

# A LITTLE SOUL

*I AM NOT A RACIST...*

ON NOSTALGIA AND APOCALYPSE

*AN EVERYDAY STORY*

*Place: Crediton, a provincial town.*

*Time: The day before the Referendum on Brexit*

*A German woman, married to an Englishman living in the town, tells me she will travel to her mother in Munster and adds with a joking smile that implies the question is rhetorical: 'Will I be welcome when I come back?'*

*The same woman a week after the Referendum is in shock and tells me how people have been ordering her 'to go home'.*

*The UK Referendum was ostensibly about 'taking back control', couched in contradictory economic arguments. Politicians and experts know that Europe and the Eurozone are not the same concept. However the people who swung the vote see no difference: Europe is a foreign continent, and the European Union an interfering governing body which has apparently taken over from our own elected Parliament and now bosses them around. As the immediate reactions to their successful campaign continue to show, the desire for national autonomy drove the result: Great Britain for the British. Most people who agree with this sentiment generally start the sentence with the words: 'I am not a racist...' followed by the unspoken implication: 'Foreigners stay in your own countries.' Some however go further and shout loudly: 'Foreigners get out and go back to where you came from!'*

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*The following is written under the shadow of a move in many countries to nationalism, protectionism, xenophobia above all dismantling the liberal consensus.*

Further to my father asking, on looking at a photo of Hitler as a baby, how an innocent child can grow up into a monstrous tyrant, another frequent question hung in the air perpetually unanswered, and continues so to the present time. That unanswered question invariably followed talk about a particular artist, the visionary water-colourist Emil Nolde maybe, or

Knut Hamsun the Nobel prize-winning Norwegian writer of such humanist classics as *Hunger*, books that were read, admired and discussed in our house: why were these internationally significant and celebrated artists committed Nazi sympathisers? The question rose again when I read recently that Frank Lloyd Wright, one of the most iconic American architects, had also been a supporter of Nazi ideology. Admired by the author Ayn Rand, believer in the supremacy of the strong and talented who, by reason of their exceptional character, are justified in subjugating and exploiting the weak, used him as a model in her novels, specifically *The Fountainhead* about a ruthlessly ambitious architect. That Frank Lloyd Wright subscribed to a brutally racist ideology raises this question in a manner where the answer reveals itself in the paradox expressed in his buildings. The rugged architecture with its clean lines and fundamental simplicity reflects both the supremacist ideology of Ayn Rand, but also takes the environment into account, linking the aesthetics of structure with natural surroundings. Such ambivalence finds expression in on the one hand controlling and domineering, but at the same time striving for harmonious coexistence with the environment. The desire for harmony between man and nature is one element that runs like a thread through the development of a white-dominated New World American culture, for example in the transcendentalist movement epitomised in Thoreau's *Walden*, the paintings of Thomas Eakins and the poetry of Walt Whitman.. This 'white' utopian vision is discussed in Douglas Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows* (the director indicated later that the title is ironic, adding 'heaven is stingy'), about the relationship between a young widow and her gardener who believes in the equilibrium of nature and mankind. .In an often forgotten and always neglected culture, New World natives had of course for centuries been living in a complex harmony with their natural surroundings, but then fell tragic victim to aggressive and destructive white colonisation. At the heart of this ambivalence in colonial attitudes is nostalgia for utopia and guilt rising from the continued experience of subjugation.

In my essay *The Face of a Child*, I have tried as a son of refugees to answer the question about how foreigners including asylum seekers, economic ‘migrants’, and ethnic minorities make a home in countries in which a vociferous minority of the population aggressively resents their presence. This minority, which recently decisively contributed to the Brexit victory, hates, fears, despises and wants to eject and eliminate the ‘other’. A substantial part of the rest of the population claims not to be a part of this xenophobic minority yet clings to a nostalgia for a time when there were far fewer foreigners, if any at all, and homeland meant a racially pure and mono-cultural place ‘when we were in control.’ Time and again comes the phrase with dispiritingly monotonous frequency: ‘I am not a racist...’ with the inevitable ‘but’, which on the one hand exonerates the speaker from any hint of xenophobia, and then the qualification in itself only serves to emphasise it.

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At the end of Mussorgsky’s *Khovanschina*, a political opera about Russia’s resistance to the liberal reforms being violently imposed by Peter the Great in his drive to modernise his vast country, bringing it in line with social and cultural developments in Western Europe a group of religious zealots, ‘Old Believers’, devoted to entrenched nationalist traditions, commit mass suicide rather than be tainted by foreign influence. Mussorgsky’s music sympathises with these fanatics. The deep sonorous bass of their leader Dosifei suits a message of doom and gloom while promising balm of salvation and apocalypse.

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The protest and pressure movement Black Lives Matter shows that racism remains a constant as it has been throughout my life. After the Second World War children would shout racial abuse without thinking or understanding what it meant. Like homophobic bullying however hurtful and never without a sense of danger, social abuse means no more than a general

dislike, fear and contempt for something strange, mysterious and challenging, traditional bigoted attitudes picked up from home and also unconsidered. Then as the first immigrants from the West Indies began to arrive in the 1950s, people were scandalised when the men married white girls, and this hatred carried on being constantly and openly expressed for decades. Meanwhile Pakistani immigrants began to settle in Lancashire where I grew up taking on menial tasks such as road cleaning and bus conducting. Films about intermarriage like *East Meets West* show that despite xenophobia being a toxic part of everyday life, mindless abuse as an expression of rage and frustration at politics, social ills and simply having someone to shout at and persecute, in general I experienced working class attitudes then being more welcoming to foreigners.

Racism from the educated classes cut deeper: foreigners might be welcome, but they needed to know their place...at the bottom. This considered racism against blacks, browns and even whites from other parts of the world, including Australia, America and Europe, reflected then, as now, the shame of loss of Empire, and a grudging acknowledgment that foreign skills were needed in a country debilitated by war, industrial collapse and the challenges of global competition, problems that used to be less widespread when the UK controlled vast parts of most continents.

The span of my life covers the rise and success of socialism in the shape of the Labour Party in post-war UK. I experienced the benefits first hand and observed with increasing dismay the erosion of socialist ideals over the decades, replaced by individualism and personal ambition along the understandable lines of ‘what the rich and powerful have for generations enjoyed at our expense, we want to have now for ourselves as well.’ Communal progress gave way to individual material aspiration.

The present fears that the remnants of the working class are turning to extreme populist right-wing movements alarms the Party which had been created to support and defend that class from those who had power. However this disillusion with socialism began before Margaret Thatcher brought about her own revolution. In fact it was this class, which had always been assumed to be anti-Tory and faithful to Labour which carried her to power. I observed with growing confusion and despair this change taking place through the later 1970s during my time living on a housing estate in South London, a solidly working class environment.

A TV film in the late 1970s nailed the nature of this change so accurately that it became iconic of its time. The popularity of Mike Leigh's *Abigail's Party*, particularly Alison Steadman's performance of frustrated passion distilled to lethal venom, turned the play into a satirical comedy when in fact it is a tragedy. There is of course always a fine line between satire and tragedy, but in this case the desire to interpret the play as mocking the aspirations of a suddenly affluent working class meant that viewers did not need to deal with the disturbing insight at the heart of the play: the spiritual vacuum of individualistic material consumerism not just in that one home, but throughout the country.

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## BARN DANCES

Throughout most of the two post-war decades housing conditions were cramped in Lancashire mill towns, and the mill labour tediously mechanical and dirty. However the crowds of workers arriving at the factory early every morning were animated and focused on getting through the day together before leaving for socialising in the evening, the women in preparation covering their curlers with scarves. In the early 50s children from poorer families smelled pungently of stale piss and sweat. Most of working people's homes still had toilets outside at the end of the backyard. Communal activities were at the heart of social life. The

men gravitated to football, while women stayed mostly at home. So, as Terence Davies' autobiographical films show with poignant bitter-sweet nostalgia, one of the main hubs of joint after-work recreation had to be the pub with its lusty communal singing, never raucous but always loud: 'Here we are! Listen to us!' Children sat outside the pub waiting for the parents to come out, so barn dances at the weekend became opportunities for the whole family to escape cramped rooms, put on attractive clothes, the men in dark suits and white shirts, the women in starched and meticulously ironed colourful frocks. The dances entered into with gusto allowed for letting the hair down, metaphorically only as no one dared spoil the sculpted perms.

In the immediate Labour government post-war years, the seeds of aspiration were being sowed on a large scale, but more along the lines of welfare, health and education than acquisition. Aspiration focused on quality of life rather than materialism. The people I came to know as a child and young teenager in the mill town took education seriously as well as the arts and music. They needed little encouragement to paint and play instruments. Seizing new freedoms and curious about everything, they joined in discussions on political and social matters relevant to their lives. Once exploited labourers now felt they had a stake in society and the country's future. To help economic growth the first immigrants from former colonies began to arrive and settle in the UK. A mill worker's daughter used to visit our house regularly for long talks with my parents. Despite reservations from family and community she then married an immigrant from the West Indies. These reactions might seem quaint now, especially their underlying assumptions. Whereas now parents might reasonably worry about daughters marrying unemployed druggie gang members from sink estates, in those days they balked at son-in-laws who were not only educated and high-flying, doctors or lawyers, but looked like Sidney Poitiers in *Guess Who Is Coming To Dinner*, paragons beyond most people's dreams whatever race or colour. Spencer Tracey's bigotry in that seminal 1960's

film is hard to take, already at the time, but Sidney Poitier's evident qualities in the film suggest a subversive sub-text: a sense of inferiority and even the father's guilt at his own inadequacy. Spencer Tracy's subtle performance suggests professional envy and sexual jealousy play a significant part in racist and xenophobic attitudes.

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The cramped terraced houses of the industrial Lancashire town I grew up in were kept scrupulously clean by mill workers' wives and mothers, charwomen, who after servicing the rich on the other side of the railway tracks, scrubbed their own door steps with competitive pride. My parents arranged evening discussion groups in several of the homes. The workers, local policemen and mechanics listened intently to late Beethoven quartets and to my father reading from the Russian classics. These people took it all in their stride. Only at the weekend barn dance did these people balk at dancing to Bach's Orchestral Suites, declaring they preferred The Cumberland Gap. Saturday nights were for fun but they appreciated my parents' efforts to open up culture to them, a world that till then had been the preserve of the middle and upper classes. My mother taught the Secondary Modern teenagers painting, and I remember the bright eyes of the young men, more used to causing trouble, riding round on motorbikes in gangs, or prowling the streets of Bolton at night, now proudly hanging their vivid art work in exhibitions at the Town Hall.

My parents wrote plays for the community including their first drama *Nothing To Live For But Life* in which my father took the lead as a thinly veiled self-portrait, a naive idealist forced to face reality in the shape of people trying to survive as best they can in a world that doesn't care for them. His optimism is broken down, along the lines of Bunuel's film *Nazarin*, which my parents would not have seen yet. In the play it is also a streetwalker who takes care of him. One of the millworker women played this part with gusto. My parents then

wrote their groundbreaking theological books, *Irreligious Reflections on the Christian Church*, *God is no More* and *True Deceivers*, inspired by their experiences in this Lancashire working class community. Along with an autobiography, *Distant Strains of Triumph*, and a controversial imagining of Hitler's final days in the bunker, a theme the Germans would later turn into a successful film, *Downfall*, my parents also paid tribute to the community in *Fringe Edge*, a book of vignettes along the lines of Turgenev's *Tales from a Sportsman's Diary*, which told the stories from the lives of the people themselves. I remember how despite my father as the new vicar of St Thomas and St John's Lostock telling them on his first Sunday they should only come to services if they wanted, a suggestion they took literally by staying away leaving the church empty apart from three people in the choir, me on the organ and at most six people in the congregation, the people in this mill town nevertheless respected and loved my parents.

Harry Ashton the local chicken farmer befriended my parents and joined them on political demonstrations like the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. I spent many weekends collecting eggs and watching him 'sexing' the newly hatched chicks and having to mass kill all the male ones, tears of shame and remorse running down his grimy wrinkled cheeks as he looked at me with eyes that said: life is too full of cruelty and unfairness, but I cannot afford to keep and feed them. His wife suffered from perpetual sciatica which no one could treat. His handsome son and daughter helped with the work. A passionate music-lover Harry would thump out Mozart sonatas on an upright piano with gnarled strong fingers and heavy fists. He listened to the most recent recordings of opera and symphonies with my parents in the evening. I still play from his copy of the Chopin Nocturnes he gave to me, with comments on famous performances written neatly above his favourite ones. He would visit my parents regularly, sitting in the garden smiling broadly, sturdily built, candid, forthright and enthusiastic. For me he represented the working class rising. My most telling memory is of

sitting in his farmhouse sitting room eating his wife's white bread sandwiches listening to Mahler's *Song of the Earth*, hearing the otherworldly music through his ears and understanding and appreciating it in a way that breathed nature and a uniquely intense sense of life passing.

