

# German Novels – Russian Women Writers

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## I

Migration to Germany – this theme dominates political debate today, and not just in Germany. I'd like to look back on an earlier and smaller wave of migration to Germany. Between 1991 and 2004 some two hundred and twenty thousand Jewish immigrants settled in Germany from the succession states of the Soviet Union. As so-called quota refugees these people did not need to make a formal application for asylum, but were allowed – on the basis of a decision of the interior ministers (home secretaries) of the German *Länder* – to settle at once. Almost none of these migrants spoke German, and yet in the meantime an unusually high number of them have gained a place within German literature. Vladimir Kaminer – author of *Russian Disco* – is probably the best known, but today I would like to concentrate on some of the women writers, who, though less prominent in the literary scene, actually write better books.

Another migrant – Maxim Biller, born 1960 in Prague and settled in Germany in 1970, a well-known journalist and somewhat less successful novelist – recently published in *Die Zeit* a strong attack on immigrant writers:

Seit der Vertreibung der Juden aus der deutschen Literatur durch die Nationalsozialisten waren die deutschen Schriftsteller, Kritiker und Verleger jahrzehntelang fast nur noch unter sich. [...] Die Abwesenheit der jüdischen Ruhestörer tut unserer Literatur nicht gut, sie wird immer selbstbezogener, dadurch kraftloser und provinzieller.

And the immigrant writers merely, in Biller's words, »[passen] sich sehr früh [...] der herrschenden Ästhetik und Themenwahl an«; their lives as migrants are never »Ausgangspunkt eines Konflikts der handelnden Figuren, sondern fast immer nur Folklore oder szenische Beilage«.<sup>1</sup>

There's no need to take these sweeping statements particularly seriously. But I did feel challenged by Biller's claim that the books by authors of non-German descent were marked by »kalten, leeren Suhrkamp-Ton« and that

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**1** | Maxim Biller: Letzte Ausfahrt Uckermark. In: *Die Zeit*, 20 Feb. 2014, online [www.zeit.de/2014/09/deutsche-gegenwartsliteratur-maxim-biller](http://www.zeit.de/2014/09/deutsche-gegenwartsliteratur-maxim-biller).

their principal characters were »gesichtslose Großstadtbewohner [...] ohne Selbstbewusstsein«.<sup>2</sup> So I decided to look more closely into the matter, and took five novels by women writers born between 1963 and 1984 in the Soviet Union, some of whom completed their university studies there, but all of whom came to Germany in the 1990s. The majority of these writers, including Vladimir Kaminer whom I mentioned earlier, were of Jewish descent.

## II

Alina Bronksy (to use her pen name) was born in Jekaterinburg in 1978, spent her childhood in the Ural Mountains and her youth in Marburg and Darmstadt. She broke off her medical studies to work as a copywriter and as a journalist. Initially she lived in Frankfurt, now she lives in Berlin.

Alina Bronksy had a major success with her first novel, *Scherbenpark*<sup>3</sup> (*Broken Glass Park*) – a text which she sent to the publisher as an unsolicited manuscript. The novel is narrated in the first person and tells the story of seventeen-year old Sascha. Sascha has a brother at primary school and a three-year old sister. They live in a tower-block near Frankfurt. All three are traumatized by events within the family. In a fit of jealousy their step-father murdered Sascha's mother – an immigrant from Russia – and her then partner, in front of the children. Sascha is a highly intelligent girl who attends a top quality Catholic high school and is trying to steer her brother and sister through life in the Russian ghetto in Germany. Her dream is to write a book about her mother's life, and to kill her mother's murderer (who is in jail). Her friendship with the son of a newspaper editor means that her world is confronted with that of the country which has taken her in. It's also a novel about adolescence. Its language is impressively terse and clear, the scenes change rapidly, as in a film. We don't get descriptions of the everyday life of Russian immigrants, but it's captured in a kaleidoscope of tiny scenes, individual images of a 14-year old having breakfast, of the brutal rituals of adolescents' free-time activities, the TV habits of an aunt, or the background noises of a tower-block – these images are fused together into convincing sketches of a particular milieu. The reader experiences a distinctive mixture of oppressiveness and yet a kind of serene humour.

There are superficial similarities between the novel and the author's biography (the background in Russia, emigration and settlement in Germany), but the book is not autobiographical. The author grew up in an upper middle-class family, her father is a college professor. Yet she admits, in her own words:

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2 | Ibid.

3 | Alina Bronsky: *Scherbenpark*. Roman [2008]. Cologne <sup>10</sup>2014.

