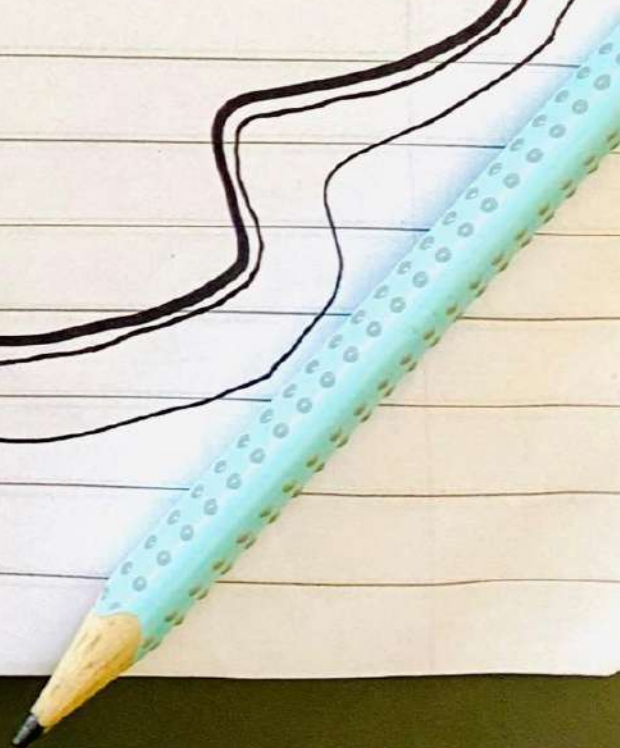


Mapping our lives

Verena Fink



For Erdmute (27.1.1931-27.10.2023 Heidelberg/Germany) who initiated this book by saying the beginning of 2023 out of the blue on the phone "I am sometimes thinking how it would be if you would come here to the empty apartment upstairs to write your book". A book we never spoke about but that I began writing a little later.

For Johan (Thessaloniki/Greece and Cape Town/South Africa) who encouraged me before and during the process.

For Geoff (Adelaide & Melbourne/Australia) who since 2015 has believed in me and my writing.

And a huge "Thank you" to Moyna (Belfast/Northern Ireland and Thessaloniki/Greece) who helped to edit this text for weeks. Her work improved my poor English writing so that I could finish this book. I do not find right words to express my deep gratitude. In no language. 💕

Mapping our lives ***[Through the eyes of a human being]***

We are living in a complicated world.

One may say this is what the world has always been.

We are living in a complicated world that shows us its complexity every night and day through social media, online newspapers and friends all over the world.

How to find our position in that world? How to do positioning in this world?

I was doing it before everyone used the word for different purposes: I was mapping my life, again and again, trying to find out where I am, where are the others, where do I want to be, where do I need to be.

This mapping is of course always connected with the environment and the people around you. But still, there is something that is already inside you, inside me.

There are so many things and thoughts in my daily life that did not come up recently. Nor in the years when I studied. I mean thoughts I already had when I was a child. Some of them in very specific moments, others I don't remember when exactly they came up, but I know that they have been with me somehow my whole life long. Some of these thoughts, convictions but also questions can be explained by the way I grew up. My family, neighbourhood, the time, the whole environment.

During the last years I was thinking more and more that these early thoughts are about me and my life and how the last 50 years brought me from the small German town of my childhood and my family there to a big city in which I worked, studied, fell in love and so on.

The last decade brought big changes in my life and brought me to Greece, a foreign country in which I found so many things so familiar and the country that I call my home now.

Here I have been working since the beginning with people who are displaced and sometimes I hear myself saying "I was questioning that already when I was a child", and I am wondering why I cannot get rid of it.

This is what this book is about.

Through the eyes of a child I formed my mind, my world view. Through the eyes of an adult I am wondering so many times how this world is running. As a human being I have seen so many things, I had so many different influences on my opinions, convictions, thoughts, questions, values and actions, that I want to bring them together and to encourage us to continue to see and to reflect.

Mapping our lives is trying to find the important points. To connect them with other points, with other lives, with other people and their important points.

To encourage people has been kind of my aim my whole life long. Many years I did not realise it, but looking back and reflecting on what is important for me in the life I

have been spending on that planet earth, I can see very clearly this (hidden?) objective...

I celebrated my 50th birthday last year. I saw and did a lot in my life already. And for a while before, I did not know anymore what exactly I wanted to do. I began suffering from anxiety. Fear of the future, social anxiety, anxiety after a burglary in my apartment, after months of long covid and a deep unspecific fear that I have been carrying with me my whole life without expressing it.

Not a very inventive story. So many people have to cope with difficult situations. I see through the eyes of a human being as so many human beings do.

We are facing situations, challenges, difficulties, anxieties. But we go on. We have to go on in order to make the best of our personal situation, of the situation of the community we are living in, of the planet we are living on.

The next chapters are about that: human beings. Difficulties. Communities. The past and the future. The planet we are sharing. And about the encouragement all of us need so desperately.



Maps with different feelings and states of mind. Pen on paper. Summer 2024

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Language is identity

When I decided to write this book, the first question that came up was “in which language?”

My daily language is Greek, my mother tongue is German, I grew up with French that I considered until some years ago as my “best foreign language”, and there is of course English, the language that unites most of my friends all over the world.

I decided that the first language in which I would write before thinking of translating into Greek and German should be English. Why? It is not only the most international language that everyone is learning somehow, it is the language that is a kind of “bridge” between my different lives.

I grew up with only German. Why do I stress that? Because my cousins, whom I met two or three times as a child and who are around my age, could speak Ukrainian, the only language my grandmother could speak. Many years later, when I saw more and more children growing up bilingual (or today more and more trilingual) I became almost angry that this wasn't possible for me.

I don't know enough, and actually only second hand information, but as I understand it, my mother grew up at home at the beginning of the 1950s with the Ukrainian language and went with no word of German to kindergarten. As I remember my grandmother being unable to have a conversation in German, I can imagine how she grew up in a “Russian-Ukrainian-Polish ghetto” in that little town in North Germany, close to Hamburg. As I saw so many children in Munich and in Thessaloniki who have fled from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Congo, Somalia, Turkey, Ukraine (!) or wherever who had to go without a word of the local language to school, I can imagine the situation.

I remember the kids from the camp in Munich where I was going several times a week to the playroom to be there with the children. They had volunteers for homework assistance, they had native speakers who could help them - their parents couldn't. The children overtook them in their language skills and so the parents have been kicked out.

I see today the children who have to translate for their parents in Thessaloniki. They are going to school and are learning the language. The parents don't. In Greece it is even more tough for the kids, as there are almost no “integration classes” in which they can learn the language before being integrated into their class. But anyhow, they are quicker than their parents, they have to help them - and not the opposite as it should be.

As I grew up in times of the migrant workers (“Gastarbeiter”, literally translated as “guest workers”) especially from Turkey, Italy and Greece and was already working in intercultural projects in the 90s after the Bosnian war (1992-1995), I remember many times children going to different public offices in order to translate for their parents. Or to school appointments for the parents like parent-teacher conferences. Or to the doctor.

What I realised then, and what I see now in Greece, is that the children are the ones who are listening to different information first. They hear it immediately – without

the emotional support of their parents, who need to wait for the translation by their child in order to understand. They are alone. And on top they have then to translate it, and many times they are trying to “soften” the message in order to protect their parents from bad news.

I imagine my mother in such a situation. And again I am so sad. No child should do that.

She thus went to kindergarten and learned German. Again a second hand story, she refused to speak her mother tongue with her parents. Supposedly she threw herself to the ground when her parents talked to her in her former language.

How did this work in practice? I don't know. I don't have a good memory about the three times we spent together with my grandmother. Twice I think she had one of my cousins with her, so she could translate again... intergenerational difficulties.

After studying trauma therapy I could see very clearly the reaction as a reaction to a traumatic situation (avoidance behaviour) and I am very sad about it.

I remember that, years after moving out, my mother tried to learn Ukrainian in a lesson, but she could not manage it.

I began to learn Russian at university, I guess in order to compensate for the loss of her mother tongue, made it to the A2 level, lost everything until now and sometimes I am thinking of beginning again. At least I am still able to read the Russian alphabet. It will be interesting if the first language of my mother - and literally her mother tongue - will come out when she is growing older and maybe the long term memory will get stronger than the short term.

I cannot imagine how it feels to lose a language. I know how it is to learn and then to live in a new one, and I love it. Every new language you also get a new culture and you are able to get much more deeply into a culture and a country than it would ever be possible with a common third language.

I grew up only 25km away from the borders with France and my first foreign language was French from the first grade of primary school. In Germany after 4 years of primary school the parents have to decide already for their children in which school they will continue: Hauptschule (lower secondary education for 5 more years), Realschule (higher secondary education for 6 more years) or Gymnasium (high school for today 8 more, then 9 more years). For me there was no question, primary school was easy for me, I had excellent results and I had only to decide between the four schools in town. One was only for girls and one was for classical languages, so actually I had to decide between two of them. Today this would never happen anymore, but then I decided on the school where I actually went, because the other had containers in the school yard and I did not like how the building was.

So I came to my school, which was modern languages orientated and I was part of the “bilingual section” of the school. I have no memories of how that happened and why, I only remember that my friends also went there and I joined them - as you are doing when you are 10 years old. One of my friends later told me that we had to do a test and there was a full procedure to get a place for that bilingual branch, but I have no memories about that, I was trying years later to understand how it happened that I began there, later decided to continue to graduate the high school bilingual and to

have French as a very familiar language. Some of the nine people who went with me to that bilingual school went to France, and one of my friends (with one of my godchildren) is still living in Paris, where I have been twice or three times a year while I was living in Munich).

French was a kind of natural language for me. I experienced with French for the first time that you can speak a foreign language and you can feel as you feel with your first one.

I remember in 2018, when I had been living for a year in Thessaloniki, I already knew a little Greek, but not at all enough to communicate well. I went to Paris to see my friends there and to enjoy the city that is a kind of home for me. We went to a flea market and I bought a present for a friend, asked for the price, was asked if I need a bag, etc. Just a normal conversation. But an eye-opener to me: In Thessaloniki where I was living I couldn't conduct those simple conversations. I did not have all the words and every conversation, even only to buy a coffee, was still stressful.

In Paris I could meet people, could communicate, could ask, could tell - and could understand the city and the people better. And through my language, people accepted me more and saw in me more than a German, they saw me.

In 2010 my best friend moved to Australia. Great: I am afraid of flying, I am disgusted by snakes and I could not speak English very well. She knew that and I remember like today how she tried to tell me gently that the wedding would be in Australia.

I survived the flights, I never saw a snake in the wild, but: I spoke very broken English. Of course I had English at school, but I never had any other contact with that language. In 1992 when I finished school, not everything was in English, the internet wasn't accessible yet and so it happened that I went in 2010 to Australia with the most wonderful German school English one can imagine. Fortunately Australians are lovely people and had a lot of patience with me. Fortunately my friend's husband is now part of my family and we have to speak English. Fortunately I was able to visit them again in 2012 and a third time in 2015 and could improve my English skills.

When in 2015 the refugees arrived in Munich at the main station, I had just come back from Australia and had enough self-confidence to speak English. That I also speak French was a reason why I could communicate with many people there, why the whole story began and why I ended up in Greece.

Language thus not only as identity but also as a game changer.

But back to Australia: I have been altogether only for four months there, but I travelled a lot, I met new people. When I was there the last time in 2019 I visited all of my friends over there in Adelaide, Brisbane and Melbourne. It also became part of my identity. My friend's two boys (born in 2013 and 2016) are part of my family, I am part of theirs and they know only English.

One of my friends, when in 2019 we did a beautiful three day road trip together from Brisbane to Sydney couldn't get over it: "Look at you, when you came the first time you could not even express the easiest things and now we can speak about everything."

Well, English was also the language we had to speak here in Thessaloniki until I could speak Greek. It was the “crutch”, the third language in order to communicate with the people. My first seminar in English put me in a panic. Now I do it very casually and have my protestant church community in which from time to time I lead the service, in English, like everyone else.

Well, actually I prefer to speak, to teach and to lead workshops in Greek. It is my daily language, the language I speak with my friends, with the lady at the bakery, with my doctors, with the auto garage, the craftsmen.

It was a long journey: 2,5 years learning on my own, every morning. And since 2020 weekly, sometimes more, lessons with a teacher who is creating such interesting lessons that I don't think about stopping them. Since 2024, after 7 years of learning Greek, I feel kind of exhausted from being all the time in a “learning mode” and decided to do my lessons only every second week. But I still love them; now we are discussing poems, reading longer texts, I am still writing and learning useful words and grammar.

With the language I am much more part of the communities, of groups, of the city. I can understand everything when people are discussing, I can read - from graffiti to handouts - what people are expressing. I can express myself, I am understandable.

People say that everyone has one language for their feelings. I don't. For most of my life it was of course German. When I moved to Greece and everything happened in English it became English. And now it is Greek. I am speaking with my friends about my feelings, I am expressing my feelings to my therapist - in Greek. In my dreams I am speaking every one of my four languages, I think mostly Greek and German, then English and then French. Maybe this is also how my identities are.

When I was in Thessaloniki for three months in 2017, I was working with an organisation which later became also one of my jobs and in which I found many of my friends. Then I was going with some staff and some volunteers every day to a refugee camp and as we discussed what I was working at and what I studied and what could imagine doing when moving to Thessaloniki, the one responsible for the finances and more wanted to speak with me. Now she is a good friend, then I did not know her. Today from time to time we laugh about the moment when she came out of the office in the room we shared with other organisations, sat beside me and said: “For a start: Are you from France?” and I laughed and said “almost”, knowing that my English accent is very German and not at all French.

Just the other day we spoke about the situation and I asked her (maybe for the second or third time): “But why did you think I was French?” and she replied “I don't know, there were discussions in the office. Some people said you were French, one said you were German, but you weren't like the other Germans that came to help in the camp, so we just discussed it and then I thought I had to finally ask you.”

Sometimes today people still ask me if I am French, and I always tell them that I grew up almost in France, but actually in Germany. Some people say that my accent in Greek is not typical German, that it also could be French. I never heard a French accent in Greek, so I need to trust them.

I like it when it happens. It just shows me that I am Verena and not only “a German”, “a migrant”, “a foreigner” or some other label. It reflects my identity that I think is not

one-dimensional. And shows that my language as well as my identity has many influences.

Sometimes I am looking for a word. And then it doesn't come in any language. These situations are kind of tricky. People try to help me then, saying "say it in English (German / Greek / French)". But sometimes my brain doesn't work in any language at all. If it only comes in one language I can find the translation in one of my dictionaries: I have one for Greek-German, one for English-German and one for French-German. If I need a word in English but it just comes out in Greek, I have to translate it from Greek to German and then from German to English.

Yeah, you are right, there should be a better solution. The good thing is that usually during that procedure the word comes to my mind.

Every language has its own benefits. Not every word exists in each of my languages. And every language is on a certain level of equality. In Germany, people have been fighting for years to have gender equality in the language. To use correct terms. Of course there are always people who say, "it is only the language", but luckily there are many people saying "language forms the thinking". And so they are striving continuously for the replacement of eg "gypsy" with "Sinti and Roma", "disabled people" with "people with disabilities" (more in a following chapter about that), and first of all including female professions / status, or even better finding new words in order to also include people who are nonbinary. In English this problem does not exist so much, as many words, professions etc. are gender neutral. In Greece I suffered a shock when I understood that still most of the professions are in the male form for both genders. That it is not common to include the female/non-binary form if you direct to a group, that everything is only in the male form. Even young people look strange at me when I am using both genders. At the toilet when there is no key, we are knocking at the door. From inside you can hear *άλλος* [allos], in English translated with "someone else", but in the male form. I was discussing it the other day with a friend, as I am always using the *άλλη* [alli], the female form of it. That (male) friend did not know that women are also using the male form. His thought was that maybe the *άλλος* is referring to the noun *άνθρωπος* [anthropos], human, which is male. Maybe that's how it is. For me it is first of all interesting that no one in no age is questioning it.

To be honest, it is quite difficult to write with gender equality - or even neutrally - in Greek, the adjectives and pronouns change, the grammar is very complicated, and even people who have been trying for years to write in a more gender equal language confess that it is not easy.

In Germany, people are also speaking now gender neutrally although many people refuse to do it. But at least it is possible. I also do it when speaking German. In Greek it is almost (if not completely) impossible. It would really need a huge effort to change it. And even though I am in a bubble of people who care about it and who are using gender equal language as much as possible, it is difficult. At least they support me in using some new female words that don't exist (yet).

I am sure in some decades they will exist. We only need to use it and to spread it that way. A society is how it is, the language only represents the society and the culture of the country.

Every language is the key to a culture. I am glad I have some keys.

I am sad for everyone who lost a language, who began to hate a language due to certain circumstances. I remember reading many times about Jews who after the Holocaust refused to speak the "language of the perpetrators".

I am glad for everyone who is growing up with different languages, happy for everyone who begins the hard journey with a new language.

I said "I will not move anymore to a country in which I don't know the language". And I mean it, as I know how hard it is besides being beautiful if you reach a certain level. But who knows...

One thing is sure and everyone should know:

If someone puts so much effort into learning a language, into getting into a new part of their identity, there are some things that are not nice to do.

For example: my friends know that I like it when they correct me. Some people know how to do it in a very good way (confirm what I said wrong but repeat it in the right way. This is how I learned a lot. Correcting only when it doesn't stop the conversation, correcting afterwards... there are different people and different ways). But it was very strange the other day when I was in my local bakery owned by a Pontic Greek from Georgia (then USSR). She has become a kind of friend and years ago she told me how she learned Greek when she came at 18 years old to Thessaloniki. I don't remember what I said to her, but I remember that another woman who was there corrected me. Seriously?? That woman could not keep it private that I made a mistake in the conversation with a friend?

For people who are struggling with their self-confidence it can be really difficult. Luckily the baker knows me well and we could laugh later in the text messages we shared.

Another example: imagine you learned a language and you are speaking it at a high level in the country where it is spoken. And people you don't know only on learning what your mother tongue is, begin to say the two words they know in your mother tongue (usually good morning, good evening, I love you. Usually with mistakes.) And YOU have to tell THEM how well they are speaking your mother tongue...

I am so tired of it... and it happens so often in Greece as almost everyone knows someone from the family in Germany.

I never thought about doing this in Germany with people. I never had the impulse to tell them the few words I know in Turkish, Spanish or Russian, only because I learned them once and still know some words. In their country of course. But not in Germany when they speak German very well. Even if they only spoke some words, I encouraged them, instead of showing my own few words in their mother tongue. If we meet in a third country, then ok. In Australia of course I spoke with the Greeks Greek. In Georgia with Swiss people French.

I am not very smart or quick when it comes to learning languages. I don't have talent, I need to counterbalance it with a lot of diligence and work. Maybe that's why I am very sensitive when it comes to the level I achieved.

People who understand me and agree are usually people who have also built up their life from zero in another country and learned the language from scratch.

So it is very difficult for me when I am speaking for the first time with someone, and only because of my accent or a little mistake they begin speaking English with me.

I found some strategies. One is to reply in French. Another is to say (in Greek): “Bravo, you are speaking English. I also know some foreign languages.”

In French or English speaking countries I don’t feel the same way. In these languages that I learned at school and in life I am not so sensitive, there is not so much disappointment about my mistakes.

Language is identity and to criticise my language I guess is to criticise my identity.

Maybe this is why I am trying to get better and better and to make fewer and fewer mistakes and why I cannot stop going to my Greek lessons.



Picture of the family of my mother in Eastern Europe. Mid-60s



Me as "Ukranian girl". Carnival 1980s

Reading is identity

The first book I read in Greek was during the first Covid-19 lockdown in Spring 2020 and it was borrowed from a friend: *Sofie's World* by Jostein Gardner. A long and kind of complicated book one may think, but actually as many words from philosophy are of Greek origin and as I had read it more than once in German, it was quite easy to read.

It was such a joy after three years in a country where I was living but where I could not yet read books.

My first time in a Greek bookshop with the aim of buying a Greek book, some months later when the bookshops opened again, is unforgettable for me. Before I was going to bookshops in order to buy a language learning book, a children's or an English book or to buy notebooks and so on. That time I went in order to find a book for me.

I am still happy every time I begin or finish a book in the Greek language. I still cannot believe that I am now able to read books in four languages.

Reading is identity and reading is for me one of the most important things in my life. I would be happy to say that I remember how I began reading. Unfortunately I don't have any memories.

I must have been a very shy child at the age of 5/6, and when I expressed that I wanted to go to school, everyone was very surprised as I did not speak and was walking only on tip-toes. I guess I wanted to have my own space and I would like to believe that the desire to read and write was also a part of it. As I was very small, very shy and had just turned six, no one had thought of it, but luckily my parents began the procedure and so I began school in Summer 1979.

My first memories about reading are that I was reading everything that I could find. Books of course, but also the headlines of the newspaper, the text on the milk carton or the water bottle on the table, the signs in the streets and the shops.

When I came to Greece and had learned the Greek alphabet, I needed to close my eyes when we were going to the camp every day with the van, because I could not read quickly enough and my need to read everything maddened me.

I grew up in a household with many books. My father was a passionate reader and he took care that we children also grew up with books.

I still have the first book that he bought for me when I began reading. I still remember the day when we bought it in one of the two bookshops the little town had. I still know the first pages by heart. And I remember how proud I was as there stood only my name in it. Usually all four names of the children were written on the first page of the book as an *Ex libris*.

Later I learned to use a library and I remember taking books from two libraries and simultaneously collecting my own books at the flea markets where we used to go in summer with the whole family.

I even had a list (here my compulsive side comes through) in which I wrote how often I read the books, some of them tens of times.

Later I went to bookshops wherever I was going. In different cities in Germany, in Paris, in Australia, in Austria, at stations and airports. Especially at stations before a train trip. These have been the best book purchases, because I knew I would have time on the train ride to read - happy times before the mobile phones and mobile data. When a friend of mine opened a bookshop in Paris, I was in heaven.

To leave Paris with the night train after spending time there with my friends and on my own was always difficult. I loved the language and the fact that I did not need to think, I just spoke French as I spoke German. And I read French books in the same way as I was reading German books. And in order not to feel “homesick” too much, I was always (always! Without exception) reading a book that I had bought in Paris. I liked the situations in the trains, when people don’t really speak to each other just because they are together in a six-person-bunk-bed-compartment, but they spoke French (or English) with me when they saw the French book. I loved to speak German fluently and without an accent when the German conductors came and asked for the tickets after arriving on the German part of the trip.

I always felt so bilingual and cosmopolitan, and the book helped me to feel that way on one hand and to show it to other people on the other hand. It sounds a bit childish, I know, but it was exactly what I needed: to have these two identities: Munich and Germany where I used to live, French books and Paris where I was also at home and where I always could imagine a life. As it wasn’t possible at that moment to move to Paris, at least through the French book I could live this part of my identity.

Whenever I went abroad for holidays, I bought books in English or French and it made me not only feel more at home but also always expressed a part of my identity. Now I can also read Greek books and it was not only a practical thing (of course Greek books are the most accessible books for me now), but also a question of identity. Like in the trains back from Paris I love it now, when travelling alone, to take out my Greek book on a beach, in a restaurant or wherever I am. I know inside that I am feeling Greek, but I want to show it also to others. Like in the train with the French books I am not proud of it that I need this, but if I am honest, I need to make my Greek identity visible.

