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## There's a Crack in the Handle

Thirty-three years ago I arrived in Munich for the first time. That very first evening, my assimilation began. A glass of cold milk and a bar of Milka chocolate.

Of course there was milk in Turkey too, but Turkish cows' milk had to be drunk boiling hot or tepid, because of the germs. I preferred the taste of it cold. I was five years old, still a bit young for beer, but just the right age for lederhosen. I was very proud of my first pair of lederhosen, which set me apart from all the other children in Istanbul when I went back there.

If all the gastarbeiters had given their children milk and chocolate on the first evening in Germany, and put them in lederhosen the next morning, we wouldn't have any problems now with integration. But my parents weren't gastarbeiters. That may explain their affinity with cold milk, Milka chocolate and lederhosen. They had no anxieties at all about contact with German culture. They had only come to Germany for two months, to learn German in a small town in upper Bavaria. Admittedly a slightly odd choice, going to Bavaria to learn German.

My parents played in and with German culture. I think this game gave them a lot of pleasure. It was simply living theatre. When you learn a foreign language you dress up your tongue. So why not dress up completely. It has been scientifically proven that you learn German more quickly, dressed in lederhosen.

At any rate, in my lederhosen I was a laughing stock in Istanbul. Yet I refused to take them off. Eventually, from sympathy with my martyrdom, my parents decided to emigrate to Germany. Four years had passed since I had been in Germany, but I remembered many things well. Above all the taste of cold milk and Milka chocolate.

In fact my parents would have preferred to emigrate to Hamburg. They had good friends there, and besides, it was much less far from the sea. But I tyrannised them for so long that they bowed to my will, whether out of consideration for my feelings, love, or just nervous exhaustion, and settled in Munich.

Today, <sup>fourty</sup> thirty years later, my feeling is that we actually only moved to Germany because of my lederhosen. Be that as it may, none of us has ever regretted the move. We are all enthusiastic champions of German quality workmanship.

I recently visited my parents in Hamburg. After I had grown up, they finally found the courage to live their lives according to their own desires, and emigrated from Bavaria to Germany. That is how my father described the move. To be precise they moved to Hamburg, their favourite city. An incomprehensible choice from my point of view, but for them it was a dream come true. They rave about Hamburg and since they have been living there they have not once returned to south Germany.

So, recently I was visiting them. My father took me into the kitchen. He is a passionate collector of 'Solingen Brand' kitchen knives. "I've bought myself a new Solingen, I must show it you," he muttered delightedly. So I took the piece in my hand. A medium-size knife. The sharp blade flashed in the light. Its stab could be fatal. My father's eyes were shining.

But what was this? "Look, there's a crack in the handle here. You'll have to take it back tomorrow. I'm sure they'll exchange it for you." I felt like a miserable kill-joy. But it would have to be returned. The period for making returns is seven working days. For my father, the evening was ruined.

"Made in Germany's not what it used to be," he grumbled. My mother said drily, "Oh it's probably from Poland, it's just got Solingen written on it. These days nobody cares much either way."

My father vehemently contradicted my mother, mentioning the considerable price he had paid for the knife. A heated argument began, which it seemed would never end, because nobody could remember why they were quarrelling. I do think we are a well integrated family.

The game my parents used to play with such delight has become bitter earnest. In fact it seems to me to be the unwritten law of life that at some point, every game turns earnest. For some time now, when people speak of their own and foreign culture, what is at stake is not a masquerade but a kind of defence of the fatherland.

The words 'our own' and 'foreign' have always been foreign to me. Especially when spoken by people I think I know well. In their mouths, these words somehow sound wrong. At least to my ears. Perhaps there is something wrong with my hearing.

Nowadays people have stopped saying: "My fatherland is Germany", instead it's: "I come from Germany", as if they had just come from the kitchen. Fatherland, so it seems to me, is no longer a geographical or political concept, but a cultural concept, which people are more likely to mull over in the quiet of their study than mention out loud. Cold milk and Milka chocolate are rationed. People worry about whether their own children are getting their due, and every morning they pedantically check the colour of the milk. There are rumours that it's not as white as it used to be ten years ago. I understand these anxieties. Cold milk doesn't taste the way it did thirty-three years ago, either. At any rate its taste in my memory is not identical with its taste today; nor, perhaps, with its taste then. At first I thought this altered taste had something to do with my move from Munich to Berlin. But on my regular visits to Munich, I have discovered that cold milk here has become just as tasteless as it is in Berlin, quite different from the milk I remember. So it must be due to my own sense of taste that milk is not what it used to be.