

## Visible

I will never know what it means to be invisible. I will never know what it's like to kiss in a park without thinking about it—just to start snogging, oblivious to the people around me. What it means to wander the streets without having to reckon with some passer-by reaching out to touch my hair. What it's like not to keep up a calming inner monologue to still my rage at being constantly asked whether I speak German. Blending in with the crowd isn't an option for me. I belong to several minorities at once and it's riskier for me to try to hide than to out myself.

*Your Silence Will Not Protect You*,<sup>1</sup> as Audre Lorde reminds us in the title of her essay collection, much of which explores the destructive power of (self-)imposed silence. 'The only way you can head people off from using who you are against you is to be honest and open first, to talk about yourself before they talk about you.' If you don't do that, you risk pushing people's attacks and judgments into the grey zone of public perception and they can afterwards claim they knew nothing.

I think of the Jewish people in the early twentieth century who were so busy assimilating that Hitler had to remind them that they weren't wanted and would never belong. Those people were made Jewish by discrimination, by exclusion, by their deaths. Many of them thought they had only to consider themselves part of Christian German society to become part of that society. Some of them believed the anti-Semitic propaganda and were ashamed of themselves. 'For those who were willing or able to assimilate,' Maria Stepanova writes in her novel *Pamyati pamyati* ('In Memory of Memory'), 'anything reminiscent of the musk of Judaism was a kind of ugly atavism, like a fish's tail that you continue to drag behind you even after you've made it ashore.'<sup>2</sup> We all know the consequences. Assimilation is doom.

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<sup>1</sup> Published posthumously by Silver Press, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Novoe izdatelstvo, 2018.

So why do we try so hard to belong? What do we hope to gain from being like everyone else—from being ‘normal’? And after the events of the last century, does anyone still believe that minorities within a community can protect themselves by lying low?

In a Jewish context, at least, lying low and not calling things by their names is equivalent to denying your own existence. I once tried to explain that to a woman who called herself Christian, when she told me after a reading that she thought my way of wearing a star of David over my shirt was pure exhibitionism. If I don’t celebrate my culture, I told her, it doesn’t exist.

I thought of that woman when I read in the Federal Anti-Discrimination Office report that 43.8 per cent of the German population ‘fully’ or ‘rather’ agreed with the statement: ‘Homosexuals should stop making such a fuss about their sexuality.’ Most people in that group have a sexuality that is seen as the norm. Those people demand that I be silent, inconspicuous and ultimately absent. They argue that there is no need to talk about homosexuality these days; gays are now accepted everywhere. Even high-ranking politicians are openly homosexual—their gay lifestyle a clear sign of the tolerance of Western Christian society. But if we take a closer look at the history of queerness, we see that we are dealing with insecure and often contested territory. Section 175, the anti-homosexual law introduced in Germany in 1872 and tightened by the Nazis in 1935, was not abolished until 1994 although it punished male homosexual acts with imprisonment. The sentenced men and their sexual partners were not rehabilitated until 2017, by which time many were long dead.

The so-called ‘marriage for all’ was introduced in Germany in 2017, but it remains controversial.

It wasn’t until 2018 that the World Health Organisation removed trans identities from the mental health chapter, but even now trans people have to produce two independent

psychiatric reports before they can begin hormone treatment. The new German law on a third gender option which allows people to describe themselves as 'diverse' rather than 'male' or 'female' provides for intersex people, but not for people who are trans or non-binary. As non-binary myself, I grew up feeling that people regarded the way I perceived myself as a mental disorder.

It is true, though, that lesbian and gay rights have become an important playing card in political power struggles. Tolerance towards sexual minorities is a crucial part of Europe's image. It is no coincidence that one of the first acts of every country applying to join the EU is to approve a Gay Pride parade—usually the first of its kind, accompanied by massive police presence to protect demonstrators and celebrators from the raging mob. Not for nothing does Russia, which positions itself in radical opposition to the EU, refer to us as *Gayropa*.