Often people ask me if I only speak Greek or if I also read and write. “Yeaaaaaaah”, I reply then with a big smile, as I am so happy about it.

And then I explain that I am anyhow an optical type and without reading and writing I would not be able to memorise words or any grammar and that reading books means that I am improving my Greek.

As I am facing the question of which language I am dreaming or thinking in, if I am not missing speaking in German, I was asking myself how I could do psychotherapy in Greek and so on, and couldn’t answer until recently.

Actually I realised that of course I like writing to and reading from my German friends in our mother tongue. But I don’t have the need to communicate (speaking) at all. I have the need to watch movies in German (in order to relax) - and I have a big, big

need to read German books, more than any other form of using my mother tongue. This is my German identity: reading books in German.

Is it possible to have various identities? I mean, without being mentally ill or dysfunctional. To identify myself with every language I am reading. Every language at its time. German when I am at home and am trying to withdraw for a while from the world and all the challenges I am facing. Reading in English because one part of me is in Australia and is international and I am identifying myself as a European and a human being that has met so many people from so many parts of the world. Reading in French, because I have felt so much at home in Paris and I experienced this language as a second language that became my second mother tongue. And, of course, reading Greek, because I am a Thessalonikan and I want to feel it as often as possible and - yes, I confess it - I want to show it to everyone.

I love my different identities and I feel them most when I am reading. Reading is so much identity, wherever I am going and wherever I am.



*Me in our garden (around 1984).
Since I learned reading, I was always in love with books.*

My first border experiences

As a member of a family of six in the seventies with not so much money, I did not travel a lot as a child. Actually we only did two big holidays, both with the little Renault 4 (unimaginable today to have 4 children on the back seat without any safety stuff) we had. Both have been kind of road trips from youth hostel to youth hostel. One to the Baltic Sea and one to Lake Constance (which is beside Germany, Austria and Switzerland). We went to Switzerland for some hours, but I remember only how we wanted to buy Swiss chocolate and as we did not have enough Swiss money the guy in the store said in a - for us very funny - accent "so I give it for free to you as a memory to Switzerland.", a sentence that we imitated in Swiss German many times afterwards. I don't remember borders, as there weren't any borders in my childhood. We did not travel a lot, only in the region.

But "the region" included the neighbouring country of France. So close to our city, we were going from time to time to the City of Wissembourg, the little city on the other side of the borders where we were living, to Strasbourg or to the beautiful cities and villages of Alsace.

From these excursions, I have some memories concerning borders, and I guess these experiences have been very important for my life and how I see the world - and the borders in it that are becoming more and more important in the world instead of disappearing.

One of my early memories about these trips to another country just around the corner is that I was wondering, out of the typical child's curiosity, what that country would look like. And I remember something between disappointment and surprise that everything looked alike: they had houses as we had. They had trees as we had. They wore trousers or skirts and sweaters and jackets just as we did. They had adults and children and dogs and forests and streets and - wait, the signs were slightly different. It was the time, in the eighties, when the EEC (European Economic Community) had already existed for more than 20 years with France and Germany as founding members. For us children the fact that there were "green borders" where you could cross without being checked was something we found both: exciting and frightening.

With my family background in Eastern Europe the Berlin wall was a kind of a personal thing and therefore more serious than it maybe was for others. My mother's birthday is the day after the National Holiday (until 1990 when the "German Unity Day" on the 3rd of October became the National Holiday) on the 17th of July. This day was the East German uprising of 1953 with strikes and demonstrations against the socialist unity party government that was violently suppressed by soviet tanks. It happened before the Berlin wall was built (in 1961), but for some reason I always connected it with the wall and the borders between the two German countries.

On one hand borders were a serious thing and on the other hand we crossed the borders easily every time, showing that we have passports with us, but without being seriously checked.

One day we wanted to go to Strasbourg which is a little farther south (a one hour drive), and on the way we realised that one of my brothers was still wearing his slippers. I know there is a picture with us in front of the cathedral with one of my brothers wearing slippers.

I like the story because it is not only about forgetting your shoes, it shows how little we realised that we would be going to another country, we just went around the corner.

Of course there was a feature that showed us that we were in a different country: The language.

As I said we learned French from the first days of school, my brothers even in kindergarten. But this wasn't of course enough to communicate with the people. In Alsace in those days most of the people knew French, German, and their dialect, the Alsatian, which was somehow close to the dialect from where I grew up, that I never spoke but that I can understand. I remember some embarrassing situations when I wanted to show off my little French and how they answered in German. Reminds you of something? Yes, so many years after moving to Thessaloniki and with C1 Greek: People realise that you are a foreigner and they begin to speak English with you.

I think these are the real borders, the borders we have in our minds.

When I used to study in Linz / Austria (on the weekends or for a full week somewhere in Austria) I was the only foreigner. Apart from me, most of the students were from the city or around, but also two women from Vienna who had a longer journey. The train then from Munich to Vienna took five hours. Linz was exactly in the middle of that trip. I remember how one of the women from Vienna said that the journey was so long and that she admired me for taking such a long way to the university. First I did not get it and then I told her that I had the same journey as her.

She could not believe it and when she realised that I was right she commented "This is what borders are doing. It is the borders we have in our minds and immediately it feels further than it is."

There are the borders we have in our minds, but for me what stayed in my mind from my childhood experiences was: people are all the same in a similar setting, only the language is different.

Later I realised of course that culture, behaviour, rules, religion and more make the difference. Maybe I don't care so much because I still have in my mind: "Oh, look: the same houses, trees, cats and trousers."

Later in high school we went with my friends by bus to the next French city in order to drink coffee in a certain café, to buy magazines and books, to go to the cinema and to feel very cosmopolitan. It was just a little after the Maastricht Treaty (The Treaty on European Union) was signed in February 1992 when we finished our highschool diploma and the borders between France and Germany were open anyhow - as well as all the other European borders of the countries which had been included in the contract.

Today there are trains every half an hour crossing the borders to France as I saw when I moved to Munich in 1992 and went to visit that region. Today, sitting in the train, you don't even understand that you are crossing the borders.

As this change to have open borders did not happen overnight, I remember many trips which we took with my youth group to many European countries and with many partner groups in the years 1987-1992, where we were just waved through the borders.

It was exciting in 1989 going into Norway to have the border police in our bus full of young people from France and Germany, to get stamps in our passports and on our hands and to really feel that we were crossing the border.

The first time I actually experienced borders was in 1993 when I went to - Switzerland. Something really funny as the father of my friend used to live in Germany just on the other side and was going every day to work on the Swiss side, on the other side of the Rhine river.

I thought it would be the same situation as I knew from the French border of my childhood.

It wasn't.

It was the first time in my life that I had to show my passport seriously. It was checked. It took a while. I became nervous. They even spoke our language, but it was a real checkpoint with real border police. I was shocked. I remember how I thought (1992, I was 19 years old!) "Wow, that's what borders are". And I remember that I was pissed off because I did not understand why they had to make a big fuss about me crossing the borders.

Maybe this is why I never understood the concept of borders.

In addition I understood very early in primary school that borders are ephemeral. The city I grew up in was German then. But it became French for the first time 1648, not even 200 years after its foundation. 1701-1714 During the War of the Spanish Succession (1701-1714) it became German then French and again and again. It was French during the French Revolution in 1789 and only from 1815 did it become German again (well, Austrian and then Bavarian and then in 1871 part of the German Empire).

I grew up thus with the knowledge that at another time in the same place I would have been French.

When I moved to Munich, I was again close to borders, this time with Austria. 80 km away you are in Austria, many times I was on mountains with one foot in Austria and the other in Germany. For my friends who grew up in Munich or around Austria was like France for me: the other country around the corner. And as it was for me the French franc, for them it was the Austrian schilling: just another currency, but we knew how to count it and we always had some of it at home.

I never got used to the Austrian schilling and fortunately after four years living in Munich, in 2022, we did not only have borders anymore, we also did not have to count anymore.

I remember the first week of 2022:

I went on the 3rd of January to visit my friends in Paris. When I came back the next day I went to Austria where I was studying at that time on weekend courses. Three countries in ten days without showing my passport and one currency with which I was paying my coffee in Paris, my bread in Munich and my tuition fee in Linz.

My border experiences from my childhood until I came to Greece for the first time (so the years 1973-2016) were easy ones.

That strongly changed when I moved to Thessaloniki.



When I got a new passport, I asked to validate it in order to keep it, as it has the stamps from two countries out of the Schengen area that I love so much: Australia and Georgia. I am and will always be aware of the privilege I have with this German passport.

Borders...

I signed for two weeks of voluntary work in a refugee camp in Turkey. After almost two months at the train station in Munich welcoming refugees and my work in two camps I was looking for something different. I discovered an organisation from Munich which was cooking for refugees in Chios and later ran a camp on the Turkish side was looking for volunteers. As I was free in May 2016 to go wherever they wanted me, I signed in during February 2016.

On 18th of March the European Union-Turkey deal on refugees was announced. One of the consequences of that deal was that every non-governmental camp in Turkey was evicted - so was the one which the organisation I wanted to work with ran. In April 2016 their camp did not exist anymore, the people had to go to one of the big state refugee camps - and I had two spare weeks.

Asking the people from the organisation if I could be somewhere helpful, they said "Go to Greece, they need help in Idomeni".

I had heard about Idomeni. Of course. As a map lover I know where Greece was, I confess that FYROM ("Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia") I heard for the first time.

Thessaloniki was a name I had heard - maybe. I mean except for the bible with the 1st and 2nd Thessalonians book. No clue about those borders and that region of Northern Greece - I admit.

In a nutshell: I wrote an email to the pastor of the German protestant church in Thessaloniki with whom I was speaking a couple of weeks earlier about a project idea. She offered me a room for the two weeks, friends gave me the number of a guy in Thessaloniki who speaks German - and this was enough for me to book the flights.

The second day in Thessaloniki, I already got to know an organisation that I was until 2024 part of, with them I was going every day to Idomeni camp at the borders to FYROM, today Northern Macedonia.

So now we can speak about borders: Two fences, dogs, military, border police, machine guns...

In May 2016 Europe had closed its borders and people who are displaced got trapped again.

And this is how it is today: people fleeing their countries because of war or poverty (caused by the climate crisis or capitalism) are trying to come to Europe. But the European borders are either killing them or are putting them daily in a difficult and life-threatening situation. I don't want to speak about other countries like Italy, Spain, Belarus, Croatia, Hungary... Only about my country, about Greece:

People are dying in the sea and at the land borders in the north-east of Greece at the Evros river. They are beaten when they are (illegally) pushed back to Turkey. They are frightened when they are pushed back from the coastguard in their flimsy boats. They

are trying to come to Thessaloniki from the borders (400km), often by walking, only to get caught by the police and to get caught by the police and to get pushed back to Turkey, sometimes again and again.

These borders between Turkey to Greece are more difficult to cross with every month. And I understand more and more that my experiences with borders are so special. I remember when I came in 2016 to work in Idomeni camp, one day someone said "and especially in this region which is so tricky". I did not understand it. Later, when I learned a bit more about Greek history, I understood that this area was kind of like my hometown, once part of this, then of that country.

The borders with Turkey are a special thing. People my age or even younger tell me how they grew up closer to the borders and with the omnipresent threat of Turkey. Turkey from time to time puts its flag on inhabited islands, and comes into Greek territorial waters.

Between Greece and Turkey there are no international waters, as the territorial sea from Turkey doesn't exceed the statutory 12 nautical miles, so here is Turkey - and the next wave immediately Greece.

The president of Turkey is thinking from time to time aloud that some Greek islands might perhaps be Turkish. Greek people always feel unsafe with regard to Turkey, and somehow I can understand it better after some years in Greece. But of course we speak about politics, so every action causes a reaction by the politicians of the other country and so on. Greek politicians also cultivate that hate and often react in an (in my opinion) improper way. Political games are so dangerous because they help to grow the borders in the minds of people.

I met more Turks, I learned more Turkish, we had more Turkish shops in Munich than I met, learn and see here in Thessaloniki, 3 ½ hours away from Turkey. These borders in the mind of people is so strong here that it is even hard for me not to get into it.

When I came to Thessaloniki and to Idomeni camp in 2016, I fell in love with the city and the people. As we know that sometimes difficult situations can bring people together and make them feel absurdly well, I wanted to verify if it was the rough situation but in it the solidarity I experienced in Idomeni camp, or if it really was the people and the city. And so I came back in August 2016 for three weeks, working in a camp and in different projects again with people who are displaced.

It was the city, it was the people. And so... yes: I came back from January to March 2017 - until I finally decided to leave everything behind and to take the step of moving to Thessaloniki.

Every time I had to leave, I was devastated. I did not want to leave the place which I unconsciously knew that would be my new home. Every time I said "I have to go to Germany". I was expressing my feelings and at the same time I realised every time I said this sentence that it was inappropriate: Thessaloniki was full of people who wanted to go to Germany. For them it was impossible, because they did not have a (or the right) passport: people from Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, from different countries which they had to leave due to the situation they were in. They had family members in Germany who made it in Summer 2015 when the borders were open for

a couple of weeks. They heard (often wrong, but I don't want to write about that now) different things about Germany, and it was their hope, their dream, their reason to wake up in the morning to make it there one day. And I said "I have to go to Germany". For me it wasn't a dream, it was the opposite. But I didn't want to offend anyone.

When I could not speak Greek during the first years and we spoke English with each other, I was confronted with the question "where are you from" and with the bright eyes that showed their dreams and expectations when they heard the word "Germany" and thought of the paradise they expected.

I am glad that no one understands now immediately where I used to live the first 44 years of my life, but I promised to myself that I would never again say "I have to go to Germany" because my passport allows me to live here in Greece or there in Germany - or in many other countries. I just have to choose and then everything is possible.

After a couple of weeks living in Thessaloniki, in autumn 2017, I went with a group of people from one of my organisations to a project meeting in Tirana. The borders with Albania these days are now more protected than before 2015, as the Balkan route has been the preferred one of people who are displaced to go further to middle and northern Europe.

We arrived by bus, all the passengers, among them our group, 7 Greeks and me, had to leave the bus, gave our passports - and waited. In the area between Greece and Albania. For me it was the first time in my life that I had been in such a situation. Even entering Australia is different, as you just wait to cross the "blue line", but coming from Europe you only have to apply online for the visa, they check your passport, your visa and that's it. Like a normal arrival at any airport.

A very strange feeling In no man's land without a passport between two foreign languages as I did not speak more than 100 words of Greek (well, I guess less, a little bit more than Albanian, in any case not enough to understand the border police).

I felt for the first time that I never will understand how people feel who flee their country and don't know how to continue their way further. Without papers, without language, without any security.

I cannot imagine what it is like to be dependent on the goodwill of others in order to survive. Dependent on people who know the way, the language, how to cross borders. On the way back they also asked us to open our suitcases and backpacks - for no reason, only because they enjoyed making our life difficult (was my feeling).

People who are displaced at every border are stopped by border police or the military, by people who want to make them stop and who want to make their life difficult.

Today, the borders of Europe are more closed than ever. "Extended measures" are announced in Germany and in Austria, and European politicians celebrate the Greek government's crackdown. The right to apply for asylum comes second, first is the "protection of the borders".

And then the opposite: the borders between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland (before Brexit 2020). I crossed them in Summer 2019 by train, going from Dublin to Belfast. So many fights, so many deaths, so much pain, so many differences

between these two countries, this one country: two governments, two currencies, even two languages.

And this was when I understood that I made it to Northern Ireland: when the street- and town signs weren't in English and Gaelic anymore.

In Belfast there is still a wall between the Protestant and the Catholic area. Of course today you can cross it, but it still exists.

When driving through the green and beautiful Irish landscape I was thinking that hopefully it will not be possible again to have these borders anymore going through the island.

I always love to cross borders. I love it when I still can see the buildings, the signs, the past, but to walk along as I am doing in the streets of my daily life.

It is unfair that I can do it in Europe, that I can do it easily with my passport, and that my friends from eg South Africa cannot. They need a visa for different countries. And the people who applied for asylum cannot go anywhere anymore. Neither back to their country, nor further, as they have to wait for their approval.

I did not do anything to deserve my European passport more than anyone else. All I did was to be born in Germany.

All I needed to do was to bring a picture, to wait a little and to pay 80 €.

And the same in 10 years again.

The first time I had difficulties with my passport was recently in 2023, as I couldn't go to Germany in order to apply for my new passport, and I needed to do it at the German consulate in Thessaloniki. It caused some difficulties, I made an appointment at the consulate, they told me I had to speak with the office in Munich, they told me the consulate has to apply for something from them, so I made another appointment at the consulate... But I always knew we would find a solution.

It is unfair and for some reason I am sitting on the advantaged side this time.

I can travel, I can come back. I can travel to so many countries even without a visa, and for many countries it is very easy to get the visa with my passport.

Not to compare with people from other parts of the world and from countries where it is almost impossible to get a passport.



*May 2016. The camp in the small village of Idomeni at the borders to Northern Makedonia.
Last days before the eviction on 24.5.2016*

Being a traveller, being a voyager

To have a European, a German passport, gives me the opportunity to travel. I have never really been a tourist, I never decided on a map or a travel brochure (back in the days) where to go, somehow the countries always “came to me”.

As described in my youth we travelled to countries and cities where we met other groups. We slept in their group rooms - wherever they were.

I remember that we stayed in one of the three towers in La Rochelle in France, in a room opposite La Sagrada Familia in Barcelona and in other places that were in the middle of cities and societies. This was before Airbnb and before couchsurfing. We just met other groups and they offered us to put our sleeping bags there on the floor as they did when they visited us.

To travel like that helps you to get to know the city, the country and the society much better.

I think this is what shaped my way of travelling. And I was already travelling a lot. Not the way people are doing it usually, but somehow it happened: There are my friends in Paris. There is one of my families in Upper Austria that grew after I met my friend when we studied together in Upper Austria and worked together in Munich. My friend who moved to Australia. There I could visit her already four times. There have been projects in Albania, Italy, Netherlands, Spain. There is my friend with her family who was in Sweden. There was the wedding of one friend in Romania and the other in Georgia. There is my friend in Northern Ireland, some more countries to come as I want to visit friends in Lithuania, Hungary, Denmark, South Africa, New Zealand...

It is so different to travel that way. Even if I was travelling around before and after the weddings, even if I was travelling through Australia (where, during the trips, I met more people and visited them again the next times), I was there for a purpose. It is so different if you say to locals “I am here for a visit” or “I am going to the wedding of my friend and want to see a bit more of the country beforehand.”

When I came Munich in 1992 it was the time of island hopping in Greece for Summer holidays. Especially a group of people I met there who had just graduated from classical High school with Ancient Greek, who were going many years in a row to Greece. They asked me if I would like to come with them, but something held me back. I tried to explain that it is not my way of travelling to be a tourist, but more than “I don’t have the money” did not come out of my mouth (which by the way of course was true, I was a student in the most expensive town then in Germany, how did they do it? I never understood.)

Fun fact: I remember me saying “I will see, maybe there will be a reason one day to go to Greece” - without knowing that this would really happen one day and that I would apply for Greek citizenship.

So actually this way of “travelling” the world brought me to Greece when I came the first time for voluntary work.

The other day a friend told me that she saw a bus with the inscription “voyager” on it. She said that she likes to be a voyager more than a traveller or even a tourist. We spoke about the differences and how much it enriches your life to go deeper into other countries and cultures and to get in touch with the locals.

It is wonderful to travel like that, but it is also sad, because that requires having friends everywhere in the world. And wherever you are, you are missing someone.

I have friends of my age, growing up until their adolescence in East Germany or the Soviet Union. What they were doing unexceptional when they finished school, was travelling. Wherever they wanted. Doing what they could not do during the years of their childhood and what was for their parents a fact that was with them their whole lives.

“Unexceptional” because of course it is these people I got to know, we met at conferences, projects, trips abroad. The ones who don’t have that need or the courage stay at home and I guess I will never meet them.

The more I live in Greece, the more I understand that the experience growing up in that contradiction and conflict between East and West in the years of our childhood shaped our and my view on the world. The borders to Turkey are here a fact with which the locals grew up. I am coming with the experience of a wall in my own country and the immediate experience of the Cold War.

The travel and voyager experiences, the borders and other cultures influenced my growing-up. It also made a collective trauma experience for all of us growing up like that. Maybe that’s why we have this way of travelling in common.



Water-touring with the kayak. Being surrounded by water, being dependent on the weather and the people around me has always been the most beautiful, intense, ecologic and relaxing way of travelling.

(Mecklenburg Lake Plateau, picture from my last (and 3rd) 14days trip on my own 2013)

Cold War

I always feel very old when I realise that the Cold War (as I define it here from the end of World War II in 1945 until the dissolution of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991) is something that I experienced.

I grew up in a strange situation:

On one hand we were a garrison town for the French military. Wherever we went in France during our teen years and said where we were from, people knew that little town that even Germans didn't know. The house of my family was built on a hill and that's where the military trucks practiced the hill starts. There was a city in the city, the French quarter, called "île de France" ("island of France") with the military barracks, the military training area, the military airport, with houses and blocks for the officers who came for longer and brought their families, there was an elementary school, a highschool, a supermarket, a cinema.

On the other hand there was a bilingual kindergarten (German-French) in my elementary school. We had from the beginning classes on French (in the late 70s and the early 80s nothing usual), played in the school yard games in French (my first word was "mouse" because we played a game in which the mouse had to run between the other children in the circle who closed at that circle at a pre-arranged number). I missed the first months in that school because we moved and so I could not count immediately, but I got the word mouse), we baked cake, learned the ingredients in French, we had days together with the French primary school and so on.

So we grew up with France, French and French people as the occupying power (still in 1979 when we moved there as it was the "French zone" after the division between the allies in 1945) and at the same time as our neighbours and friends whom's language we learned.

In a nutshell: when we began to go to the disco we had learned enough French to tell the soldiers, only a couple of years older than us, that we were not interested in any of their advances (that's where I learned swearing in French, not at school).

We grew up with the noise of the American jet planes every single day. Not only once a day. Hours and hours of noise and somehow also fear because often they came really close to the houses and sometimes they broke the sound barrier and it was a sudden noise that I still can feel. The American base Ramstein wasn't far away from my hometown, the "American zone" the allies formed. This was "our side", the Western side of the cold war that we experienced vividly.

But there was also the "East side" of the Cold War, even in my country. And there was the "East side" in my family.

My mother grew up with a Ukrainian mother who had to come as a forced labourer during national socialism. She came - as far as I know - as a young woman from Lviv to the North of Germany to work. After the end of the war she began working at a British military base close to Hamburg.

There she met her husband, my grandfather (whom I saw - or have been shown to - only once when he was lying in a dark room, my mother always said "he has been dying since I was born"). He deserted from the Red Army and defected to the British Army with which he then was in the North of Germany and worked after 1945 in that military base where they met.

The story of both of them is a very dark and unclear thing to me. My mother experienced through this family frame and some later difficulties between her parents etc. a lot of traumatic situations and did not want to / could not speak about it.

I am beginning now to discover the "East side" of my family . In Greece. With a Ukrainian friend who grew up in Russia. With the invasion of Russia in Ukraine. With my preference for pickled gherkins, raw onions, potato salad with a lot of mayonnaise and with a heart that, every time I go to the "Russian" shop that is luckily around the corner, feels at home.