In their book *Fringe Edge*, my parents wrote about both sides of the railway tracks. The seeds of envy were being sown already then. The mill, the church and the labouring community living in cramped terraces were on the one side. On the other side lived the mill owners and managers in grand houses hidden by forests of rhododendron bushes on the hill. In between, along the road by a golf course, stood the semi-detached houses of professionals like teachers, doctors and my father the curate-in-charge. A few homes had outdoor swimming pools round which children played in the brief summer months and most displayed carefully tended gardens. At the end of the road a public tennis court stood beyond a paddock for horses. These amenities were symbols of aspiration, places that existed in a parallel universe to mine, although my mother played tennis there with me the few times she was not ill, and the daughter of the paddock's owner once persuaded me to mount a horse which she then mischievously caused to bolt and I fell off. No one ever invited me to join the children in the swimming pools.

The rich, the middle classes and even parts of the working class tend to look back on this ordered social way of life with nostalgia. People knew their place. Why should things not continue undisturbed in the same way?

When the mill closed everything changed.

Friends from the working community I had known while it still stood and operated expressed no nostalgia for their past. They wanted to forget the suffering and injustices, the grind of everyday existence, poor wages, no prospects, bad health and lack of any interest in their

wellbeing. However they did display surprising nostalgia for the war years, a recent memory of bombing, towns on fire, fear and danger. They would indulge in lively exchange of stories, of near-misses, bombing and fires: the excitement. A sense of possibility for a new life with promise of better health, education and prospects came through these narratives, a promise that remained unfulfilled but fiercely held. What had all the pain and horror been for if not the chance of change? The rich preferred to keep things as they were. The poor demanded a better future. Politically, under a series of Labour governments, interrupted by a return to old values under several Conservative ones that included hubristic colonial attitudes leading to the shame of Suez, the country doggedly continued projects of construction and rebuilding, despite a gigantic national debt incurred by the war. Divisions still existed but acknowledgment that fairness and equality mattered also continued. Education and access to a health service were established for everyone, even within systems structured to be unfair, such as one type of school for the privileged and intellectually gifted and another type for those with lower prospects. Money and privilege today still purchase advantages, better schools, healthcare and access to power.

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I returned to Lancashire in 1973, having left for university ten years earlier.

During that decade the working class side of the tracks in my home town changed, sliced by a motorway. The mill no longer stood by the dank polluted canal alongside which I used to cycle into town. Not a brick remained, the industrial past erased as though it had never existed. New houses scattered over the place which raised me, now a dormitory town for Bolton and Manchester. These dwellings breathed aspiration, each with a garden, drive, garage and neat lawns where the terraced houses had once stood, each with a cramped narrow backyard leading to an outside toilet. Twenty years later in the 1990s further changes

indicated how immigrant labour from the former colonies, mostly the Caribbean and Pakistan, began to change the demography of this part of Lancashire. There were fewer pasty white faces and wiry frames of the millworkers, mechanics and charwomen, bred for several generations in the grime and murk of smoking factory chimneys, coughing themselves into early graves. Bronzed handsome faces, smouldering brown eyes and fit bodies of second generation immigrant families populated the buses and trains. Amir Khan the Olympic boxer became a star of Bolton.

Another twenty years later in the early 2010s, the influx of labour from Eastern Europe became a turning point in the argument to leave the European Union. These new foreigners created tensions because government and local authorities gave insufficient effort and attention to assimilate them. Relations worsened within communities which were left to fend for themselves and too little care or none at all was given to helping people build relations socially. Minorities which in the past had encountered similar hatred also resented the newcomers. Industrial neglect and unemployment were the superficial reasons given for these tensions which fed the Brexit vote, but the deeper causes have long been corrupt business practices by which bosses, focused on easy profits, undercut wages so that these new immigrants readily accept payment in unacceptable working conditions others cannot afford to take. This situation whips up resentment and racism. By the time the UK voted for Brexit, xenophobia boiled over regardless of political correctness. Now it is considered reasonable to express incendiary opinions and UKIP, the party which openly encourages fear and suspicion of foreigners, is now accepted as a legitimate political force deserving of respect and attention despite opinions and tactics that Europe thought had been discredited and defeated in the Second World War, and until just before the Brexit vote and the American election were considered beyond the pale. Whenever nationalist political figures are questioned about the dangerous consequences of their rhetoric they answer: 'Civil War? Bring it on! Get rid of

rubbish.’ When they are asked about the breakup of the European Union and Europe with the threat of a return to past blood-drenched rivalries, they welcome the consequences and say: ‘War is normal... it toughens up a degenerate liberal society... makes men out of wimps... it is a good thing’.

In my life-time there has always been a committed and vociferous minority which supports racism. Occasionally right wing politicians have flirted with this minority. Margaret Thatcher notoriously welcomed a former member of the British National Party as a Tory MP. As by then she had dictatorial control over her party, Steve Bell could depict her welcoming him as just one more obedient goose-stepper in her own Sturm Abteilung. Up to now the majority of the electorate has been able to contain this extremist group. However, according to experts, the success of UKIP targeting Labour strongholds in the North of England working class indicates that the extremist minority is becoming a majority, taking advantage of the fragmentation among the parties of the left everywhere. This happened in Germany, Italy and Spain in the 1930s when the fascists unafraid of using violence and bullying street tactics took control of whole countries. The imperative now is for all those on the left to bury differences and unite against the danger, for once correct to be described as ‘real and present’. The first task is to attend to the anxieties of people, especially those who have been neglected, patronised and derided.

My experience of blue-collar workers does not tally with the present interpretation of their attitudes which delivered Brexit and President Trump. As a whole this class possesses a deep-rooted intelligent scepticism and mistrust of all extremists, whether of the right or the left. This wisdom is born from suspicion of all those in charge and an awareness of manipulation by bosses and politicians over generations, powerful people who are more likely to espouse racist bigotry for their own political ends. For all the apparent lack of sophistication and degrees, most of the working class having been ruled out of the best schooling, the people I

knew were well educated, and shamed me often with my ignorance. I did however witness a decisive change of attitudes in the few years leading to Thatcher's victory. This hinged on the Tory promise to allow people on council estates to buy their own homes. At a stroke these working people who had lived under the thumb of generally unreliable council maintenance could become independent, the second rung of the ladder leading to property speculation and being able to manipulate the capitalist economy rather than being controlled by it. Thatcher cannily pandered to frustrated working class material aspirations.

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#### PRESENT CONTEXT

A few days before the UK decided to turn its back on Europe a young MP, Jo Cox, was killed on the street by a nationalist shouting 'Britain for the British.' The message couldn't have been louder or clearer. The majority shrugged its shoulders, agreed with the sentiment and voted to keep Britain British. Xenophobic and racist attacks increased markedly after the majority's success, indicating that hatred of foreigners took priority over all other considerations, particularly economic ones. In case the country still didn't get the message, nationalists beat up and killed a young Pole on the streets. Of course these acts will be punished, but they will continue and multiply. As a Czech friend of mine told me: 'I cannot come to the UK now. There is too much hate and violence. It is dangerous for me.'

Politicians now insult other countries in Europe with impunity, dismissing them as incompetent and a shambles, the implication being that the UK is a continent apart. The gloves are off.

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I observed the shift from a traditional sense of working class community to individualism already in the late 1970s on the St Helier housing estate in South London where I went to live and work with the Revd Donald Reeves, recently appointed vicar of St Peter's. Thatcherism put the seal on this change, declaring: 'There is no such thing as society.' Though her words have become iconic of Thatcherism, few answer the question this shift begs: how did the individual and family so easily replace community as the focus of aspiration? Cultural pretensions of the new working class are easily mocked, although never in the films by Mike Leigh, notoriously misunderstood by those people who refuse to acknowledge their sharp social and political edge. Just as the French film *La Haine* prophesied the troubles to come between police and no-hope mixed race youth in the sink estates of Paris, so, as I have argued, Mike Leigh's timely *Abigail's Party* commented on traditional working class culture being replaced by a new-found affluence, egotistical and hollow at its heart, with similar prognostic awareness.

The vicarage buzzed. Alongside citizen action groups lobbying local councillors arguing housing problems in the vicarage office, liberation groups campaigning for women's ordination and gay rights in the sitting room, urban ministry training programs for clergy and others in the parish hall, and art classes in the dining room, Donald hosted informal gatherings of divorced couples recently married. These remarried couples happened to be part of the newly affluent working class, people with money to spare for holidays and doing up their council houses, which they were then able to buy and own. Decorating and furnishing these small homes at an expense they could never have afforded in the past, failed to fulfil these young couples. Feeling disgruntled they had a sense that there must be more to life. Donald formed two informal groups. They met regularly at the vicarage ostensibly to open their minds to new ideas, in the way my parents did with the millworkers in Bolton. These groups came together without coercion, and I observed their enthusiasm, a sense of

communality. Often nothing of any significance would be discussed, but just the fact that they were sitting together feeling warmth and solidarity meant more to them than anything discussed. Sometimes it became messy. One couple, professional ballroom dancers, eventually broke up. The husband inspired by the campaigning and discussions going on in the vicarage, but without understanding their social and political context, took money from the Church, handed himself in and declared that according to Christian principles the institution should not be dealing with money at all. When we left the estate the groups folded up and lost touch with us. What I remember vividly is their sense of bewilderment at the new materialism, their knowing there must be more to their existence than acquisition and redecorating, and worst of all a gnawing fear that maybe this represented the limit of what life had to offer.

George Bullard, one of the churchwardens, had been raised on the estate but as a successful businessman he could afford a large house in Cheam, a middle class area of South London. Guests would receive a typically warm working class welcome with tea and biscuits in an enormous room, chairs lined along the walls around a large thick pile carpet in vivid colours. For all the family's success, they missed the communality of the estate and replicated their former council house on a larger scale. The sons were sent to private schools. One of them, a pianist, while still a teenager could play the Tchaikovsky Piano Concerto: a piece I still can't get my hands around. The parents commissioned me to do a painting of their garden, and insisted on Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn being in the picture, along with some squirrels. The royal couple had been known to court there several centuries earlier, at the bottom of the garden now belonging to a family born and raised on a London housing estate.

Another church warden, George Ball, a plumber still living in one of the council houses, also commissioned a painting from me. He had seen one particular painting of mine, a favourite of Donald's who always says he would rescue this one first if the house were to be on fire.

George Ball asked me to paint a copy for him. His choice struck me as significant because the painting is about nostalgia for home, a moment when all is at peace and a new day is dawning. It is based on a dream, itself inspired by Schubert's song *In the Village* from *The Winter Journey*. A village with a church spire can be seen dark against a hillside in the moments just before dawn breaks, the sky lightening up with rays from the still invisible sun, and a morning mist lying over the fields. The song is disturbing, because the traveller does not feel at home, envies the people sleeping and dreaming, is unnerved by the dogs barking at him, the growls and rattling chains depicted in the restless piano accompaniment. He is driven to move on. However there is an envy of the peaceful dreamers who are unaware of the outsider's anxious sleepless presence. I try to capture the longing for home-coming in my painting. George Ball shared this nostalgia, but I still ask myself: what did it mean for him?

The church organist Leslie Kercher, a gentle and undemonstrative man who nevertheless conducted the choir with a firm clear beat, allowed me to play at services and concerts. He gave me old well-used copies of sheet music from which I still play, including Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*. My favourite is one of those Victorian compilations in hard-back including a late-romantic painting of a handsome monk in the grip of divine inspiration playing the organ surrounded by angels, a picture that prefaces Liszt's grandly atmospheric transcription of Bach's *Fantasia and Fugue in G minor*. The old pages are now torn and frayed, stuck together with cellotape so that I can hardly read most of it, but every time I practise the piece I think of Leslie Kercher and the times I accompanied the choir in excerpts from Gilbert and Sullivan, the recitals I gave with singer friends and how the choir cheered me after I managed to get through Chopin's *Fantaisie Impromptu* relatively unscathed. People from the estate and beyond bothered to turn up to these recitals. The parish secretary, Pearl Kinghorn, gave me Chopin's fourth Scherzo to learn, along with critical advice how to play it. Each time I practise this tricky piece, I see her at the Xerox machine copying out the Sunday service.

