

“I wanted to embrace being German”

**The artist Tanya Ury and her very personal
re-appropriation of memory**

(with images of *Promised Land: Beelzebularin* and *doo bee doo*)

by Hartmut Bomhoff, Jüdische Zeitung (Jewish monthly) no. 11 (39) November 2008
(Translation from German TU)

“Berlin has always been very good to me”, says Tanya Ury at our rendezvous in the Kant Strasse, Charlottenburg. The artist, born in London 1951, has been living in Germany for the last 15 years. London, that’s family; but the centre point of her life has been Cologne, for a long time already. “A coincidence”, she says. “But there are no coincidences.” Cologne has always been more than merely the university town where in 1989, having completed her studies in Fine Art at Exeter College of Art she spent a semester at the Institute for Theatre, Film and Television Studies. “My family came from Germany, most of them from Cologne. The connection was so strong that, apart from those who died, they all returned after the war. My great-grandparents survived Theresienstadt and moved into an old people’s home in Cologne afterwards. My parents were both born in Germany.” During her semester in 1989 she lived with her grandfather Alfred Unger, for some months. After she had completed her Masters in Fine Arts at Reading, Tanya Ury was guest lecturer at Sheffield Hallam University and moved to Cologne in 1993. Her dual nationality has a certain symbolic significance: “I wanted to embrace being German, understand the whole story,” precisely also the German aspect of her Jewish family.

Berlin is to a greater extent more than Cologne, the epitome of her German-Jewish dilemma. Exactly ten years ago, in November 1998, Tanya Ury took part in the exhibition “Davka: Jüdische Visionen in Berlin“ (Jewish Visions in Berlin), in the empty rooms of the former Jewish children’s home, August Strasse and organised by the artists’ group “Meshulash”. Her contribution was a life-size self-portrait „Triptych for a Jewish Princess Second Generation“, in the central image of which, demonstratively naked, she protectively pulls a German Luftwaffe leather coat over her. Around the image are texts – extracts from the poem “Daddy” by Sylvia Plath, to which she adds her own verses. They speak of anger and the over-identification with the role of the Jewess as victim. They are also about the difficult relationship with Germany the fatherland and the German language itself. “I have a discontent that is difficult to explain to those who might think it’s time to move on. I am not more objective, not having lived through Shoah; but I feel it in my bones. Although I never had children, I am left firmly holding the baby.” “Holding the Baby” is also the title of a short story from 2002, which tells of a reunion with the theatre director Peter Zadek, who in younger days was a close friend of her father, Peter Ury; both were Jewish refugees from Germany and wrote a children’s opera together.

Berlin and the forgotten children’s home in the August Strasse are sources of friction and areas for projection, places in which there are no empty spaces, no lack of history. Ury hears the voices in Cologne also. “...there are traces everywhere, indications of crimes of the past. Every November, I attend Art Cologne, the big art fair in the Deutzer Messe and think about Grete and Ella Unger, two of my grandfather's sisters, who were deported from there and were never seen again.” Ury’s art is always personal, always political and in every way ruthless. In 1993 she got herself tattooed with the number

4711, to commemorate the transportation of her Cologne relatives. “Kölnisch Wasser” (Eau de Cologne) as re-appropriation of history. She refuses to take up a defensive position towards history, belongs to the engaged opposition of the Flick Collection exhibition in Berlin and criticised the historical film “Downfall” for its unremitting denial of the victims’ position. “I have always had the feeling that I owe something to the generation that died in the Holocaust – quite simply time, which I can now dedicate to this re-examination.”

Last summer, almost 10 years after the exhibition in the “Ahawah” building in Berlin centre, we met again at an education weekend run by Limmud at Werbellinsee on the outskirts of Berlin. Tanya Ury is part of the programme with a talk on the previous Nazi history of the company Hugo Boss. “Not many of the 300 festival visitors came to the lecture, probably because, as somebody explains, a talk on sexuality in the Torah was taking place concurrently. At any rate, the 9 who did come demonstrated real interest by putting the right questions, whether Boss has reacted to my work, and whether I will continue with it... I have been giving similar seminars over the years, mainly in Germany, at universities and in galleries. The journeys to and from are always welcome opportunities to distance myself – I usually read or think things over – sometimes write.”

The artist has concerned herself with the Hugo Boss fashion company and its involvement in National Socialism, for many years. After it was made public that the founder of the firm had secured his fashion empire with the tailoring of SS, SA (Storm Trooper) and Hitler Youth uniforms, employing a workforce that included forced labour, she began to explore the relationship between fashion and politics, fashion and military fashion. Her artwork “Who’s Boss” consists of many pieces that stand in relationship to one another. And so, she has collected her own hair in small plastic bags, which she labels with a date tag daily. For “Who’s Boss: Hair Shirt” she sewed the plastic bags together to create a coat similar in design to the Luftwaffe leather coat that also resembled the Hugo Boss AG coat design, winter season of 1998/99. This hair shirt, is a sarcastic representation of penitence and reparation: in 1946 Hugo Boss was called upon to compensate the forced labour employees with 100,000 Reich’s Mark, the sum had however not been remunerated at the time of his death in 1948. In the year 2000 Hugo Boss AG finally paid an absolute minimum into the compensation fund for forced labour. The video performance “Who’s Boss: Röslein Sprach...” is penetrating and at the same time drastic: Ury sews the logo “Boss” into the palm of her hand. The reference is to an advertisement for a Hugo Boss men’s cologne in which a young man is seen, with the inscription “your rules” on his hand.