I always thought I would end up in an East-European country, but then it became Greece. But still with the "Russian" shop around the corner (to which btw I am actually going in order to buy Georgian food that I love so much).

I remember that we sent parcels to - well, where? Not to East-Germany as we did not know people there. I guess to Poland, to Ukraine? But I don't know to whom, don't know if I still have family there.

It wasn't important enough to ask and of course it was too much taken up by the trauma my mother is living with and never worked on.

When I was about to study in 1992/93 I wanted to become a camerawoman. There were three or four schools back in the day. One of those I considered is in Potsdam, close to Berlin, but "in the East", as Germans still (34 years after the fall of the Berlin wall) say.

My mother freaked out and said that she would not let me go there, "in the East". She was speaking in earnest. "You never know, imagine you are living there and then the Russians build a wall again."

This fear I guess is something that many Germans still had for many years, even after the ending of the Soviet Union.

And somehow now with the invasion of Russia in Ukraine we see that it is a big power that is dangerous.

Do I express that because I grew up in the Cold War?

Do I say that because I grew up with grandparents and a mother with that background? I am wondering how the Cold

War affected us so much as we grew up with it.

I remember the idea of the "red telephone" we heard about: that the Russian and the American presidents have that phone line. As a child it was something very spooky: they didn't have to dial a number (I am speaking about the phones of the 70s and 80s on which dialing was a time-consuming thing), they only lifted the receiver and were able to speak with each other.

As I knew they were in a cold war, but actually in a war, so I tried to imagine as a child which situation could come up one would call the other. Maybe only to say "The Cold War is getting hot now".

And red was also the button with which they could send the long range missiles.

I always loved maps and so I was checking the map, checking where to find America and Russia. I saw that we were quite in the middle - and of course I was afraid as in my lively imagination I saw them crashing right above us and destroying everything around us, including ourselves.

When I heard the American jets every day, I was afraid.

We grew up with something that was too big for us.

I also remember the "Easter marches" that were organised by the peace movement in Germany. Even in my small town there were enough people and the environment in which I grew up was active enough for me to know about it, to be informed very young and to join them.

"Make peace without weapons" (orig.: Frieden schaffen ohne Waffen) was the slogan of the movement which was against the armament of both sides. I liked the idea as a child and an adolescent. I found it understandable. I did not really understand the conflict between "East" and "West".

There were the French children with whom we had joined for sport lessons at highschool. There were the American jets, the British army base in which my grandparents met and there was my Russian grandfather.

Of course I felt the closest to France. So close - geographically but also through personal contact as my grandparents have not been present..

I did not really understand it, even when I got a bit older. For me it was kind of a personal relief when the wall fell and at least Germany was one country.

For me, Europe (the European Union) is a personal love, a hope, a concept that is the opposite of my childhood years.

I took it almost personally when in 2015 the Eastern-European countries refused to work together for the good of the refugees who arrived, I almost took it personally when Great Britain voted for Brexit and I had tears in my eyes when I arrived in Georgia in Summer 2022 and saw the European flags at the airport. I understand the different approach of Greek people towards the EU, but through this, I also got to learn my love for the European Union better from the background of my childhood..

As a child I understood that we need to work together, that - as we had sport lessons together and went together for a two weeks ski camp - we have to learn different languages in order to understand each other, but that it is much more important to be open and interested in others (independent from the name that may sound strange, from the language and maybe an accent, or the passport).

As an adult I still don't understand why there must always be "two sides". Naive, but I am questioning it. Always. again and again.

For many years and decades I did not realise how much I have been affected by these two sides in which I grew up, only with a distance from Greece I can understand better how much the Cold War was a part of my and our daily life.

The Cold War brought many difficult situations to the people. A lot of fear, and in 1986 a very significant event that was made worse through the political situation which Europe and the world was in.



In 2000 when I visited my friend in Berlin, we did a lot of “selfies” (with my camera on top of a coffee tin). Here in front of the “Red City Hall” (German: Rotes Rathaus) in (East) Berlin. She grew up on the other side of the wall and we met 9 years later, in 1998, at a conference in Italy. We became friends immediately and we are still. Every year on German Unity Day (3.10.) we exchange messages because without the end of the Cold War we never would have met.

Chernobyl

In January 2020 there was that virus that suddenly brought us and the whole world into the middle of a pandemic. A pandemic that is still going on. People were wondering how to explain it to children that they cannot hug other children, their grandparents, neighbours and friends anymore. The virus and the danger is invisible. We cannot see it and we are not used to an “invisible” enemy. Not only the children, but also we, the adults.

Somehow it is funny that it is so difficult for us – we are so used to having wireless internet everywhere, to sending documents to the printer some rooms away, we are listening to music with a Bluetooth speaker in one room and the player in another, we are even sitting in trains (and planes) and are checking and replying to emails, listening to music, watching movies, checking the news of the day.

Very rarely are we thinking about that, we just take it for granted – and only a few people are discussing that it is not healthy to be exposed to the radiation.

When I moved to Thessaloniki, there was already the opportunity to watch the German TV stations online, to read German newspapers online, to buy German books for the tablet, to speak in a video call with my friends anywhere in the world.

I was thinking how much moving to another country changed during the last decades and how much easier it is: besides the beautiful things such as friends, books and movies, also the organisational aspect like doing your taxes declaration online, getting and sending money with e-banking etc.

Personally, I am sure that the danger caused by Wifi is not bigger than the environmental problems and threats we are facing.

And I think since the beginning of the pandemic it could help many people since the beginning of the pandemic to understand the invisible threat of the virus: We are used to invisible “forces”.

In 1986, when I was 13, some days before Pentecost, we were preparing ourselves for the 4 days camp we wanted to go to with my youth group, when on the 29th of April, we learned about the nuclear accident in Chernobyl.

The 1980's had already brought the danger of the acid rain phenomenon that had been discussed around me. So we already knew that nature could bring bad things. I grew up in a very aware environment, so we knew about harmful substances in the rain, about the ozone hole, both invisible dangers, but somehow noticeable by the rain and the sun.

What happened then was a shock for us. We could not go camping. They said the soil, the rain and the air were polluted. Radiation through mushrooms, the sand boxes for the children, the fruits, through everything could make us sick.

How could it make us sick to play in the meadow?

The days looked the same as they looked before the Soviet Union decided to inform Europe and the world that there had been that unbelievable (but still believable) accident.

I feel how the children felt when they learned about Covid. An invisible enemy.

This enemy was already around us and we did not know it as the situation in the world and then in Ukraine was based on East and West and the idea of being at an advantage and not to talk about the difficulties - even about a nuclear accident. This political situation meant that we were still eating stuff from the already contaminated soil, still playing outside and learning only three days later after the disaster that had happened already on 26th of April. We did not even realise that we had an invisible enemy. On 30th of April Soviet TV showed for the first time a (retouched) photo that we also could see on German TV, only one day later a French exploration satellite brought real but poor pictures and it took a long time to get real pictures from the other side of the "iron curtain".

Right up today, when I go to the Russian supermarket around the corner and I see in the freezer Ukrainian blueberries I cannot imagine eating them. It is a deep traumatic experience that even almost 40 years later my first thought is "contaminated".

As the children today became specialists in Covid, we became specialists in radiation: What can be eaten in a year, in five, in ten... When can we play outside again, for how long will it be impossible to be in the rain outside... We did not know about Wifi, Bluetooth, Covid. We grew up in a visible world with the visible cold war in the streets and in the news with visible actions and audible speeches from the US and from the UdSSR.

I don't want to say that the children today can cope better with the invisible, but it isn't - as it has been for us - that first time that they have heard that there is something invisible that can be harmful and that can change our whole life as we have known it.

When in 2011 the nuclear accident in Fukushima happened, I was speaking with some of my friends from then, from 1986. For me it was a flashback to a childhood trauma which I did not even realise had been a traumatic experience.

It was the first time that I had spoken with my friends about it - then we were too young and later there was no reason to speak about it.

All of them confirmed that it had been a traumatic experience and that the Fukushima accident brought back to them the memories and the pain and fear that it had brought to us. We had been too far away to get seriously hurt, but close enough to understand that the world is complicated and that our lives are fragile and many times other-directed.

And we were old enough to understand that there are issues that are far from borders and from political situations that we need to fight for.



*The news on 29.April 1986 in the ARD, the joint organisation of Germany's regional public service broadcaster. “nuclear fire not under control”.
I don’t remember this specific news, but I remember this picture with the stylised nuclear power plant not too far from us on the map.*



Berries in the “Russian shop” around the corner, I still cannot imagine eating them. Also 33 years later I feel threatened by them.

Ecology flashback

Having grown up in an environment that was very much into green ideas, in the times of the foundation of the Green party in Germany in 1980, as an initiator with some friends of “green activities” like clean ups in the forest and raising consciousness about recycling, vegetarian food, trash and the ozone depletion, I can say about myself that I have been doing ecological activities for more than 35 years.

I never thought about it, as I saw in Germany that the next generation took over that issue. As I saw some kind of a development.

But then I came to Greece.

A flashback to times of my adolescence.

A flashback to times when we went camping with a French youth group and when they brought food cans, and when we were shocked. “We can bury them”, they said to us. And they did not know (then in 1988) why we were shocked.

A flashback to times when in Germany every child learned to know about recycling, about climate change and about the danger of pollution of air, soil and sea.

France very quickly caught up, I was impressed in the years 2000 and following by how far the Netherlands and Sweden had come in facing the climate crisis. When I went to Australia in 2010 for the first time I was impressed by how much effort they went to in order to save water, energy and CO₂. Everywhere in Europe and in the world I could see that people understand - or at least know - about the issue of ecology.

Until 2016 when I came to Greece for the first time.

And in 2017 when I moved to Greece.

It was a shock and a flashback to times of my adolescence concerning the lack of information and concern about environmental issues. “Green values are not shared”, as a friend expressed it euphemistically.

Nobody knows if the recycling bins are really going somewhere where recycling is happening.

No one knows what to put into the recycling bins and no one really cares except from a few people, so it is already mixed up before it is picked up.

The flood of plastic and non-recyclable paper/plastic cups with straws is unbelievable, the same with the single use boxes and cutlery that are given every day to people who are taking “cooked food” home or are ordering food, which everyone does several times a week.

Plastic bags in the supermarkets have now to be paid for, but in every other shop, and not to forget at the big street markets, where most of the people buy their fruit and vegetables once a week, free plastic bags are offered. People are leaving the market with a dozen plastic bags. And many of them are thrown away immediately, only some of them are reused (and, to be honest: how many plastic bags do you need again and again in a lifetime?).

To speak eg about the consumption of meat f.i. is a big mistake, people will laugh at you - as much as they do when I come with my reusable box to take food. I mean, I now have some shops where I can bring my containers or my bag for fruits and vegetables and even for bread, but it is still every time a discussion every time if someone new is working there.

When I give the bag (always the same, I use it only for bread), I am asked every time if I want some paper around the bread. When I reply with “no”, I am asked every single time “Are you sure?”.

Or when I give my container at the “cooked food” shop where they have known me for years now, I am still from time to time asked if I want a plastic bag. Not every time any more, but still.

I would like to say that things have been changing during the last five years.

And really, things have changed since I came for the first time eight years ago and I was in shock about the situation here.

Now more and more people have reusable cups (I insist as a joke that the introduction of these cups came from me who moved with my keep cup to Thessaloniki and I also bought one for 12 friends).

Unforgettable the first time when I asked in a coffee shop for my coffee (with only 4 Greek words of course) they stared at me and said “You want me to put it in here??”. But they did it, and the next day again and also the next. Later they saw my cup and already knew which kind of coffee I wanted. The same happened with the different colours and the different cups and coffee tastes of my friends).

Today I can see more and more people with these cups. More and more coffee shops are selling these cups and even giving discounts if you bring your own. The “more and more” people still are only a few and are around me, as I am surrounded by people who have the same values as I have. I am glad about that because at least no one laughs at me anymore.

But still there are shops where I have to talk about it (luckily now with many more than 4 words of Greek).

I know that these things will not save our planet.

But these are the only things I can do and everyone can do it without doing a big thing or changing the whole life.

I am very thankful for the people with whom I am working and living and who have the same values as I have. The same green values that don't mean only ecology, but also equality on the planet we are sharing.

I am tired of doing “green activities” as I did them already 35 years ago as a teenager. And first of all of these consciousness raising activities that I cannot believe that we still have to do in 2023. I am tired of collecting trash, of explaining and of justifying myself and my values that are not for myself but for the future of the planet.

I am thankful to see that there is a new generation who want to change something in the world. Unfortunately in Greece the movement is very small. But still there are a handful of people and I feel blessed that I can cooperate with them. There are only a few, but they are amazing.

In Germany, a middle European country, I would not have thought twice weather if I would join a climate strike. I am over 50, I am too old. I wouldn't.

Here, for years I was even organising the climate strikes. The Fridays for Future group in Thessaloniki is always about 3-5 people and only 2 active members, so in cooperation with my organisation we were organising it. With my colleague who is even 9 years older than I am. This shows that it isn't a priority.

But it also shows that there are always people who care, and that they are special people, as they really need to be fighters.

There is a network for the trees in the city of which the city council took the decision to cut down more than 4000 in the whole city and 41 in one place that was one of the few kinds of parks.

The network held countless meetings in which I did not join as I don't want to waste my lifetime in many meetings without results. But I have always been active in the activities of the group. There have been many different attempts to stop the municipality from cutting down the trees in the city with the worst air in Europe.

Finally it came to the peak of the whole situation when they began to cut at this "park" and after they had cut six trees we were 8 people there - and still a wonder - could stop them.

Also with a change in the security measures we were able to delay it for four more days - since it came to a situation that is unbelievable for this planet in 2023:

On the fourth morning we knew that they were allowed to cut down the trees and we gathered in order to stop them.

14 of our group sat down and refused to leave the place where the machine wanted to enter in order to cut. The responsible person called the police, then more police, and more - and finally the place was full of police that carried the non-violent protesters away.

A freaky morning.

In succession they had to wait at the police station.

The three people who did not sit down including me, who had documented everything, tried to find lawyers, to organise a gathering in front of the police station, then at the court and in the afternoon at the city hall.

The 14 people are accused of illegal violence.

The last one did not even have his leg in the police car when they already cut the first tree down. And then in a maniac way hundreds of trees in the whole city.

As if they knew that we would be in shock for some days.

We were actually in a shock, but again five days later we had another activity for the education of the citizens.

Anyhow the trees are still cut, and unfortunately this is happening all over Greece, so that we cannot only blame the city council.

Citizens came to the gatherings, and also to the following demonstrations. Not too many, but for an ecological environmental issue more people than ever.

It was a very strong movement for a while in a city where “green values are not shared”.

I remember different climate strikes with 100, with 80, with 50 people. I remember one Friday a couple of years ago, with 50 people at the main square in the city center. Almost more media than protesters.

I had to leave earlier and did not walk with them to the city hall. On my way back along one of the busiest streets I could not believe my eyes when I saw all the young people shopping. They don’t care, they are living as if there is no climate crisis. They don’t even know about the Fridays for Future movement. In Nigeria there is a bigger FFF movement than in Thessaloniki, in Greece.

Ecological flashback: I am doing the same things that I did 35 years ago. I am doing things we have been doing for so many years, things I thought didn't have to be done anymore.

When I take my food in my own reusable box to the shop where I am going, they don’t laugh anymore, but still it can happen that they ask me if I want some plastic cutlery. And, to be honest, I am too tired to explain it.

In psychology the “flashback” is a sudden, usually powerful, re-experiencing of a past experience or elements of a past experience. The term is used usually when the memory isn’t recalled voluntarily.

I moved to Greece and did not ask for ecological flashbacks.

But I moved as the one who I am. I brought these experiences and values with me - and I found a few cyclists in town in 2016, I met the people who formed the Green party in Greece.

Of course this is who I am and what I want to do. But I did not ask for that flashback. I would be happy to see some progress in my life. Also concerning this point.

I know that this lack of action in green values is also a lack of education about it, but I am wondering if it is also the lack of being consistent in education and then in life.

Pfadfinder finden auf allen Pfaden Müll

Provokante Aktion will Umwelt-Gewissen schärfen - Von Förster und Denkmalschutz unterstützt

VORDERWEIDENTHAL (the). Angenommen, Sie wandern sonntags zu der 440 Meter hoch gelegenen Burgruine Lindelbrunn hinauf - da steht vor Ihnen vier junge Leute am Wegesrand, die in diesem Augenblick aus Gedankenlosigkeit oder purer Langeweile leere Cola-Dosen in den Wald werfen. Wie würden Sie reagieren?

Einer solchen leicht vorstellbaren kleinen Provokation sahen sich vorgestern die Besucher der verfallenen Feste bei Vorderweidenthal ausgesetzt. Doch die Szene war gestellt. Eine Pfadfindergruppe aus Landau, 17 Mädchen und Jungen zwischen 14 und 16 Jahren, trieb ihr Spiel mit den Reaktionen der Wanderer. Die jungen Leute wollten mit dem ungewöhnlichen Test an einem der landschaftlich reizvollsten Ausflugsplätze im Naturpark Pfälzerwald das Umwelt-Gewissen schärfen.

Tags zuvor hatten sie, die als Kinder einer Wegwerf-Gesellschaft Großgewordenen, im Umkreis des Lindelbrunn stundenlang, bis zum Einbruch der Dunkelheit, Abfälle gesammelt. Revierförster Armin Osterheld unterstützte sie in ihrem Ein-

satz. Denn auch ihm ist ein Dorn im Auge, wie sorglos manche der vielen hundert Burg-Gäste an den Wochenenden den ihm anvertrauten Lebensraum von Pflanzen und Tieren verschmutzen. Osterheld erwähnt, daß der Termin im Herbst bewußt gewählt worden sei, um nicht die Vögel bei ihrem Brutgeschäft zu stören und keine jungen Triebe abzutreten.

Von dem Ergebnis der Aufräum-Aktion ist Anne, eines der Mädchen aus der Landauer Gruppe, „echt entsetzt“ gewesen. Die anderen hat ebenfalls „total überrascht“, wieviel Müll durch Menschen in der Natur landet. Was die fleißigen Pfadfinder auflösen mußten, füllte 20 Plastiksäcke. „Jeder sollte diese Drecksarbeit mal machen“, schimpften die sensibilisierten Jugendlichen. Sie jedenfalls werden nicht länger nur zuschauen, wenn jemand „zu faul, zu bequem“ ist und seine Picknick-Abfälle im Grünen hinterläßt.

Die Reaktionen der Wanderer auf das Dosen-Schmeißen waren dagegen eher verhalten. Viele schauten einfach weg, häufiger ernteten Cordula und die anderen Provokateure allerdings schiefe Blicke.

Wenige hatten die Courage, die Jugendlichen zur Rede zu stellen. Dann klärten sie den Irrtum auf. Es freute sie, daß ein Mann, als er auch noch gesehen hatte, von wieviel Abfall sie den Wegrand befreit hatten, ein paar Mark als Taschengeld spendierte.

Im Burghof versuchte die Gruppe der Deutschen Pfadfinderschaft Sankt Georg (DPFG) mit den Erwachsenen ins Gespräch zu kommen - durch Fragen zum Umweltschutz, durch Schautafeln mit den über Nacht entwickelten Bildern vom Wald-Säubern. Sie fanden meist Verständnis für ihre Anliegen - und Unglauben, was die Menge des Sammelgutes betraf. Die Jugendlichen warben für Pfandflaschen statt Dosen, sie übten Kritik an Einwegverpackungen.

Für die Landauer Gruppe und deren Leiter Klaus Schoppe hat sich das Wochenende sehr gelohnt. Nebenbei bemerkt, fließen in ihre Kasse 200 Mark vom Speyerer Landesamt für Denkmalschutz, weil sie die Ruine Lindelbrunn von in den Mauern wucherndem Holzgestrüpp befreit haben. Künftig möchten die jungen Leute sogar eine Art Patenschaft für das liebgezeichnete alte Schloß übernehmen. Ihrem Mentor, dem Förster Osterheld, schwebt darüber hinaus so etwas wie ein „Burgfrieden“ vor. Er verpflichtete im Mittelalter die Menschen zu fairem, einander schonendem Verhalten; er galt damals soweit eine Armbrust reichte. In der Gegenwart müßte die Übereinkunft mindestens in „Wurfweite“ des Wanderweges gelten, daß man nicht Müll hinterläßt.



Mit dem Müll, den gedankenlose „Naturfreunde“ im Wald hinterlassen, konfrontierten Pfadfinder die Wanderer am Lindelbrunn. Foto: Schmeckenbecher

“Scouts find trash on every path” (in German Scout is translated as “path finder” and the title is a play on words. We were collecting trash in the forest in 1987, marking the next generation who grew up with ecologic ideas and actions. Whenever trash collection took place in the 2020s, I couldn’t believe that we still have to do that.

What does it mean to be consistent, what is a consequence

When we grow up, at a certain point of our childhood, we learn that our actions have consequences. Different ones. Whatever we are doing - or saying - has an impact. An impact on us and on others and maybe even for the world.

Already during the first year the child learns that it has self-efficacy¹, which until the age of seven is pronounced.

In English there are the words consequent and consistent. In German “konsequent” means both of them - and in Greek we have three different words, depending on the context (συνεπής, επίμονος, δραστικός).

It is interesting that in German there is one word, as to be consequent is somehow important in German culture: And in Greek where we have three words, but to be consistent is not very popular.

But let's see what thoughts I have about being consistent and thinking about consequences and how these words in practice have an impact on the people around us and for the planet. Again this is something that came up after moving away from the context in which I grew up and diving deep into the society of another country that is my home now.

There is a very simple example, following up on the last chapter: ecology:

I know that if I am flying more than I should, if I also eat meat more than I want and if I do not reducing my plastic waste, it has an impact on the environment and climate change.

I am struggling with my actions and the consequences that results from it.

I am very aware of how often I take an airplane instead of a train, what I am eating and how much I contribute to the mass of trash we have every day.

While I was living in Germany it was not necessary at all to take an airplane, I was travelling around Europe by train. Since I have been in Greece, I have to take a plane, a trip eg Thessaloniki-Munich would be 48 hours by train in like five different trains with the possibility of delay and missing one of them. To be honest, I don't even know the price for it as I cannot imagine doing it. Maybe my younger self would have done it, my present self feels too old for it.

Especially during the first years in Thessaloniki I was travelling every 3 months, sometimes even more often, to Germany to do some jobs that I had agreed to before I knew that I would move my whole life to Greece.

Not only do I hate flying, but I really struggled with myself regarding the ecological aspect of it.

While I was living in Germany, it was really difficult to buy ecologically. As there are less fruits and vegetables than in the south of Europe, many of them are imported from afar. But even local fruits or vegetables are sometimes either more expensive,

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Self-efficacy>

or not available, due to the complicated (and many times incomprehensible) ways and rules of the market. In ecological markets in Germany, often the fresh stuff is much more expensive and for an unknown reason they have very often more plastic around than in the discounter. Regional with more plastic around them or from afar without? What is better? With my friends we always were trying to figure it out. To be consistent, what does it mean in that situation?

In Greece it is so easy to buy seasonal and regional produce, we have so many fruits and vegetables. At the beginning I still used to do what I was doing without thinking in Germany: reading where the stuff is from. Quickly I understood that I don't need to do it. It is either from 40 or 80km away.

