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Bitter Wells. Hertha Gordon-Walcher and the Remembered Dream of Revolution

A Memoir

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Bitter Wells

The life of an extraordinary woman – and the dream of a just world

Aunty Hertha

When I started school in 1956, my beautiful mother married a man who I didn't know, who I was meant to call dad from then on. To me he looked like our President Wilhelm Pieck, whose photo hung in our classroom. He was over sixty, my mother not yet thirty. He sometimes spoke on television, but at that point we didn't own a TV set. I learned the word emigration; my new dad had lived in Paris and New York as part of the emigration. That was something special, because the other fathers had been soldiers in the war. My mother's husband still travelled the world, to Africa or Cuba, to Iran and to Algeria, but he told me nothing about his travels, and I didn't ask him either. People often came to see him, and then I had to stay in my room. The visitors weren't interested in me, but I observed them through the crack between door and door-frame, and eavesdropped outside the living room, often not understanding their language, which must have been

English or French. Others spoke German, but I still didn't understand what they were saying, and the conversations seemed boring. Which made it even more peculiar how excitedly the guests and my parents talked, often all at once, sometimes getting loud as if arguing, and sometimes speaking extremely quietly, almost whispering, as if no one was meant to hear them.

There were two married couples who just came into my bedroom and gave me presents, who sometimes insisted that I sit with the others at table, and who asked how things were going for me, and listened attentively to the answers, as if I mattered to them. That was Volodya the writer and Ida his wife from Paris. They clearly travelled a lot, because as time went by they brought me a set of Russian matryoshka dolls, a little Indian cloth, and a pendant with a seven-branched candelabra on it, which they explained was called the menorah. But my mother guarded that for herself — I wasn't meant to wear it, though I didn't find out why. Aunt Hertha and Uncle Jacob was what I called the other visitors who took notice of me. They were even older than my mother's husband, and also lived in Berlin, in Hohenschönhausen. Sometimes they took me to their house there, with its garden in which a cherry tree grew. It was smaller than the house my parents were living in by this stage, but was much cosier. They had lots of books, like at ours, but also colourfully painted cupboards, a rug hanging on the wall, and two strange, clunky leather armchairs, which looked like they were car seats. And I heard they were car seats, which *Brecht himself* had instructed be taken out of his old Steyr automobile, and had wooden stands built for backstage at the Berliner Ensemble. Where I had used to live, together with my mother, and my first father, my real one as I thought to myself silently, I had been able to see the Berliner Ensemble's revolving sign out the kitchen window. I didn't know the name Brecht. Aunt Hertha gave me a book with a funny poem by him in it, called *Alphabet*. "Steve sits long upon the john / You see he took a book with him / If the book is very thick / He'll stay there hours or days with it". I could just imagine that, because I had been reading everywhere myself since I had first been first able to, and

preferred thick books to thin. I found this under “I”: “Ice cream’s an eventuality / Means no one knows with certainty / Omnipresent possible / But better than no hope in hell”. That made me think. Was a “maybe” really better than a clear “never ever”? When I asked my mother when my real father might come and visit me, or if I’d be allowed to visit him in Hamburg, to where he had returned to live, she looked upset and said something like, “who knows, maybe later on sometime”, but in a tone suggesting I had demanded the impossible. And one day I stopped asking, and didn’t mention him at all any more, and no one else mentioned him either. I didn’t understand it.

Aunty Hertha and Uncle Jacob also gave me books as presents, I can still remember how I sat curled up in the soft, green leather upholstery of Brecht’s car and leafed through a teach-yourself-chess book for kids, or Anna Maria Jokl’s *Die Perlmutterfarbe*, while the grown-ups sat out on the veranda drinking coffee. I liked being at this old couple’s house. Uncle Jacob looked a bit like Wilhelm Pieck in the photos in the paper, all paunchy and good-natured, though he occasionally swore about something, and then Hertha put her hand on his arm until he calmed down. He talked a lot, but she didn’t, not back then. She was small and thin, and mostly wore trousers and a grey or brown jumper, and no jewellery. She wore her hair – still dark then, and only turning grey later – short, and it always sat in lovely waves, although, as she told my mother once, she never went to the hairdresser. She hardly ever went anywhere, because she had problems breathing, and she preferred to stay in her little house, where she translated Chinese books into German. Not from Chinese, however, but rather from English. She also typed up Jacob’s manuscripts on a portable typewriter. I thought that Jacob was a writer or journalist too, like my mother’s husband. Who they called Walter, although he was really called Maximilian; as an émigré, he had gone by the name of Walter. Or was Walter his real name and the other one his false one? It was confusing. Uncle Jacob didn’t write books, or for the papers; as I heard him say himself once, he wrote for his desk drawer. And the drawers and cupboards in the little house

