

I want to embrace being German now

STADTREVUE (City Revue) Cologne 5/95

English translation of German interview by Tanya Ury

Tanya Ury was born in 1951 in England, into a German-Jewish family. She lived in England for over forty years, working amongst other things as a cook, and in more recent years as an artist. Two years ago she moved to Cologne and presented, the video- performance "Kölnisch Wasser", amongst things, at Feminale (the women's film festival). Karin Jurschick spoke to her.

STADTREVUE: *Tanya, you were born in England, lived and worked there for a long time. Two years ago you moved to Cologne. What connects you with this country?*

TANYA URY: My family came from Germany; most of them were from Cologne. The connection was so strong that apart from those who died, most of them returned after the war. My great-grandparents survived Theresienstadt and then lived in an old people's home in Cologne. Both my parents were also born in Germany.

S.R.: *Do you have a German passport?*

T.U.: Yes, I decided to get it two years ago and now have dual nationality, which is very uncommon in Germany. When I first decided to make art, the whole Jewish theme came up for me and my roots are in Germany of course too. I want to embrace being German now. I want to understand all of this history.

S.R.: *What does being German mean to you?*

T.U.: I don't know! I just try to see what it means to the people here. And what I see are people trying to avoid being German. This is an American culture, not German... For some reason it's difficult for the Germans, to be German; they always have to be directing their gaze somewhere else.

S.R.: *Isn't it a contradiction, when you say that you're looking for your German roots? It's as though you were simultaneously having to look for an oppressor's identity?*

T.U.: It's crazy, if I were really honest, were I not Jewish, I myself might easily have become a perpetrator. My great-grandfather fought in the First World War and even won a military decoration; my grandfather was an army doctor. I know that these people were nationalists, true Germans, who later could not grasp their terrible fate.

S.R.: *Would you describe yourself as a Jew?*

T.U.: Yes, now I would, even if I have no particular affinity to the Jewish religion, and although I have experienced being Jewish in a very negative way because the connection has more to do with the Holocaust than anything else. In all truth, the whole of Jewish history has to be seen as a Holocaust. It is the Diaspora, which belongs to Jewish history. But that's just one definition. There are others, which are more positive. Amongst the Jewish people are many comedians, actors, and writers. It is a very rich culture.

S.R.: *Do you relate to that all as an artist? What does it mean to you, Jewish culture?*

T.U.: I first thought about becoming an artist because I knew that there had been other artists in my family. It was even an integral part of being Jewish; amongst the Jewish people there are many philosophers and poets, who take on all aspects of life in their art. I think there is a feeling that it is an honour and a duty, if one is privileged, and I am that because I was not born into the war generation, to make something of one's life.

S.R.: *This process, of finding your Jewish-German identity, do you feel it was something that was forced onto you?*

T.U.: It is complicated, it was an inner process but also an external one. I look quite Middle Eastern; I'm dark. Everywhere I go, whether it's England or Germany, people ask me where I come from? If I answer Germany, that's no explanation. Even though I always wanted to fit in, it was never possible. When I started making art, the feminist movement was happening in England; there was an atmosphere that encouraged women to talk, not just about being a woman but also about their roots. There were many women artists who were making art about being Indian, for instance, or about their Afro-Caribbean roots. Then I came upon some artists making work about the Holocaust even though they had no direct connection to it. That really made an impression because up till that point it had not been an issue for me.

S.R.: *To approach and re-invent specific traditions is a very positive process, rather like a re-animation. You got yourself tattooed for your last performance...*

T.U.: That was for me, closely connected to my Jewish identity.

S.R.: *But in a negative way; it's a concentration camp number that you had tattooed onto your body.*

T.U.: Yes, the number "4711"; it was black humour. And of course it has a lot to do with Cologne, but also with the perfume (Eau de Cologne) that my mother and grandmother always used to use.

S.R.: *In your performance you re-stigmatise yourself. You reenact this process.*

T.U.: I wanted to show people: actually, this is who I am. The number on my skin is a statement: every other cell of my body is similarly encoded and inscribed as Jewish. It was something I previously had tried to deny; the history was so dreadful. But I wasn't the only person in denial; in the 70's nobody talked about it. We invented utopian philosophies; we were concerned with the ecology of the planet, but you were not allowed to look over your shoulder. Regardless of whether you were Jewish or anything else, if you turned to look back, like Lot's wife in the bible, one feared the consequences. Eventually it became clear to me that I couldn't avoid the fact any longer. I am what I am. The tattoo is an affirmation, a sign that I have now accepted it.

S.R.: *We keep hearing from Jewish survivors, that there were contradictory feelings about having survived. It wasn't liberating but rather a shameful, painful feeling to be alive, where others had died. Is that something that affects you as part of the so-called 'second generation'?*

T.U.: Yes, it's true. But I have also felt ashamed of these feelings because, after all, I did not suffer the fate of the last generation. One has the good fortune to be born into a decent family, and I was, and yet somehow you feel completely useless, superfluous. And if you do look back over your shoulder, nothing makes any sense. I do what I do, because I have such a keen sense of frustration; I have to do something really powerful, perhaps even extreme. There is a great anger in me. It is anger about history, and I suffer from it daily. And it is also anger over the violent nature of human relationships.

S.R.: *Have you ever been confronted with racism or anti-Semitism here in Germany?*

T.U.: Yes, but I must say that more often than not, I have been met with the wish to be friendly and open; sometimes I've actually been suspicious, because people have been so nice to me, maybe because they feel guilty, but I can't complain because I get exactly what I need. I need to be loved. If that need is fulfilled by the German people I meet here it becomes an act of healing and maybe it is important for Germans to experience that also.

S.R.: *Have you noticed the renewed interest in Jewish culture here? Or, how would you judge this phenomenon, the sudden popularity of Klesmer music?*

T.U.: That has nothing to do with the politics of contemporary life. There is no Jewish feminist culture here, now for instance. Why is that? There was an open discussion after the Feminale programme, during which myself and three other Anglo/Jewish women artists presented artwork. But nobody in the audience wanted to say anything. There was a difficult silence. In the end one woman said: 'It's very difficult for me to talk to you, I've never in my life seen a Jew before; I don't know how to deal with you.' It was a shock for us. But we had to accept it as fact. There is no Jewish culture here any more.

The exhibition: "Coincidence – the coming together of 6 artists from 6 nations, in Cologne" 12.5 to 7.7.1995, features a new video by Tanya Ury (with Doris Frohnappel). Location: IGNIS cultural centre, Elsa Brandström Strasse 6. Tue 10-15, Thur 14-20 O'clock and by arrangement Tel: 72 51 05