This led me into a situation in which on one of my working trips to Germany I went into a supermarket and bought the offer of the day, some grapes. On the way back from the supermarket to the seminar hotel I suddenly realised that it was March and the grapes could only be from the Southern hemisphere, an ecological disaster. I remember how ashamed I arrived in the evening at my friend's house where I headed to after the seminar and how I presented the remaining grapes with an introducing speech of shame to myself...

Since 2011 I have owned a reusable coffee cup that travels with me wherever I go. In Munich, on train trips to Paris and Sweden, around the country, on trips to Australia, on my 3 stays of some weeks and then some months in Greece - and of course when I moved. After ten years my old cup did not close very well anymore and I only use it at home, and I have a new cup.

As already described, in Greece 2016 it was something new. It isn't anymore, but still you can see more people with single use cups than with reusable. It is always good to go back to Germany and to see all the people with reusable cups.

In 2018 we went for a project to Lesbos Island. The Greek way of coffee is not to put a coffee machine on, but to order coffee. We have so many different ways of drinking coffee that at projects that's the way it is going: One person is responsible for writing down everyone's wishes, then calls the closest coffee shop and then the single use cups with single use trays are delivered or someone goes to take them.

Everyone in the team knew how much I love and need coffee, that's why they could not understand why I said every time "no, thank you, I don't want any coffee."

And that's where it comes to being consistent and consequent: As I know the consequences of all the single used stuff I cannot even take one cup. And even if I love coffee, I will be consistent and only take one if they can fill it in my cup.

There are only a few people who understand me here. More in Europe. In Greece the "δεν πειράζει" ("It doesn't matter", in the sense of "shit happens, no worries, life is going on, take it easy") - mentality is very popular and leads to indifference.

The question we always have when it comes to ecology is who has to begin. The very popular opinion "The government has to change something" guides us nowhere. But anyhow they should do it, I agree!

On the other hand I think we also could not only make a change but we could force the government to do something. And not only the government, but also the market. I am consistent when it comes to my little coffee cup. If a shop doesn't want to give me coffee in my cup but only in a single use one, I refuse the coffee and give my money to another shop. Often, the mere sentence "So I am going somewhere else" makes them suddenly change their opinion.

To ask again and again if there isn't a vegan alternative makes a shop think about it. Money rules the world. So let's make the rules!

This means that we need to be consistent in order to have (positive) consequences.

I watch on the internet the two German public TV stations, as they have really good documentaries and self-produced movies and series.

It is so obvious that some things arrived in the middle of the German society when it comes to ecology, and I like it:

What is possible for Apple and for certain cars with the product placement in movies is also possible for ecology: in German productions the people have had their coffees in reusable cups for years, they brush their teeth with bamboo toothbrushes and they always have also vegetables on the barbeque. The same I can see in Netflix movies and series from Scandinavia: Going on the bike to work or to a date, having the kids in the trolley on the bike, bringing reusable dishes to a picnic or putting the cigarette butts in a small portable ashtray and not in the landscape or in the street.

And of course the climate crisis is an issue in many plots of the scripts.

I believe in the function of people as role models for other people. Parents for children, teachers for pupils, leaders for groups, neighbours for each other, friends for other friends, and also me for others.

There are not many things in which I think I can be a role model, but when it comes to being consistent and to the consequences, I can.

And I think all of us who are struggling for a better world should be.

It is always a relief to be with people who are struggling the same struggle: To meet with climate activists and no one uses plastic bottles, but refillable bottles. To meet friends who also come by bike. To go for holidays with my friend, we don't unpack either the little soap bars nor the plastic wrapped food for breakfast in a hotel.

When it comes to role models, it comes to education.

As an educator, I was working, observing and writing about education for many years. I could see how education in Germany changed over the years. I could exchange observations and ideas with my friends in France, one of them a sociologist. I observe now in Greece what education means. And I see that the issue of what it means to be consistent is so different - as different as the cultures are. The question of consequences - and when to teach the children consequences is so dependent on the culture and how the adults are acting.

One evening, we hosted for an evening a couple from Sweden with whom I am still in touch. They have been travelling for two years by bike from Sweden to Turkey, then after a flight from Korea all along South-East Asia, before taking the last part again

from Europe to Africa and the Western Sahara. Two years long all around the world with the bikes.

But not for holidays, but in order to sensitive people all over the world in 30 countries to the situation of the Sahrawi people who have been under occupation and exiled from their homeland for almost 50 years. In every country, in every city, they try to get in touch with people and organisations where they can stay and where they can inform about the refugee camps and the occupation in Western Sahara. This was also how I learned about the situation and I find it incredible what and how these two people alone are doing².

I remember how they explained to the people, whom I invited and who wanted to learn about their project and the Sahrawi people, that they decided to do it this way, because to speak about it only once, or to go by bike only for a couple of months would not have such a big impact. "We are sacrificing two years of our life, we quit our jobs, we never know where we will sleep, but this can make an impression on the people. They see that we are making a sacrifice and we hope that this can give an example."

It really impressed me - and I hope it will impress many people during the next 1,5 year while they are still cycling. And I hope that many people will see them as role models and will make a sacrifice for something bigger. Like the common good or the planet.

They put me in touch with a guy from Great Britain. When he retired last year, he decided to do a "Walk to Palestine" in order to sensitise the people to the situation of people there. And he walked from Northern France to Palestine. On foot. And he told me the same: "People see me and then they are wondering, 'What is that old guy doing there?' And that's how they begin thinking that it must be something important." People's sacrifice for a common good can be a game-changer. I believe strongly in that. This means to be consistent and to stay with the aim. But I think that's how we also receive consequences and can really change something.

I admire these people who are doing these activities as well as everyone who tries to be consistent for him/her/theyself - and in the education of the children, as they are the future. Their consequences will show if the human race is to survive on a surviving planet.

I often struggle with the Greek "laissez-faire" approach. Not because I don't like freedom and an easy going attitude, but because I see how many problems we have and how to solve them is not soluble with a *δεν πειραζει* ("it is ok / it is half as bad"). I see and listen to people who know that this attitude is difficult for the country and the development of society, but as with every change it needs effort and time and patience. And many generations I guess.

² <https://www.facebook.com/SolidarityRising> | <https://solidarityrising.com/>



*"We did nothing." - "We did everything".
Graffiti in the Upper Town in Thessaloniki. June 2023*

Sorry to hear you don't have children

When we got married, we did not think about having children. After seven years of marriage and ten years of living together, we thought it would be nice to give all our ideas and convictions to the next generation and tried to get pregnant.

What we did not know all the years when we were relaxed and thinking that we would see what would happen, was that my husband wasn't able to beget children. We had to face a situation in which we could not just "see what happens", but in which we had to make decisions.

In a time when people did not talk about that issue at all, in a time when IVF wasn't something as usual as it is today. In a time when we were at the beginning of our thirties and faced a kind of existential crisis.

We only spoke to a few people, and everyone said "but there are possibilities for what you can do." or "You can do something."

That brought us somehow to the situation in which it seemed to be clear that we had to DO something. We went to one of the two clinics that existed back in those days in Munich in order to get some information about possibilities, dangers, possibilities for success, costs etc. for IVF. Actually we did it more because we thought we should do something, but then we went back to what we actually wanted to do: We went for two weeks in a canoe and did some water touring between lakes and canals, living between our tent and a canoe and together, speaking barely about what happened to us: that we had to decide if we really wanted a child so desperately that we had to decide about risks and costs and a long journey in order to have the possibility of a child.

And then we came home and made a decision: we said that we would reproach ourselves if we did not try it at least once.

We did.

It was horrible. For me physically and psychologically. For my husband because he was feeling constantly guilty. Usually 24 hours after the egg collection they call you to say how many fertilised eggs they have in their petri dishes. After 24 hours they asked us to call them again in 12 hours. And then again in 24 hours and that was the moment when I knew for myself it would not work and the moment in which I decided for myself to accept that it was not meant for us to have children.

I continued the treatment and after one week it was clear that I wasn't pregnant, something I was sure about since the third (or even second) phone call.

Subsequently we separated as we could not cope with the situation of difficult experiences, guilt, physical consequences, sadness, acceptance and lack of acceptance, and only when my husband had his cancer diagnosis and was about to die could we be together again.

For me it was really clear that I was not meant to be a mother. I could feel it with all of my heart, my soul and my thoughts. I was so peaceful with that issue. Today, almost 20 years after the fertility treatment, I have experienced so many newborn babies that did not have any hormones in my body cracking up and making me feel sad or in a wrong life. For me it is clear and wonderful that I can have many children in my life,

official godchildren, unofficial “secular godchildren”, the children of my close friends, that I call family.

I am thankful that I can deeply accept that my life wasn’t meant for that and that I am living on my own now.

This is not understandable for everyone. Many women cannot understand that you can have a good life without being called a mother. A good life. A useful life. A meaningful life.

From 2015 on I was facing this reaction more and more when I began working with refugees. I remember the Summer of 2015 in Munich at the train station, when refugees from everywhere arrived, among them many young guys from Syria, Afghanistan, Northern Africa. With those who spoke English or French, we shared facts like age, marital status, children, and again and again I heard “I am sorry”, followed by “But you are still young, you can find another husband in order have children.”

I remember one of my Syrian friends, when we had already known each other for more than a year, said to me “But you still can have a family” and I replied “But I am happy”. “Yes, but you could be more happy”, he was saying every time when we had that conversation - until I told him that I refuse to tolerate this kind of conversation. I could see that he could not understand it from his point of view, from his cultural background. Now, seven years later, we are still friends, I think he can see that my life is still a good one. And after so many years in Germany, he can see other ways of life than the one he learned the first 20 years of his life.

It did not get better when I moved to Greece, a country in which the family is something very important. And here I came: a widow without a new relationship, without children - and happy with this situation, not at all willing or longing to change that state.

“We can find you a husband” is still an issue, “You still can have children” is finally, as I reach my 50s, done.

It is a different life.

Often, people tell me that I cannot understand how a life with children is.

People with children cannot understand how the life of people without children is.

When I was young, when we got married in our early twenties, I thought I had a choice. I did not have one. We did not have one. But I am so fine with it. And I am sad for all these women around me in their forties who desperately want to have a pregnancy, a child, children, and cannot accept their unexpected situation.

I am so deeply thankful that I am at total peace with this twist in my life. That I can accept that this did not happen in my life and that I am without my own children and the family, that somehow everyone of us is thinking as a child or a young person, he or she will be in later.

Sometimes we are surprised by our lives in a way that we did not expect. Sometimes we have to accept that life is different. And if we can accept it, it is not a worse life, but a good one within a new framework.

“Sorry to hear you don’t have children” is still a sentence I hear from time to time. “It is ok” I say usually - and I just hope my counterpart can somehow see or feel that it is really ok and that I am not sorry for myself.

I am glad for myself that I have all these children in my life, “my children” as I say. I am trying to be a kind of “godmother”, an aunt to them, a companion, another adult beside their parents. To give th

em my values, my ideas, but not to force them to do what I think would be good for them - something I don’t know if I would have managed with my own children.



*My oldest godchild
(1997 at my wedding and 2021 when I visited her from Greece in her home town)*

My godmother

My godmother was the most important person for half of my life. She passed away unfortunately some weeks before I turned 25, but she had a big influence and shaped my life in so many (good) ways.

She was born in 1915 in a village in the region where I was born. There she went to primary school and later to a school for girls where she learned everything about housekeeping. She experienced World War 2 and the time after 1945, she lost her first husband, she took his adult son as her own, she got married again, she could not have children, she had a foster child from a home for “difficult children” and gave him what she could, although he was literally a difficult child, adolescent, adult.

She was a simple person from the village, she did not even move to the small city where I grew up, moved with her second husband to two other villages, but she had the widest heart I can imagine.

Her heart so wide, her view on things sometimes narrow. I loved her so much, without any doubts, but I remember some things that I disagreed with her about:

There are these wonderful books by the Swedish author Astrid Lindgren (1907-2002) that I loved so much (and still love and cannot believe that my Greek friends did not grow up with them). There is “Ronia, the robber’s daughter” (orig.: Ronja rövardotter) that was the base of many role plays we did outside with my friends. And there is of course Pippi Longstocking (orig.: Pippi Långstrump), the little girl, living on her own in a villa with her monkey and the horse and who is the strongest girl in the world with many funny ideas, with no rules in her life and with the neighbour’s children who are the opposite of her, very well-behaved children, who begin to love Pippi’s way of life. But as my godmother said: “But a girl shouldn’t be so cheeky.” This book was a revolution to many people, and my godmother, when she became part of my family in 1973 already was 58, so I guess when we had that discussion she was close to 70 (what in the 80s in a village wasn’t today’s 70 in a city).

My godmother was a multi-talented woman: She was the perfect housewife for her husband (who, when she passed away in 1998 was not even able to make a coffee and of course not to cook anything. Very soon he found another woman with whom he moved in and who refused everything that had somehow to do with the love of his life, my godmother. Sometimes he called me, quickly, secretly, with the words “You know, I cannot call you...”.).

My godmother was also a perfect partner for him in his little plastic processing company. She helped to carry things when they could not pay an employee and worked with him “like a man”, as he said. And then she was responsible for the office. For the phone, the invoices, the paper stuff. She was an amazing woman and I never understood why she could not see all her talents and only defined herself as a housewife. When she had to go to the hospital, she cooked like a fool beforehand in order for him to have enough to eat during her absence. I think she was one of the first people I knew who had a microwave. So she prepared everything for him for let’s say 14 days, and he just had to find the box of the day and put it on a plate and in the microwave. For me this was so wrong. I grew up in a family in which my father did so

much in the household, he was the one who made us breakfast every morning, who cooked at the weekends, who taught me “boys’ things” and my brothers “girls’ things”. I was in a youth group in which gender equality was a big thing, and I could not believe it when she said to me “Can you help me, this is what the women are doing, my husband wants to relax now.”

She was very catholic. She was my godmother for the baptism and for the Sacrament of Confirmation when I was 14. She went regularly to church. When I went with her to church (especially when I was still a child) I was afraid to cough because I had the feeling it would be inappropriate to make any noise. She believed everything the priest said, something that I was learning more and more to question. I had my own church with a young priest, with my youth group and in my teen years we even had a key for the church, so believing became something wider than only sitting and listening and not making any noise.

When she assumed that her foster son could be gay, she told it with tears in her eyes. I wasn’t in touch then with homosexuality, but deep inside me I knew that people don’t decide on their sexuality. I remember that I could not reply to anything, but I could feel (and I know now) that she could not accept it because of her catholic background.

And then there was of course that unpleasant conversation that we had about national socialism. She was 18 when Hitler became chancellor in 1933.

She had been part of the “Band of German Maidens” (German: Bund Deutscher Mädel | BDM) and was influenced a lot by this ideology. As I did not have present grandparents, she was the one I asked about things in my adolescence. She was the closest adult I had in my life. Needless to say I was shocked when I heard her saying that “at least there was work” and “There was much less criminality” - common sayings when it came to these discussions in German families from the 60s to the 90s.

Why do I tell that?

Because with her - and her narrow thoughts - I learned what family is. That you can be close, closer, the closest to a person. That you could love a person so much although there are thoughts you cannot agree with or understand.

That you can understand the framework of a person, can understand how the person ended up with these thoughts and that you can accept these opinions within the framework.

My godmother took somehow the role of a grandmother. Sometimes I was jealous because my brothers got parcels from their godparents for Christmas. But I had my godmother with us every single Christmas. She came every year, we knew the sound of the engine of her car. She brought hundreds of different Christmas cookies that she made with her hands, she was with us, and it was MY godmother that joined us and that made me forget that I did not get a parcel.

For different reasons we did not have family except my parents and that’s how I learned to know the concept of family without sharing the same blood. The two people who were family to us (and that I invited to my wedding) were my godmother and the godfather of 2 of my brothers. They were “auntie” and “uncle”. I never

questioned that concept, actually I loved it so much, because I loved these people in my family so much. When my parents moved to another city in 1993, one of my brothers stayed with this “uncle” his godfather for the next two years until he finished highschool.

My godmother was the one I could tell everything that was difficult for me. When I had troubles at home again as an adolescent she invited me to stay for the weekend or for a couple of days during the holidays with her. It was kind of boring, as there weren’t other people of my age in the neighbourhood. When I was a child and they used to live in their first house (fun fact: our “uncle” bought her house when she moved out) there was another girl in my age (fun fact 2: the only other “Verena” I got to know during my first 18 years). But not boring enough not to enjoy it: I learned almost everything I know today about cooking, baking, and housework. Most of the cookie-cake recipes our family has are from her and when I still sometimes tried to bake, it was her cheesecake or her gingerbread. I enjoyed the time alone, walking through the village, drawing, learning to play the electric organ her husband had and watching TV in the evening together with some sweets she always had for me.

Writing these memories, I am smiling. She really gave me the best moments of my childhood and of my adolescent years. She gave me the feeling of being ok, of being a good person. She showed me that I loved by her, whatever I would do.

The biggest present she gave me was when I was 18 and wanted to begin with the driver’s licence. The first day I wanted to go along with two of my friends, my mother refused to let me go and to pay for it. I don’t have any memory of how it went, who told her, but I remember how very soon afterwards I found an envelope with 1.000 DM (today like €500, the price for a driver’s licence in 1992). Of course I was glad that I could join my friends in the lessons, of course I was glad that I could learn how to drive, but most of all I was grateful for this gift: the gift of acceptance: “You are worth it. You should do it. You did not do anything that justifies not being allowed to do it. Whatever happened is not connected with your wish that you were told before would be fulfilled. For some reason you are now alone with it. I am beside you. I support you.”

When I moved to Munich, my godmother gave me an unbelievably ugly blanket. She said that I needed something warm. I kept it because it was from her. I never needed it, but it took three moves before I gave it away.

I visited her as often as possible (in times when you had to buy your ticket at the counter at the train station it was always funny because the station was called “Knöringen-Essingen”, even in German a funny name), she gave me coffee, chocolate and oranges - the luxuries she thought my student’s life needed. Unforgettable was also a parcel she sent me: a washing powder box full of walnuts. She had many properties in the village where she grew up and I spent many times picking fruits or collecting walnuts. This box was very precious to me though, but I will never forget my husband’s face (then my boyfriend) when he was searching for something else in the box (at least a card) and when he repeated again and again “only walnuts”. I did not need a card. For me it was again one of her gifts full of love: Not only the nuts, but the memories.

From her I learned a lot about gardening. With her we picked fruit so many times from these cherry-, walnut-, apple-, pear-, plumtrees. Needless to say that she still did that work in an age in which no one should get high on a ladder.

She began to suffer from Alzheimer's and still picked me up at the train station and I died a thousand deaths when she cruised through the narrow streets of her village. I sent her photographs in order for her to remember me and to look at the picture when we were speaking to each other on the phone. I became closer to her husband who, in my childhood and adolescent years was always working and anyhow could not handle children. My husband and he had a very good connection and I was very thankful that it was possible to expand the family in that way. It was so important to me that they both could join our wedding and then, one year later she passed away. I was inconsolable. It was the first time in my life that I lost someone close. I remember going with my husband to her funeral in the village, spending the day before with her husband. There I learned that she actually had suffered also from cancer, something that he told us off the record, no one should know about it in the village. A fact that I did not understand then although I had not have the experiences I have had today with this disease.

How much I missed her the first time.
How often I am thinking of her still today.
How grateful I am that I had her in my life.
She showed me what family is.

And I knew already at a very young age that I also wanted to be a godmother. I never thought about whether I wanted to be a mother, but a godmother was crystal clear. And I love being a godmother. Or a kind of an "auntie" for "my children". They are everywhere in Europe and two of them in Australia; since I have been in Greece I cannot visit them so often anymore and I feel guilty. The actual presence of my godmother was so important for all the years and I just hope that all of my godchildren feel safe enough with me to ask me to come or to visit me whenever they need me.

The moment when a couple of years ago I slept in a sleeping bag on the floor in my oldest godchild's little apartment was one of the happiest moments ever. She can host me now. We are both adults. And all the distance that there has been during the years did not end the feeling we have for each other: We are family and we love each other.

I learned that family can be wider than biological relatives. I took it to the next generation. And I learned that these people are home, wherever you are based.



My godmother with her husband at their wedding. Mid-70th



My godmother at our wedding. 1997

What does it mean to leave your country

I grew up with both parents away from their roots, from their homes. They met in a third place where they went to school / studied. From time to time we visited my father's village , because the parents and family of the godfather of two of my brothers still used to live there.

I remember my father always speaking in his dialect that we didn't usually hear. I remember that the concept of "at home" was for me where we were living. The first two houses I don't really remember, except from photographs. When I was four we moved to one and then when I was 6 to another house, where we all grew up and from where I moved out.

Thus from the age of 6 to almost 19 I was used to living at the same place. Moving I did not know.

Then there was a big change when in 1992 I moved to Munich, 320 km, three trains and five hours away from the city where I grew up.

A difficult time the first year there while working and being alone in the evenings and at the weekends, a better time when in 1993 I began to study and to meet more people who also came from other cities than Munich.

Is it because it is more than 30 years ago that it feels in retrospect like "difficult, but ok", or is it really a difference if you move within your country - or if you change the country - and with it the language, the culture and even the religion?

When I moved to Greece, in 2017 I was already 44 years old and I had lived in my small hometown for 19 and in Munich for 25 years.

I don't know from where I took the assurance that I would make it, or even more: I don't know why I never thought about the many different steps that were in front of me then.

Very important is that I chose to move to another country and I wasn't forced to. As my grandmother was when she had to leave her country for forced labour during the Second World War, or as all the refugees I was and am meeting since 2016 in Thessaloniki since 2016.

Some of those I met in 2016 were still there when I moved. And although they had already stayed for more than one year in Thessaloniki, they had always hoped that they would leave for other European countries. That was why suddenly we found ourselves in the same situation: learning Greek, finding a house, struggling with the taxes number and other bureaucratic stuff... - all these things you need for building a new life.

I could understand them so well - and they could understand me so well.

But I was always aware that my situation was and is so much more privileged. Not only for the reason that I made the free decision to leave my country. That I made the decision to go to Greece (and not a European refugee law). And last but not least I already spoke three languages and from my studies I knew how to learn and how to proceed with different things.

But: it was for all of us leaving the country in which we knew how things were done. Where we knew the language and the people. Here we had to figure out everything from scratch. Here we were dependent on others.

I remember when a friend, who was helping me a lot with all the bureaucratic stuff, told me that even he, who grew up in Greece and has lived here his whole life and studied and is working here, doesn't understand many things.

Then I thought he was making fun of me. Now, six years later, I understand that this is the way it is.

If you are moving to another country, you have to build up everything anew. The big thing is the language.

Another big thing is an apartment (related to the language, and I was lucky after many strange tries by myself, for five days a friend took me from place to place and organised everything for me so that on the last day we found the apartment in which I have been living since then).

And then there are many small things: what is the coffee that I prefer to drink called? In which supermarket can I find which things and for which price? Which pills do I take here if I have a headache? When I am sick? what are they called and can I buy them without a prescription? Why is this day a day off and what does it mean if the pickups with the speaker are cruising along the streets - and what the heck are they saying?