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The people on the estate engaged with music out of love and not out of duty or a sense that they were 'bettering themselves'. I had already experienced this quality of love for the arts by a class patronisingly assumed to be uneducated in the Lancashire town which raised me and where people accepted all aspects of culture as a matter of course. The Boltonians took quality of performance seriously, not afraid to express critical opinions of musicians who didn't come up to scratch. Doris Staton my elderly piano teacher had in her day as a concert pianist accompanied among others Kathleen Ferrier ('a kind lovely person', as though kindness were an unusual trait in a famous artist). Photos of these celebrated artists were arranged around the Blüthner grand, all signed with gratitude to her. Their faces looked down on me encouragingly. Doris Staton, who lived all her life in a small chintz-curtained semi-detached house off the Chorley Road, painstakingly prepared me for recitals at the town music society because standards were high and she took pride in her pupils. With elegant coiffure, her silver hair in a smart perm, bejewelled and wearing a fur coat befitting a special occasion, the highlight of her year, she would listen nervously in the green room and warmly congratulate me and other pupils after our pieces. The squeeze of her hand and the tears in her eyes meant more than the applause. Normally I used to play through the music lazily as though mistakes didn't matter, but she taught me the rigours of performance, lessons I still remember such as 'the more passionate and therefore technically demanding a piece, the cooler the player should be'. She scornfully mocked the notion of 'playing with heart' declaring: 'Either you have a heart or you don't,' and made me focus on following the composer's markings precisely. She did however attend to how my fingers related to the keyboard, following the composer's instructions and dynamics, a wide variety of touch from stroking the keys to more percussive effects, although extremes of loudness were to be used with discretion. This had nothing to do with so-called British 'reserve', but an understanding

that extremes of emotion are best expressed for the listener to be moved, not the performer. As a perpetual alien in the UK my relationships with the British taught me early on that their seemingly unruffled cool external appearances thinly cover volcanic passions. This is after all the *heimat* of Shakespeare. Suffering constantly from chronic arthritis in her fingers Doris Staton played in the old-fashioned style where colour and touch were as important as technique, nothing exaggerated and if anything understated to create a mood of intimacy, drawing the listener in. On one memorable day, much to my surprise as I had done nothing to deserve it, she presented me with the complete Schubert sonatas. Realizing that I would never be a virtuoso, and therefore steering me clear of the late romantics she sensed my sympathy for Schubert's music in particular although she considered that his sonatas needed a special kind of pianism to 'make interesting'. Fixing me with a particularly intense stare she solemnly handed the volumes over, as though they were bread and wine at the Eucharist, a gesture that implied a challenge which she was not sure I could meet: a responsibility on my part to make the music work. I have played from these copies ever since. She could be waspishly critical of mediocre performances by academy students, one of whom stumbled in a Beethoven sonata but subsequently dispatched some tricky Kabalevsky studies with aplomb: 'Fancy forgetting your Beethoven and remembering all that rubbish!' But then she waxed enthusiastic about discoveries like John Ogden who gave some of his first recitals at the Bolton Music Society. The choirs and local orchestras in which I played second violin came to know the repertoire intimately, rehearsed tirelessly for well-attended performances. Music making of the highest quality was traditional in the North of England, which explains why the Leeds Piano Competition is the most prestigious in the world, alongside the Russian Tchaikovsky Prize. Elgar's *Dream of Gerontius*, Handel's *Messiah* and Bach's *B Minor Mass* were staples of concert going but Bolton also regularly hosted chamber music. String quartets such as the Amadeus appeared regularly, alongside the most famous groups from Eastern

Europe, that mysterious part of the continent behind the Iron Curtain, which made their visits exotic and miraculous. Audiences poured in from all over the Manchester area, the venue always packed, with many listeners avidly following scores of the more complicated contemporary music. Apart from piano lessons, I received my main musical education at these concerts. Watching the players at close quarters, the expressions on their faces, the concentrated focus of their performance, rarely overtly emotional, most of the time seeming to be just doing a job of work, taught me how art finds its transcendence through the mathematics of composition and the discipline of technique. The two are its foundation and only when they are embraced even if not totally understood, then and only then can art touch people. The audiences comprised people from across the social spectrum, including Harry Ashton, but also a number of refugees from the Second World War, whose sad faces found solace in music they associated with their home countries, a nostalgia for a culture they could not disown. My parents were foreigners like the musicians from Eastern Europe. After one performance the celebrated Smetana Quartet found itself without transport and stood outside Bolton Civic Centre, seemingly abandoned by those who were meant to look after them, wondering what to do until my father took charge of the situation and found them a taxi. Alan Bennett describes attending concerts in Leeds and afterwards seeing the musicians who had only minutes earlier been moving the audience to tears, sitting on buses with their violin cases, eating biscuits and looking forward to a good night's sleep. So with the Smetana Quartet I observed four men in shabby clothes, lost in a Northern English town when moments before their performance of late Beethoven had taken me and the rest of the raptly attentive audience way out of our bodies and beyond the dark cold wet streets to a realm of pure spirit which had a totally different climate, a place of memories, of dreams and longings. The Science writer Vivienne Parry puts it pithily: 'Science explains life. Art gives meaning to life.'

The most important influence on my artistic development came from Theo Major, the Wigan artist who rivalled Salford's LS Lowry. Aptly dubbed Northern England's Rembrandt by John Berger, then a leading art critic, Theo Major never left his Wigan roots and devoted his whole life to painting the industrial landscapes and working people of Lancashire, the men and women he grew up with and knew as his neighbours, not in the familiar totemic style of Malcolm Lowry, but expressionistically, with bold brush strokes, occasional dynamic use of colour and a perspective that gave the individuals dignity, placed in a universal context that suggested, as in Rembrandt, the spirituality behind the grimy reality of everyday Lancashire existence. An exhibition of his work in Manchester bowled me over as a twelve year old and my parents encouraged me to phone him and ask for lessons. His daughter Mary recently told me that although he taught everyone who approached him so long as he considered them to be serious, what particularly caught his attention were my words on that first phone call. I had said: 'I'm no Van Gogh.' My parents burst out laughing behind me, and he told me to come straight away with my paintings. Theo Major's life and art were one and the same. Living in a small sparsely furnished typical industrial town semi-detached cottage with low ceilings and iron grated fireplace he sat waiting for my arrival on a low sofa flanked by his soft-spoken daughter, who became my friend, on the one side and his kindly big-hearted artist wife on the other. The wife's pictures, rather than his own, lit up the room with their sensuous shapes and warm colours. A trained pianist also, she talked to me about learning Beethoven's *Appassionata*. We spent future afternoons playing the piano, listening to records of Marian Andersen or whichever great singer's recordings Theo had recently bought, and watched old films being shown on television ( I remember once being mesmerised by Robert Mitchum and Jane Russell stumbling around a dark expressionistic set in the film noir *Macao*, atmospheric like Theo's paintings). While Theo and his wife talked quietly in the living room, Mary and I tried vainly to whip evaporated milk into cream in the kitchen. Theo

looked and dressed like the people he painted. With compact physiques wracked by ill health, and heavily lined faces peering out from under caps, bodies wrapped in plain clothes they represented humanity at its rawest but resilient, honest and direct. He taught me the basic techniques of preparing hardboard cut-offs primed with glue as a cheap alternative to canvas, mixing colours and how to become my own best critic. More than that he educated me in every area of the arts, introducing me to films, classical and esoteric music, and, as a classless man fiercely critical of injustice and discrimination, taught me how to look, to think about social and political issues, always to be true to myself and to 'keep on painting!' These lessons I passed on to people I taught later in my life, because the encouraging rather than critical manner of his teaching, intended to instil confidence, not only opened my eyes and mind but showed me how to live. Just as Doris Staton did not discuss the 'heart' in music nor did Theo Major talk about the 'spirit' in painting, and yet everything they taught celebrated heart and spirit. These artists born, bred and living their whole lives in and among the working class of Lancashire were concerned with passing on skills and experience so that these transcendental qualities can flow organically from the material and the instrument.

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The St Helier Estate could not compete with Bolton's level of engagement with the arts, but star performers did occasionally appear in this despised corner of South London. The internationally famous opera singer Renate Scotto made a recording of Italian arias in the church and sat in the vicarage between takes regaling us with stories of her partnerships with great conductors and other singers such as Maria Callas. One of the women who attended my art classes worked as a costume maker at Covent Garden and knew Callas personally. Another church goer sang in the opera chorus and told us funny stories about conductors like Georg Solti: St Helier not only seemed, it was close to and even part of the centre of the world of art.

The estate in the 1970s had a shopping street with specialized shops including kitchen ware. I bought some French iron pots which I still use as I do a copper bowl for whisking egg whites. Such utensils are now hard to find in city centres let alone on housing estates. The newsagents stocked international magazines. On the one hand young people wanted to leave because of better prospects elsewhere. On the other hand the older generation remembered being moved out to the estate from notoriously insalubrious inner city slums in the 1930s, and appreciated the place with its relatively healthy air, large green spaces and easy access to facilities. A gigantic hospital stood on the edge of the estate, and provided work for many residents. Nevertheless the young people had nothing to do on the estate which did not cater for their interests or surplus energy. Gangs of angry youths made the streets dangerous at night. Returning from the West End in the late evening, crossing the estate from Morden tube station, I quickly learned how to negotiate these gangs, by studiously avoiding eye contact, and striding purposefully through them. Never once did they challenge me, but my friends were less lucky, not knowing how to deal with the situation. Bored, restless with too much energy to burn, these youngsters were spoiling for a fight, and I frequently had to take visitors to the hospital.

Not all young people behaved this way there. I made friends with several who enjoyed expanding their horizons and accompanied me on mural painting expeditions across South London. A wedding photographer used to visit me regularly to talk about Visconti films. A milk delivery man attended my art classes which were a mixture of teenagers, pensioners and bored housewives.

The older generation represented the backbone not only of the community but of the country. War years taught them the value of survival. Living in better conditions than their parents, for instance having small gardens instead of tiny backyards, had encouraged them to be self-sufficient. Some of these pensioners taught me perspective and practical life lessons, how to

make do and mend, make best use of a garden, how to look after plants, to preserve fruit and brew wine. They gave advice on the best utensils and especially good hygiene. I remember them every time I decant second fermentation into bottles.

Now the descendants of these people and their families have left the estate to make better lives for themselves elsewhere in the world. Several keep in touch. The estate has changed, the council houses privately owned, and despite the assumption of increased wealth this might signify, the specialist shops are long gone, put out of business by conglomerates. Most of the rest are boarded up. There is nostalgia actually for how it used to be when I used to live there, even though such estates had been despised and mocked.

During the year that Margaret Thatcher came to power and before we moved to Central London where Donald had been appointed rector of St James's Piccadilly, I used to go swimming at the local baths with several men from the estate. After pounding up and down the lanes and drying by the side of the pool we would discuss life and politics. Some of the older men had fought in the Second World War and one of them, a sailor, commissioned me to do a painting for him of his naval ship. He gave me two photographs showing a rescue at sea after a U Boat attack. This is not a subject or even a commission I ever expected or would know how to tackle, but something about the cold sea, the grey ship and the metallic sky unlocked the picture for me. This man had gone through a terrifying ordeal, yet what meant most to him was being able to rescue people. War taught people like him how to survive and make the most of their lives, however limited and restricted. It made them suspicious of cant, especially from those who never went through what they endured.

That generation were beginning to express disillusion with the way society had changed since the war, not as far as I could see for moral reasons, although they complained in traditional fashion about the behaviour of the young, but because the consequences of war trauma, the

stress and suffering, the deaths, the losses, the grief, and above all the holocaust and the atomic bomb, horrors which none of them could have imagined, none had been adequately addressed. That generation and the one immediately following still lived in war's shadow so dark that people, short of denial, had no idea how to shift it.

My paintings for the retired sailor were done from this perspective. However, humbled by the real life narrative behind them, I had the uneasy feeling they disappointed him. Thirty five years later his daughter contacted me to tell me of his recent death, and sent photographs of the two paintings, saying they had meant a great deal to him. So I succeeded after all. The cold grey sea dominates, and there are the sailors pulling others from the choppy waters.

The last swimming session I attended before moving away from the estate, happened to be on the eve of the General Election in 1979. I stood with my retired sailor and his neighbours round the pool and to my horror they each declared: 'Maggie has my vote!' For the first time I felt everyone drift away from me and from each other. At one and the same time I not only understood their sense of betrayal by those who governed them, but also saw them move unwittingly into yet another betrayal disguised as a promise of home ownership, prosperity and a nostalgic return to Victorian values, a time when everyone knew their place. This simultaneous realization shocked me so much that I could not challenge the enormity of the change in their allegiance from diehard communally-minded socialism to a puritanical self-centred conservative capitalism. I also knew instinctively this really did not have so much to do with shifts in political allegiances, than with a deep seated mistrust of their leaders, a disillusion that only deepened during the centrist years when governments by all parties focused on following the money rather than the wellbeing of all the people.

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Liberal arts studies used to be compulsory in the early 1970s for young male apprentices in manual trades and women training for office work. Because of this hour's unpopularity, and no call needed for special qualifications or practical skill on the part of teachers, young part-timers like me, with no training, would be drafted to take the classes. In contrast to the enthusiasm around my painting lessons, I immediately came up against a brick wall of disinterest and aggressive resistance. The men would have preferred to be playing football outside and deliberately turned their backs on me. A few were curious about how I might navigate the situation and observing my dismay laughed and told me not to take it personally. 'We're nice people, really – don't mind us.' But this blatant rejection turned out to be less painful than the young women who filed into the hall and without turning their backs, just carried on talking with each other. They did this while I tried in vain to attract attention with a talk and slide show on Surrealism. Eventually one of them had enough and took me down several pegs by announcing she probably could teach me more about the subject. Had I been older and more mature I would have known how to involve them and together turn this dreary compulsory hour into an opportunity to talk about what really mattered in their lives.