Tanya Ury is not just a Cassandra figure. With all her decisiveness in the grieving process, she has maintained a sense of humour and joie de vivre, maybe gained it anew - she is someone who needs to keep her feet on the ground. “Half a year ago I decided on 2 things: to continue with the meditation that I have neglected over the last 10 years, but also to become a member of the Liberal Jewish Community already, established ten years ago. These decisions throw up a lot of questions for me. I started practising Guru Maharaj Ji’s Meditation 35 years ago and stopped, not because it didn’t work – but because I was alarmed by the infinite doors to other worlds that were being opened up.” Now she wears a Star of David.

Another work that at first glance appears to be funny, Ury’s double portrait “doo bee doo” of 2007 in dialogue with Albert Einstein, is at closer perusal, a lesson in history and reaction to the “Du bist Deutschland”(You are Germany) initiative coordinated by the

Bertelsmann group 2005/2006, which, with its TV spots, posters and a budget of ca 30 million Euros intended to awaken a feel good effect in the country. In this work Ury places a self-portrait under the image of an Albert Einstein double from the media campaign (who, according to Ury hardly resembles Einstein) - she mimics the Einstein pose and poster design by leaning her furrowed brow into her left hand. But the humorous edge that the press spoke of is a misconception. You only have to glance at the text below that reads: "I am Albert Einstein. Am I slow? Now they're advertising German patriotism in my name. Not funny. I may have been a Nobel Prize winner but back then I had to flee the country, for my life. You really don't need to understand what $E=mc^2$ means. But one thing you should know is your history. Don't be starry-eyed about false respect and poorly researched spin. Du bist Deutschland? doo, bee, doo, bee, doo." "Doo bee doo" is the sound made by bored people to fill silence. Albert Einstein was born in Ulm, as were Sigmar and Hedwig (née Ullmann Tanya Ury's grandparents, both victims of the Nazis. After 1945, the Nobel Peace Winner, celebrated in Germany of 2005 with its Albert Einstein year, didn't want to have anything to do with the land of his origin.

"lesser is me more or less" (2003) and "or else" (2007) belong to the discursive series of double portraits. The latter portrays the artist together with the writer Else Ury, in the former she faces her great-grand uncle Lesser Ury in his "Self-Portrait with Dark Hat" from the year 1914, separated by the representation of scar tissue. At the time of his self-Portrait the well-known Impressionist was 53 and at the height of his powers; in this double portrait both Urys are more or less the same age. Lesser Ury, who died in 1931, was quickly forgotten in National Socialist Germany. Tanya Ury first came across a painting by her great-grand uncle as a child, in the parent's house of a friend. In recent years, bit-by-bit, "Tentatively and in recent years, Jewish artists have been returning to live and work in Germany," she summarises. "Whether the reanimation of a Jewish culture in Germany is possible now, and whether this attempt is Frankensteinian and bound to fail, are questions that 'lesser is me more or less' pose."

Tanya Ury's art, whether in photography, video, performance or short story form, always concerns itself with questions of ageing, memory, sexuality and identity, but also diaspora, in the widest sense. One of her most recent works, "Sibling Rivalry" of 2008, is a photo portrait of the sisters Elà and Leylà Ury, who live in London. Their parents are Tanya's brother David Ury, a British Jew of German origin and Deniz Engin, a Turkish Muslim. Both allow their children to live out a choice among several cultural and religious hybrids. In the photo, one is wearing a Kefiyah, the Palestinian scarf, the other a Star of David. It's a short step from the subject of sibling rivalry to that of the Promised Land. "Promised Land" encompasses art works and biographies that scrutinise Israel's history: 2 perspectives from 2 generations of different eras, the contemporary view and the biblical. "Beelzebularin" is a photographic portrait of Tanya Ury dressed as the biblical Bezalel ben Uri, the artist who constructed the holy objects for Moses' new monotheist God, after he had formed an alliance with Moses. Bezalel stands in front of a beach and sea view that is not the Red Sea but Binz, on the Baltic Sea, Germany, not far from Prora: in his right hand he holds a golden calf, in the other a Swan Vestas English matchbox, representing the Ark of the Covenant, that for Ury represents a kind of Pandora's tinderbox; the matchbox has been altered so that the logo shows not one swan but two symbolising the two winged Cherubim facing each other on the Ark of the Covenant, although the taboo of the graven image had just been initiated. Bezalel means: in the shadow of God. "Beelzebularin" is an anagram of the name "Bezalel ben Uri" suggesting the word "Beelzebub", a god of the Philistines, literally: "lord of flies". The

concerns here are the responsibility of the artist, ethics in art and the eternal question “which direction to choose?” “There isn’t a Jewish culture here any more, no connection to political life”, Ury complains. She is the exception, one would like to counter with, but exceptions prove the rule, so they say. “ Not everyone can afford to put up resistance”, says Tanya Ury with regard to her life and work in Germany. “I want to give back.”