The first time I heard one of those pickups was on a Sunday. As I wasn't very familiar with the orthodox church, but I knew the services are transmitted from the church to the places in front of it, I thought that this maybe is a church thing. I don't know if I was disappointed or relieved when I learned on Monday when I asked a friend that they are selling fruit or are collecting scrap iron. I was a bit embarrassed, until she told me the story of another friend who came to Greece years ago and when she heard the speaker from a pickup for the first time, she thought that it was a kind of announcement of a catastrophe and couldn't understand why the people continued walking in the streets. End of the parenthesis.

If you move to another country it is such a difference if you know that you will stay for a certain time or if you moved. Forever or for a long time. For me it was clear that I moved "forever" to Greece. Whatever this means. But it was clear that it will not be an interim.

This made things for me on one hand much easier, because I had time. And on the other hand it caused me a lot of stress because I knew that there are certain things I need to do and I cannot skip them.

Whenever you leave your country, you are going into a new culture. Even when I studied for a year at the weekends in Austria I faced another culture. As the language is the same, I did not expect it.

Of course I expected another culture when I came to Greece. To be honest, I did not know what exactly I expected, but I did not expect what it finally was: a country somehow far away from Europe, a country between Balkan and Turkish and something Europ-ish.

There have been many questions, there has been much information, there is still - if not every day so every second day - new information, new questions, new (better or worse) answers.

It is a new cosmos (it is the same word in German “Kosmos”), and after 44 years I learned where it comes from: Of course, as with so many words, from the Greek κόσμος which is translated by “world” but also by “people”. And I came into a new world which is formed by people.

A new culture - which in many ways feels today more familiar than the culture I grew up with. Somehow I feel Greek so deep inside myself, that there are many people who ask if I am sure that I don’t have any Greek roots. When I tell them about my Slavic - Eastern heritage, they have even more questions.

I am very blessed by people around me who love and understand me and who can feel how I am feeling here: Still sometimes surprised, still sometimes uncomprehending, but still: I am a Θεσσαλονικιά, a Thessalonian.

Sometimes it is hard for me to understand the part of the culture concerning the family, but I can cope with it. First and foremost because I have friends who see the concept of family a bit wider, as I do, and include me in their families, or who don’t have the classic family and can identify with me.

There is a lot in the Greek culture that I already described in which I differ, like the importance of the blood related family, of children, a “traditional” role model, patriarchy, the strong feeling about borders with Turkey, the situation of being surrounded by non-EU countries, the lack of ecological conscience. But I can adjust, I can distance myself from it, I can include it in what I learned the first 44 years. I can embrace it or I can always find people who are not that “traditional”.

There is only one thing in Greek culture that I am really struggling with: the Greek Orthodox Church and its influence everywhere in the country.



Oh, I love maps. And I love to see wherever I have already been as well as where I want to go. When I found this map for school classes, I took it home immediately and I since then I have been looking at it every day as it hangs in my apartment. It is so important for me to get to know my new country better and better. The history, the culture and the geography.

A believer in an orthodox country

At the beginning of the 2000s one of my best friends went several times for several months to Afghanistan. I remember how strange it sounded to me that they had their services in the international church on Fridays. How difficult I imagined it to be to celebrate Christmas or Easter without the local colleagues most of whom were Muslims.

Now I am in a Christian country, the church is so much involved in many state issues, but I feel like a foreigner.

I grew up in and with the Catholic church. Luckily in a very good way. There was a young priest then in the church where I grew up from the age of six.

We moved there after a couple of months in elementary school. I was a very shy child then and it wasn't easy for me to go to a new school and class. I found a friend immediately after the teacher sat me beside her.

The school stood (and still stands) between the two churches, the Protestant and the Catholic. The region where I grew up is mixed (when I moved to Munich it was strange to see that there were three times as many Catholics; after 30 years it changed: in general, in 2002 only 36% of the population was still a member of a Christian church, but still 25,9 Catholic and 9,4% Protestant).

I remember my first day in the new school. We also had religion that day, and I went with my new friend. That day and for the next few weeks we were singing, drawing, listening to the female pastor and I really liked it.

Until they realised that I was Catholic and not Protestant and from that day on I had to go to the Catholic religion class, which was also fine, but (and I don't say that only now, I remember that feeling very well although I am speaking about a feeling that I had 44 years ago) by the male priest and less colourful.

These are my first memories concerning the church.

It is still a nice memory.

Also later there are many good memories about playing flute and theatre at church, having first communion lessons with my best friends and celebrating the first communion together with my friends and their families in the big room of my father's work, a home for children with special needs. I have this present one of my oldest friends made for me: a photo book with these memories for my 10th birthday. She and the second of the three girls are still good friends of mine - now with their growing families.

There were the scouts where I became a member at 7 and with members from both confessions under the roof of the catholic church. There were always young trainee priests who understood how to show us that priests don't have to be grey and sad. There were trips to Rome and to Assisi (as the priest of our church liked Francis from Assisi very much). There was the key from church I used to have as an adolescent because with the youth group we liked to do what all the young people liked, but we also had a spiritual dimension to our community. We conducted services by ourselves sitting on the floor of the altar room, we had the group room in the center attached

to the church where we stayed overnight many times. I was doing a lot for our church and the church gave us a home, as individuals and as a group.

There were questions as a child and as an adolescent: Why can the Protestant pastor be a good pastor with a wife who is also a pastor and why can the Catholic priest not be a good priest if he gets married? Is the housekeeper of the priest only his housekeeper or is there more? Why is it necessary to kneel down? Why is the pope, why are the bishops more important than the members of the church? Why are women less capable than men in the church? And so on.

But in general I never really questioned God because the church I got to know was good enough for me to believe that they believed in Him and not only in themselves.

This changed a bit when I came to Munich.

It was a bit difficult at the beginning, but then I found a scouting group not too far from my house. There I not only met my future husband, but I also found many friends. What I did not find was the church.

In the scouting movement which I have been in in Germany there was always a "spiritual companion" (a priest, a theologian) and the spiritual part was important - and I always experienced it in a beautiful way, never with the wrong use of power as has happened so often in the church. Yes, this changed when I came to Munich and found its peak when we wanted to get married.

So my husband and I were married in the church where we met, by a friend, a priest we met at the scouts in another city. For us it was crystal clear that we wanted to get married in church. We just went with our witnesses to the registry office where you have to get married first in Germany and the date for our wedding always was the date of the church ceremony. We planned it together with the priest and the best compliment afterwards was when the 120 friends we invited to our wedding said that the wedding service was so beautiful - even more touching when atheists told us this. We wanted to celebrate the wedding just in any room, asking our friends to help us to organise it, to bring food for a buffet, and to dance and party. The closest idea was of course to do that in the big room in the church where we got married, where my husband grew up and where we were doing voluntary youth work, but the priest there did not allow it.

After asking all the other (Catholic) churches around and getting only refusals, we asked the Protestant churches – and immediately got an ok from one.

When we visited the place in order to arrange the framework (not even 60DM/ 30€ and a warm welcome) we loved the church there so much that we were thinking of getting married there in order to avoid the journey from the church to the celebration place.

The catholic church did not allow it.

We were so angry and were thinking for a moment of turning our back on it.

We didn't, we went in a rickshaw and on bikes from one church to the other through Munich's English garden, it was beautiful - but I got to know the real Catholic church, the one in Bavaria, the one I did not like because they used their power.

Then, during the years 2004/05 I became a believer.

I began reading the bible, getting really in touch with Jesus and asking every day what God wanted me to do.

Suddenly I realised that I could not be catholic anymore. That church with all these formalities. With showing around the bible and blowing incense on it - but not telling the people where they are reading from. Reading without encouraging people to read themselves. A church in which only 50% of the population is represented as women are not in leadership and decision-making. I left that church and converted to the Protestant church. I was lucky that I found a church close to my house that became for my home for the next twelve years, where I met many wonderful people and where my belief could grow and flourish.

And then I came to Greece.

To be honest, I wasn't prepared for the Orthodox church. When I put my foot into a church for the first time, I expected what I knew from Europe: a place where at home as well as on trips I could sit down and calm down. Entering Hagia Sophia in Thessaloniki, close to the place where I stayed the first times, I literally had a shock from the excessive colours, the darkness, the excessive smell of incense, of candles and people kissing the icons on the walls. I understood that it would not be possible to sit and calm down in such a place.

As I also studied art history, I can see orthodox churches from this point of view but actually every time I feel that it is too much. Excessive. It distracts from what I need, the word and the relationship with Jesus.

Sitting in a bus for the first time I saw people crossing themselves. After a while I understood that they were doing it every time we passed a church (and you pass a lot of churches everywhere in Greece, believe me). Another day I was waiting for a friend in front of a church and could see many people who made the sign of the cross when they came along.

I experienced an unforgettable situation in my second three weeks long stay in Thessaloniki: I went into an area a bit on the edge, where I had to wait for the bus at the central square, which is of course around the church. Beside the churches there are very small chapels for the purpose of putting candles inside. Only one person fits inside. I was sitting there, waiting for the bus in the heat of midday when a motorbike came along. The driver stopped, did not turn off his motorbike but got off it. He went into the chapel, lit a candle and left on his motorbike immediately. Quickest worship ever. Drive through.

I bought three books when I moved to Greece at the end of 2017: a short history of Modern Greece, a novel which is set in Thessaloniki and a book about the Orthodox church. I really wanted to give it a try. Unfortunately I did not get beyond the first 20 pages, understanding that it was all about formal stuff.

I always feel bad when I am saying it. I always feel bad when people abroad or newly arrived German pastors tell me how much they stand for an ecumenical approach.

So I try to be positive and tolerant and I am trying again and again.

I remember when a friend told me that she was a believer. As I am very sad that my whole life is in Greek, but this (for me important) part of my life is happening in English, I wanted to know more.

Unfortunately it turned out that it was about buying candles and going to some places of pilgrimage. I remember the feeling when I gave her a book which I have shared with many people all over the world, the Moravian Daily texts (Herrnhuter Losungen, translated into 61 languages) and she did not understand why I gave it to her. She could not share my Protestant approach of sola scriptura (by scripture alone).

So it never came to a discussion about the other three basic elements of my faith, sola gratia (by grace alone), sola fide (justification by faith alone) and solus Christus (in Christ alone). And I gave up and accepted that the Orthodox church and I will not be friends.

(The protestant pastors - women - I met here and who arrived with tolerance and ecumenical intentions left after some years as I am: there is no way of ecumenism, they don't accept the protestant church, they don't accept women as ministers, they don't even show up at ecumenical events. I am sorry for these women who stay here for some years, I am also relieved that they have gone home with the same feelings and thoughts as I have, so I don't have to feel bad.)

Up until 2022 I have been to two weddings: at one I was the "best woman", but both were civil marriages. And then: a wedding at church, a baptism - and most of the events at church until now: funerals.

I may feel so much at home in Thessaloniki, but when it comes to these events, I feel the loneliest person on earth. I don't know what is spoken, I don't understand the rituals, I dislike most of them (those I understand), I am sad about the number of people in church and the majority of them chatting, talking on their phones, coming late, leaving early, smoking on the doorsteps... But I also need to laugh from time to time because I see that they enjoy it. And I can see that it is kind of a "stage" for the priests and it is a play in a way. From this point of view I

I never in my life met so many atheists as I have met in Greece. And I understand them. If the church is everywhere in your life and it is above all about power, how can you see more than the church who tells you how and who God is.

It is a kind of difficult thing in general to confess your faith in modern societies. Usually I don't speak about it very often, only with people I really know very well.

I know so many people with a bad opinion of (and I guess who also bad experiences with) the church, that I always feel a bit ashamed to confess it.

I don't need to feel that way, I know. Especially because I speak of belief and not of church. And if I speak about church, I am speaking about my church in Munich or our small congregation in Thessaloniki with only a couple of people and with our way of discipleship. We meet in the morning, in the afternoon - always depending on when the room is free for us. We are sometimes four, then twelve, rarely more people, sometimes with visitors from abroad who read that there is an English service. We take turns at leading the service, there is no "church", we ARE the church. I guess for visitors it can be both: encouraging to see us in this way of discipleship, or disappointing because they expected a "usual" service with a pastor and a pipe organ in a traditional church and not in the kind of "living room with a cross" we are using.

Some people in this church became my friends, some left Thessaloniki, others left the church, there is nothing that is stable in my life.

It is ok, but often I feel very lonely and without a real framework for my faith.

When do I feel the loneliest person on earth?

At Easter.

Easter usually isn't on the same date as the other Christian churches are celebrating. Sometimes there is one week, sometimes 3 weeks difference. Doesn't sound so difficult, but for me every year it is a very lonely thing that somehow got better during lockdown when everyone was at home and not with his/her community, church, family. Since then I have been sending pictures from my table on which I arrange candles, bread and wine on Maundy Thursday, the candle on Easter Sunday etc. to my friends around the world. For them it is just a picture. For me it is the attempt to become part of a community.

Then, one, two or three weeks later, when I have already celebrated Easter, Holy Week begins in Greece. Everyone (believer, churchy or atheist) wishes others "a good Holy Week". (Fun fact: writing this on the Monday of Holy Week, on my Easter Monday 2023).

Tradition and religion and church are very mixed up in Greece. Some church-based wishes can come from people who told you a couple of days before that they don't believe in God, or people who laughed at you for celebrating Easter. "It doesn't mean anything to us either", a friend said yesterday when I complained a little bit that I have to work on my Easter Sunday and that I am looking forward to having a meaningless weekend next week but 3 days off. Today she wished me "a good Holy Week".

As we love to say wishes and in Greek we have a wish for every single opportunity, this is part of the culture. And religion just got mixed in.

People can be atheists or agnostics (and I never met more atheists and agnostics than I met in Greece), but if it comes to discussions about religion, they defend more things than I ever could defend even in the Lutheran church to which I belong and in which I joined a church in Munich, even actively and that I really loved. But I never could defend them as people here are:

I mentioned that it is difficult for me every year with the different dates for Easter. "When I studied abroad I also had to cope with the fact that Easter was on another date than the date my family celebrated", she said. I did not mention that actually almost everywhere in the Christian world it is the same date, except for the Orthodox church which is different in only a few countries.

I discussed different traditions with a friend and that I find it very difficult that they are so mixed up with the church. He, so much against church and without any understanding of being a believer, defended not only these church-traditions but also blamed other countries for being worse than Greece.

I saw a graffiti against Muslims and wrote a text in my blog about the strange feeling of living in a country where the church is so involved in everything, so intolerant and so out-of-date and that sometimes I feel there is no difference in the old fashioned rules these two religions have. A friend who never had a good word for the Orthodox

church wrote an angry comment and tried to provoke or to blame me by posting a picture from Germany from PEGIDA (Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes = Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West. A European initiative, 2015-2017 they have been very present in Germany. They believe that Germany is being increasingly islamised and defines itself in opposition to Islamic extremism. Pegida wants to curb immigration into Germany and it accuses the authorities of failure in enforcing related laws. They held many demonstrations, luckily in most of the cities accompanied by counter- demonstrations).

During the years I have understood that I cannot criticise anything that has to do with the Greek Orthodox church. I just try to figure it out by myself.

For the church, who understands itself as the “only real church” I am not a believer. Friends are not aware that they are indoctrinated from their birth on by that church so that I feel sometimes they are not able to see it. It is so mixed in that criticising the church is criticising themselves.

This makes me feel like a foreigner although I feel so much at home here. Not in and with the church.



*First communion (1997)
With my best friends then - and today still beloved friends and “my family”*

A foreigner. A foreigner?

When I was young, I did not really think about where I would live. In 1992 when I finished school, it was not yet very usual to move to other countries. But it had already happened that some of my close friends went somewhere after school for six months. I did not know where to go, I did not have the money nor the support of my family, and to go to Munich was adventurous enough for me.

I wanted to become a camera woman and was working for almost a year at a TV station, changing from studio technician to camera woman to editing and to the editorial department. And when I realised that I didn't want to become a camera woman and that I didn't want to work in the TV world, I found something I wanted to study and started university. Everything was exciting enough and more than I think a time in a planned project in a foreign country could have been for me.

When I studied, still it wasn't usual (or even mandatory) to study abroad, but I knew two people (can you imagine today, in 2023 that you study for 4,5 years and you get to know only two people who went abroad? Try to find two who didn't... but it also was before the universities in Europe were brought into line with bachelor and master degree and the European study credits system).

I was a bit jealous. I also met a friend, with whom I studied together in Munich, in Paris where she went to university for a term. I knew it wouldn't be possible for me. I did not have the financial opportunity, and as I already lived very early with my later husband, who never wanted to leave, not even his city, it did not happen.

Later then, in the 2000s it became more usual to go abroad – jobs were offered, the internet and globalisation taught us that everything is possible everywhere and if you want to have a career, you need to go wherever an offer takes you - within Germany or Europe or even the world.

As I knew very early that I would never have a career, I was relaxed.

As I was married to a man who did not even want to leave "his" part of the city and who hated changes, I never really thought about it.

My life was fulfilling, my relationship good, we had an equal partnership, I could travel - for jobs and to meet friends. I did not miss going somewhere else at all.

Maybe it was in 2003/04 when I studied Russian, that for the first time I had the feeling that it could be that I would live somewhere else.

I did not think about it, but now, looking back, I think it was the first time this thought could have arisen. No concrete thought like "I want to move to Russia, to Ukraine", but somehow it was the first time I learned a language without reason.

When I went to Thessaloniki for three months from January to March 2017, I also began studying Greek a month before. I remember how a friend said "but you had a plan, I am sure. No one would study a language for only three months."

But that's what I did.

I did not think about preparing myself for moving to Greece, I studied the language because I wanted to stay for three months and it seemed to me to be a long time. Long enough to get a bit deeper into the country - and as we know therefore language is the key.

In 2004 I stopped learning Russian for personal reasons, as a friend was very sick and I began filling in for him in his project. And at the same time we tried to get pregnant and all the difficulties around that did not allow me to go to my class at university three times a week and to study in between.

Ten years later I was wondering what to do with my life. I had some little jobs, I liked what I did, but I knew and felt strongly that I needed a change.

When I had to leave a project in 2015 I already had it in mind to study again, but unfortunately (then. Today I would say luckily) I did not obtain a place for what I wanted at university.

With my last money I went to my friends to Australia, travelled around the country and came back after five weeks with no idea but knowing that I would need a bigger change in my life.

This was when the refugees arrived at the main station in Munich and where somehow I began my journey to Greece and my new life here.

In 2013/14 during the revolution of dignity in Ukraine I was feeling a strong attraction to the country and I remember thoughts like "if I just had a more useful job like psychologist or doctor and if I knew the language."

As I was saying many times, "I always thought I would end up in an Eastern European country and now it's Greece" - maybe during that difficult time for Ukraine the foundation stone was laid which led to the decision to leave Munich a couple of years later.

And this decision wasn't something that I planned.

But looking back it was like a masterplan: going for two weeks with a kind of concrete mission, going a couple of months later for three weeks without knowing what to do, but with the same people as a backup. Going five months later for three months and learning Greek for a few weeks. Moving four months later and having jobs in Germany for the next years that would pay for my life until I knew the language and the country well enough to work here.

As we know, plans are plans and life is life

On one hand the pension I get from my late husband and that I knew I would get from my 45th year on was higher than I ever could imagine.

On the other hand the pandemic made a big change and so many seminars did not take place and I lost a lot of money so that I am now in a difficult situation, as the economic situation in Greece also suffered more from these years of lockdown.

This chapter is called "a foreigner. A foreigner?" because this is what I am. Is this what I am?

I never thought that I would live in Greece. I did not expect it, I didn't plan it. But that's what I got.

Obviously when I show my passport, I am a foreigner. Obviously when I am speaking, I have an accent. Still I have many questions and still so often I am screaming out "really???", because I have heard again something that I did not know, neither can I believe it.

I have wonderful friends. Friends who know the story I described above - in full or only parts of it. Friends who can understand what is behind the passport and the accent: That I feel so much at home here.

I cannot say that I never felt so much at home as I do now. Every time has its places and persons. But I am sure that I feel better than I did during the last few years in Munich.

This is not an adventure, it isn't an interim. This is my life. And - with all the difficulties the country has - my place.

Good friends support me by telling other people that I am "Thessalonian" and I love them for this.

So now for six years I have got to know what it is like if you feel at home, but people treat you as a foreigner.

I remember how I could not accept people in Germany who asked people of colour or Asian people "Where are you from?", on the basis of their thought that they could not be Germans. So many times I witnessed people answering "Here, from Munich", or "I am from Berlin, but studying here". Then people insisted and said "But where are you really from?" - emphasising the "really".

I was always ashamed, angry, and sad when I heard that. Angry when people said "I am just curious, it isn't racist." - because it IS racist. Ask "Where are your roots?". You never know if someone is adopted, the parents came to study here or if there is a funny, a sad or any other kind of personal story behind the person.

"The person asks for the first time. But I have to hear that question every single day", I read the other day from a German person of colour on social media. I can feel for him.

I did not like it when I used to live in Germany, when I used to work with different people who sometimes did not look "German", but they spoke Bavarian like the locals, more like me for sure.

And I began to hate the question since I am myself a foreigner and my accent tells them.

Am I lucky that I am a white person? So they don't see it immediately but only when I am speaking? No, because I have also heard "you look German".

Racist. Again.

Germany is so full of different people. Just in my very close circle are:

My friend with an Afghan father. Her sister with a Ghanaian father.

My nephew with a Vietnamese mother.

My friends' children with a Palestinian father and a Greek mother.

My friend with a Turkish father.

My mother with a Ukrainian mother and a Russian father.

Germany made a big mistake when they said only in the 2010s that they are an “immigration country”, that’s why so many people are still facing the question “Where are you from” although they grew up in Germany.

Germany is (state: 2017) after the US and Saudi-Arabia the most popular immigration country. There are migrants from 194 countries. 19% (15 million people) in Germany came from another country or have parents who came from another country. Their children will be Germans, will marry people from other countries again and the idea of blond, blue eyed people is already obsolete.

It is not me who is a foreigner. It is the people who make me a foreigner.

Many people cannot understand it. They say “Yeah, they just wanna know where you are from”.

Usually these people have not lived abroad. “Live abroad” means you build up your life in another country. I am not talking about studying for a couple of years somewhere or being in an English speaking country or in some countries with a well secured foreigner bubble.

People who moved as I did to another country know what I mean and I am thankful for these friends with whom I can from time to time talk about the problem that they know as well as I do:

You are working very hard to learn the language, you are very brave to do hundreds and thousands of things that you never did before. You are overwhelmed, tired, brave, frustrated and then again all over again, but you cope with it.

...and then someone wants to reduce you only to the passport you have and to stress that you are a foreigner.