And so, here in Germany, we have the fairy tale of the good gay. The good gay is (a) white, and (b) supposedly blessed with the same desires as any heterosexual person: a partner, a house, a couple of cars and a career. One of these 'good gays', Jens Spahn, has recently applied for the leadership of Germany's ruling party. Spahn makes no secret of his sexuality, but has admitted that he was forced into both his private and public coming-out by inner-party power struggles. He also never tires of stressing that he has no intention of practising 'gay clientele politics'. The last thing he wants is to draw attention to his gayness. His trademark is his hatred of Muslims: he wants to ban burkas, rails against Muslim men who shower in their underpants in the gym and draws causal connections between criminal offenders' religious backgrounds and the crimes they commit. When Spahn is looking for arguments for his demagogy, however, his sexual orientation comes in handy. He claims to be scared of Islam because in a Muslim country he'd be thrown off a tower for being homosexual. When asked by a journalist how the idea of marriage for all had been received in the small

Catholic town where Spahn comes from (Ottenstein in Westmünsterland), he replied: ‘Sure, people have misgivings. But just because someone has misgivings, it doesn’t automatically make them homophobic.’<sup>3</sup>

Following that logic, the hardliners in Hungary, Poland, Bavaria and the Netherlands aren’t hostile to gay people either—nor, presumably, were the million who demonstrated against marriage for all in Paris a few years ago. In Jens Spahn’s view of the world, the only enemies of gay people are Muslims.

There is no shortage of gay saviours of the West. Spahn didn’t invent the role. Gender theoretician Jasbir Puar uses the term ‘homonationalism’ to describe the phenomenon of members of ostracised minorities who make careers for themselves in majority societies: economically privileged, usually white homosexuals present themselves as advocates of European achievements which need defending against supposedly homophobic cultures.

Homonationalism is not, of course, the exclusive reserve of male gays: Alice Weidel recently claimed in a speech to members of her party, the ‘Alternative for Germany’ (AfD), that she’d be a millionaire if she had been given a cent every time she was asked how she, a lesbian (with a partner from Sri Lanka and two adopted children), could represent an alt-right party whose programme has little to offer beside hatred of minorities. Hatred of the so-called ‘gender madness’. Hatred of Islam. You name it.

Weidel’s answer is predictable and follows the same ‘logic’ as Jens Spahn’s line of argument: she is in the AfD not despite her homosexuality, but *because* of it.<sup>4</sup>

I watch the audience at Alice Weidel’s twelve-minute speech on her sexual orientation. They whoop and cheer. Wrinkly grandads give her the thumbs-up. Women applaud with

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<sup>3</sup> From an interview with Jens Spahn in *Die Zeit*, 20/2018.

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B8\\_ozwNihW4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B8_ozwNihW4).

shining eyes, close to a standing ovation. I ask myself what would happen if Alice Weidel were to say now: ‘My dears, the wealth of our society is based on the massive exploitation of this planet and its peoples, and so I stand before you today to call for open borders and the proper and necessary redistribution of goods.’ I imagine the woman with the backcombed chestnut hair and the exaggeratedly painted lips nudging the people on either side of her and saying in a loud whisper: ‘She’s a lezzie, isn’t she?’ And I imagine the man in the striped shirt and the close-fitting rimless glasses thrusting his chin in the air, unfolding his arms, rolling his eyes in disgust—perhaps even saying something with a grimace of disapproval.

I wonder whether Alice Weidel really thinks these people accept her as a homosexual. Or does she know that her audience loves her for the hatred she stands for—a hatred that has been simmering beneath the lid of political clichés for a long time and is now bubbling up into the open in the crude slogans of the AfD? Anti-immigrant hatred (anti-refugee, anti-Turkish, anti-Arab...) is, like anti-Semitism, popular in the ‘Alternative for Germany’, currently the third largest party in the country.