really were full of paper that had been written on, the sheets also piling up on the table beside Brecht's green armchairs. Jacob wrote about what he had experienced decades before my birth. He wrote about the party and about his years in exile, about people who were no longer alive. They also talked about these people when they were sat around the coffee table, or when my parents came to visit. That didn't particularly interest me, but I was impressed that Uncle Jacob and Auntie Hertha had known our president, and had met Rosa Luxemburg and Clara Zetkin, whose head was depicted on my school books, but above all I marvelled at them because they had known LENIN. Perhaps something like a God, but not like other people, LENIN'S name floated above everything, as did STALIN'S. But something was up with this Stalin, whose memorial was still standing near the "House of the Child", but whose head – still depicted on posters, in a row beside the heads of Marx, Engels, and Lenin, during my first year of school – had now disappeared from this godly line-up. And one day, when we were driving past the "House of the Child", I saw that his memorial had gone too. I once asked Auntie Hertha if she had also known Stalin, and she laughed and made an indefinite gesture with her hand. "Yes, I did meet him", she said. "Along with Clara, she had been invited to his place to eat. His son Yakov, he must have been fifteen or sixteen, sat with us at table. Stalin said something to him and the son answered; we didn't understand the answer, but Stalin bent over the table and slapped the boy. Who then got up and left the room without saying anything. His stepmother, only six years older than Yakov, didn't say a word either. We had lost our appetite".

That was what she told me about Stalin: he had hit his son.

But I didn't ask any more about it; the lives of Stalin and Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg and Clara Zetkin, were too far removed from my own.

When I was ten, and had just started year five, our president Wilhelm Pieck died. A black sash was hung on his picture in our school, which after a while was

swapped for a new one. I knew that Uncle Jacob and Aunty Hertha had thought highly of him, even though they hadn't said so. Now everyone was talking about the Chairman of the State Council, Walter Ulbricht, who they also knew personally, well even, but evidently didn't like much. By this stage I believed that this old married couple in Hohenschönhausen knew all important people in this world, or had met them at least. In Paris or New York, in Moscow or in London.

I liked being in the little house, because it smelt good there, not like old people's houses usually smelt. I liked listening to Jacob's warm, booming laughter, and Hertha's quiet voice, which could also be firm and bossy. But not with me, who she spoke to almost tenderly, liking it when I told her about the books I'd read, or about my girlfriends, and she was interested in my school and in me, something I wasn't used to. Jacob enjoyed it when I asked him something, as he liked explaining, and launching into various digressions. During which I'd often forgotten my original question, and felt a little bored by his comprehensive answers. Sometimes Hertha phoned my parents' house and invited me to come to her on the tram and the bus. Despite that, months often passed in which I didn't see her. But the certainty of knowing I was welcome there anytime gave me a sense of security that was hard to articulate, a feeling of belonging that I lacked in my own home. When I was in year eleven, I moved out of my parent's house, and simply never went back. A female teacher became my legal guardian, later I rented as a sub-tenant of an old lady who lived on Anklamer Straße, and after that, by which time I was already doing my *Abitur*, at a girlfriend's place in Karlshorst. When I turned eighteen, and became an adult in legal terms, I got my own little attic flat, and in the autumn of the same year I began studying at Humboldt University. Although my mother's husband was their friend, Hertha and Jacob didn't ask and I didn't have to explain anything, they seemed to understand my departure, and this silent understanding bound me even closer to them.

In March 1970, by which time I was already a student, Jacob died. I found out from the paper; I hadn't visited the Walchers for long. I had known that he was ill, and that he'd intermittently been admitted to a ward in the Robert Rössle Clinic. Hertha, however, also had to recurringly go hospital, where I sometimes visited her, but she didn't like it when I came without booking my visit first, she said I should always phone beforehand to make sure we could spend time together. She had other visitors too, to me it seemed like there was a constant que. I often found it too much hassle to arrange an appointment, and my days were so choc-a-bloc anyway, that little space remained for these two trusted, elderly people from my childhood. And now Jacob was dead, "a veteran who served the working class" is how the papers described him.

I can't say I was particularly sad about his death aged eighty-three. It seemed to be entirely natural that such an incomprehensibly old person should pass away; I was not yet twenty. But when Hertha died, twenty years later again, aged ninety-six, things were different. Her death hit me, and in the years since that death, which have now turned into decades, I periodically felt a great loss, which is also the reason why I'm writing this here.