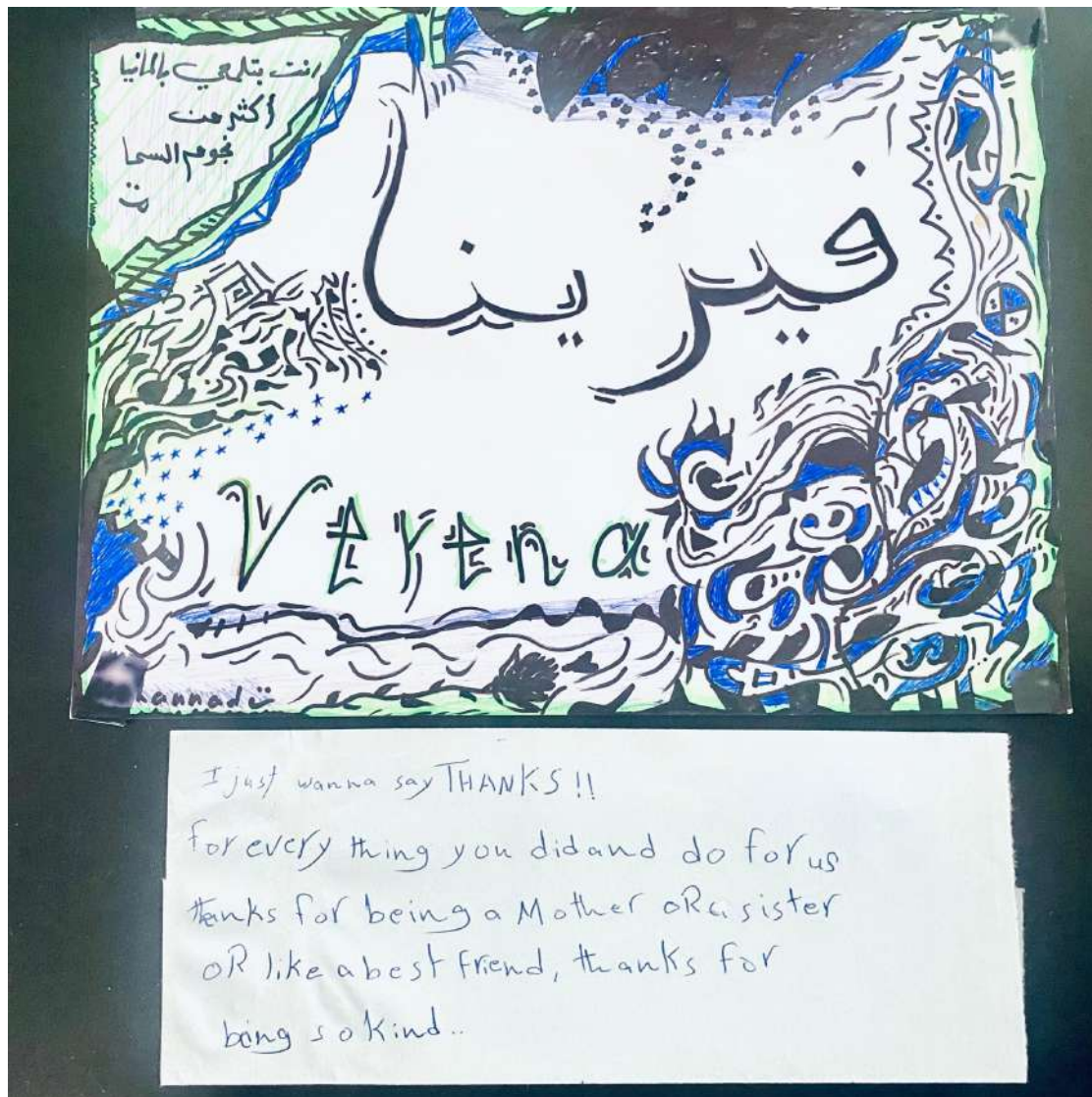
Be kind to us!

We love to tell you our stories. If you want to know them.

We love it if you are really interested in the different cultures and languages, if you are really interested in the foreign things you see when you look at or hear from us.

If you are not interested in us and only want to tell us your story (in my case who from your family lives where in Germany), please don’t ask! Please!

I am considering applying for Greek citizenship. I want to vote in the national elections also. But the other very important reason is an emotional one and I ask everyone not to laugh when you are reading it: I don’t want the people at the airport to speak English with me when I come home from a trip and I show my passport. I want them to say “Καλησπέρα” and not “good afternoon”.



In December 2015 I became friends with two young guys from Syria. They met in Greece when they arrived by boat on an island and realised that both come from the same city and share the same religion, both of them Druze. We are still friends, both speak perfect German now, are working after finishing their education, and I remember how beautifully they encouraged me when I also became a foreigner in Greece.

The text in the drawing says in the middle my name in Arabic and at the left "You are brighter than the stars here in Germany". Both papers from 2017 when I moved to Greece.

Stereotypes

A friend of mine wrote a book about the Roma in Thessaloniki³. I went to one of his book presentations in May 2023 and I not only met some impressive people, but I also began thinking about stereotypes. It is strange enough that I began at that moment and not earlier to think about it, but at that moment I could actually put it into a context.

In the context of the Roma in Thessaloniki (or let's maybe say everywhere), everyone who is a little bit selfaware agrees to say "we have stereotypes", but then I was wondering if all these people who were at the presentation would also agree that they don't have stereotypes about for instance Germans?

A stereotype is a generalised belief about a certain group, nationality, culture, people and an expectation that people might have about every single person of that group. People are not seen as individuals, but as a member of that group, whom people feel they know about.

In the case of a Roma woman it is that no one believes that she studied and does not have children, that she is living the same life as many other Greeks of her age. These stereotypes are coming from the Greeks, but also from inside the Roma community. Stereotypes are many times absorbed by those who are living inside the group of the people about whom the others have a clear stereotypical picture. It even can be a kind of vicious circle. Then their reaction can be that the stereotyped group of people accepts the picture other people have of them and the reaction is to fulfill the stereotypes.

The other reaction is trying and trying not to fulfill the stereotypes. Which is a permanent stress to do - and at the same time to remain a part of the stereotyped community.

In my case I am facing stereotypes from two sides: on one hand the Germans who know how Greeks are and on the other hand Greeks who have their stereotypes about Germans. Often Greek friends or random people have asked me what the Germans think about Greece. Often people in Germany tell me without asking me what they think about Greeks. And of course I hear all the time what Greeks think about Germans. I just need to open my mouth and my accent seems to give them permission to tell me their opinion about Germans.

There is a big exchange: Germans have been coming for holidays to Greece for decades. They buy houses, they are everywhere. Greeks have been working in Germany since the 1960s, the third / fourth generation is now there. Some of them came back to Greece, others come during summer to their relatives for holidays.

People are asking me how Germans see the Greeks. They are telling me what they have been told about how Germans are thinking about Greeks at the beginning of the economic crisis: Germans think that Greeks are lazy and it is their own fault that they

³ Γιώργος Τσιτρινίδης: Οι τσιγγάνοι της Θεσσαλονίκης. 2020

ended up in an economic disaster. I have been asked if that is true. I always have to say that I am not proud of it but that I did not care at all about the situation in Greece as I don't understand economics at all. That I did not have thoughts about Greeks as I did not think about them. I always reply that I am sure that there are people who think about Greeks that way, but that I know how people - and Germans a lot - like to put other people down in order to feel better themselves.

Germans tell me how Germans see the Greeks. The first years when I was still working very often in Germany, I had so many comments that I did not ask for. Most of them of course about holidays Germans had in Greece on the islands and most of all in Crete. It was kind of boring and to be honest I did not really care about it as I knew that you don't know a country before you have lived some years among locals. Of course there are a lot of stereotypes and again it is about putting people down in order to feel better. The diligent Germans. The smart Germans. Of course no one else can keep up with them. I could see many of the stereotypes Greeks have about Germans fulfilled.

And then there is the hospitality of Greeks that of course exists. But for Germans it is kind of a stereotype because they want to believe in it as the German hospitality is not so famous. The stereotype of hospitable people, sitting around in the sun during Summer is of course a picture Germans have after their holidays in Greece.

The stereotypes Germans have about Greeks are not easy for me as I have another picture. And even if I can see the common culture that Greeks have (every group has), I still can differentiate and meet every person on their own. If I cannot (it happens of course and usually it happens if someone fulfills the stereotypes a lot), I really try to be more aware.

Let's see what Greeks tell me about Germans. The worst thing was being on crutches and taking a taxi every few days. I open my mouth, I have an accent, "Where are you from?" and then: stereotypes at their best: where they travelled to in Germany, where they drank beer (sometimes even in exact numbers of the beers), where they ate sausage and that everything is so clean. And not only from taxi drivers: everything is great in Germany, you can make good money and everything works. But "people are living to work and we here are working to live". So many true things, and I agree with many things, and many things make me feel that I never want to go back to that country. But again: a stereotype is the generalised belief that every person of that group is that way.

I am a very organised person. I guess not because I am German, but because I already was doing many things parallel when I was very young. Then I became a freelancer, I have been living alone for many years, so I have to be very organised in order to have food and toilet paper at home and to get jobs and to do them well. "I see, you are German", I hear when I am trying to plan things in advance. No, I am me and if I don't plan in advance, things are not getting ready because I have a lot of different things all the time in my head.

There are stereotypes about the diligent Germans who blame those who are not that way. Stereotypes come from experiences people have with single people of a group

and then apply them to every person from that group. Yes, many Germans are diligent, many Germans like to put others down, many Germans overrate themselves. But like every stereotype it is wrong as only some people from a certain group are that way and a lot of people from the same group are different. Many people, including many Germans, and so am I, are trying to look exactly, to observe and to ask in order to form an opinion before they would call a whole group eg “lazy”.

I love to break stereotypes and on the islands I always try to hide myself when I hear German. I love to be the one who comes with an accent but without fitting into the stereotypes people have.

And I love when it happens like what is happening to one of the Roma women when they are going to schools with their education program and the children don't believe that they are Roma because they don't fit into the stereotypes: I love it when Germans come to Ecopolis and they see me with my colleagues and friends, they see and hear me acting and speaking - and they don't believe that I am German. Unforgettable is one day when we hosted an international meeting with Germans also. I was speaking with the organiser, doing my job and heard one of the young guys saying to the other (in German): “Really, she is German? No, I don't think so.” - and how he stared at me when I spoke later with him in accent-free German.

I love to break stereotypes because I think that they inhibit us in growing and in relationships with others. I am trying not to think in stereotypes when it comes to other groups or people although it may be difficult.

I am thankful for events like the book presentation and these people who remind me to live without stereotypes and to break the ones people have about Germans, Greeks or whomever.

When I came to Greece I did not have any stereotypes.

As I wrote, I was completely without any knowledge about the economic crisis, I hadn't been on vacation in Greece, I only knew somehow the location and the shape of the country.

Everything I knew about Greece was about Ancient Greece: the theatre of course. The mythology. Aristotle, Sophocles, Pythagoras, democracy and the Acropolis. And the Olympic Games.

Με αγάπη και εκτίμησι
στην Βερένα
χωρίς κανένα στερεότυπο
και με ελπίς να έχεις
πάντα από το φωτεινό χαμόγελο!

Γεωργία

The dedication in her book (Η πεταλούδα Ειρήνη και η μαγική συνταγή | Γεωργία Καλπαζίδου - The butterfly Irini [which also means "peace" in Greek] and the magic recipe by Georgia Kalpazidou): With love and appreciation for Verena. Without any stereotype and with the wish that you always will have a bright smile"

The Olympic Games

The most important thing first: when I was a child I learned that during the Olympic Games there was no war taking place. And I liked it.

The most known second: we know that it is not true anymore.

Maybe I learned very early at school about the Olympic Games, but the first time I really understood the concept was in 1994. The Summer Olympics in Los Angeles. I was 11 years old, my brothers 9, 7 and 7. And we collected stickers that came with a certain chocolate bar. We did not have the book to put the stickers in, but we stuck them on the door of our playroom. And I remember that we checked every morning in our local newspaper how many gold-, silver- and bronze medals the German athletes had won.

I think it was also the year when I understood the concept of Nationalism: this is the German flag, this is the German hymn, these are the “German” medals.

I learned nothing that has to do with Nationalism at home, as we grew up with the knowledge that our grandparents from one side are from two different countries and that to be born and to grow up in a certain country is just by accident.

But suddenly I felt “proud” of German medals.

Somehow proud.

And somehow I had the feeling that it was wrong. That it was wrong on one hand because I was only German by accident and on the other hand because the athletes took the medals and not we. No one except them exercised, were in the competition and won. We only collected stickers.

And somehow I did not like this kind of patriotism. I always felt uncomfortable when the national anthem was played and the national flag wasn’t something I could identify with.

You might say a child of 11 cannot say that. Maybe I couldn’t. But I can remember the feeling of being somehow proud of the number of German medals written in the newspaper and at the same time feeling that this was something I didn’t like to feel.

However I felt I was introduced to the concept of the Olympic Games.

Then, years later, I learned at school (I guess in history) about the Ancient Olympic Games. What I kept was: the Games were only for a few days not for weeks like the modern Olympics, besides sports there were also cultural events, the athletes were naked, the winner got an olive wreath and not a medal and there was something called the “Olympic Truce”.

Actually this was the most interesting thing for me. I learned that the reason was to ensure the host city state was not attacked so that athletes and spectators could travel safely to the Games and also return to their countries without getting into a war zone. I really liked this idea and the Olympic games became thus more interesting for me. And of course I was wondering why this Olympic Truce had been lifted.

When I moved to Munich and used to live for the first years close to the Olympic Village, I learned more about what happened during the Olympic Games in Munich

1972, only one year before I was born. Not only that there was no peace during the Olympic Games, there was even “war” AT the Olympic Games.

When I moved to Munich in 1992, I used to live the first years very close to the former Olympic village and I had already understood that the Olympic Games consist of only a little part of sports, and a big part of marketing and money. The romantic idea I had when I learned about it in school, the fun we had when we collected the stickers in 1984 turned to disappointment and a realistic view. And as I am not very interested in watching sports on TV, as I am not patriotic, I forget about the Olympic Games.

Of course you cannot avoid it, because the money machine is working and it is literally everywhere, but at least I am so little interested in it that I never know when they begin, when they end. With the Olympic Games in non-democratic countries like Russia and China it became anyhow a very difficult topic.

After Los Angeles then the first time I remember Olympic Games was in 2004 when a friend of mine went as a journalist to Athens. She was telling me before and afterwards that nothing was really ready for the athletes and the journalists and about chaos and the Greeks. At that time, Greece was for me nothing other than a country in the south of Europe in the funny shape of a “cow’s udder” as we said.

And of course I understood that it was something special that the Modern Games were taking place in the country where the Ancient Games had been invented.

More than 15 years later every now and then I have something in my hands from that time. A shirt, a toy, a cap. From 2015 to 18 when there was a big need for clothes for refugees, we gave a lot of these donated clothes to people who are displaced and I was thinking how funny the ways of objects are sometimes.

Olympia is a place in the Peloponnese, far away (about 600 km) from the place where I am living now, in a completely different part of the country. As the Ancient Olympic Games were Games in honour of the God Olympus, there is a link to my daily life:

There is almost no day on which I don’t look at Mount Olympus, the home of - according to mythology - the twelve Olympian Gods.

Due to the particular location of Thessaloniki at the Thermaic Gulf on days with a good view you can have the impression that Mount Olympus is so close you could swim to it.

Actually it is only around 100 km away and it took me years to manage to get there. Up to today I still haven't been on the peak of Olympus, there are not so many months in which there is neither snow nor heat.

Living now so close to that mountain and in the country of the Ancient Olympic Games, I am thinking of the Ancient theatres that you still can see everywhere around. I am not a big fan of watching sports, but as I studied theatre and as it is one of my professions, I almost cried when I stood for the first time in the theatre at the Acropolis in Athens. There I stood. Around me were all these parts of the theatre that I had learned by heart for the exams at university. It really moved me, and it moved me again in the Ancient city of Filippi, and in every ancient theatre I stood in until now. Every time I have the thought “I am living now in the country that invented theatre.”

I don't know if this feeling would be the same for every athlete standing in the ancient Olympia, but I imagine it.

Everything is coming closer to me. On one hand I mean that figuratively as I am more interested in things since I have been living in Greece that I wasn't interested in so much before. On the other hand I mean it literally, because wherever I go I can see history and culture.

I learned about Greek mythology - and realised how much we heard about it at school and how much Greek mythology is part of European cultural life.

It is great to learn more about it, to have the (literally) everyday view of Mount Olympus and to have a lot of destinations in mind where I can go in my new country, theatres, ruins - and Olympia of course.

I guess I will not be able to be there during world peace, but this is an idea I had to give up already early in my life...



*Mount Olympus from Thessaloniki - and from a bit closer.
One day I will finally make it up to the peak. Until then I will not get tired of seeing it from the
city, in winter so clear and beautiful.*

Military and pacifistic thoughts

Growing up in the city that was “Île de France” (“French Island”, a base of the French military after WWII, consisting of 7 parts, of which the last one has been dissolved in 1999. The first part left in 1992, the year when I also moved from that city to Munich.

I grew up with the military around me, the French military trucks, practising hill starts in front of our house, the American military jets, practising whatever on their way from and to Ramstein, 70 km away. We had sports lessons together with the children (11-18 yo) from the Lycée Hoche, the high school at the French military base, where the children of the military went to school. I remember when I visited, as part of a school exchange, one of the girls at home, at age 12 or 13, her father came home in uniform. Very strange for me, but as we were seeing the French military all the time in the city, it was also kind of normal. It was the “French part” of my life.

At the same time I somehow grew up in an environment of the peace movement. The discussions at home, the books my father was reading, the commitment of the adults around us to a world with less war, fewer weapons and less injustice. Something that shaped my life, my thoughts and my values.

I remember that I was shocked when I went to a demonstration instead of school during the Second Gulf War, more specifically the so-called “Operation Desert Storm” on 17.1.1991. For all of us then it was a shock to see the war on TV live for the first time and we couldn’t cope with it.

The first time a war happened live in the living rooms and we were at the age of understanding what self efficacy⁴ could be. So we went on a demonstration and shouted “No blood for oil”.

I asked for a signature for school as I was only 17 and couldn’t sign for myself, but my father refused it. I did not expect it, as he had educated me to do exactly this, I thought. I remember how he told me that it was my responsibility and that I have to take it also.

I don’t remember how it went on, but thinking about it today, I think that it is exactly what it is about: activism isn’t always fun. Isn’t always easy. It has consequences. Always.

And it is something that I have been facing my whole life long: the decision to stand up for your values, not to give up your values when it gets a little bit difficult, to go beyond your comfort zone in order to change something. To take the consequences. I am glad of that lesson (that I did not realise as a lesson then) and I am very often confronted by people giving up everything when it gets a bit more difficult.

I am in the lucky situation that I have never lived in a war zone, that I never had to decide to join the military or to flee my country or to go to prison. I cannot know how I would react, but I want to believe that I would not betray my values.

⁴ In psychology, self-efficacy is an individual belief in their capacity to act in the ways necessary to reach specific goals. The concept was originally proposed by the Canadian-American psychologist Albert Bandura in 1977

The first year after I moved to Greece, a friend was in a very difficult situation. He had finished his studies and had to perform his military service.

It took me a while to understand.

Then I understood that military service in Greece is not optional as it is in Germany.

I thought that Germany had abolished the mandatory military service decades ago, but after checking it, I learned that it was actually in 2011.

In my life I did not know anyone who did military service. Everyone I knew, including my three brothers and my father as well as my husband, were rejected as unfit or decided to do civilian service which was possible since the 80s. Another example of consequences: this service was for half a year longer (at least) than the military one.

As I was working in many social organisations, I also met many young men doing their community service and for me this was the norm and the military service something that only strange people did (my experience, my bubble).

This friend now had to find a solution - and I learned that I am now living in a country in which it is almost impossible not to spend a certain time in the military.

He found a way, with doctors who wrote him an attestation of his incapacity for the service (this is the good part of the corruption in Greece). He began to study again and I hope that he will never go to the military.

People here say, "We need it, we have Turkey beside us." But I cannot agree.

Friends did refuse military service and cannot get proper jobs, had to hide, went to prison, left the country or couldn't travel.

In September 1998 we finally voted the Greens into the German parliament. It was our first wedding anniversary and I remember that my husband and I were sitting almost alone in the restaurant as everyone was sitting at home in order to see if after 16 years the Kohl government would finally leave.

We had huge expectations for the socialist democratic - Green ("red-green") government. I remember us in the evening cycling home through an empty street as everyone was sitting in front of their TVs (these were the times before mobile phones and mobile data), crossing a red light and shouting "Red - green... all the same!" My generation only knew Helmut Kohl and the Christian democratic ("black") party and we really hoped for a change.

On 12.10.1998, only a little more than two weeks after the elections, a couple of days after the swearing-in of the new red-green government in Germany, the German federal parliament ("Bundestag") had to decide about the participation of the German military ("Bundeswehr") in the armed conflict in Kosovo. Five months later, NATO intervened in the Kosovo war by beginning air strikes. The armed forces of Germany were part of that operation, of that war.

It was a big disappointment for us and for years I could not say if I would vote again for the Greens who competed for peace based politics.

In 2022 the next war close to middle Europe began in Ukraine: the Russian invasion began on 24.4.2022 - and like a bad joke - in Germany again after six months the Greens were one of the three parties who built the German government. Again after

16 years of the Christian democratic ("black") party, after Merkel who seemed to stay - like her predecessor Kohl - for ever.

Again a war so close, again the decision to support NATO, again the question of delivering weapons and equipment into a war zone.

There are two clear opinions: the Ukraine needs support in order to defend itself against the aggressor. We should not be a part of that war and not get involved at all. Many people could not understand why Germany hesitated so long about sending tanks and other stuff. Looking to the newer history and the participation of the Green Party which is in the tradition of the peace movement can explain it.

I don't really have a strong opinion, I feel only overwhelmed when looking at every war zone in the world and of course when looking at what Russia has done to countries like eg Ukraine or Georgia during the last decades.

But I am - as I did when I was a child - thinking of the postcards and posters that I grew up with, a sentence from the seventies and the beginning of the peace movement: "Imagine there is a war and no one is going there."

When you are a child you are allowed to have these thoughts. When you are an adult you should accept the reality as it is. and reality is complicated.

But I still insist on this: if no one is holding a gun, war does not work anymore.

Erich Maria Remarque in "All quiet on the Western front" ("Im Westen nichts Neues", 1929 - banned and burned by the national socialists 1930) wrote something that I still remember.

The book in general describes in parts very analytically the German soldier's extreme physical and mental trauma during World War II as well as the detachment from his former life as a civilian when returning home from the war.

We read that book at school when I was 15 I think, and there is one passage I remember like today: the protagonist describes how he is lying in the mud, attacks and withdrawals day by day and how he gets more and more tired. In this situation he is wondering why he has to do it and what he gets for it. He is thinking that he doesn't gain anything and that none of all the friends who already died under inhumane circumstances had gained anything. And he goes a step further and asks what the soldiers on the other side are gaining and determines that they are in exactly the same situation and don't gain anything but fear and agony and death. And so he writes down a proposal: that whenever two countries have an issue instead of sending thousands of innocent young men into a war in order to fight against each other, although they don't know each other and thus don't hate each other, that the presidents of the countries who are fighting should meet in a boxing ring and fight themselves. The winner gets the land or whatever they are fighting for and no one gets hurt.

I liked that idea so much and his thoughts - and at the same time I could not understand why he had become a soldier at all.

"Imagine there is a war and no one is going there"

I learned at school that in the two World Wars there were young men who could not wait to go to war. I can see it today in Russia and Ukraine - but there I also can see men who are fleeing their country in order not to go to war. I know also then (in World

War I and II) there were men who did not want to “fight for their country”, but they had no choice. Or the choice was death or the concentration camp or prison. In every war, men - and women - are called to “fight for their country”. And I never understood it. And I was wondering what you would do when growing up somewhere and somehow like I did: somehow “between the countries” and “between the cultures and the identities”.