Trotzdem schöpft man natürlich aus dem eigenen Erfahrungsschatz. Es ist auch nicht so, dass ich Saschas Geschichte gerne selbst erlebt hätte, was ja nachvollziehbar ist. Dennoch bewundere ich sie für einiges und denke manchmal ›so wäre ich gerne gewesen‹ – unter besseren Umständen. Ein kleines bisschen Wunschdenken war beim Schreiben also auch dabei.<sup>4</sup>

When asked about her literary models, Bronsky replies:

Ich bewundere alle, die es schaffen, einer Szene oder einem Charakter mit sehr wenigen Worten Leben einzuhauchen. Es gibt zum Beispiel einige russische Autoren, die hierzulande völlig unbekannt sind, die diesen knappen, präzisen und trotzdem sehr lebendigen Stil meisterhaft beherrschen. Absolut bewundernswert finde ich auch Schriftsteller, die es schaffen, eine eigentlich traurige Handlung komisch und lebensfroh zu erzählen [...].<sup>5</sup>

Some critics complained that the scenes of shocking violence in Bronsky's novel spoilt the reading pleasure. Bronsky's response was laconic: »Ich kenne kein spannendes Buch, in dem angenehme Menschen in einem schönen Umfeld einfach nur ein glückliches Leben führen.«<sup>6</sup>

Katerina Poladjan was born in 1971 in Moscow and, like the central character of her novel, came to Germany with her parents as a child. Her father was an artist. She lives in Berlin, where she studied Cultural Science, completed her training as an actor and now works for theatre, TV and radio.

*In einer Nacht, woanders*<sup>7</sup> (*One night, somewhere else*) is her first book. In 200 pages it tells a family story. The narrator, Mascha, is torn out of her daily life in Berlin by a phone-call from Russia. She's in her late thirties, unmarried, no children. She's told that her grandmother, the legendary Tamara, has died and that she has to see the house on the outskirts of Moscow in which she grew up. In her memory, the house is a paradise, with birch-trees and a pond. She was torn away from that paradise when her parents left the Soviet Union. Mascha's mother, Tamara's daughter, had become pregnant while still at school after a brief affair with the art-teacher. Tamara had taken over responsibility for her grand-daughter.

4 | »Die Figur war plötzlich als Ganzes da für mich.« Alina Bronsky über die Protagonistin ihres Debütromans »Scherbenpark« und den Reiz von Schullesungen. In: lesepunkte 4 (2009), No. 6, online <http://archiv.lesepunkte.de/archiv/autor-im-profil/bronsky-alina/index.html>.

5 | Im Interview: Alina Bronsky. »Träume können sowohl beflügeln als auch lähmen«, online [www.kiwi-verlag.de/autoren/interviews/im-interview-alina-bronsky](http://www.kiwi-verlag.de/autoren/interviews/im-interview-alina-bronsky).

6 | Ibid.

7 | Katerina Poladjan: *In einer Nacht, woanders*. Roman [2011]. Reinbek bei Hamburg 2013.

When her daughter decided to emigrate (by the way, that was not a political decision) it was a big blow for Tamara – a committed citizen of the Soviet Union – and she lost her job as a space engineer. Her daughter's life had fallen apart too, her marriage had collapsed and she became a chronic depressive, living in a psychiatric clinic. As Mascha searches for Tamara's house, the reader is brought into an oppressive and ghostly journey into the Russian night and into Mascha's past. It's freezing cold, and the narrator, Mascha, thinks she's being followed by a wolf, but eventually she finds the house, now deserted. The next morning she meets Pjotr, a peasant fallen on hard times, and now a chain-smoking alcoholic. As Tamara's friend, he has initiated the sale of the house and expects to pocket a share of the profits himself. The next days pass in a trance for Mascha. The house buyer offers an extraordinarily high price. Pjotr's stories make clear that this man is deeply involved in the family history, having shared a bed with both Tamara and Mascha's mother.

*In einer Nacht, woanders* foregrounds the themes of homelessness and estrangement. The central character has never felt at home in Berlin but cannot return to her idyllic childhood – not least because that distant childhood was not so idyllic after all. Poladjan's language is measured, sparse and enigmatic – one reviewer wrote of its »Hieroglyphen des Schweigens«.<sup>8</sup> Her text plays with motifs from fairy tales, and mingles fantasy with reality, showing her debt to the techniques of psychoanalysis. The result: a highly original text exploring cultural difference.

Olga Grjasnowa was born in 1984, in Baku (Azerbaijan) and came to Germany in 1966 with her parents, father a lawyer and mother a musicologist. She studied in Munich and Leipzig, where she graduated from the *Deutsches Literaturinstitut*. She has paid long visits to Israel, Poland and Russia.

Her first novel, *Der Russe ist einer, der Birken liebt*<sup>9</sup> (*All Russians love Birch-Trees*) was awarded a number of literary prizes. The first person narrator, another Mascha, is like the author herself an Azerbaijani Jew, who arrived in Germany at the age of eleven. She's self-assured and well able to adapt, speaks five languages (including Arabic) and is planning a career with the United Nations. Everything changes for her with the unnecessary death of her East German friend Elias. A bone fracture which he got in sport is wrongly treated and he dies from an infection, which the doctors don't identify until it's too late. Mascha escapes to Israel and works for an NGO on the West Bank.