The aspect of this humiliation that taught me most had to do with my sympathy with the frustration of an up and coming generation of what used to be the working class, traditionally forced into menial labour, now better educated than their parents and well aware of where they stood politically and socially. These young people on the brink of life careers were offered only material aspiration and each and every one of them knew instinctively that financial security and acquisition only constituted the basic necessities: this at a time of relatively full employment, before international competition and the ruthless demands of unfettered market forces and globalization forced the country's manufacturing and production industries to close down. The intelligent and thoughtful apprentices and trainees humiliating me understood only too clearly the precariousness as well as the limits of their working

existence. Governments promised improvement in standards of living, and little more. Was this it? They resented being patronised by a privileged class which considered itself solely qualified to govern and lecture. This used to be how people saw the Tory Party, and how the Tory Party still likes to be seen: the natural party of government appointed to rescue the economy which they consider socialism to have wrecked by being too generous to the poor and not supportive enough of the rich, who should be allowed to flourish at the expense of everyone else. Lip service is then paid to concern for the losers and the ‘hard-working’ poor (those unable to work mocked and ‘deservedly’ punished for their failure) by appealing to charity, voluntary help and the cynical promise of ‘trickle-down’, crumbs from the rich man’s table.

This Tory view of political entitlement is expressed with sly symbolism in the Ealing comedy *The Ladykillers*, made after the Tories took over from the first post-war Labour government, the universally respected one that established universal education and the National Health Service. For the first time in British history practical benefits and hope were given to the lower classes which until then had at best been patronised, but mostly neglected. The mixed bag of thieves in *The Ladykillers*, from the sinister educated one to the loutish oaf, bicker with each other and then fall out lethally, while the sweet-natured, self-possessed elderly landlady, an image of traditional values, impervious to menace, innocently scuppers their plans and finally gets to walk off with the loot as though she had every right to it. The film’s satire is even more biting relevant to current attitudes towards the main political parties, both of which have disappointed the general electorate. Unlike those immediate post-war decades when memories of the traumatic consequences of unfettered fascism meant a preference for liberal centrism, now there is the danger of a lurch to the extreme right, xenophobic, racist and isolationist on the one hand, and on the other hand a movement across the globe forging a new socialism. The younger generation knows the world cannot continue

under the present political systems. There have to be new ways of addressing social, political, economic and other matters, especially climate change, sharing the world's resources more fairly, and ending war as the only solution to problems. Over the decades all governments became more right wing centrist so the sense of betrayal felt by those who do not belong to the privileged wealthy one per cent is now leading to a search for alternatives, the simplest being nativism, a new name for the nationalism that breeds fascism, isolationism and the rejection of the complexities of living in a global village. It appears that the First World, in particular, is evenly split between those who long for a revival of socialism, the rights and idealism spawned by the revolutions of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century and those who prefer a return to the safety of tribal allegiances, family and self interest. Whereas socialist idealism which puts community, the 'we', above the 'me' has been under constant attack, diluted, ignored and demolished by the minority that owns the power, of whatever hue, the nationalist alternative encourages nostalgia for a mythical past which offers simple solutions to complex problems. As the name implies, utopia doesn't exist, never existed and never will, except in the imagination. The nationalist utopia offers drastic solutions motivated by self-interest: the 'me' and not the 'we'.

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## SOAP NOSTALGIA AND MATRIARCHY

From the beginning, home entertainment in the form of radio and television latched onto the popularity of perpetually evolving story lines ostensibly reflecting the dramas and relationships of people's everyday lives. Like the crowds queuing up at the United States Boston harbour in the 19<sup>th</sup> century clamouring to know the next episode of a serialized Dickens novel, the fate of Little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop* meaning more to them than

the Little Nells perishing in their own towns, now viewers are entertained by cliff-hanging soap story lines. In the UK the two most popular soaps are firmly rooted in folk nostalgia.

These dramas function in the manner of *The West Wing* which achieved world-wide popularity in the years of the Bush administration, providing those disappointed and demoralised by his victory with a preferred alternative. The series portrayed President Bartlett as a template for what a ruler should be, while not being afraid to observe his flaws, and acknowledging the reality that such a basically liberal president would always face problems winning majority support in both houses of representatives and senators. These political and personal conflicts, nationally and internationally, are what make the series such satisfying and thought provoking viewing. Soap operas at their best fulfil the same function.

From its inception *Coronation Street* described a particular view of Northern working class community. Despite the changes that I witnessed in the first years of its development, the series kept faith with a way of life encapsulated by the evocative title sequence: terraced houses, pigeons and soulful brass band music. Albert Square at the heart of *East Enders* is a place long gone in an age of gentrification, The characters scrabbling for a living there would long ago have been moved out to the suburbs or further afield. Also the sense of community that provides continuity to the narratives is no longer relevant to London's present-day inner city. Tourists would look in vain for such a place. Both soaps are of course about nostalgia for a vanished way of life in which the older generation dispensed home-spun wisdom in a launderette or leaning against the bar of a pub. Even the 'bad boys' are a throwback to post-war gangsters, who had long been glamorized and mythologized: ruthlessly tough on rivals and upstarts, loyal to 'famerlee' and helping old ladies across the road. The new 'bad boys' assume you can't be a real man unless you have challenged the law, broken it and roughed other men up. Casting celebrated icons like Barbara Windsor in the role of gangster family matriarch added to the authenticity of the myth, because of her known former friendships

with crime bosses of the past. Any attempts to bring criminality up to date only show up the nostalgic anachronisms that contribute to the popular success of these soaps. These dramas provide an ersatz religion for a secularised society. Each episode contains at least one sermon, or piece of dialogue dispensing 'good advice', and frequently ends with a couple of emergency telephone numbers to ring for assistance with 'issues' peppering the narratives. For all the obvious soapy manipulation and scenarios rooted in a framework that belongs to another time, they are popular because they fulfil a need. The story lines feed nostalgia for a social network when people engaged in personal conflict but generally made peace in the end, helped each other out, broke each other's hearts but also sustained community, and when personal interaction is essential for both slow burn and cliff-hanging narratives.

Classic soapy melodramas, so-called women's pictures of a superior kind which celebrates sentiment rather than manipulates it, penetrate to the essence of social problems and relationships. Emotional reaction can initiate political responses to change society. Such films in the hands of expert directors and actors are on the whole more useful, productive and revolutionary than machismo message dramas. Successful melodramas can be subversive. They appeal to nostalgia for an imagined future which promises improvement: 'If only life could be like this! Even as we all know it never is, at least let us hope it can be.'

The backbone of soap dramas like *Coronation Street* and *East Enders* are women, with few exceptions stronger than the men. The males even at their best are feckless, prone to mistakes, violence and messing things up. Whereas they generally say they'll 'get things sorted', it is the women who end up doing that. The northern drama series began at a time when women ran the household as well as worked. I knew these women in Lancashire where I grew up. They spoke their mind and you just had to put up with their honest bluntness. They were matriarchs on a grand scale. Majestic and in charge, as Hilary Mantel once described them: 'They blocked out the sun.' Even though both drama series try and keep up with the

times, such matriarchs in places like Albert Square have long been an anachronism. They moved out to housing estates where homes were better equipped and the environment healthier.

I counted myself lucky to have known one such matriarch on the St Helier Estate in the 1970s. Gwen Abbot remembered the unhealthy slums of the inner city and settled on this South London estate with gratitude. She not only worked full time as a nursing assistant, but raised a large family of strapping children who ended up as nurses, police officers and running businesses. She also looked after an ailing husband, and managed at the same time to be a pillar of the parish community, sing in the church choir and with her family run the bingo club. Sunday lunch would not only have the whole family round the table, but the vicar too, me and other friends who happened to be around. Unlike in soap series where such meals generally end in fierce family rows, fights and slamming of doors, these real-life lunches at Gwen Abbotts throbbed with spirited conversation and a sense of communal sharing beyond family. Her thwarted ambition had been to be an opera singer, and she made up for that failure by performing the Easter Hymn from *Cavalleria Rusticana* at church whenever the opportunity arose, hurling her powerful soprano across the nave to the altar. She balked at some of Donald's experiments, such as Julia Usher's daringly modern danced *Mass for the Sun Rising* which Gwen at first described as 'music of the devil' but finally performed with gusto. Gwen Abbot's defence of my own *Stations of the Cross* saved them from destruction. This large-scale series of contemporary interpretations of Christ's Passion painted on roundels with the final two large panels depicting the Crucifixion and Resurrection facing each other in the chancel, caused such a rumpus that a consistory court needed to be held years after Donald left the parish, to decide on whether to destroy them. The artist Leonard Rosoman and the theologian John Drury spoke in their defence alongside the lawyer husband of the playwright Caryl Churchill. Their championship humbled me, but what touched me

most were the great matriarch Gwen Abbott's words as she went from one painting to the other declaring their importance and what they meant to her. More than anyone she persuaded the judge to save them. I had painted this interpretation of the Stations of the Cross for the estate as it existed then in the 1970s, on the cusp of social and political change that would bring about the end of a culture with its roots in community and strong family structures. This society which had no ideological bees in its bonnet could be open-hearted, curious to learn and welcoming to strangers and alternative life-styles. This was the working class I grew up with and could never patronise because these people taught me more than I could ever teach them. Personally I feel it is important to be reminded of these qualities in an age of relentless 'dumbing down' by the media and politicians, patronising as pernicious as class snobbery in the past, implying that the working class has no interests beyond physical and material gratification. This attitude from the powerful shows no understanding and respect for the people who elect them.

Gwen Abbott represents the beating heart of such a community. I had known other matriarchs, tough and benevolent, in the north of England where I grew up, the women who bound families and communities together in times of crisis, not the men in mayor's robes, or the bosses, who pretended to be in charge. These matriarchs are trusted by the community, which they guide. They are open-minded and intolerant only of bigotry and intolerance. Without higher education, they nonetheless possess an intelligence that sees through cant and pretention. They deploy a sharp sense of humour that puts people in their place. Unthreatened they allow no one to stop them. Though powerful and robust in their opinions, they were never intimidating, because they had a genuine curiosity about people and felt instinctive care not only for family and community, but also for strangers and mavericks, eccentrics and those who are despised and discriminated against. There is a striking example of such a matriarch, acted by Imelda Staunton, in the film *Pride*. As the film indicates, these matriarchs flourish

best in communities with a tradition of work which binds people together. Those days are long past. This is why soap operas exert such a nostalgic appeal: the matriarchs are achingly missed.

Matriarchs are not nannies. This is why those women who became Prime Minister in the UK, Margaret Thatcher and now Theresa May are not matriarchs. Political ambition is about control, which suits the nanny state. Matriarchy is about nurture of community.

This kind of matriarch is a British phenomenon: mistresses of household and community. Democracies, which are forever evolving to achieve their full potential, encourage them. Tyrannies oppress them. The recent US election with victory for Donald Trump over Hilary Clinton illustrates this. A majority disgruntled with the gridlock system of American politics voted in a man who openly rejects democracy. Dictatorships and democracies treat women, and especially matriarchs, differently. Each system feels nostalgia for how women preserve, strengthen and improve social wellbeing. Tyrannies place the woman firmly in the home away from community to fulfil this function. Democracies welcome them in every part of society. Where are the matriarchs now?

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## NOSTALGIA FOR UTOPIA AND ARMAGEDDON

There is the nostalgia for utopia. Then there is the nostalgia for the end of the world.

The one yearns after a golden age, a Utopia for all humanity, inspired by communal myths of a golden age. The other attracts recruits through fanatic belief in purity, whether religious or social and political, for which it is prepared to die and take the world down with it. This apocalyptic nostalgia is inspired by dogmas that favour unpolluted ethnicity and faith and is intolerant of dissent and diversity. Utopia is a challenge which demands that the world

changes radically and makes every effort to achieve peace and harmonious co-existence, even as the name implies, such an idyllic state can never truly exist, but has always to be striven after. Ernesto Sábato, the Argentinian writer and physicist said: ‘Only those capable of envisaging utopia will be fit for the decisive battle, that of recovering all the humanity we have lost.’

Fundamentalist extreme purity demands different challenges: unquestioning and self-sacrificial obedience to a leadership which is trusted to make the decisions. Followers are prepared unquestioningly to destroy and die. This is as true of right wing extremism dedicated to racial purity and white supremacy as it is of militant Islam.

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Utopian nostalgia is seductive. Nostalgia for the end of the world is also fascinating, in the way a cobra hypnotises its prey before pouncing. The apocalyptic aim for purity attracts but also repels because such spiritual cleansing invites ultimate annihilation. By excluding everyone and everything else, the world is turned into a place of constant war. So what is it about the desire for a simple solution that fascinates: to be lead, to be unthinkingly prepared to die in the midst of destruction? What is it about mortal self-sacrifice that attracts young people with long productive lives ahead for them?