As a child I tried to figure out what I would do, what I would have done.

As an adolescent I said “I would rather go to prison. I would rather die.”, but inside me I knew already then that you can never speak in the subjunctive. You never know until you cross that bridge.

And actually this is something we can see today: Ukraine and Russia, two neighbouring countries, countries from which many marriages came out, so that there are so many children who are the result of both (as my mother, for example). Which side will they fight for? They don’t have “their country”.

It shows that the concept of nationalism, the concept of the military, is not really working. And in a globalised world less than ever.

But still: we are human beings and we are fighting against each other. Still “for our country”.

I mean, if I did not understand the concept of nationalism with the Olympic Games, how can I understand it in a war, where people are supposed to kill other people. People they don’t know but they have to hate because they are born a hundred kilometers more north, east, south or west.

Come on, it doesn’t make sense to me.

I keep saying “Imagine there is no war and no one is going” in the same way as I keep saying that if we all refuse plastic, no one would produce it anymore, so hey, let’s do it. Let’s stop the ones who are making money out of the war by stopping taking part in it.

Of course everyone is laughing at me. And of course in Greece there is always the “But Turkey...”

But Turkey: there is the Greco-Turkish War of 1919-22. The Turkish advance on Smyrna on 9.9.1922 (the Greeks call it “the Asia Minor catastrophe” | Μικρασιατική καταστροφή | “καταστροφή” also means destruction) was the conquest of Smyrna (Smyrna) by the troops of Atatürk.

Atatürk was born in Thessaloniki, in Greece. This is where my questions begin and where I am wondering how people take one part of their life and decide that this is “my country which I am fighting for”.

But what is more important to me, and what is up to today a big issue in Greece, especially in the north of the country and so in Thessaloniki, is the population exchange that took place after the defeat of the Greek military and the Treaty of Lausanne on 30.1.1923, signed by both, Greece and Turkey.

“This exchange of population” involved at least 1,6 million people. More than 1,2 Million Greek Orthodox from Asia Minor, Eastern Thrace, the Pontic Alps and the Caucasus as well as about 400.000 Muslims from Greece had to leave their homes and

were made refugees and had to go to a place they did not know as they grew up in the country they had to leave now.

It is still an issue, still the second and third generation say “I come from a refugee family” or “I have a refugee background”. So many people in Greece have ancestors who used to live in Turkey. They still cook their Turkish recipes, but in a war – would they point their weapons at the descendants of their ancestor’s neighbours?

Then I am thinking again about what is happening in Ukraine and how neighbours are fighting.

Imagine there is a war and no one is going there.

I grew up with this in times of the arms raised in the West and East. In an environment in which pacifism was a realistic idea. The opposition to war was the only way I could imagine from my very young years.

The “Easter marches” (“Ostermarsch”) took place even in the small town where I grew up. I remember from my early childhood balloons with the dove of peace on them. I remember from my adolescent years “we shall overcome” or “give peace a chance” songs I learned to accompany on my guitar.

The “Easter marches”, already an initiative since 1959, experienced their second upswing from 1979 to 1990, the years when I was 6 to 17. The topics were the neutron bomb and the NATO double-track decision to station short- and medium-range nuclear weapons in the German Federal Republic. In 1983 (me ten years old) about 700.000 people took part in various peace campaigns and activities. How could I not be influenced by that?

I am glad that I was able to grow up with these pacifistic thoughts, ideas and ideals.

I am glad that later I met people who shared the same thoughts, ideas and ideals.

And I guess I am a very lucky person that I found in even some countries further away, in my new home in Greece, people who share with me this idea that another world could be possible.

Still, the idea of peace is a difficult one. Even us, people who share these ideas, we hurt each other, we are fighting and sometimes we cannot find solutions.

I see that I still have to learn so many things, but I am glad that I can do it with people who share the same ideal of a pacifistic world. We are trying hard. We are failing and we are trying again. And again.

So many times in my life I have been thinking “How would I react if I had to go to the military, to a war?” Would I really make it? Would I really decide to go to prison?

I don’t know. I cannot know.

I am striving to be pacifistic. To be consistent in what I am doing and to encourage other people to do the same.

Maybe that’s where pacifism begins.



"Imagine there is a war and nobody goes there" (postcard)



"Not one single hour at the military. Graffiti in the Upper town in Thessaloniki 2024"

Northern Ireland and Palestine

"I am always on the side of the oppressed", I said one day.

I was in Belfast to visit my friend whom I met a couple of years earlier in Thessaloniki. Being in Northern Ireland brought back memories to me, thoughts, questions - and this statement, well-knowing that things are never that easy.

I am not sure when we got our first TV. Or from which age we were allowed to watch something on TV.

It was the eighties, the time when we had three TV stations in Germany, one of them the regional one. I remember that after swimming classes my mother dried my hair and we watched something "funny" (or what we thought then was funny).

I remember Saturday nights in the double bed of my parents, all of us together, watching the Saturday night program (20.15 after the news until 21.45, very late for us, a wonderful exception from time to time).

Somewhere in between these memories must also be that I began watching the news in my teenage years.

I remember (without date or time or specific occurrence) great famines in Africa. I remember earthquakes in countries I tried to find on the map - and I remember the two conflicts in Northern Ireland and in Palestine.

Palestine: The First Palestinian Intifada, which ended with the Oslo agreement in 1993, began in 1987. I was 14 then and tried to understand the world. Chernobyl, the arms race between USSR and the USA, a divided country, and this news.

As a German I had learned very early about the Holocaust and what the Germans did to the Jews and other

humans they despised and feared. As a teenager, I began very early to read every book that has been written for children about that topic. For some reason I wanted to know everything.

So I had the picture of Jews that who were one hundred percent victims of the grandparents of my friends or neighbours (of course no one knew, of course I never met anyone in my whole life who told me "my father / my grandfather was a Nazi / member of the SS / worked in a concentration camp. Statistically it is not possible, but that's how human beings cope with their dark past).

And then I saw the Jewish state of Israel shooting at the Palestinian kids in this "stone war", as they did not have other weapons.

But then I also saw buses in pieces because Palestinian men and women attacked Israel with their weapons: self made bombs on their bodies.

For me as a teenager it was a confusing thing.

For me as a middle-aged-woman, it is still a confusing thing.

And then there was Northern Ireland. Even worse: Catholic and Protestant neighbours killed each other. I was Catholic, some of my friends Protestant, it seemed to be so unrealistic and at the same time I saw the pictures in the news of assassinations, of blood and death and fights and the troubles.

A friend's brother went for a year after school to do his community service in Ireland. I remember when my friend told me, I first felt fear and asked "Where? In the north or in the south?". It was years ago before I went to Ireland I understood that there is the Republic of Ireland and there is Northern Ireland as a part of the United Kingdom⁵. My friend replied then "Not where they are fighting" and I was relieved.

Of course I did not have an overview the whole thing - and actually I did not until I actually went a couple of years ago to Northern Ireland. Before I had only a little picture and my friend made the puzzle complete.

"I am always on the side of the oppressed", as I said, is somehow the reality and at the same time I know that it is wrong, because also the suppressed can use instruments that are for the right goal but still they are wrong.

A big discussion.

In 1983 U2 referred to the 1972 "bloody Sunday" in Derry. When three years later I began to have an interest in music, I also began listening to U2, as those were the times when they became well-known.

At their concerts, the band began with the words "We are U2 and we are from Dublin, Ireland". Then in the 80s, 90s, the world was still small and travelling was not so normal. Neither were exchanges for students and bilateral marriages and the wonderful aspect of globalisation. Of course I knew the world map, the European one, I checked Dublin, I saw the borders with Northern Ireland, but no, I did not get it. They were singing about Bloody Sunday, they came from Ireland, I really did not get it.

When I met my husband seven years later, I met the biggest U2 fan and we listened together to the music, watched the videos and went to concerts. "Bloody Sunday" is a song that the Irish band has been singing again and again and over the years I had a lot of discussions with people who seemed to know better than I what happened in Northern Ireland and why. Slowly I built my own picture.

I stood there like a child and said "Well, I don't know, but I always feel more on the side of the oppressed"...

During the first three months of 2017 in Thessaloniki, I met Moyna from Belfast.

My first thought was - no thought. A feeling. A feeling of pity for her that she came from that country, U2 had to sing about.

To be honest, I had lost track of the situation in Northern Ireland, somehow I knew that there had been the Good Friday agreement in 1998, somehow I remember when in 2005 the IRA declared the armed struggle over. But actually I still had the pictures of my childhood from the news in my mind whenever she said something about Belfast or Northern Ireland.

And although my brain knew, my feelings were still full of these pictures from then and of a time full of violence and fear.

⁵ Ireland is the whole island, North and South, so as a country the South is the Republic of Ireland. Great Britain is the only the larger island ie England , Scotland and Wales. If Northern Ireland is included it is the United Kingdom.

Meeting my friend Moyna was for many reasons a stroke of luck. But beside everything it gave me the opportunity to visit Northern Ireland. Besides the beautiful time we had together and besides the beautiful places I visited, we could also talk every day in the afternoon about my experiences and her time during the troubles when she studied and later on.

Her father, a Presbyterian pastor, she an open-minded and loving person.

Me, a visitor, on the side of the suppressed, informed, but only from far.

I went to Derry, where Bloody Sunday took place. It was a lovely train trip along the North coast of Northern. There, you are walking along the city walls and within the walls is that beautiful (Protestant, English) little city Londonderry. And when you look beyond the walls you can see the Catholic, Irish Derry: streets upon streets in squares full of small houses.

I went along the city walls, saw an interesting looking shop and decided at the last minute to stop and to have a look. I found two books about childhood and growing up in Derry in the 60s and 70s, and because my small luggage only allowed one book, I began a conversation with the lady at the shop and it turned out that she was the sister-in-law of the author, two of her brothers were shot during the Troubles and she told me a lot about her own childhood in Derry. How normal it seemed for them as children to lie on the ground while playing when they heard a shooting. To wait until it finished, to count - as taught - up to 20, getting up and continuing to play...

She told me how she was still a bit afraid when her son, with an Irish name, was going to "Protestant quarters". How she is still a bit worried that he got married to a Protestant girl. She said "I love her, the family loves her. We see each other as human beings and not anymore as enemies. But still... there is something..."

Actually my friend told me the same the day I took the tourist bus and got off at the Catholic quarter in West Belfast. Everything is getting more and more mixed, but you still can very clearly see the different parts of Belfast. It was 2019, long after the Troubles, but still my friend said to me in the evening: "Suddenly I was thinking "oh, Verena is in West Belfast. I hope everything will go well."

I can understand it in a way. Today, in 2023 we are 34 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of Germany. But still if someone tells me he/she is from a city in East Germany I am thinking "ah, East Germany" or if someone tells me "I grew up in Berlin" there is always the spoken or unspoken question "West or East Berlin?".

This is collective and transgenerational traumatising that needs time - and work on it.

I learned eg that the Europa Hotel in Belfast is the most bombed hotel in Europe with 36 bomb attacks. That pubs have been closed, theatres and cinemas could not open and even if they were open sometimes, they closed the toilets in order to avoid bombs there. You could go into a pub but not to the toilet there.

The other side. The side of the suppressed oppressors... The Protestant Ireland that had to suffer the attacks of the Catholic suppressed people. And of course there were many people like my friend who just wanted to go into a cinema after university, but she couldn't.

And I see the collective traumatising that still exists and went to the next (and the third, fourth...) generation. I never saw so many glass fragments in the streets as I saw in Belfast. The first day when we walked into the city center, I asked my friend why. She said, there is a lot of devastation and demolition in the street. People destroy their bottles and whatever they can find,

For me it makes sense: the young generation knows about the hate between Catholics/Republicans and Protestants/Unionists, but they don't express it anymore like their fathers and grandfathers during the Troubles. So they found another way to express it. They express their anger with destruction in the streets.

Still so many years later so much hate from both sides. From the one who have been suppressed by the British and the other who had to suffer from the attacks, those who have been suppressed and struck back.

Who is right? I don't know.

As a pacifistic orientated person I judge every armed activity.

As the one who is usually on the side of the oppressed I somehow understand the motivation. Still I find it wrong.

Northern Ireland, the Troubles, Bloody Sunday, the Good Friday agreement... There is one thing that comforted me: today the Rugby team is an Irish Rugby team. Athletes from Northern Ireland and from the Republic of Ireland are playing together. Since 1995 they even have their own anthem: "Ireland's call". There may be a dark past, there may be still different countries, different flags, but they sing "shoulder to shoulder" and it is kind of kitsch, but actually I found it moving when I heard it the first time⁶.

In the Israel-Palestine conflict I have to confess that I lost track during the years. Not because I wasn't interested anymore, but because I feel so overwhelmed by that insoluble conflict. I feel so overwhelmed by reactions everywhere in the world, from people I know and from people from other countries who have an opinion, and from the vehemence they use to spread the word.

When I wanted to go to Greece for three months, I decided to learn at least a little Greek.

This is how I met my friend Maria in 2016. We are the same age, arrived at the same time in Munich, the

difference is that she came from Northern Greece (after a while in Thessaloniki) and I came from a small town in Western Germany. Very quickly we became friends, she taught me a lot of Greek language and culture during the seven weeks before I went and in the time between these three months and the moment when four months later after I came back to Munich - I moved to Thessaloniki.

At the same time as I met my husband (born, raised and stuck in Munich), she met her husband who had left Palestine.

So Palestine came closer again to my life, as I came closer to the family - and the children who speak Greek, Arabic and German.

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ssUwj9xofew>

But still I don't feel that I can say anything about the situation, that I am able, competent or allowed to have a good opinion.

Since 7.October 2023 when Hamas attacked Israel and Israel then began inhumane attacks on Gaza, things became difficult again. Germany stands 100% on the side of Israel, and I can feel that I have that guilt in me for what the German people did to the Jews in 1933-45. That guilt leads to a big solidarity with the Israeli people who are all Jewish. On the other hand I am observing the bigger and bigger part of land that Israel steals from Palestine and I can understand the anger of the Palestinian people. There are the victims of Hamas, there is the family of my friend in Gaza with whom they cannot stay in touch and for whom they fear for their lives.

Then there is Kurdistan. So many Kurdish refugees from Turkey already in the 90s in Munich in my theatre and cultural projects. So many Kurdish refugees in 2015 in Germany, in 2016 in Thessaloniki from Syria or Iraq that I met. How can I accept oppression? And how can I accept terrorism?

It is so difficult and there are only a few political topics I don't discuss. These are part of it.

What can I think, which opinion shall I have?

I am confused, I still feel as I felt as a child when I saw the news and I was asking my father why Protestants and Catholics were fighting against each other.

I still feel like the child I was that could not understand why people are killing each other. Why one country or a group suppresses another.

The only difference is that I know now that I am doing the same - smaller. Without stones or guns. But still. I defend "my territory", my boundaries. With words, with looks, with behaviour.

This is how we are. I don't find it easy to accept it, but this is how we people are. And as people are building groups, religions and nations, this is how they are acting.

In Northern Ireland the situation became more complicated again by Brexit in 2020.

The war in Ukraine seems to go on still for a long time.

So many other countries suppress minorities, more or less.

The only thing we can do is to make it better in our small world, in our environment, in our community. To see us as human beings and not part of a certain nation, religion, group which is superior to another.

Belfast, after thirty years of
darkness,
turned its face towards
the **light** again.



*Text in the exhibition in the city hall of Belfast
Monument "Free Derry"
The "Catholic" part of Derry*

(all pictures June 2019 during my visit to Northern Ireland)

People with special needs? People.

The other day I had a conversation with a woman who told me how uncomfortable she felt when she had to do a job interview with a man who is living with a handicap. He could not speak that fluently and it needed time to wait for the continuation of sentences, she told me. And how she wanted to help him. And that a friend of hers, who is a social worker, told her that she doesn't have to help, that for "these people" it is ok and can be wrong to help without being asked for help. A third person that was with us told us that their son went to a kindergarten and then to a primary school with children with special needs and that they were so normal with each other. Rarely have I heard stories like that - and more unusual are these stories in Greece, where inclusion is not one of the first aims in schools, nor in the society that is living in a non-barrier-free environment.

I was in the situation that I would call wonderful, luxury, fortunate. My father got his first job after graduating from university in a home for children with special needs. When I was a child the term was still "disabled children".

Somehow I grew up with these children. Not on a daily basis, but at least often enough to find it normal. Every Summer, since I was four years old, we went for two weeks together with some children from the home, with a youth group from a village to a camp site where we spent time together according to a motto. I remember in particular the circus and building a playground. And I remember one year with ten days of rain, something that happens in Germany, and that we left the camp earlier than planned.

My memories with these children are at the same time the development of my concept of man.

I remember that I did not really realise the difference and that I had friends there.

I remember that I began going to school, learned writing and reading, something very important for me, and that I realised that these friends couldn't do it and that some of them never could learn it.

I remember how we learned to build up the different sized tents. How I was told to hold this line, to keep that corner and how the children from the home were also told. I remember that it was great for me to learn and to see my development every year and to go slowly into another role while the children still held a line or a corner of the tent. I remember that I did not think or feel better, that I only observed it.

I remember that I spent days beside a boy who could only make some sounds but was smiling and laughing all the time and I just held his hand and was laughing too. I still have a photograph of us. I remember the feeling that wasn't pity or anything like that, I remember only enjoying being together.

I remember one of the first years, when I was maybe 6 years old, when I went to the toilet and one of the older girls hit me. For the next two weeks I did not go by myself one single time into the toilet building because I was afraid.

I remember one year (when we broke up because it was raining all the time) that one of the older boys hit one of my brothers (with the huge soup ladle for the really big pots from the industrial kitchen, I remember it as if it was today) so much that the wound needed stitches.

I remember that my parents found the right words to explain to us that it didn't have to do with our behaviour. That we did not make a mistake. That these children who hit us did not want to hurt and that they were not bad people. That they didn't know how to express their feelings.

It wasn't about "accept that they hurt you", but we learned to understand what is behind the actions. We learned to see them as human beings with their way of acting, with their skills (eg. when we built up the tents, when we played circus, when we built the playground) and with their difficulties. As I grew up with three brothers, two of them twins, we knew that all of us have different skills and difficulties. I don't know how, but our parents made it and helped me that way to form and develop my present concept of man: We are all different. We have skills, we have "good sides", and we have difficulties, weaknesses, soft spots, talents and failings. We can develop as everyone can. "Disabilities" can be very different and I could - even as a child in the 80s - not accept this word.

Later, when I began working with people with special needs, I also learned about the People-First-Movement. Recommendations and explanations to use person-first language already existed in the 1960s. In 1988 the first "people first" groups began meeting in the US, It took a bit longer to come to Germany but actually I was able to encounter it when I began my first inclusive project at the beginning of the 1990s. In Greece it is still not in use, I remember a European project in 2018. In the project where I was working and organised this international project meeting for groups from Greece, Portugal, Great Britain and Lithuania we had a discussion about what to call the participants. The project is a very politically correct one, but no one except me ever had been in touch with people with special needs. I faced the wording of my childhood years: disabled people, now in Greek.

I had theatre projects that were inclusive or projects with people with special needs only. People from the audience used to ask me "Which disabilities do the actors have?" and I couldn't answer. That is what I told them and they looked confused about how I could not know. I told them what was important for me: one person needs fifty rehearsals in order to remember what she has to do. Another needs one thousand "bravo" from me in order that he finds the courage to go on the stage. Another person maybe needs some grumbling because he or she is able to learn the text by heart, but she or he did not sit down at home to study the lines.

What I explained to the people from the audience when they asked me "And are you not backstage to help them?" that my aim has always been not to send them on stage but to empower them to help each other to do it by themselves.

And it worked. And it helped them to have less "special needs" to be more "people".

I was working with a colleague in the education of people with learning and multiple difficulties who are working in sheltered workshops (WfbM, by the way, the translation today, 2023 is still "workshop for disabled people, so still no people first!) and took a role there as "trade union" or the women's representative. They have always at their side a supporter from the employees. The content of our seminars has been about their rights, their duties, about communication and relationships. We taught the people with learning difficulties together with their supporters and I cannot

say which of the participants was more difficult, more complicated, more pleasing... It was depending on the people.

And as I learned as a child: some of the people have the special need to be supported in communication because they cannot speak, because they don't speak clearly, because they are deaf and need sign language. But also because maybe they don't have the filter we can use when we are angry or overwhelmed. Sometimes we got very clear feedback that someone was not satisfied with our seminar anymore. Maybe someone shouted. Maybe someone left the room, slamming the door. On the other hand I had the most beautiful positive feedback from these participants.

At one theatre workshop I remember the 20 participants hugging me all together. People giving me their last chocolate, one of the 5 expensive printed business cards, selfies and - if it comes to my professional skills - a positive feedback that you never would get from "normal" people, as they rarely give you 10 out of 10 for your work, even if they really appreciated it.

In one of my first inclusive theatre projects I had a participant who did not get the attention he needed in one rehearsal. Or he could not play the drums as much as he wanted, I don't remember. What I remember is how he hit me in my back and I couldn't breathe anymore. I remember that I had in my mind immediately all the situations with the children of my childhood and the explanations of my parents. I could leave the room in order to recover, I could understand his way of reacting and could be with that man afterwards in a good way (by the way, he was very sorry and afterwards we had a couple of good projects together).

I am so thankful that I could grow up with these children. It gave me the fearless way of being with people with disabilities as well as with every person from everywhere with all their strengths and weaknesses. I can treat them as human beings, as "people first".

I am struggling with the word "refugee" as it shows only that aspect of the people, as "disabled", as "stutterer", "black", "German"...

Maybe you have been asking why during all the chapters I did not use the word "refugee" or the expression "displaced people". Since I learned about the People First movement, I couldn't use these terms anymore. In any language. In Greek it is (as always) very complicated, in German and English it is not. If I call someone a displaced person or a refugee that is how the person is defined. Nothing more. But a person who is displaced is first a person with a lot of life already lived. With a family, a background, a profession, beloved things – and on top they are a person who is displaced. I don't want to take from the people everything they had before they had to flee. As I don't want to take from people with difficulties being a person first.

I like to say "people who are displaced" and I hate to be called "the German". People on the flee have so much more than they that had to leave their country. I have so much more than to have a German passport. People with special needs have so much more than a handicap.

What I learned during the 20 years I was working with people with special needs is that they don't have special needs. They have needs. Some needs are the same as we also have: We want to sleep, to eat, to laugh, to love, to be loved. Some of them need help with even basic needs, some people need help to go to bed, need machines to sleep, need help with eating, even machines for that. Some cannot express their laughter so much, some fall in love too easily and are also heartbroken easily. And then there are people who need help to read and to write. People who need help to understand our complex world.

I need help to have the self-confidence that so many of my participants had. I need help to make life as easy as many participants do. And I remember a table tennis match in which a woman "with special needs" and I really fought hard to find out who would win (I don't even remember the result, but I remember the fun we had).

Refugees are people first. They had a life, they lost that life, they are trying to survive and need support. People with special needs are people first. They need sometimes more, sometimes much more support than I do, maybe most of us do. But we should take the trouble to meet the people, not the handicap.

Then we can like the person, we can dislike the person. We can say after a job interview "this person suits" or not. We can become friends or not. We can live together "inclusively" and everyone gives what she/he/they can give. This would be a solidarity world.