The first part of the novel plays out in Germany, and the second in Israel, but the narrative present is repeatedly taken over by Mascha's memories. These are memories of Azerbaijan and the pogroms against the Armenians, something

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<sup>8</sup> | Sabine Berking: Bloß nicht nach Moskau! Katerina Poladjans ziemlich packendes Romandebut. In: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 10 Jan. 2012, p. 30.

<sup>9</sup> | Olga Grjasnowa: *Der Russe ist einer, der Birken liebt*. Roman [2012]. München 2013.

which Mascha's parents, as Azerbaijani intellectuals and artists, are powerless to stop or even to comprehend – and memories of her friend and her own sense of guilt that she had not seen how serious his condition had been.

Grjasnowa ties together the various strands of the plot and crafts in an impressive novel about multiculturalism, estrangement and ethnic conflict. Estrangement is a central experience of her character Mascha: as an Azerbaijani she felt great sympathy for the Armenians persecuted in Baku, in Frankfurt in West Germany she lives with an East German, and in Israel she presents herself as a Jew speaking Arabic. Diversity is also a feature of her sexuality – she lives with men, but also takes women lovers. Even eating customs are marked by diversity, as various cooking-styles compete in her varied experience. The minor figures in the book are also characterized by hybrid features: one of her friends is a German Turk, another is born in Lebanon, but has German nationality and wants to do a PhD in the USA.

Two ethnic conflicts are at the center of this book and they clearly represent a whole series of other conflicts. These are the conflicts between Azerbaijanis and Armenians and between Israelis and Palestinians. Germany, with its tensions between the old and the new federal states, constantly reminds the reader of these other wider conflicts.

My brief summary of the plot may sound a little confusing, but this is an absolutely fascinating novel about Germany, about Europe and about the Middle East, a novel put together with compelling miniatures of everyday life.

Nellja Veremej was born in Southern Russia in 1963 and has lived in Berlin since 1994. She has worked as a care assistant in an old people's home, as a language teacher and as a journalist.

Her novel *Berlin liegt im Osten*<sup>10</sup> (*Berlin lies in the East*) is packed with sympathetic outsider figures, and the reader soon feels quite at home with them. The first-person narrator, Lena, grew up in the Caucasus, studied in Leningrad and went to Berlin with her husband and daughter. Her husband, a big spender and loud mouth, walked out on them and on the little she earns in the care home Lena has to struggle through life with her teenage daughter. There are clear parallels to Veremej's own life. Lena develops a strange relationship with Mr. Seitz, one of her patients – a relationship not without its erotic dimension, but more strongly colored by the fact that both of them come from the East. (Mr. Seitz had been a journalist in East Germany, but lost his job when the Wall came down.) They also share a fascination with Alfred Döblin's great novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. The action of Veremej's novel takes place round the Alexanderplatz and is constantly alluding to Döblin's novel, without this device ever seeming artificial. *Berlin liegt im Osten* is above all concerned with people from the East who have never really found their feet in the West. The lives of these people are made up of memories, disappointments, set-backs and self-delusion. Out of these elements

10 | Nellja Veremej: *Berlin liegt im Osten*. Roman [2013]. Berlin 2015.

Nellja Veremej has written a wonderful piece of literature, which so strongly draws the reader into its world that one is sad to leave it after three hundred pages. It's not sentimental, but is held together by a distinctive narrative style, unique in its mixture of precision and imaginative originality.

The novel is a quite special kind of *Wende*-novel, since it places side by side the social upheavals in the GDR and those during the collapse of the Soviet Union, and links in the historical background to these events. At the same time, it's a Berlin novel – as you read it you can understand why, despite all its negative features, people enjoy living in this city. It's a city lit up by head-lines and glossy pictures, yet observed through the eyes of outsiders.

Katja Petrowskaja won the Bachmann prize in 2013. Her book, *Vielleicht Esther*<sup>11</sup> (*Maybe Esther*), appears at first sight to stand in the tradition of the family novel, a genre which has once again become popular in Germany. As one looks more closely, however, Petrowskaja's novel reveals itself to be in a genre of its own, comfortably balanced between reworking historical material, literary conventions and a report from the writer's workshop.

Petrowskaja was born in 1970 in Kiev, where she grew up. She studied literature in Tartu, did her doctorate in Moscow and has lived and worked in Berlin since 1999, as a journalist for German and Russian media. Her book, which she is careful not to call a novel (just ›stories‹) takes the reader on a search for family history. In her Soviet childhood being Jewish was not something one talked about, and it's only when the first-person narrator (identical with the author herself) brings back a record from Poland that the Jewish songs on the record open for her grandmother »das versiegelte Fenster ihrer frühen Kindheit«. Suddenly she understands that her »Babuschka aus einem Warschau kommt, das es nicht mehr gibt«<sup>12</sup>.

