself to look at my own German history critically but with understanding. I wanted to access the mind of an intelligent woman who became a Nazi in order to comprehend

my own cultural background. While writing the book, I often had the same recurring image in front of my inner eye. A long, pitch dark shaft, and I was hovering on the top. But I knew that I had to get down there, deep inside me, to access an historical truth.

In the first draft, some scenes were written in German but they took the form of a stream of consciousness. Transferring them into English helped me to gain the necessary artistic distance and tackle a very sensitive subject.

Moreover, I like English. I love its straight-forward syntax. The short phrases and the orientation towards action with the verb towards the front of the sentence. It's a language which allows you to be simple but rich in vocabulary and voice.

I speak English with a German accent. I speak German without an accent. But my German nevertheless now sounds slightly strange. It's the rhythm and intonation that have changed. Not that I speak with incorrect grammar but the emphasis is often off beat. Out of synch. After 25 years I have internalized the English rhythm.

And if grammar is the glue of language, then rhythm is its foundation.

But I guess unless you live in a country for many years and speak the language for many years this is difficult to understand. It's not a logical thing. For example, many of the Peirene authors speak very good English. Therefore they believe that they can judge the English translation of their work. They are often surprised when they discover that the English text does not sound like the original. But how could it? A translation that preserves the essence of a text has to find an English rhythm. Otherwise the Peirene books would become meaningless, a ramshackle of words and nothing more.

I now dance to an English beat - whether I want to or not. But I want to and I am happy. English has removed the empty noise and silent wall and has given me freedoms to express emotions I would otherwise not be able to access.

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