Alice Weidel is, of course, aware that the cheering crowd use her homosexuality to protect themselves against potential accusations of discrimination and racism. And Jens Spahn knows that plenty of Catholics—even in his beloved Münsterland—would have advised him to get psychiatric treatment in his childhood, to ‘cure’ himself of homosexuality in line with Pope Francis’s recent recommendations.

All so-called world religions are used for purposes of exclusion—to justify hostility towards homosexuals and women. Liberal imams, queer rabbis and openly gay vicars are not proof to the contrary. But that doesn’t interest Spahn or Weidel, who both know that alt-right slogans will get them up the career ladder faster than in-depth debates on multiple discrimination.

These two homonationalists occupy top positions in Germany's political landscape at a time when the economy is thriving, unemployment is at an all-time low, the crime rate is down and the number of asylum seekers is below the agreed benchmark. That puts paid to the usual explanations for a swing to the right.

'Unfortunately,' Hannah Arendt says in her essay 'Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship', 'it seems to be much easier to condition human behaviour and to make people conduct themselves in the most unexpected and outrageous manner, than it is to persuade anybody to learn from experience, as the saying goes; that is, to start thinking and judging instead of applying categories and formulas.'<sup>5</sup>

Sociological studies show that the dynamics of violence do not point, arrow-like, from culprit to victim, but take the shape of a triangle. Discrimination, exclusion and destruction are played out between three parties: the person attacked, the attacker and thirdly, the group of people who take no responsibility for the person attacked and do nothing to defend or protect her. Who look away. Who claim nothing has happened. Who try to cover up what has happened and tell the victim not to make a fuss by making the attack public. For the person attacked, the immediate threat comes from the attacker, but the lasting threat comes from the group of people who look away. It is no surprise to the victim that she should be attacked by someone who is full of hatred for her way of life. But that people can look on without intervening or helping and maybe even later deny that anything happened—that causes a deep wound that destroys the victim's confidence.

Such an experience is transferred into a knowledge that never leaves the victim—a knowledge that has lasting effects on the marginalised body's attitude towards the third group which sees itself as a majority. It doesn't matter that the majority has not itself attacked the

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<sup>5</sup> In *Responsibility and Judgment*, Schocken, 2003.

victim—aggression is always carried out by individuals. What matters is that it offered no defence: each attack carried out by an individual is born of the structures of violence of that third, majority group.

38.4 per cent of people questioned in Germany find homosexual kisses in public unpleasant. 43.8 per cent want me to be invisible. Since childhood, when I was put in clothes that tried to deform me—since puberty, when my body changed in ways that felt wrong to me—at the very latest, since my first coming-out, which I didn't then know would be permanent, I have been *other*. I have no use for 'integration' into discriminating structures. I know the mechanisms of appropriation; being Jewish has taught me all about such strategies of divide-and-rule.

Just as homosexual rights are often held up as evidence of Europe's liberal credentials, Europe is presented as a protector of Jewish people. This invention bears the name 'the Judeo-Christian West'. Despite growing anti-Semitism (according to the 2018 Leipzig Authoritarianism Study, one in ten Germans think that 'Jewish people are somehow different and don't really fit in with us'), being Jewish in Germany comes with a whole heap of privileges, as long as you remain within the accepted coordinates: either you've forgiven the Germans or you're an implacable aggro Jew who will never forgive the Germans.

Both positions, mirror images of one another, revolve around the Shoah. This means that Jewish people in Germany are unthinkable without reference to the attempt to eradicate them. In the 1990s, Germany imported Jewish people from the countries of the former Soviet Union to fill the gaps created half a century before, and gave them the title 'quota refugees'. The idea was that these would be members of the white middle class who lived secular lives or wore their stars of David unobtrusively inside their shirts. It's considered acceptable for them to don their kippahs on 9 November (the anniversary of the Night of Broken Glass), and

occasionally—when an embarrassing comedian has pitched it wrong again or someone is looking for a pretext for immigration ceilings—they are asked for their opinions on anti-Semitism.

