

Noctua Press

CITY OF EXILES: BERLIN FROM THE OUTSIDE IN
STUART BRAUN

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Berlin from the outside in



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Whoever stays any length of time in Berlin hardly knows where they actually came from. Their earlier existence vanishes, they believe they are living... purely in the present.

Siegfried Kracauer

JEWISH WRITER, JOURNALIST, PHILOSOPHER
AND WEIMAR BERLINER

OPEN CITY

I needed to get out of Australia, and Berlin had long been my Plan B.

It was, I'll admit, a pretty vague plan. I'd spent some inspired weeks in Berlin in '96, had often professed love for the city. But I was young then. The years passed. That fabled summer was fading into the mists of my wasted youth.

Yet out of all the cities I had travelled and sometimes lived in, Berlin was the one that gave me hope. It was my promised place—the salve for my savage restlessness.

In Australia, I'd been making documentaries about the Aboriginal people I had met on the streets of inner-city Melbourne. Maybe I was trying to belong, trying to connect with the indigenous history of a land I believed was not really mine.

I was also doing bits of writing but it hadn't quite clicked since I'd returned from Tokyo—the city I escaped to in the early 2000s, and where I consolidated my career as a journalist and writer. Melbourne was a nice change from my hometown of Sydney. I had many friends in the city. I had found love in Melbourne. But I kept dreaming of escape. I kept dreaming of Berlin.

What was the problem? Hard to say. Australia's beautiful. It's supposed to be wild and free. I find it very controlling. Too many rules. And competitive. Stressful. Trying to get ahead. To fulfil the dream of owning a big house—two big houses, preferably.

Melbourne was once a little like Berlin. It was affordable, sort of European, home to many artists. But these days you need a million bucks to live in Melbourne. It started to feel segregated, as my Aboriginal friends who were getting kicked off the streets they call home will confirm. And you had to drive. You sat in traffic a lot with all the people trying to get back to the safety of their big house. I don't know. I suppose I'd always felt a kind of anxiety in Australia.

It was 2006, and like a good citizen I got a bank loan and bought a house. Mine was off-grid, fitted with a couple of solar panels, the cheapest one bedroom in the state on a dirt road to nowhere. A little cottage in the mountains where I could escape the city, write and build some kind of foundation. It was paradise up there in the rainforest with the kookaburras. A real sanctuary. But I kept thinking that I needed to move to Berlin.

I was making a documentary about the Aboriginal community in

the Fitzroy district of Melbourne—the Black Mile that was being recolonised through gentrification—when I decided it was finally time to go. Luckily, my partner Melisa agreed.

It had been 13 years. I could barely remember Berlin. But I had a strong sense of it. As we flew in over the outlying forests and lakes in the autumn of 2009, I felt like I was coming home. People welcomed us into the city, angels on trains and sidewalks showing us the way. After a week in Berlin, I wrote this in my notebook.

In the city where Walter Benjamin and the National Socialist Party were born, a city of great humanity and horror, my companion and I have decided to create history. One is only as good as his and her address, and so our metropolitan moment can now be had, our time on the good strasse where the world has come to meet, merge, emerge. It's the time of the gypsies and we've made it, just, easily, not knowing how, when, where, why, but staying on track, on song, en route to this prehistoric, predestined, preternatural gathering in the land of the goths.

The National Socialist Party was born in Munich (something Berliners are proud of), but what did I know? I was writing crap in a 50-cent exercise book I'd recently purchased in India, about a city I had been in for exactly seven days. But looking at the words again a few years later, I'm struck by the line about the place where the world has come to meet, the words «preternatural gathering», words that resonated and seemingly inspired me to write this book.

Subconsciously, I knew that I was now living in a city of exiles. I was one of many. I was among people who had nearly all come to Berlin from elsewhere. Some were privileged soul-searchers like me, some came because this long divided and bankrupt city was relatively empty and cheap and gave people the freedom to do their own thing, to make their art. Some were real exiles: refugees from war-torn Sierra Leone; Palestinians who had lost their home forever; Germans who had escaped to a walled, demilitarised city in the 1970s to avoid joining the army; Greeks and Spaniards fleeing austerity and unending deep recession. Oh, and don't forget the dogs. Many are refugees, like our Spanish street dog who was rescued from certain death. We take him to bars, restaurants, the office, on the train. He's somehow free here and like many of Berlin's exiles, he needed to get out of somewhere.

When I wrote those words about the time of the gypsies, I didn't know what I was saying. But now that I think about it, I wrote those

words because I quickly felt that a certain kind of vagabond, of free spirit, was drawn to this city. Maybe I was writing in my notebook about the meeting of another Lost Generation, like the one after the Great War, all those disillusioned souls who wanted to be writers and artists and sometimes ended up in Paris, but also Berlin, as I'll explain later. Maybe Berlin really was a great open street where the world had come to «meet, merge, emerge». Maybe Berlin was a place where people try to be poetic.

What will I do in Berlin? I thought. *Will I write about the Stasi, or the Wall, or drinking and dancing and going to darkrooms and living on very little and having so much fun and losing my soul like they talked about in all the magazines?* Berlin was having another mythological moment; it was the golden 1920s all over. But there was something else about this city, something that hadn't really been written about.