My essays *Face of a Child* and *Eyes and Smiles* began to explore the theme of utopian nostalgia as a yearning for home, Heimat. This sentimental longing washes like a watercolour into its opposite dystopian nostalgia for a past that is death by immolation.

This theme leads me to the heart of what I want to say.

I intend to focus on the period of intense nationalism at the heart of Europe leading to the Second World War, with specific reference to *Heimat*, a German film made in 1938 by Carl

Froehlich. The perennial popularity of that film indicates dystopian nostalgia still simmering below the surface of a resurrected nation long after the horrors of that war have been generally acknowledged and regretted.

*Heimat* also became the title of the more celebrated Edgar Reitz's film epic made over a period of twenty years at the end of the last century and which succeeded, certainly as far as Germany is concerned, in challenging the insidious toxic nationalism at the core of the earlier film, and its influence on subsequent events, while at the same time acknowledging Utopian longing for homeland that is shared by people then and now.

Carl Froehlich's *Heimat* depended for its emotional resonance on Zarah Leander the film's Swedish star dubbed the German film industry's Garbo. She came to represent a womanly ideal not only for the Third Reich but for the generation after the war. Even those who regretted the crimes of the Hitler period never stopped adoring Zarah Leander, and she continued to make films in Germany throughout the post war years. Her performances reflected the changes of mood in her adopted country. With a unique sumptuous contralto voice and a face almost perpetually in stoic tragic mode she could be naughtily seductive, warmly motherly or self-sacrificially saintly, all within the same film. Basically she represents a woman who yearns for independence and love, but is perpetually doomed to submission. The development of her roles from early films before the war, while the Third Reich established its authority, to films made after the war, is instructive on matters of national nostalgia in the lead up to war and then the subsequent guilt after Germany's defeat. In those later melodramas the themes concern longing for forgiveness. I will focus on her three most famous earlier films. Besides Carl Froehlich's *Heimat* she starred in *Zu Neuen Ufern*, *To New Shores*, and *Habanera*, both directed by Douglas Sirk. The Third Reich admired his work in particular, but Sirk, as the latter films subtly indicate, had become disillusioned with Nazi ideology. He had also remarried. His first wife was about to denounce

his second wife for being Jewish, so they fled and ended up in Hollywood where he became a celebrated director of what became known as ‘women’s films’.

*Heimat* provided Zarah Leander with one of her most iconic roles, and the film warrants scrutiny because of its popularity, a classic German film from the years of the Third Reich, and for its themes of family and nation which are at the heart of the present crisis in Europe.

Melodrama in the hands of politically savvy directors like Douglas Sirk can be subversive. In all Zarah Leander’s films the main male protagonists are weak, bullish or devious and cannot be trusted, especially not those in authority. Only a woman’s suffering, sacrifice and resilience in the face of tragedy can bring humanity to a harsh world, as long as she accepts her subservient position. Apart from the sadistic entertainment value for a fascist machismo society relishing the spectacle of a woman suffering, particularly one as charismatic as Zarah Leander, the subversive implication is that in a world that functions without humanity maybe the only solution is a rejection of male authoritarianism. The leaders of the Third Reich, chiefly Joseph Goebbels who used cinema for propaganda purposes, would not have been interested in this message or been aware of it. Audiences were fixated on Leander’s performance, camp melodrama sumptuously costumed, expertly mounted and directed, and therefore not to be taken seriously. But this is where the subversive element can deliver its punch. The audiences would leave the cinema emotionally involved with Zarah Leander’s fate and simultaneously be uneasily aware of the subliminal message that the male-dominated world is rotten.

As in grand opera, narrative logic is never a priority in these kind of melodramas, and there are illogical shifts of narrative and action in the 1938 *Heimat*. What matters is the emotional truth that allows for inconsistencies in behaviour. The mood in Leander’s films is always set by the music. Because of her popularity as a singer audiences expected at least one hit

number, if not more, and she never disappointed. Whatever the absurdity of narrative her songs would reassure audiences that it is her response to people and events that counts, and that they should empathise with her through the music,

So in *Heimat*, music drives the narrative and the mood is set by a sentimental number about longing for home: ‘Three stars are shining...’ Leander plays Magda, a world-famous singer returning to her small home town in Germany, one that she fled some years earlier, rejected by a father who disapproved of her career choice. She was then ruined by a scandalous affair with one of the town’s bigwigs who had for ulterior motives offered to pay for her studies. This affair produced a child, a secret that had to be kept hidden. The film is about her longing for reconciliation with her father and struggle for acceptance by the community, while resisting blackmail from the father of her child. After performing a popular number ‘A woman only becomes beautiful through love’, with a Marie Lloyd twinkle in her eye indicating that this has more to do with the physical act rather than anything romantic, she moves from whore to mother to saint in a film which ends with her singing the passion chorale in Bach’s *St Mathew Passion*. Only then does she earn paternal forgiveness and acceptance by the community. For all the sentimentality, the look on her face as she intones the chorale expresses a stoic awareness of the cost of such acceptance, the long journey of suffering, the battles of attrition with the main men in her life. That look on her face along with the potency of her voice is what audiences would take away, when the disturbingly patriarchal element of the story is forgotten.

The Third Reich would have appreciated the film’s overt message that all true Aryans should come home to the warm embrace of the Fatherland, with perhaps a sly dig at globally celebrated German singers such as Marlene Dietrich and Lotte Lehmann who resisted such a command. Lehmann famously laughed in Goebbels’ face before packing her belongings and leaving for a successful career in the United States; Dietrich performed for Allied forces

during the war, an act that infuriated her mother country. Branded a traitor, even after the crimes of genocide had been revealed, it took years before Germany accepted her return. Despite the then shame of having been misled by what Germans came to call the Nazi ‘gangsters’ it was still felt that she should have kept faith, even with the fascism which she detested. Her deliberately chilly performance as the wife of a general indicates in the film *Judgment at Nuremberg* about the trial of Nazi leaders that Dietrich understood the mentality of people who did not resist, and who despite the crimes of many compatriots, believed they were good Germans. The film makes observations which are particularly relevant now in Europe and the US shifting to the far right. The Slovakian Kadar’s *The Shop on the High Street* gives an even starker reminder and warning for the future: what can a decent ordinary citizen do to resist the force of aggressive nationalism as it permeates and destroys a community?

## FIVE WOMEN (POLLY, LEONORE, MADDALENA, SALLY AND ROSALINDA)

### WEIMAR AND THE THIRD REICH

Obsequious portraits of autocrats use photo-realistic styles of painting to enhance their almost divine authority. A similarly idealized and oppressive representation of women indicates what essentially sets patriarchal dictatorships apart from liberal democracies.

Look at the films made in the free world during the 1930s and 1940s. America witnessed the emergence of powerful female characters who dominated the screen in parts created for stars such as Bette Davis and Barbara Stanwyck. These women squared up to the men and most of the time came out on top, or at least forged a relationship on shared terms. Even the ‘eternal masochist’ Joan Crawford turned her perpetual suffering at the hands of predatory males into

female triumph. Such women might have to be punished for being uppity in a world ruled by men, but the force and passion of their performances gave a subversively contrary message to audiences: women are capable and can run the world. The femmes fatales of film noir who challenged macho men sent a similar message: fear the strength of our thwarted passions and consider the waste of our energy, intelligence and imagination which could be put to more creative use turning your fear into respect. There is nothing such women cannot do. In these politically and socially astute films that flourished precisely in the decade of build up to war, throughout the war and during the post-war blues, there is also commentary about the male character that is on the one hand expected to be strong, aggressive and victorious in battle but on the other hand turning out to be weak in peacetime and failing in domestic and social relationships. While these men were sent to fight, the women ran the place, not just the home but also in industry, successfully doing men's work. It has been frequently commented on how when the men returned from war, these women who had learned to be capable and independent were expected to return obediently to their subservient role in domesticity. As film noir showed effectively, women resented such demotion, challenged male decision-making and fought for their independence. Thwarted ambition led to the femme fatales punishing the men by twisting them round their fingers and destroying them.

Much has been written about film noir and the role of its women, but nothing or little that I have come across about the role of women under fascism. For example there is the celebrated and shocking shot at the end of *Roma Citta Aperta*, *Rome Open City* set and made in the closing stages of fascism in Italy when the image of defiant Italian womanhood Anna Magnani is gunned down on the streets. The bravely anti-fascist Italian director Rossellini saw this as a tragic waste of life, but is also making a point that under dictatorships any woman who dares to protest against authority will as a matter of course be destroyed. But before I explore this theme with more examples from German cinema of the same decade as

Hollywood film noir, tribute needs to be paid to a peculiarly British phenomenon, the matriarch virago. This is often a figure of fun, like Peggy Mount who roared and bellowed at her quaking husbands and any man who dared to challenge her, a type that became the formidable 'her indoors' in series like *The Last of the Summer Wine*. While mocked these self-confident bossy women were at the same time considered to be essential pillars of society. During the war British cinema featured the maturing figure of formerly subservient role models, obedient wives and home-makers into women who discovered the strength individually to take on the marauding enemy. Greer Garson in *Mrs Miniver* represents such a housewife with Oscar-winning quality, but this happened to be a film made in Hollywood where the actor had moved to join the ranks of other strong-willed women stars. Back in the United Kingdom in more modest productions less glamorous types found themselves capable of doing what they had never imagined being called to do. A striking example can be found in *Went the Day Well*, a film made during the war at a time when Britain faced defeat. The women folk of a small country town taken over by German Nazi troops, find the courage to fight and defeat the enemy whatever the sacrifice. When the post mistress under duress finally reaches for a knife and kills a German soldier, the look of shock, despair and disgust on her face tells us the cost to her of this act of violence for which her peace time life of wifely obedience and public duty had never prepared her, but that simply had to be done to protect the community even at the cost of her own life. Such women refused to be intimidated and defeated. Even at their most gracefully feminine and polite, like Deborah Kerr, also poached by Hollywood, and Celia Johnson who stayed in the UK and became the symbol of refined but resilient British womanhood, they possessed spines of steel, making the decisions that provide resolution to whatever drama they took part in. In *Brief Encounter* it is the woman and not the man who has the guts and resolve to end the relationship that offers only a problematic future.

Powerful women existed in German cinema, but only for the brief period of the Weimar Republic, in the late 1920s and early 1930s which made what followed so different. The negative and depressing manner of this change provides a warning to the future. Ironically, this image of womanhood offered by the Third Reich had not been intended to demean and degrade women, but in fact to raise them on a pedestal. This however had the effect of restricting and hemming women in: they needed to be taught their place, by men of course, so that the men could take charge of the more important business of state, business and warfare.

There is stark contrast between Lotte Lenya's robust Polly Peachum in Pabst's film of the Brecht Weill *Threepenny Opera* and Zarah Leander's victimized Magda in Carl Froehlich's *Heimat* made only five years after, a year before Hitler launched the Second World War.

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First there has to be a brief comment by me concerning all those critics of the Weimar Republic artists, Berthold Brecht foremost, that because they set themselves up as political and social commentators, then blame has to be laid at their door for failure to prevent the rise of the Third Reich. Blame can never be put on artists for such failures, but must emphatically be laid on their audiences who did not heed the clear and trenchant warnings of the disaster to come.

Resurrecting Germany from the shame and cost of losing the First World War, artists as well as politicians were trying to find a way of creating a new society out of the ruins. Socialism looked to be the best alternative, but self-interested business threw its weight and finance behind nationalism that promised to make Germany 'great again'. This is for me a significant point to make right now because Europe is once again divided irreconcilably between extreme political forces. Belligerent nationalism is once again attracting support from business and the populace alike. Artists in prophetic mode warn as best they can. Despite

critical respect heaped on Brecht and his contemporaries, audiences failed to act sufficiently to prevent the fascist take-over.

This time round a young generation will hopefully succeed where they failed then. Michael Moore among many has faith in the under-40s. These new activists are needing to learn from those of the older generation.

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Villains are the most interesting characters in James Bond films. Icy-eyed Robert Stephens and dynamic Lotte Lenya bagged attention in *From Russia With Love*, providing the thrills and absurdity. What is it with those awkward poison-tipped knives in Lotte Lenya's shoes? Couldn't she have found a more convenient place to store them? Probably not so securely with no risk to herself, but unfortunately the clumsiness of their location made it easier for Bond to dispose of her eventually, and in ungainly fashion. It also made for memorable cinema, like Oddjob's bizarre razor-rimmed bowler hat in *Goldfinger* – he could after all have stored a discus in his pocket.