Ever since debates about immigration from Muslim countries have begun to dominate the media, Jewish people—like gay and lesbian people—have suddenly become useful. With one proviso: they have to be prepared to speak out against Muslims. ‘My lesbian/gay/Jewish neighbour doesn’t want to live next door to Syrians either.’ The prospect of belonging—in other words, integration into the majority society—is dangled like a carrot. This mechanism finds its perverse culmination in a kind of Jewish nationalism which has recently begun to take shape under the name of ‘Jews in the AfD’—a group which does not boast significant membership numbers, but has received considerable media hype.

Some time ago, a weekly newspaper asked me to write about what I, as a Jewish person, felt about the alarming social changes caused by the large numbers of Muslim immigrants. I offered instead to write about life with my Syrian flatmates, two young men who had been in Germany for a year and two years respectively. I imagined describing my mother’s visit to our shared flat. I would write about my own prejudices and the ridiculous fantasies they spawned—how I was afraid that my mum would air her anti-Muslim prejudices and that Mazen and Yazan would make inappropriate remarks to her, when, in fact, the three of them enjoyed a lively conversation about conditions in asylum homes—the managers’ checked shirts, the smell in the communal kitchens and the immigration officers’ trouble pronouncing names. It took them years, my mum told the boys. In fact, she said, they never learnt. The three of them laughed a lot.

I stood and watched them from the kitchen counter: a doctor from Moscow who has been in Germany for twenty years and now possesses a German passport and impeccable

German—though her curly black hair and broad cheekbones seem to make people think they have the right to quiz her on her ‘immigrant background’. And two young men from Syria, only just adult. Their official title is ‘refugee’, their residence status unlimited. Their language classes start early in the morning. Sometimes they oversleep; sometimes they don’t go because someone needs accompanying to the authorities—someone who has just arrived and knows even less than they do.

That afternoon, in the kitchen of our flatshare, my mum told us the sorry tale of trying to buy me a star of David in the town where she lives in Lower Saxony and discovering that every jeweller in the place was out of stock. She got quite worked up about it. I think it was Yazan who cried out, ‘Abla, my uncle has a jeweller’s shop just round the corner. Just drop in, we’ll make you a star of David. As many as you like.’

It wasn’t until the newspaper had turned down my story that I came up with an ending for my text: I would have described going dancing with my flatmates in Schwuz, the legendary gay club in Berlin’s Neukölln. Mazen and Yazan are straight, but they appreciate good music.

What are Alice Weidel, Jens Spahn and the ‘Jews in the AfD’ going to do about our Muslim-Jewish-queer dance culture? Our friendships? Our shared stories?

Where were the 43.8 per cent of the population who ‘fully’ or ‘rather’ agree with the statement ‘homosexuals should stop making such a fuss about their sexuality’ when a man hurled abuse at my girlfriend and me on the bridge in Kreuzberg, calling us ‘fucking lezzies’, and then turned on me when I yelled back at him, refusing to accept the insult? I think they were there. I think they looked away. Two passers-by helped me, both phenotypically ‘Muslim’. I know nothing else about them; once they had chased off the attacker, we didn’t speak much. But they offered the two of us cigarettes, and something in the gesture told me that they were familiar with the sense of vulnerability we felt at that moment. Despite our

differences, they knew, just as we did, how it feels not to fit in. Never to be normal. Always to be visible.

Like Mazen and Yazan, those two men on the bridge are part of a big community—part of my community. It is not defined by sexual preference, sexual identity or religious affiliation. We are the *others*. *Normal* means nothing to us; we don't accept *normal* as an authority. We will be there for one another when the majority society looks on and doesn't intervene. We don't have to agree on everything—we don't even have to like each other. But we know the strength of alliances, so we create our own structures and we will be able to depend on one another when we are in danger. We are the alternative for Germany.

*Tr. Imogen Taylor*