Hertha was in hospital herself when Jacob died, and after his funeral she had to return there. I put my name down to visit, and when I met her she was grieving deeply and a little confused, but she was happy to see me, didn't accuse me of anything, and didn't ask where I'd been at the burial. She told me that her old friend Walter, my stepfather, was meant to give the graveside speech, as that had been Jacob's and her wish. But Jacob's death was not a private matter, he was buried in the Memorial to the Socialists on Pergolenweg, and some Department of Protocol determined what form the memorial service should take. Walter wasn't in the party, you see, so he wasn't allowed to speak. That job was given to Hans Jendretzsky, ten years younger than Jacob, and also an old trade unionist, a decent comrade in Hertha's opinion. She could barely still recall what he had said,

she felt numbed by Jacob's death and the events thereafter, and numbed by the realization that her Jacob, who she'd loved for fifty long years, now seemed to belong to other people.

By the time I visited her next she had been released again from hospital, and her house had changed. Brecht's car seats still stood where they always had, the silk cloth from the 1951 World Festive Youth Games still covered the glass pane in the sitting room door, the same tin plate — which I only years later understood was a seder plate — still hung on the wall, with the hollows for the bitter herbs and the other ingredients. Papers were piled up on the tables as ever, but something was missing. Jacob had always been present, even when he was in hospital, in the garden, or in the room next door, but now his absence lay upon everything, invisible and yet possible to sense immediately, like a bitter odour or fine dust that you might taste on your tongue, before that dust lends things a blunter appearance. A framed photo on the wall, which hadn't been there before, showed Jacob as I'd never known him, a young man with a wide smile. It was only later, after having this photo in my mind for nights on end, and after further visits to Hertha during which I listened to her monologues, that I finally got it: Jacob had been really handsome in his youth, strong and determined, and yet still somehow mysterious and erotically attractive.

I looked around, asking myself what it was that looked so different, and then I saw the empty spaces on the bookshelves. Whole rows were missing. Still aghast, Hertha told me how comrades had come to secure Jacob's literary estate, which was working class property. Against her will, three men had packed whole piles of manuscripts, letters, notebooks, pamphlets, and books into boxes. It had been like a house search. She had protested in vain against the seizure, had made clear that lots of the letters were addressed to her, and that several of the books belonged to her. She was informed that the manuscript texts would be handed over to the Party Archive, and the books and pamphlets to the Institute for Marxism

and Leninism, which is where such rare first editions belonged, including the *Illustrated History of the German Revolution*, which the publishers, *Internationale Arbeiter*, had brought out in 1929. They informed Hertha that the book was otherwise nowhere to be found, and belonged to the party.

“Although”, said Hertha bitterly, “by 1929, when he was working with others on this book, Jacob had already been expelled from the party. Hermann Duncker also contributed, as did Alber Schreiner and Clara Zetkin. They knew what they were writing about, I mean it had been there revolution. But they also discussed mistakes and wrong-turnings, which was anathema to the party leadership then already. And it’s no different today: the book will get locked away beside other forbidden works”.

“Jacob was expelled from the party?” I asked, bewildered. No one had mentioned this in the obituaries and eulogies on his birthdays that I’d read in the papers. “Yes, more than once”, replied Hertha. She showed me a book she had saved, which they’d given back to her after she had protested. It was *Rosa Luxemburg’s Position on the Russian Revolution* by Clara Zetkin.

“Clara gave me that as a present for Christmas 1922. With a dedication to me. I guarded this book as if it were my own front teeth. And it’s Hilde Mende I have to thank for getting it back again, after I couldn’t go back to our flat at the start of 1933”.

Who was Hilde Mende? And why was Hertha’s surname Gordon-Osterloh in this dedication, although her maiden name was Gordon?

Hertha suddenly looked very tired, very small, and very old.

She then told me quietly that the worst moment had been when one of the men had pocketed a little book, a workers’ songbook. “Jacob got that from Robert Siewert, on his awful sixty-fifth birthday in May 1952, when Brecht and Walter

and Robert himself were the only guests. Robert probably found the book in an antique bookshop, he can't have kept it safe all that time, because he had been in Buchenwald himself, and was left empty handed at the end of the war like we all were. This small, thin book was so valuable for us, and irreplaceable. Jacob sang these songs way back at the start of the century, when he led the Free Socialist Youth in Stuttgart. And I had known some of these songs already in Königsberg, when, after 1905, the Belarusian revolutionaries at my parents' . . .”