Lotte Lenya turned out to be inspired casting because of her celebrated substantial back story as the muse of both Berthold Brecht and Kurt Weill, the artists who became universally representative of the post-First World War Weimar Republic years in Germany: a period when international socialism presented a substantial challenge and an alternative to nationalism. She might have been a villain in the Bond film, and it hopefully provided her with a fat pay cheque, as well as the opportunity of enacting in real life the example of the protagonist of Brecht's *Good Person of Szechuan*, who subverts capitalism to help the poor. Her back story meant she upstaged everyone in the film. Audiences would hear in their memory's ear the songs that made her such a potent interpreter of Brecht and Weill, in that unique voice both gravel and honey, and in performances, world-weary, cynical but resilient

and ultimately hopeful, robustly challenging but also tender, dangerous to anyone who crossed her, independent with feet firmly on the ground, a survivor. This ‘infinite variety’ of character, not unlike Shakespeare’s Cleopatra, made her a person who spoke to and for everyone: representative of a new breed of strong women who resist being pigeon-holed by anyone, especially not by men. Even in such ostensibly self-lacerating ballads like *Surabaya Johnny*, she manages to stand up to her unresponsive lover, ‘take that pipe out of your mouth, you dog’, not concealing her emotion but also aware that she will get over the heartbreak. This woman is most definitely not a victim, for all her emotional candour.

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#### *DAS EWIGWEIBLICHE ZIEHT UNS HINAN: THE ETERNAL FEMININE DRAWS US ON*

Generations have attempted to interpret these somewhat ambiguous words by Goethe that end his magnum opus *Faust*. What is ‘feminine’? What is she drawing us on towards? What is her eternal aspect? The words can mean anything, although the implication is that the male character needs the quality of woman to achieve wholeness and ‘salvation’. ‘Hinan’ cannot be precisely translated. It implies a place to which one is going. To what and to where is the eternal feminine drawing us? What heaven? What salvation? That begs the question: why is this responsibility laid on her shoulders, in particular in the form of this particular woman who has been seduced, shamed with an illegitimate child and abandoned? Goethe, the poet, is deliberately ambiguous. One of the revolutionary European Enlightenment’s supreme intellectuals and poets with a mind rooted in Greco-Roman culture, the Renaissance, the mythology of Central European folklore, wants us to think for ourselves.

Beethoven took Goethe’s declaration about the ‘ewig-weibliche’ at face value and in his opera *Fidelio* created a formidable woman protagonist who triumphs against all odds.

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An observation needs to be made at this point about the arts and society's attitude to them. Traditions change. Church patronage used to make demands that fitted ecclesiastical purposes. Aristocratic patronage preferred the arts to be about entertainment and prestige. Then after the Revolution at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the arts became a ritual in which 'serious' artists and what they wanted to express became more important than patrons or audiences. Now the tradition is changing again into emphasis on entertainment, not for patrons but for audiences. Before any performance or exhibition, the exhortation is to: 'Enjoy!' This assumes an overriding expectation to be cheered up, to take a break from and escape real life. Michael Moore declares that entertainment should in fact always be the main aim for the artist creator, but as his own films prove, skill at making an entertaining film does not necessarily get in the way of uncomfortable truths. Humour and delight can contribute to making the subject matter more palatable without losing trenchancy. Satire from Aristophanes, Juvenal through Jonathan Swift to Steve Bell can effect change. Laughter is the prime aim, unsheathing the dagger of anger to convey the challenge. Steve Bell once asked me, after I arranged an exhibition of his lacerating cartoons and had expressed my admiration for his ability to strike home: 'But did I make you laugh?' On the other hand, holding a mirror to disturbing truths without sugaring the pill can also succeed in changing attitudes, but one is not necessarily exclusive of the other.

However brilliant the satire, which does not work unless it entertains, and however pointed the subversive challenge, audiences today on the whole remain resistant to being so inflamed that they rise up in revolutionary protest about the matters raised, say in the way Italians reacted to Verdi's *I Lombardi*, rushing out of the opera house to take up arms against the tyranny of oppression.

In the musical *Cabaret* there is a seductive song about nature, sunlight, morning and fields which awakes nostalgia for a wholesome way of life before the words turn into a hymn in praise of the coming Third Reich victory. The satire is effective because the song, both the words and music, subtly subverts expectations. Love of nature morphs into a nationalist call to arms. The song gives a stark warning: remember how this moment of sweet nostalgia led directly to war and holocaust; it can happen again. Steve Bell referred to the song for one of his cartoons before Margaret Thatcher's third election. The sinister last words, 'tomorrow belongs to me' became the cartoon's title, a chilling reminder of Thatcher's 'nativism'. By reminding readers of *Cabaret*'s narrative and satirical purpose, it should have stirred people to vote against her, but she won with an even bigger majority. An appeal to Victorian values won the day, in the same way as Brexit recently appealed to the majority's desire for a return to the 'good old days' when there were no foreigners and the UK used to be a proudly self-contained island nation with no ties to anyone or anywhere else (all myths of course). The consequences including a striking rise in hate-crime, are now being brushed aside as irrelevant and exaggerated, just as they were in the Weimar Republic before a minority of street thugs took over Germany. What this majority hears is just the opening strains of the song from *Cabaret* celebrating the dawning of a new day, unaware that it is paving the way seductively towards a future of conflict. This future is already being imagined by the right-wing media. When farmers after Brexit now complain about the future lack of subsidies and foreign workers to pick the fruit, the media now suggests prisoners should be sent to the orchards. They would of course need to be shackled and supervised so none escape. This conjures images of chain gangs and is a small step to concentration camps that will be needed to incarcerate and dispose of illegal immigrants, dissenters and other undesirables. Attack on liberal attitudes, mocked as political correctness, and threats to the rights for all minorities prepare for this new future. A few days after his confirmation as the new President of the US

Donald Trump announced he would be deporting or incarcerating three million unwanted immigrants.

When it first appeared on stage in the 1960s *Cabaret* was reflecting on recent history, drawing on *Goodbye to Berlin*, Christopher Isherwood's semi-autobiographical observations about Germany in the 1930s. The disturbing warning elements of the musical hit me in an unlikely amateur performance given by school children in Charlbury near Oxford. After the shock of seeing teenage girls pretending to be provocatively gyrating chorus girls in a sleazy nightclub, a withering performance as Emcee by a sixteen year old boy, one of the helpers at my Coffeehouse, struck me even then, twenty years before Brexit, how dangerously close our world always is to spiralling into violent intolerance. The sixteen years old boy did not imitate Joel Grey's celebrated blistering turn in the film, but remained his customary cool self, and just pointed directly at the audience with the implication: 'You make your own mind up about this: does the cap fit?' The innocence of the performers only accentuated the political, moral and social corruption that permeates the narrative.

Johann Strauss's operetta *Die Fledermaus, the Bat*, holds a mirror up to the decadence of class division, morals and hypocrisy in the final century of the Hapsburg Empire in Vienna. The music's charm provides a witty perspective to this classic risqué operetta about adultery, an oppressive class system where the only way out for talented lower class young women is to become 'actresses', and a society ruled over by an overbearing and jaded aristocratic elite focussed grimly on being ceaselessly entertained. The piece never fails to shock and charm because in the end it is human beings who triumph. Marriages, like society, can splinter dangerously but it is when people come to their senses, stop being selfish, and acknowledge each other's frailties as well as talents that there can at least in an operetta be a happy ending.... of sorts. People may leave the theatre uplifted by the beauty of the music and vitality of the performance, but will not easily forget the mirror held up to them. The first act

unfolds in a bourgeois living room, where a rocky marital relationship and social division are on display. The second act joins a lavish aristocratic house party where people behave badly but all in good fun. The final act takes place tellingly in the bleak environment of a prison, a symbol of this society's decrepit infrastructure, and where the resolution comes after several moments when relationships threaten to disintegrate beyond repair.

At the heart of this operetta are two knock-out arias, a laughing song in which a chambermaid, Adele, mocks her master who is blind to her qualities because he can only see her as a servant, and a Hungarian czardas in which his wife, Rosalinde, asserts her independence as a woman who can handle any situation, including her faithless husband. In a sparkling performance, like Gundula Janowitz under Karl Böhm's sprightly but disciplined baton, this aria can raise the roof. On this recording the whole cast for whom this operetta is so much in the blood they become the characters is completely at home in the Viennese dialect, as pungent as London cockney and inimitably expressive of sentimentality and cynicism simultaneously. The pungent Hungarian and Slav accents remind us how diversely multicultural Vienna was at the time of the operetta's composition. It is these subversive elements that keep *Die Fledermaus* as edgily scintillating and relevant as an Oscar Wilde comedy of manners.

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Sally Bowles in *Cabaret* does not have the vocal skills needed for a Rosalinda, and we know that Christopher Isherwood while admiring, as who would not, Liza Minnelli's barnstorming performance on stage and in the film, did point out that the original Sally Bowles could neither sing nor dance. Based on a real person living in Berlin at the time, he was making an observation about her lack of professionalism which made her lovable, particularly as she is

aware of her faults. Her flaky character echoes weakness in a society that lacks resolve and proficiency to resist the forces of intolerant nationalism.

In contrast Lotte Lenya's power as a performer defined the robustness of her character which informed the roles she took on. She is effective as the ever resourceful Polly Peachum in Brecht and Weill's celebrated update of John Gay's 18<sup>th</sup> century *The Beggars Opera* about London low life, the same sleazy world as Sally Bowle's Kit Kat Club, above all in Lenya's understanding of the world she lives in and has to negotiate every day. The fascists trash Sally's club, in their first step towards war and the holocaust. Sally's world then comes to an end. However the political and emphatically socialist message about state corruption and oppression, criminal solidarity and rebellion in Brecht's world cannot be trashed. It may go underground out of necessity under the Third Reich, with Brecht and Weill fleeing into exile, but would re-emerge later with its message intact, as prophetic now as it ever was.

Created in the crucible of revolution and the Napoleonic wars over a century before the Weimar Republic, Beethoven's only opera *Fidelio* shines ever more brightly across the decades and centuries as not only a howl of protest against injustice and oppression but above all in the character of the courageous and indomitable Leonore: an example of Goethe's assertion about the 'ewig weibliche' drawing us on.

The work shocks with its contemporary resonance. Even the setting is timeless: a jail. It was an irony, but also a matter of no other choice, that this paean to freedom opened the Vienna Opera House, a cultural centre for the Third Reich, rebuilt five years after its destruction in the Second World War. The occasion inhibited the main singers, and it is moving to hear the usually dependable dramatic soprano Martha Mödl choke on her role as Leonore, which challenges any singer whatever the circumstances, let alone one as charged as this occasion

The subject matter of unjust incarceration, harsh punishment and threat of death is sadly not of the past, but a regular occurrence even in the West which hypocritically considers itself morally superior to other cultures, while sanctioning torture and allying itself for economic gain with brutally repressive regimes across the world. Into this dangerous and gloomy situation comes Leonore disguised as a man, because this is a man's world which restrains woman. She is determined to rescue her imprisoned husband, victim of an unscrupulous enemy. With no idea how she can release her man, she can only be resolute and is prepared to sacrifice herself. There is no other choice for her. The two words that leap out of Beethoven's score apart from 'Freiheit', freedom, are 'Mut' and 'Hoffnung'; courage and hope. Freedom cannot be achieved without these two essential qualities. Leonore represents them to a degree that is inspirational. However challenging, even at the cost of her life, she speaks for all people: hold fast to courage and hope, and then there is a chance of achieving success. Her husband shackled in a dungeon hallucinates about freedom and being in the arms of his wife, but is a helpless chained prisoner about to be killed by a political adversary, the man who wants him dead. It is the wife who is not only prepared to face every complication, including the jailor's daughter falling in love with her in Leonore's male disguise as Fidelio, but puts her body between the sword and the intended victim. By lucky chance, as only happens in opera, the state governor arrives on cue to save lives, so the opera can climax in a sublime moment of celebration as the wife cuts the chains binding her husband: 'O welch ein Augenblick!' 'O what a moment!' words made all the more powerful by echoing the 'Ah! Welch ein Augenblick!' uttered with utmost ferocity earlier in the opera by the man who intended to kill him.

Of all inspirational heroines in music and literature Leonore is without peer. Beethoven, who as an inexperienced opera composer admitted difficulty giving birth to this one, even offering three perfectly suitable but perhaps too lengthy overtures before settling on a pithy effective

fourth, wrote music that does her justice, so she shines like a beacon across the centuries, as relevant and necessary today as ever. Her large-scale taxing first act aria is a hymn to hope that never fails to move audiences, even though, as I observed before, they do not necessarily heed the urgency of her plea. With a soothing accompaniment of three horns she sings: ‘Come hope, do not allow the last star to pale for the wearied. Brighten my goal, be it ever so far.’ In the second act she begs for courage and strength, knowing that she may have to sacrifice her own life to save her husband. Were the challenge to confront me, and we live in times of growing xenophobia, racism, nationalism and persecution of the innocent in which that threat is ever present, I would hope to be inspired by Beethoven’s Leonore and find the resolve to stand my ground even if I fail. She is an ideal. The reality is Tono in the Slovakian film Jan Kadar’s *The Shop on the High Street*, a simple decent man who falters out of understandable fear and confusion in the face of a ruthless political juggernaut and then cannot live with himself for failing. His barber, a Jew preparing for transportation to a death camp, says in that exemplary film about extreme right-wing corruption of community: ‘When the law persecutes the innocent, that’s the end of it.’