Berlin reminded me of the places in inner Melbourne where my Aboriginal friends had long gathered. They originally came from different tribes across the state, and many ended up in Melbourne after escaping missions, jails and children's homes in which they'd been imprisoned—often after being stolen from their parents. They gathered in these once working-class streets of Melbourne and set up a meeting place for a displaced generation. They created this place on their own terms, taking back squares and parks for themselves. They were still marginalised of course, and there were drugs, alcohol, fights and police harassment. But there was a freedom, a kind of self-determination that I could identify with, that I was looking for I suppose.

It's a hazy comparison; but many people had similarly come to Berlin to live on their own terms. It was also a meeting place. Berlin was open to these exiles; it gave them space to build their world from the ground up. Not always. But the potential was there. Like the indigenous people from diverse regions who came to Melbourne and created a pan-Aboriginal identity, a necessary solidarity, Berlin's global tribes were also getting together. Here you had no family structures to fall back on. You had to work together. Plus there was no corporate money, no big investors or sponsors around. The good money went south to Munich and Frankfurt during the war and wall years and never came back. That's why all the enterprise—the bars, galleries, clubs, outdoor markets and bookstores—seemed to be independent collaborations. You still don't see many chains. Meeting people who'd been here a long time, they all talked about this idea of a Berlin family.

As I started to think about Berlin as a sanctuary, and remembered that, in the 1980s, a band of Berlin exiles, Nick Cave and The Bad

Seeds, recorded an old blues song here called «City of Refuge», I started to realise that people had been coming to Berlin for similar reasons for a long time.

It was 2010, and the American photographer Nan Goldin was in town to promote an exhibition of images taken during her Berlin years in the 1980s and '90s. She is a legend among some of my friends, and I'd seen her very candid portrayals of the people she knew intimately in Berlin, some dying of AIDS, others living in squats. I attended the retrospective on the day that Goldin delivered a talk, and was struck by the following words:

The best years of my life were here in Berlin. I don't say that lightly. I've been looking for a home all my life. The only place I feel myself and comfortable and feel real love for my friends is Berlin.'

Goldin had been a runaway since she was a teen, finally escaping to New York before moving to Berlin. She now lives in Paris with her girlfriend. But Berlin remains the only true home she's ever had.

My father, who, aged 16, fled Hungary as the Red Army put down the 1956 revolution, told me he could live in Berlin as he walked the city for the first time. He says it every time he returns. If only he had the means, he'd move here. But why would he leave the sparkling east coast of Australia for this dark, decrepit city? Sure, the linden trees remind him of his village in Hungary. Yet it's difficult to say. He just feels good here.

So I had something to write about: this idea of a city of exiles, this place where different kinds of people didn't necessarily just fit in, but felt good—not always, but in a fundamental way, a way that had long eluded many of them. I read about the Czech-Jewish writer Franz Kafka and his obsession with finding sanctuary in Berlin, the city that remained his mythical escape until his death, his 'antidote' to his despised hometown of Prague.

Many have come to Berlin and have disliked it, or have just found it okay. They have not had the epiphany that Goldin or Kafka had. Some had little choice in coming to Berlin. Like the French Huguenots, who were escaping religious persecution in the late 1600s. They were offered sanctuary. They couldn't say no. They helped establish a template for tolerance in Berlin that I will get to later, and which partly explains why Jewish people were so integral to this city until 1933—the year Hitler came to town from Munich, the year Berlin officially marks as the «destruction of diversity».

In the 1970s, David Bowie, like the Huguenots, found refuge in Berlin. I shouldn't mention Bowie. His Berlin story is cooked. I can hear my friends now—*no you didn't, of all the people, in the prologue!* But Bowie loved this town because he, like everyone else, could just be a Berliner. He moved around as he pleased. He was taken at face value. «I just can't express the feeling of freedom I felt there», he said a little predictably.²

But what exactly is this feeling of freedom, and why has it endured? Why this city, built on a sandy swamp, a no man's land bordering East and West Europe? Why, despite the decades of conflagration, the crushing continental cold?

Hundreds of books have been written about a Berlin that grew up so fast, flowered so brilliantly, that was burnt, divided and held prisoner for half a century. They have inevitably pored over its restive history, its cultural effusions and totalitarian darkneses, its decadence, its ghosts, its secret police.

But as my earlier notebook ranting about preternatural gatherings and the time of the gypsies alluded, I believe that Berlin is Berlin because of its strangers, its wanderers, its many displaced people who have come to build a kind of safe haven. These free-flowing exiles are the source of the freedom so many feel when they come to Berlin—they are the city's substance in a sense.

I know; I'm making a huge generalisation. But it's a means for me to explain why, as I walk and bicycle Berlin's cobbled and increasingly renovated streets, I feel so settled, more than I've ever felt before. By trying to understand how this city of exiles came to be, maybe I can also hope to understand the place I left behind, and to one day go back.

NOTES

- 1 Josie Le Blond, "Nan Goldin in Berlin: An Intimate Diary of the Bohemian Underground", *Der Spiegel*, 19 November 2010, www.spiegel.de/international/zeitgeist/nan-goldin-in-berlin-an-intimate-diary-of-the-bohemian-underground-a-730122.html
- 2 "Uncut Interviews David Bowie on Berlin: The Real 'Uncut' Version", www.bowiewonderworld.com/features/dbuncut.htm