She broke off what she was telling me mid-sentence, as she often did. We were drinking tea at her table in a room that was now so altered. I didn't ask much. Not today. I knew that she wouldn't want to listen to my questions, and that if I sympathised with her outrage, she might then feel pressed into defending the men. Despite everything, the fact was the party had ordered the men to come. Her party. But later she talked about it again, imitating the hoodlum gestures and rapid movement with which this character, who caused everything inside her to revolt against calling him comrade, had popped the little book into his breast pocket, while the two others packed their booty into cardboard boxes, and pushed a document under her nose for her to sign. She had felt sick when they'd gone at last, and her housekeeper, who had been there during the whole scene, had thought she'd have to be taken to hospital again. But she had pulled herself together, as Jacob wouldn't have wanted people like this to make her so upset. They had had to put up with a whole lot worse in the past, from enemies and from their own comrades.

And yet this episode must have been particularly disturbed her; during the following two decades, she ended up talking recurringly about the raid, and the little stolen songbook.

After Jacob's death I visited her often, sometimes with longer breaks between visits, but at least once a week in the final years of her life. This was the period in which I completed my studies, got married, had a daughter, and got

divorced. I worked for a newspaper, our editorial board was dissolved “due to counterrevolutionary tendencies”, and, twenty-six years old, I resolved to battle on as a freelancer. Which was barely possible, as it required a tax number — freelance journalists weren’t meant to exist, and only authors who were a member of the Authors’ Association were given a tax number. But I had written some lyrics for rock groups as a young woman, and some of my poems had been published, so I was issued a tax number, and went on writing for the papers, radio, and television. I read out loud to Aunty Hertha, which is what I called her until she died, from my articles and other texts, as her eyesight grew steadily worse until she was almost blind at the end. I also read her aloud from the papers, but a few sentences often sufficed before she gestured me to stop, and commented witheringly on what she had heard. But behind the sarcasm you could sense real sadness, and behind her evident scorn for politics I sensed her hope, which was inexhaustible and disappointed. Time and again.

Although I certainly wasn’t her only visitor, it seemed like the hours with me mattered to her. She often thought for days about things I told her about my life, and sometimes phoned me late at night to continue the conversation. We talked about the goings-on in my “counterrevolutionary” newsroom. We spoke about my experiences with other editorial boards, about small and large scandals in the culture industry, and about banned books and films. She was much more relaxed in how she dealt with all this than I, treating it as something inevitable. She tried to alleviate my growing sense of despair, to allay my feeling of helplessness, and yet her fundamental bond to the party remained, something I understood less and less the more I discovered about Herta and Jacob’s lives. But we also chatted about completely everyday stuff, she wanted to know about my love life, and meet the man who I lived with, and the one that followed him, although they remained strangers to her. She liked my daughter, however, just as she had liked me as a child, and now and then she asked me to bring the bright little girl to visit her. And when I gave birth to my second daughter, aged thirty-

four, and Hertha was already eighty-nine, and no longer strong enough to devote herself to this little child, she gave me a thousand marks after the birth: she wanted us to be doing well.

She helped others too. On her behest, I sometimes sent bank transfers to people I didn't know, including this Hilde Mende, who had saved Hertha's book with Clara Zetkin's dedication. She was now living in Vogtland, and Hertha told me that Hilde and her husband had been treated extremely unjustly in the early GDR. She could afford to support her old friend, because she received a pension for being a "Warrior Against Fascism", an additional widow's pension, and — a point she stressed — her own pension, which she'd earned through translations and other writing work. She was able to pay her housekeeper and other helpers, but she was also thrifty and scolded me when I tried to throw away a used teabag, saying it could be used again. She often told me about the privations of her childhood, about the thin soups in their Paris exile, and about the early fifties, when Jacob and her were suddenly left standing there with no income at all. During decades of her life, having no money had been the usual way of things.

Sometimes she got me to read out loud the letters and postcards that arrived at her place from foreign countries, and then she often told me snippets about who these correspondents were, and how she was connected to them. These were always fragments from stories I'd have liked to have heard more from, but when I asked directly she fell silent, as if she'd said too much already. Some names I knew, but others I had never heard of.

Volodya and Ida, the writer and actress from Paris, also wrote to her occasionally. They also happened to be in Berlin when I gave birth to my first daughter and again, also coincidentally, when I had my second child twelve years later. Visiting me in hospital on both occasions, Ida, the beautiful and elegant French woman, caused a stir.