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Racism and xenophobia are bound up with the desire to protect national identity from influences considered alien and polluting. Such ideology has a direct consequence for women because nationalism decrees their fertility must be limited to a particular race. Miscegenation, a word hardly used now, is considered one of the most serious crimes in nationalist states, and as shown already a century ago in Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein’s musical *Show Boat*, is punished with the same degree of disgust as those branded ‘Jew lovers’ under the Nazi regime. However in that musical it is a white woman who subverts racism by taking a song belonging to blacks and at one of the heart-breaking climaxes makes it her signature.

More than the physical fact of mixed blood in one person it is the cross-fertilization of cultures that cements cohesion in a diverse society.

Already the pre-credits sequence of Carl Froehlich's *Heimat* reveals the lie at the heart of extreme nationalism, and illustrates the seductive deception of nostalgia. A woman sings of three stars that are sadly not the ones of her homeland. This is not true. Stars are the same wherever they shine. They shine on her wherever she is, the same stars that shine on her homeland. It is a universal expression of union between parted lovers that they need only look up at the moon and the stars, and know they shine down on their beloved and it is this knowledge that unites them in spirit. To say that stars are not the same as those over other countries is as absurd as saying that every community, nation, religious group has a different and separate history, even within the same country. Yes, each nation may lay claim to its own mythology and interpretation of the facts, but that is quite a different matter from historical actuality which is incontrovertible. The tearful appeal of the song and its performance by Zarah Leander appeals not to truth but to sentimentality. The seduction of sentimentality implies that stars mean most when seen from home, that everywhere else is foreign and unfriendly. The lie behind the song provides the emotional thread of the narrative.

When Marine le Pen greeted Nigel Farage's Little England victory for Brexit in the Brussels' EU parliament she stretched her arms out to him and declared 'History can be beautiful'. This gesture that appropriates events to forge particular and separate histories is the same notion as stars being different for different nations. The word 'beautiful' implied that anything other than a return to ethnic and cultural purity could only be ugly.

'Beautiful' in the way Marine le Pen uses the word inspires a sense of consoling nostalgia for homeland and nationhood, a longing for family that depends on suspicion, fear and hatred of 'others'.

The 1938 *Heimat* is set at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in a small German town. Having sung about the stars of her homeland, Maddalena dall'Orto, a world famous opera star living in America, enthusiastically accepts the invitation from the prince of her home town to take part in the annual performance of the Bach *St Mathew Passion*, give a recital of popular music and sing Orpheus in Gluck's *Orpheus and Eurydice*. The prince does not yet realize she is in fact Magda the daughter of Colonel von Schwartz, in charge of the local barracks, and the main reason for accepting this provincial engagement is down to a longing for home. The film is making a point about the particular genius of German art, as well as German sovereignty and military strength. Note her stage name. Maddalena implies Mary Magdalen, the fallen woman who is forgiven by Christ. She had left her home town under a cloud, rejected by her widower father who wanted to keep her at home where she should accept her duty as obedient daughter and look after him. To make matters worse she then embarked on an affair with the town banker who paid for her musical studies, and with whom she had a child, a daughter. At that time he did not want to marry her so the daughter needed to be kept a secret. The banker is the film's villain, with the implication he is Jewish. The narrative is about her search for forgiveness.

The film's setting moves between the army barracks, where Magda's sister's fiancé is a lieutenant, to the large house of her father the Colonel, the town bank, the prince's palace and the church, with its grand baroque interior and a gothic spire.

Much of the dialogue between the male characters, with the exception of the banker, is about the army, a reminder that Europe has been at war for the most part of the last two thousand years. Fighting is a European tradition, what men do, and is considered natural to specifically male activity: heroism and patriotism celebrated from the Iliad onwards. Even today, at the prospect of the breakup of the European Union, a Polish minister smilingly reminded an interviewer of this fact, and that war between nations is not only normal but honourable,

strengthening moral and physical fibre. After the carnage of the First World War many began to wake up to the catastrophic consequences of war, its inhumanity and destructiveness, especially in an age of advanced military equipment that can kill on a scale never imagined by Ancient Greek warriors. Then within less than a quarter of a century it embarked on an even worse global destruction, initiated by Germany. Carl Froehlich made *Heimat* the year before the invasion of Poland but Germany had already annexed Austria and Czechoslovakia. The film's appeal to patriotism, unquestioned obedience to authority and assertion of the primacy of German culture, was clearly intended to prepare the country for that event. The disastrous consequences which included the bombing by both sides of whole cities and destruction of infrastructure, led after the war to a small group of German and French visionary politicians to instigate a union of powerful European countries that would prevent such future immolation. But even as that global conflict ended, leading powers then embarked on a Cold War which involved arming the chief antagonists with enough nuclear weapons to completely destroy the whole world several times over. This possibility made the foundation of a European Union even more urgent. Given the apocalyptic consequences of a Third World War, people began to consider the possibility that war need not be considered ingrained human behaviour, and could even be interpreted as a human weakness, a pathology rather than a strength, and one leading to inevitable self-destruction, not just of people but the whole planet. Carl Froehlich's *Heimat* was made before such thinking became an acceptable subject for discussion rather than cause for stern criticism: cowardly and treacherously showing lack of patriotism. The job of women is to look after the men, who will then do the fighting and protect the homeland. Everyone should know their place and never question it. There is a bitter-sweet comfort in that security, bitter in that it involves self-sacrifice, sweet in that those who obey are rewarded with acceptance by the whole community. This approval makes up for the suffering of self-sacrifice.

To modern eyes the film begs the question: why would a successful artist, an ambitious woman with resolve and talent, wish to return to this toxic environment? But that is how we look at the film now. At the time it would have been seen differently. Present political developments indicate a return to the 1938 *Heimat*'s traditional values. That film is therefore relevant to understanding the phenomenon of nationalist protectionism, which encourages xenophobia and racism, and once again restricts the role of women in a society where the rules are determined by men, a world which once again turns to the military as a first resort to solve problems. The film is sumptuously mounted, expertly directed and performed and is therefore popular and much loved by people who fondly remember the 'good old days.'

When now in post-Brexit Britain and in President Trump's United States people talk nostalgically about a mythical time when the country was 'great', when we had 'control', when we were not 'bossed about' by others and there weren't so many 'foreigners', it reminds me of an anecdote about my aunt, a Jewish survivor of Auschwitz who continued to live in Germany after the war. In those chaotic early years she found work as a secretary and eventually joined a typing pool with other women, all pure-blooded Aryan Germans. At a coffee break in the early 1960s one of them trilled about how much she had enjoyed the war years, what fun they were. My aunt bit her lip, which must have been difficult for her because she never normally allowed a remark like that to go unchallenged. To me she commented ruefully: 'it depended who you were and on what side.' I learned that what might be pleasant nostalgia for some, for others is a trauma.

What is it about Zarah Leander singing through a filter with moist eyes raised upwards that triggers such sweet nostalgia? Magda wanted and needed to leave an oppressive family situation. But despite the conflict with her father, she yearns to return. The subsequent drama centres on casual bigotry, hypocrisy and the triumph of patriarchy, but the opening song does hint at subversion. Even the lie about the three stars could be a sly comment from the

director. The three roses mentioned in the second verse are a reminder of the Grimm fairytale about separated lovers who become white and red roses growing and twining despite the efforts of parental disapproval. The three palm trees in the third verse recall the Jewish poet Heine's poem set to music by several composers, about a palm tree on a distant foreign shore and a pine tree on a northern crag dreaming about each other. The subtext of the song about stars appears to suggest the opposite of patriotism: that foreign places and homeland have an intimate relationship.

My own nostalgia for the woods, hills and fields of Central Europe, home of my ancestors, is sharpened by awareness of a lost paradise. This disappointment became most acute on my last visit to Thuringia, described in *Face of a Child* and *Eyes and Smiles*. The place had become poisoned with recent history that the country wanted to forget, hide and deny. The woods and fields remain beautiful. Nightingales still sing in the 'Gebüsche.. shrubbery', just as they did for lyric poets and composers. Pushkin's 'tyomniye deyaniya.... dark deeds' lie buried beneath; sinister ghosts haunt this landscape. As the trial of Beate Tschäppe is now revealing in Germany, extreme nationalism, involving violence and murder, is establishing itself again in precisely this region of the country. These facts only make my nostalgia for a paradise lost even more acute. It never had been a paradise.

Edgar Reitz quotes Magda's song about three stars in his own epic film chronicle *Heimat*, as he does numbers from another seminal Zarah Leander film, *Habanera*, which also deals with nostalgia for home. In that earlier film directed by Douglas Sirk for Germany's UFA studios before he quit the country and settled in Hollywood, Leander acts another headstrong independent woman who liberates herself from an oppressive parental straitjacket, and commits a cardinal sin against nationalism by marrying a foreigner, He turns out to be cruel and despotic. The marriage falls apart: confirming prejudice that miscegenation only ends in disaster. She dreams of home and eventually returns, chastened and 'realizing where her true

feelings of love lie'. However the great director Sirk subverts the appeal to patriotism. As the title of the film suggests, the foreigner can be seductive and in the final frames of the film Sirk shows Leander on the ship returning to her homeland, not joyously facing her pure-white future, but gazing back regretfully at the foreign country where she married and had a child. The seductive strains of the Habanera remind her and the audience of its irresistible charm. There happens to be a similar piece of subversion in Carl Froehlich's *Heimat* also, though in a way that may well have been unintentional as I will show later. Never underestimate the skill of a good director. Sirk went further and darker in perhaps the least glamorous film Zarah Leander ever made before he left Germany. In *Zu Neuen Ufern, To New Shores*, he takes the beloved Third Reich singer to a penal colony in Australia, a place from which she cannot return home. Shorn of her magnificent gowns she is taking the rap for her lover's crime, following him to the other side of the world, enduring punishment in the self-sacrificing manner Leander made her own, her tragic mask of a face set against fate. In this film her lover turns out to be an opportunistic egotist. The film ends with her rejection of him and perhaps beginning a new life in the outback with a native white Australian, not an aborigine of course: this kind of native would have been taboo in a Third Reich film, not only despised but invisible. Sirk's film is bleak in its analysis of colonialism, depicting the far reaches of empire as dumping grounds for criminals, people escaping justice and taking any opportunity to further ambition and satisfy material greed. Instead of nostalgia the morally murky Australian setting makes a bitter observation about male duplicity, cowardice and unearned patriarchy that inflicts suffering on women who are expected to obey and endure.

Edgar Reitz in his epic *Heimat* quotes again from the earlier *Heimat* in the form of the celebrated tenor Leo Slezak, who takes a sadly non-singing role in Carl Froehlich's film. In Reitz's *Heimat* the working class Simon family are enjoying a picnic on the hills in the Hunsrück region of Western Germany, and the technically gifted eldest son has rigged up an

aerial on a high ruin so they can listen to a radio broadcast, which happens to be the tenor performing a Schubert song.

Carl Froehlich's *Heimat* pivots around the relationship and power struggle between father and daughter. The emotional tie is unquestioned, however bitter the conflict. The 19<sup>th</sup> century, at the height of Prussian dominance before its collapse in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, witnessed growth of aggressive nationalism allied to capitalism and socialism simultaneously. The theme of father daughter relationships became central in the two major operatic composers of the period. Verdi and Wagner, both actively involved in nationalist revolutionary politics, focused on this theme with their most inspirational compositions. This is not co-incidental. Whereas *Verdi's Rigoletto* unwittingly destroys his daughter by being over-protective, in *Aida*, an opera about the toxic alliance of politics and religion, the plot pivots on the conflict of loyalty which the father inflicts on his daughter, leading to her self-sacrifice. In Wagner's *Ring Cycle* the plot again hinges on a daughter's disobedience to her father: more about that later, because this theme touches not only on a challenge to corrupt patriarchy but also the longing for redemption at the cost of apocalypse.

In the 1938 *Heimat* there are several patriarchs Zarah Leander's Magda must deal with. On the one side is the banker father of her daughter who uses blackmail to access the wealth she earned from being a star singer. His unreasonable demand to send their child abroad, to be kept secret, is what gives her the courage to resist, whatever the cost. She part solves that dilemma by giving all of her wealth to her sister. On another side the church organist and conductor who had encouraged her singing career offer to be the 'good' father who understands her ambition, fosters it and is prepared to take care of her and the child. However her real father, Colonel von Schwartze, will triumph, because the film declares emphatically that militarism is the unquestioned over-riding authority. Even when there is forgiveness, it is the father who alone can give it, and at a price which the daughter must pay. She must be

obedient again. The film attempts to sugar the pill with extracts of organ music, Gluck's *Orfeo* and Bach's *St Mathew Passion*. Satisfied with the resolution, the father is even prepared to accept her illegitimate child. Zarah Leander's face in the closing moments as she joins in the Passion Chorale turns into her trademark mask of tragic stoicism. She relinquishes independence and ambition and must accept her future as an obedient daughter.