One of the children I felt very close to. Although he couldn't communicate with words we found a way of communication.



The final presentation of the circus camp.

Both pictures from the beginning of the 80s from the summer camps with the children with special needs that my father organised, where my siblings and I used to go every Summer.

Solidarity could save us

I don't know when I named it the first time. I don't even remember the language in which I spoke about it for the first time.

I know that it is a part of my life. And I am convinced that only solidarity can save us. We never called it solidarity, but somehow I grew up with it:

When I was four, the third and fourth child of my parents came on the same day - they were twins. Still I cannot imagine how, but in a small town hospital in 1977 it happened: My parents expected one baby - and came home with two. An interesting and challenging thing not only for my brother (almost two then) and me (just four), but also for the economic situation of my parents. My mother was a housewife and my father was still a student, right before graduating.

The best friend of my godmother did something that was something we talked about often in my family: She paid for the pampers for both of the twins for one year. A big relief for my parents' budget - and a huge act of solidarity.

Later we had a befriending family who gave us lots of clothes. These were the 70s and 80s. No Ebay, no bazaars at schools and churches, a family with four children the exception and considered as strange and even antisocial.

In my youth group I learned for the first time how solidarity outside of the family in a bigger framework can happen.

This was the time when my concept of solidarity was born:

Everyone is doing at a certain point something which helps for the good of the community.

We learned to organise, travel and live together in this way.

One friend even went so far that she stayed with me overnight for uncountable weekends of my adolescence. I wasn't allowed to stay out later than 21.00, even in the last years of school. But I was allowed to sleep over in the group room we had at church. And my friend - out of solidarity - stayed with me when all the others left and so I did not lie when I said "Other people from our group will be there".

It was a wonderful time concerning solidarity. A small group of nine people were literally living together in the years when we were 15-18 years old.

Solidarity saved me then as I had a rough time at home. There I had another "family" in my friends, people who helped me, people whom I helped, people with whom I lived in solidarity.

We did not name it, but today I can see it and I still feel very close to three of the friends from that time (as well as to their families), I am the godmother, I have a home at their home.

I guess if you once used to live in solidarity, you will always find people with whom you will live this way. Me myself, I am neither able nor willing to live otherwise.

I met these people in Munich, I met them building a bridge between Munich and Thessaloniki and I found that and I am still finding them in Thessaloniki.

In Munich after my husband passed away, I was living in a small apartment and did not have many jobs. Nothing new, up to now it has not changed, but then I was really sometimes in a desperate situation financially. Unforgettable the envelope with one month's rent in it a friend gave me. The parcel with a lot of beautiful organic foodstuff, the mother of a friend sent me. The many many bags at my door with fruits or sweets or any treats.

One of my friends at this time was and still is an inspiration for me concerning solidarity. Her way of living then, when she was still studying and we met in the Protestant students' church, showed me what solidarity looks like and I am grateful that I was able to be a little part of the community. We shared foodstuff, clothes, bikes, time, money, apartments...

One of the two Syrian friends I made in 2015 in a camp in Munich, stayed with her for months. From her first income in 2018 she sent me 500€ for my work here and wrote "I want to share it as I don't need so much".

This is what I did when I got the widow's pension from 2018 on and at the same time I had a lot of well-paid seminars. I never expected so much widow's pension and I did not need it, as the jobs allowed me to create a financial buffer. The first year thus, I gave every month half of the money to someone around me whom I knew needed it. People said "You can keep it, maybe you will need it later", but as I don't have stuff that I don't use, I don't want to keep more money than I need.

The wonderful thing is that everyone who is suddenly part of these solidarity networks, even though they never thought about it, afterwards they also adapt their behaviour and become part of it:

I used to open my apartment when I left for a couple of days for the two Syrian friends as long as they still had to live in the camp. I remember the first time coming back: The one of them who stayed there for the days left me a big amount of the very yummy Arabic bread from the bakery I liked.

I remember how the other one who learned that I need headphones gave me his own. I don't use them anymore, but I don't have the heart to give them away.

One of them has just been in Syria for the first time after seven years to see his family. He has a German passport now and is able to travel.

When I sent him a message and said how much I want to believe that we will make it one day together to his hometown, he sent me a voicemail and said (in German of course): "Whenever you come here, you have a home. My family is waiting for you, they all know who Verena is".

Solidarity extended to his family.

We also have this idea at the social space in Thessaloniki, Ecopolis. A place for ecological and solidarity activities.

Since 2015 and more after the eviction at Idomeni in May 2016, there have been many refugees who have received clothes, foodstuff, meals, sanitary items, furniture, housing...

The idea of solidarity isn't of course for everyone from the beginning - and many of them will never understand or live it.

But some of the people who stayed there and with us, became volunteers. There has even been one activity that was run only by refugees and one or two locals.

I like to say to groups when they are visiting us "We are working and living together". What I want to express with it is that:

I can bring whatever I don't need at home (clothes, foodstuff, plates, glasses, stuff) - and I can take what we have if I need it. Moving to Thessaloniki with only three bags included being without plates, forks, towels, kitchen towels, pots... I could take what we had. And when I slowly settled down and bought what I really wanted, I could bring it back to Ecopolis for the next people who would need it.

When I want to bake a cake (something that I do every year once, maybe twice), I take home the mixer from our kitchen and bring it back the next day. This is btw not only solidarity, it is also ecological as not everyone needs to buy everything that you also could share.

We have bikes (this is how I found the first bike for cycling in Thessaloniki in Summer 2016), so sometimes it is great that I can take one to be somewhere more quickly. Very often I put my bike there as we have an elevator that I don't have at home. Sometimes we meet in the mornings when two of us are taking our bikes from there, and I really love it to have this "have a nice day, see you in the afternoon.". It is that "living together" I mentioned. For a long time again and again we had people staying there for a while, people who did not have another possibility of staying away from a life in the streets, and it was always nice to meet in the mornings.

If I am leaving for a while I bring the foodstuff I still have in my fridge there. Sometimes I arrive there with the question "Do we have anything to eat?". As we get food from restaurants to give to the people, sometimes you are lucky and there is really food, not just some olives and crackers. Sometimes someone was cooking the day before and there are some leftovers to share. When we were going to the market every Saturday to collect fruit and vegetables, I took the vegetables that were left and cooked during the week whatever was there. Or it was a warm day but in the evening it was suddenly cold and I needed a pullover. I found one in the clothes. I bought a dress for a wedding, I wore it twice, I know I will not wear it again, I brought it there. Even the crutches for the time after my surgery I got from Ecopolis. Not the right size, but good enough.

I brought all my skills into our daily work. I was organising, I was writing social media posts, I was drawing banners, making posters, exhibitions, I was the one who speaks French if someone doesn't know English, I was doing the presentations if groups were visiting from abroad and so on... At the same time I knew that I was not alone because everyone there brings his/her/their skills and that I could always ask for help for my personal life, whatever it is. This way of living together I stopped in 2024 after the difficult time of more than seven months Long Covid, but I am very grateful for the time we had together.

With the refugees again and again it was a difficult time. Every new person (most of them young men) did not know about ecology nor about the concept of solidarity as they came from countries where the family is even stronger than in Greece.

That's how we had discussions also about the role of the women and men and that we don't accept sexism. And again and again that it is not possible to use the place, the facilities, the food and never to give anything back.

This in theory. In practice many people did it that way. Many of them disappeared and it was ok. But actually those who somehow understood a bit about solidarity and about how we are living it, could hopefully enjoy it for the period of his time in Thessaloniki and hopefully took something with him for life.

And I think it is a real place of solidarity that should exist for more people in order to learn about and to live in solidarity.

In my blog I was writing about it, in public readings in the German speaking area I was talking about it, and in Thessaloniki whenever we had groups I spoke about it - not hiding the difficulties. I also lead workshops about solidarity in theory and practice and I love to do it because I think that really only solidarity can save us:

If we understand that we are not alone. We are not only our family (even if it is a big one). We are living in different communities and we need to live and to act in solidarity.

That means that we will live more ecologically, closer, but still individual enough. Happier because we can use our skills and can bring them into a bigger framework than only a job. We will do what we like, what we want and what is really needed in the community we are living in.

I think solidarity can save us, because it saves me every day. Whenever I am doing something for others I know that it makes sense. Whenever I need help, I know I can ask openly for it.

There are many difficulties in my life, but I know I am perfectly supplied, because I am a part of a solidarity network and I wish this for everyone who thinks that it is enough to have money and a couple of people around her/him/them.

We need people around us. And we need to create together.



Growing up in a family of 6, I learned that it's not only about me, but also about the whole community. (Pictures ca. 1981 and 1985)

Can art change the world?

Can you imagine a life without art? I can't.

Do you remember what was important during the lockdowns in 2020/21? It was music, it was movies, performances, podcasts and all the new beautiful projects that came up from creative people who could not work anymore in theatres, galleries, ateliers and museums,

Somehow art was always in my life. Maybe every young girl in the seventies played the recorder, was drawing and singing, but somehow I really did a lot already as a child.

With my friends when we were 8-10yo. we had a choir during elementary school where we had rehearsals during the breaks. I remember that I even made a little song book for us that my father copied at work.

With one friend (she is a graphic designer and a designer now in Paris, her daughter is one of my "secular godchildren") we made little school bags, books and notebooks for our dolls. We wrote books together and I admired her for not being afraid of making mistakes, while I tried to do everything right, using a ruler and sketching out. There I could already see the difference between talent and only a little talent. But I never stopped doing things.

With this friend and a group of common friends later when we were 16 and 17, we organised two exhibitions and made music for the vernissage. They were called "Art instead of ability" (Kunst statt Können"). With these people we created an artist group "The underpass" ("Die Unterführung") - leaning on the "Künstler Gruppe Die Brücke" (founded by expressionist artists 1905) and I remember beautiful performances on top of the ruins of the castles in the region where we grew up.

I remember that later I began to be a part of a group who made live videos that we sold to local bands who had their concerts in the nearby bigger cities around our little town. That I stayed at home when everyone in the second last year went on a one week class trip because I did not want to ask my parents for money - and I convinced the principal of the school that I could produce a video clip instead. I remember my room full of equipment and a week full of work and joy about it.

And then for my last summer holidays (six weeks in Summer 1991) I wrote applications to different TV stations and production companies in order to do an internship as a camera woman, as this turned out to be the education I wanted to get. I got the opportunity in Munich and so I stayed for six weeks in the apartment of a friend and went every day to work, working in the studio of a local TV station such as arose in the nineties everywhere in Germany.

I spent my last school holidays and up to my 18th birthday in Munich, working on my future and on my dream (that this wasn't my dream I did not know, but it helped me to begin somewhere).

And then after a year of TV and studio and editing and editorial stuff, when I knew it would definitely not be worth it to continue in that uncertain - and for me unpleasant - way, I discovered the theatre.

Funny enough as I had never been thrilled about theatre. I liked it but I had never been the one who loved to play theatre or so. To become a dramaturge seemed to be strange, but somehow I knew that it was perfect for me.
And so I began my way in this direction.

And later there also came the visual arts. And the story telling. And the writing and the photography.

Yes, I think I am an art person.
I cannot imagine a life without arts. Not personally and not for the world.

But.
There is a but.

“Can you live from that?”, people in Germany have asked me for 25 years since after university I decided to become a freelancer working with theatre and arts.
In this question I heard that people were jealous of me for doing what I want and need to do. I also heard it kind of “sounds nice but stupid”. Later when I was widowed and struggled a lot to survive, I also heard wellmeant ideas in order to help me to have “a better life”, as some people expressed it.

The “but” is the money.
Unfortunately the story about the poor artist is not just a story, it is reality.
Unfortunately I have been feeling all my life that there is no choice.
Not when I went to Munich after school in 1992 without having any more than a verbal undertaking for an internship.
Not when I began studying in 1993.
Not when I began to work with people who did not have the chance to go to an art school, to an actor’s school or to a university. When I began working with people with special needs, with migrants, with children, with people with dementia a couple of years later.

And up to today I feel I cannot do otherwise, I need to write, to draw, to organise different art projects, workshops, seminars.

It is something in between talent and jobs and surviving.
Talent - that I don’t feel I have too much, but at least I feel the need to follow what I am doing and I am doing it well enough.
Jobs - that are rare and during the years many times more educational jobs than art.
Surviving - which is difficult, because it is not well paid and unfortunately I never considered doing something else because I realised it would not make me happy.

Art can do a lot. If it is possible to save the world as the chapter title says, I am not sure.

But the education through art I have been doing for many many years showed me that it is not only beautiful, but also a sustainable way of teaching the next generations whatever topic we want to teach them.

In theatre projects, where young people, migrants, refugees, people with special needs could express their feelings, their needs, fears and hopes and I was writing a play about it. Where they learned to cooperate, to accept each other, to take care of each other, to be present and brave and strong, but where there was also space for weakness and tears and help for each other.

In a workshop, where children from three years on learned in mixed groups to express when they needed help. To realise their ideas with colours, wood, pottery, stone or whatever their projects with which they expressed their real life. Where they learned to look after each other, to support each other, to ask for help, to learn to find out what help they need. Where they learned writing, reading, counting as well as history of art, to distinguish the materials, the tools etc.

In a storytelling project as a tool for biography work, I had the chance to work with hundreds and hundreds of people of older ages, many of them with dementia. Their world was a little room, sometimes even a double room and a living room in which the TV was on for the whole day. This hour once a month brought them out of this little world and into another world, the world of stories.

All these projects made some good minutes for the individual human beings every time they worked with visual arts, theatre, storytelling. Every time they were in touch with their emotions, their needs, their knowledge and their social behaviour.

All this can definitely save the world because this is what we need when we want to live together in peace. In peace with ourselves and with others.

Art can be a very lonely thing, but in the end it brings people together. People who are talking about an exhibition, people who are coming to see an evening at the theatre, people who read the same book and talk about it.

I am deeply convinced that art changes people into better people, and better people form a better community.

When refugees arrived in big numbers in Munich in 2015 and I was a volunteer welcoming them at the station, it helped me many times to be educated in arts and to educate in arts.

I remember how late in the evening the police began to lose patience and tried to bring the overtired crowd into a row. They began to scream, the people did not understand the language, everyone was overwhelmed. I remember how I played theatre. How I was “blowing” the people in the row... blowing air in the direction in which we wanted to have them. And if it did not work, I was playing the clown who is disappointed. The people (mostly young men) liked it. It was humane, I was a human being in the whole difficult situation. I remember laying with children pictures, putting the lids of the bottles and other stuff on a piece of paper on the ground. Afterwards we put the stuff in the bin and cleaned the place in a beautiful way. I remember doing the same in Summer 2016 in the streets of Thessaloniki, where hundreds of people stayed and hoped to continue their way to Europe, after the eviction of Idomeni and the closure of the borders.

I remember playing the same with the children in a camp in Thessaloniki, taking the stones and making pictures and racetracks for the little toy car one boy had caught somehow somewhere.

I remember taking the drawings I made with some children at the refugee day center and putting them together on a frame and making them look beautiful and the self-confidence of the children, stranded in a foreign country without home, school or framework, grew immediately and the mother was so proud of them.

I remember so many situations when refugees through different small or bigger interventions have suddenly been human beings and not refugees anymore.

A good feeling about themselves, about the others around them, and eventually about the community.

At the same time I realised that what I am able to do is not enough. That the theatre project with refugee children is nice, they also learned some German, self-confidence etc., but - all of them traumatised children.

That's why I decided to study trauma therapy and found an opportunity and the fund to do it in 2016/2017. Since then I not only have more knowledge and another field in which I am doing seminars, but also my art projects with vulnerable people became more specific. Art is art and therapy is therapy, but there is a link.

I myself did not learn to express my feelings very well. During the last few years I have been working on it and enjoying the rare times when I can cry, when I allow myself to express anger or to accept my anxiety.

Through art I was always able to express my feelings. To write, to draw, to put things together, to sing, to dance, to bring out through any possible way what is inside. But well hidden. Hidden through art. It is not me, it is the piece.

This is why my voice whenever I am not well or I have to speak about something that concerns me and my feelings, just leaves me. At the same time I can hold a seminar, a rehearsal or even go on stage in every situation: It is not me, it is my professional me.

Sometimes it bothers me that I am not really good at something, that I am only quite good at many different things.

But actually it is ok, so I can never get stuck with one thing and I will always be open to new projects, techniques, ideas, as I will feel deep inside me "let's just try it".

And isn't it what we need desperately in the world?

People who say "Let's just try it" instead of getting stuck in something they don't like.

I think art cannot save the world, but it can make it a better world. Not only because the world is brighter, more colourful, richer in sounds, fuller of stories, but also because these stories and pieces and music and colours and concepts can change us. And it is us who will change the world.

Sometimes we need to be a little brave, because we never know what the reception of our art will be, but maybe being brave is in general a part of being human and humane.



Poster from our first exhibition "Art instead of knowledge". 1990



Working with the children in a Greek refugee camp. 2016

Being brave

During the first couple of years after moving to Thessaloniki, people often said to me “You are very brave” when they heard that I gave up my life and moved to another country. I remember replying “To stay there would have been brave”.

I never considered myself being brave. Or I never thought about it. I did what every teen does: I tried to have as good a life as possible, hoping that school would one day be over and real life could begin.

Of course I remember the question of whether to jump from the springboard or not and how high. I remember singing, making music or dancing in front of an audience. And of course I remember reading stories about brave children (and adults) whom I wanted to be like.

But I think the word “brave” came later in my life.

When I moved to Munich in 1992 I did not feel brave, I just did what I wanted to do. And somehow also what I needed to do. Later I realised that it was very brave: to go, not even 19 years old, to a city of 1,2 million then, without knowing how it would continue. I didn’t go, as did my friends, to study. Munich had the highest rentals in Germany then and I did not know how I would finance my life. With my father I had the agreement that he would pay for an apartment for me up to 600 DM (300€), for a higher rent and for my life I had to pay by myself.

I am wondering today how I dared it. I guess it was a mix of youthful carelessness and the conviction that it was what I had to do at that moment.

And actually I can only give myself a pat on the back for it, because my whole subsequent life, from which I

don’t want to miss any of the good and any of the difficult parts, resulted from the brave, youthful careless decision to move to Munich, where I had a friend where I could stay at the beginning, where I quickly found my own apartment (for less than 600 DM), and where I was feeling so much alone the first time.

But with all the difficulties that every new beginning brings, I was able to overcome it, to find solutions, new ways and new people and my life gained momentum.

After a hard year of working a lot and not really getting to know people, I began studying. Immediately life became easier, I met people - and I met my husband to be. It took one year until we became a couple in 1994. Very quickly we moved in together - and this I found very brave. One of four siblings, I never wanted a roommate and up to today I have lived in a very tiny apartment rather than share a flat with someone. But it was great and I did not feel brave at all when in 1997, at the age of 24, I married my husband. Again people said that we were brave and I did not understand them. Again it was something I had to do and up to today I know it was right.

The same story a year later when I finished university and decided to become a freelancer. OK, it was brave, but again I did not feel brave. Again: there was no option. This was what I wanted to do, this was what I had to do, this was what I did. All the years since then - until I moved to Greece - people told me “I couldn’t do it” when they learned that I am a freelancer. They called me brave and again I did not

understand them and again, up to today I don't understand why and I love the Greek people who don't call me "brave" for being a freelancer, but who have all different jobs and everyone just tries to survive and I am one of them.

I am using my Instagram account as well as some platforms with the nickname "Bravefinch", a friend gave me in 2015 when my life changed on different levels and I coped quite well with it. He is a close friend who knows how to encourage me, we did improvisation theater together and share the same humor. He called me with the English version of my surname and the brave before "Bravefinch" because he said that it is very brave what I am doing: trying to change, to develop.

When I decided in 2017 to change the country and people told me I am brave, for me it was clear that I had to do it, as it was then in 1992 when I moved to Munich. And this is why I replied "It would have been brave to stay there". Maybe not brave, but only wrong and exhausting and a bit stupid, but I never felt brave to go to Greece. It was the logical conclusion.

But of course I realised during the last years that it is not done without being a bit brave.

When my friend got married in 2022 in Georgia we were asked to say a toast to the couple. I did not know the husband well, but my friend. The first thing that came to mind was that my friend is brave. And as I got to know the Georgian people in the days before the wedding and from history, they are brave in general. That was my toast: to the bravery of my friend who came to Germany very young with only a little German and on her own. Who stood up for herself when the family where she was an au-pair did not treat her well and how she reported them to the police. How I met her was that she had a surgery and as she knew she would need help, she asked me although she did not know me well, but I had offered it and she accepted it. To ask for help is so brave. And how the Georgian people stood and stand up against Russia is brave anyhow - and that is what I said to the husband "you have to be brave now too".

To present yourself with your art projects / products needs courage, to give your soul to something that you may be fed to the lions. To be a freelancer without security. To live in a different way, to live in ecology and solidarity while neoliberalism and capitalism are everywhere. To change something needs courage and to stay in something when you know it is right also can need courage.

I think to be yourself and to do what you know you need to do needs courage and if I define it that way, I am brave. And this is what I am trying to tell my godchildren and the people I meet in my projects: that being happy is not about money or career, it is about doing what you want to do and what your soul tells you you need to do.

Often it is not what we think that is right, what our environment tells us, but this is when we need to be brave and to do what has to be done - despite the comments around. Despite the difficulties that we are sometimes facing when doing something brave.



Sometimes I think growing up with three smaller siblings, 2, 4 and 4 years younger than me, is not possible without a certain kind of being brave.

Picture around 1984 from our backyard where we loved to play with the water hose we turned on for watering the grass and plants in Summer. Of course it was fun to turn it into a water battle.

Mapping my life

Mapping my life means mapping the different locations: a small town in Germany close to the borders with France. Unknown countries like Ukraine and Russia. Cities in which I had a home like Munich and Thessaloniki, but also the cities where my friend-families are living, where I have a room like Paris, Linz, Munich, Berlin, Melbourne or Beuggen. These are the geographic locations, but with them also the people. Mapping these people means also mapping emotions, love and common values.

Mapping my life I can see that this was always with me: To do what had to be done and to be brave enough to do it.

As a child and later an adolescent, and even as a young adult I was part of the Scout movement. The founder of the scouts, Lord Robert Baden Powell, said something that became very important in my very young years and it is still today. "Try and leave this world a little better than you found it, and when your turn comes to die, you can die happy in feeling that at any rate, you have not wasted your time but have done your best."

I am – hopefully - not yet dying, but this is what I have been trying since I was a child at the French borders with these unknown Slavic grandparents, in Munich in my adult life and now in Greece in the new environment that is more home than every other place has ever been.

"A little better", I never thought about saving anyone or anything, but this trying at least spurred me on. And yes, sometimes you need to be brave to do this. Not for big things, but for doing it every day.

I am not sure if we can save the planet, if a more sustainable and humane life is possible. I don't know if art or solidarity or the Greek family can save us, but I know that "life to the full" is what we should have. An abundant life is what we all deserve and what only we can give ourselves.



1991, so eager to leave the small town where I grew up. The first time with a real camera in my hands, mapping myself, my ideas, my plans, my inner compass. Brave, but I did not know it.

Looking today at that young woman I am a bit proud of her that she began her own and unique way. Looking at her today I would love to encourage her as I hope I can encourage people today in my every day life.