The reader is brought into the narrator's childhood in Kiev. We accompany her into nineteenth century Vienna, where a member of her family ran the first of a chain of deaf-mute schools for Jewish children across Europe. We're taken to Moscow in the 1930s, where a great-uncle of hers shot at a German diplomat. We meet her grandfather, who had been first in a concentration camp and then in the Gulag before founding a new family in Siberia and returning to his old home in Kiev only forty years later, where he refused ever to speak of any of his experiences: »Sein Lächeln nährte sein Schweigen. Keine Erzählungen vom Krieg, kein Wort über die Vergangenheit, über Erlebtes [...].«<sup>13</sup> The author offers the readers the same possible pointers to her own past which she herself had to rely on: personal things like her parents' stories, photos, oddments like recipes and hair-pins, but also more public material, discovered in museums, archives,

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11 | Katja Petrowskaja: *Vielleicht Esther. Geschichten* [2014]. Berlin 2015.

12 | Ibid., p. 76.

13 | Ibid., p. 229.

the fruit of internet searches – and of course the narrator's own travels, including journeys to the concentration camps of Auschwitz and Mauthausen.

From these sources she has written an impressive book that uncovers the twentieth century European history contained within the story of her own Jewish family. The language of the book is very striking too; so is the way in which she reflects on it: »Ich dachte auf Russisch, suchte meine jüdischen Verwandten und schrieb auf Deutsch. Ich hatte das Glück, mich in der Kluft der Sprachen, im Tausch, in der Verwechslung von Rollen und Blickwinkeln zu bewegen.«<sup>14</sup>

### III

You'll remember Maxim Biller's complaint that immigrant writers merely conformed to the dominant styles and themes of the day. I've tried to present five books written in German by women born between 1963 and 1984 in the Soviet Union. Their books are concerned not only with memories, but also with everyday life in Germany. None of them are explicitly autobiographical. For all these authors biography is the material for fiction.

Bronsky's work focuses on the margins of society. Her characters' position as outsiders open up for the reader a special perspective on normality: the dingy scenario of life in the Russian ghetto tells us more about everyday life in Germany than we would sometimes care to admit. Veremej's perspective creates connections between the end of the Soviet Union and German reunification. Petrowskaja and Grjasnowa write about forms of alienation from which even memories offer no escape. In Petrowskaja's stories memory stretches much further than the author's own life-time; she explores her own pre-history, talks to people who experienced past events, looks up sources, combs through the documentary evidence. If all these resources were not available, if those who have survived the catastrophes of the twentieth century remain silent (something many victims and perpetrators tend to do) – if all these sources fail, then Petrowskaja reconstructs that past, if need be using fiction. Stories are a way to test out the possibilities of memory, to bring alive various perspectives on events, to find out how things were. The *work* of memory (a key concept of the 1950s) has become a kind of *play* with memory. This is not going to rewrite history, but it will enrich it.

None of these books is in any way boring, and in none of them could detect »das harmoniestüchtige, postnazistische und vereinte Deutschland«.<sup>15</sup> I found extraordinary views of everyday life in Germany, surprising insights into European history and a sceptical questioning of the achievements of a Europe alleged to be growing ever closer together. Literature of this kind encourages a nuanced

14 | Ibid., p. 115.

15 | Biller: *Letzte Ausfahrt Uckermarck*.

reflection on problems which politicians tend to deal with in tidy little packages. This kind of writing can be an important element of *Landeskunde*. An American colleague of mine got it right when – in a slip of the tongue – he spoke of *Landeskunst*. And immigrant women writers have an important part to play in this, not just because of their experiences but because of their language. That's just what Katja Petrowskaja means when she writes: »Mein Deutsch blieb in der Spannung der Unerreichbarkeit und bewahrte mich vor Routine.«<sup>16</sup> These texts are written in a language which transforms the author's ›country of origin‹ into an aesthetic form and into art.

How then are we to describe these books? As German literature written by Russian women, or as Russian literature written in German, or as multicultural literature? I can't answer this question, but it's in any case probably unimportant to do so. What is important is the function of these books, both for their authors and for their readers: unearthing, collecting and retaining memories – their own and those of the ancestors. At times of major social and geographical fracture, at times when people cross frontiers – whether voluntarily or under compulsion, when frontiers mean more than just lines on a map – then at a time like this these books can help to reconstruct shattered identities and to stabilize broken lives.

That Germany, of all places, finds itself at the centre of this type of literature is – as Hegel might have remarked – one of history's special tricks.

Translated from German by Hugh Ridley, in collaboration with the author.

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**16** | Petrowskaja: *Vielleicht Esther*, p. 78.