The film is in many details anachronistic, but purposely so, because the message is clear: be obedient to the Reich and put up with self-sacrifice, just as they used to do in the 'good old days'. There are also a number of racist comments in the script that go unchallenged, because at that time they would have been considered acceptable. So when Magda returns to her hometown under the pseudonym of an international star, a singer who made her career in America, the welcoming committee are relieved she is a white woman and not a 'Negerin'. She faces disapproval from the strait-laced wives and mothers for being an independent woman, confident in her looks and appeal, but faces them down with the risqué song about women becoming beautiful only through love. While the women disapprove the men exchange lewd comments. Hypocrisy is endemic in this kind of society, but the film shows it also to be essential: cementing social relations between the sexes.

As the film proceeds Zarah Leander's costumes become more elaborate and restricting. The men too are seen to be hemmed in by tight-fitting uniforms. Their emotions are expressed in red-faced bluster. The women retreat into knowing their place and poisonous gossip. The film depicts this as amusing, not making any subversive point. The music takes an ever more important part, as words cease to have a purpose once the battle lines have been drawn up and order restored with patriarchy triumphant and uppity women sacrificially subservient. Music has a specific role in this drama. While celebrating German culture it also becomes repressive, a tool of authority. When Magda first enters the church on her return the organ is at full throttle, on the one hand gloriously impressive, the way organs should sound in a grand

building, but also intimidating. Magda the internationally celebrated singer looks diminished. Culture as the expression of nationalist fervour can be witnessed in documentary film footage of the Nazi elite attending concerts of Beethoven's symphonies, congratulating the conductor and giving the Hitler salute. The words of the 9<sup>th</sup> Symphony about 'all men will be brothers' are interpreted by the elite as 'only all men of the same nation, ethnic group, colour and orientation will be brothers'. In the same manner the words of the *St Mathew Passion* arias become a directive to 'put up, know your place, and take the self-sacrifice as part of the journey towards patriotism; love of nation trumps personal desire.' Culture as a tool of authoritarianism existed not only in fascist states but under socialist tyrannies also. Attending concerts and performances became a duty as I witnessed in the bored faces of audiences attending concerts in Prague under Communism. The authorities would also determine what music could be played. At times of crisis, such as the president's death, the Soviet Union media would play Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* on a perpetual loop, so people quickly came to realize something serious had happened that the politburo were going to spin-doctor for the masses.

In Carl Froehlich's *Heimat* music can also be stopped. When the sister begins to play a piece that reminds her father of his daughter, he comes behind her, shuts the lid firmly, and locks it.

This ambivalent attitude to culture is reflected in Magda's relationship with her father: 'Ich bin bange nach Ihm, bange vor Ihm... I am longing for him, afraid of him.' 'Bang' means both longing and fear in German, a significant piece of semantics.

To clarify the subservient role of art in this kind of repressive society beloved of nationalists the sister declares: 'Life takes precedence over art. It is not important what happens to us women. It is father who is the priority.'

The father emphasises this point at the dramatic climax of the film by dragging wayward Magda into his study, locking the doors and taking two pistols from his desk drawer, then giving her an ultimatum: to obey him and for the sake of family honour marry the blackmailing banker, or both commit suicide. Fortunately the banker has already shot himself over another misdemeanour, embezzling bank funds, so there is no need for such a drastic resolution. His daughter will stay at home to serve her father, and be allowed to sing the Bach St Mathew Passion, pointedly the aria: 'Buss und Reu...penance and regret.'

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Wagner is well known to have been the Hitler's favoured composer, although it is also a fact that very few of the Third Reich leadership actually enjoyed sitting through long hours of his epic operas. Wagner's association with right-wing authoritarianism, let alone fascism, is a moot point for discussion, but from his own political history he would have supported more socialist libertarian systems of government. His nationalist principles were more to do with unifying Germany and dissolving the numerous autocratic princely states whose corruption and rivalries weakened the country in comparison to the United Kingdom and France.

Although Wagner's vitriolic anti-Semitism can never be ignored, his music is open to much wider interpretation. His nostalgia for a golden age is tempered by awareness of how that never existed, how systems of government and social traditions are easily corrupted. His focus on changing the world for the better, specifically in his final works for the stage, the *Ring Cycle* and *Parsifal*, offer insights into how power works, its fallibility and vulnerability and most strikingly and hopefully the role of women in initiating change. In the *Ring Cycle* a woman triumphs but at the same time takes it on herself to instigate apocalypse, in an act of redemption destroying the whole world, not only on the earth but also its belief systems, in order to make way for a better purer society. She knows the order of Gods must also perish: 'Ruhe, Ruhe O Gott... Be at peace, be at peace, O God.' She returns nature to its pristine

order before human beings, dwarfs, giants and gods corrupted it with greed and bloodshed. However this purity after destruction is of a world without human kind.

Wagner's Brunnhilde is an archetype of Teutonic womanhood: fearless, combative and also self-sacrificing. In Fritz Lang's film of the medieval *Nibelung Epic*, the same legend from which Wagner had taken some of his chief characters but altering the narrative for his own purposes, Brunnhilde is an independent woman who challenges the hero Siegfried in single combat. He cheats by wearing a helmet that makes him invisible, and only that way can he vanquish her. She then takes a minor part in the story. The main arc of the narrative focuses on another woman, Kriemhilde, who becomes Siegfried's wife and exacts a terrible revenge on the people who kill him. Josef Goebbels the Third Reich's minister for culture and propaganda objected to Fritz Lang's film because the actor playing Brunnhilde, viewed by the Third Reich as a paragon of Aryan womanhood, was Jewish. Wagner relegated Kriemhilde to the less important character of Gutrune, allowing Brunnhilde in the final scene to take on the Gods and the world which she ignites, causing the home of the Gods in the sky to burn up. This is then followed by a flood which destroys the world below.

Today extreme radicalism yearns for a similarly apocalyptic resolution, but one in which a specific group is allowed to dominate and survive. Wagner could not have imagined the excesses of Islamic fundamentalism nor the mechanics and outcomes of excessive nationalism. The *Götterdämmerung* of two world wars was supposed to lead to a permanent rejection of such ideology. However the longing for the security of nationhood and nostalgia for patriarchal order is emerging again.

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What does a purified nationalist utopia look like? We already know the example of an extremist theocracy like the Islamic Caliphate, in which the whole world is forced by violent

means to adhere to a strict definition of Islam. This is claimed to be based on the word of the Prophet Mohammed. In practise, from what we witness, it is a theology unlike anything the Prophet actually spoke about in the Koran. It is a state in which women are totally subservient, and punishment for any disobedience, however minor, is extreme. There is nothing nostalgic about this terrorist utopia, except a longing for self-sacrifice and annihilation: a cult of death.

We have the evidence of the Third Reich to show us what nationalist utopia can become on an apparently more benign and seductive model, at least to those voting for it, which present day nationalists are also offering. The example provided by Carl Froehlich's *Heimat* in its acceptance of militarism and nationalist bigotry does already hint at the consequences that were world war and the holocaust. The film was not to know these consequences, but its nostalgic longing for a militaristic patriarchy and acceptance of that order prepares the way for them.

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Fifteen years after the defeat of the Nazis, I travelled around Germany. Everywhere I encountered nostalgia for the past and appreciation for what the Third Reich had done for the German people. Europe knew about the motorway network that made driving between the main cities easy. Few shared my agreeable experience of German youth hostels on which the Third Reich had spared no effort or money. No one I met mentioned defeat or the holocaust. Rose-tinted memories seduced me, an impressionable fifteen year-old, and I still feel nostalgic for those evenings spent in the youth hostels singing along with the young people in rousing folk and Hitler Youth songs about blood red skies and victory. At one hostel the manager woke us up with a gentle guitar solo that everyone applauded. This tradition long predated the Nazis and meant to encourage young people to socialize, engage in useful

communal activities like helping with the harvest, and on long walks over several days to become familiar with the countryside, its culture and history. The movement, quite separate from scouts and girl guides which had a political purpose of enforcing discipline and practical skills, was a branch of socialism focused on raising a new generation healthy in body, mind and spirit, freethinking and libertarian. It became known all over Europe as Wandervogel... birds of passage. 'I like to go a wandering' translated from the German, would be sung when British youngsters went striding in groups over the Yorkshire Dales or the Lake District. In Germany nationalists took over the movement, which had always been intended to be international and a way of encouraging young people from all nations to get to know each other, and turned it into a training ground for patriots prepared to fight for the homeland. Defeat lent this movement in Germany a melancholy that came from a realization that it had been tainted by politics. It lost its freshness, openness and innocence. The young people I met and came to know and love understandably did not want to give up the 'wandering' and singing in the evenings, the relationships and affairs of every kind that blossomed, the sports events and above all the camaraderie. While working in Israeli Kibbutzim in my late teens I took part in similar events organized for young people, singing and circle dancing to steps taken from European folk traditions, particularly the Yugoslavian 'kolo'. The songs were all about 'Eretz Israel – nation of Israel' patriotism and group solidarity. Those who didn't join in would be ostracised. I missed the Wandervogel innocence, and a sense of young people collaborating on community projects, regardless of faith, nationality and politics, the way I used to on teenage summer holidays in France and Germany, organized by socially minded churches and councils, building for instance children's playgrounds and leisure spaces in towns being rebuilt from the ruins of war.

Now in the days of social media focused on individualism, finding solidarity in shared projects no longer happens as a matter of tradition.

This group dancing has not disappeared completely. I came across it in Kosovo on a day celebrating its independence from Serbia. At one time Yugoslavia considered itself a single nation, different ethnicities and faiths living together. The people shared a diverse culture. Nationalism sprung out of the post-Communist period and led to division and separation. But on that day of celebration a group of young people joined hands in the traditional 'kolo' the dance that used to be familiar from the Alps of Slovenia, all the way down the coast of the Adriatic to Macedonia and across to Bulgaria and Romania, a dance that nationalists turned into recruiting entertainment. A young woman began to teach a group of teenagers the complicated steps, arms over each others' shoulders, and the group tentatively began forming a long line that offered to become a circle. Tears prickled in my eyes at the memories of my youthful sojourn in Germany, at the significance of this kind of dance, shorn of any aggressive political message, just for the delight of communal movement and singing.

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Jan Kadar's *The Shop on the High Street* shows how a community of a typical provincial town anywhere in the world can easily and almost imperceptibly be taken over by intolerance and brutality so that normal people become complicit in atrocities. The story is all the more gruelling for its recreation of ordinary life: a story without heroics. Jan Kadar was a Jew who survived concentration camps and lost family in the holocaust. His sympathy for Tono, the non-Jewish carpenter and good-natured everyman with whom we can all identify, is therefore all the more telling. The ending of the film follows the harrowing climax to the film and is unexpectedly uplifting, a Utopia imagined in extremis. Tono has unwittingly killed Rozalia the elderly Jewish shopkeeper while trying to hide her from the fascist militia intent on transporting her to a death camp. In despair at this dreadful outcome he hangs himself. He kicks away the chair on which he stands, and at that moment the door of the shop, which has become a prison and torture chamber, opens into sunlight. Rozalia and Tono rise from the

dead as their younger selves and float out into the square where a band is playing and the smiling couple dance into the distance. The poignancy of this dream is almost as unbearable as the pain that preceded it, because we know that this is the only way any of us in such a mortal dilemma can survive: holding onto that hope of what life could be. The brutality of life as experienced then and is about to return would be unbearable without this hope.

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## AMMI

In 1920s Berlin my father and his sister grew up in a relatively prosperous Jewish house on Wannsee. Before the Nazis came to power their father Ludwig ran a successful chain of cinemas. The Third Reich then took his businesses away. While rich the children were cared for by a nanny, a non-Jewish German girl called Ammi, daughter of an unemployed labourer.

The family had to move into a cramped inner-city flat. Ammi insisted on continuing to help out, refusing pay. Because my grandparents had treated her well she felt part of the family.

When life became dangerous for Jews in Berlin, and only my father found refuge in the UK, Ammi again insisted on helping, offering to hide them in her flat. At that time this was highly dangerous. Jew-helpers were punished as harshly as those they were protecting. My grandparents refused to put her in such danger, and absolutely refused her offer. They were eventually taken to Auschwitz and killed. When my aunt, who managed to survive Auschwitz, returned to Berlin, Ammi cared for her.

I met Ammi on an occasion when she visited my aunt many years later and I happened to be there. The serenity of this daughter of an unemployed labourer's kindly and wise countenance I associate with Gwen Abbott and those Lancashire matriarchs: a look of unruffled candour. Thinking about her name and it's derivation I realize Ammi means a little soul.