

# THE LADY WITH THE ERMINE

## Art and Nationalism

A painting hangs on an otherwise bare wall in a large dark room. A spotlight illuminates the subject of the painting: a young woman who holds and strokes a pet rodent while looking with some apprehension to her left. A chair faces the painting. There sits a stocky middle-aged man in a smart suit. He spends hours gazing at the woman who never looks back at him. The man regularly arises and leaves the dark room to administer genocide. The woman is fixed for eternity in that pose along with the rodent which can also never escape the stroke of her slender fingers. Both creatures are permanently held in the moment of wanting to leave.

Leonardo Da Vinci's *Lady with the Ermine* is a portrait of his patron Ludovico Sforza's teenage mistress. Iconic works of art are open to an infinite number of interpretations. Mine focuses on the painting's theme of beauty idealised, defined and owned. This is a woman of spirit as determined not to be controlled as the feral creature she is tenderly caressing. The young woman has her head turned away from our gaze. Most portraits look at us for the reason that sitters are facing the artist. Her eyes are glancing elsewhere, implying a desire to escape, as does the cute rodent in her arms. The perfection of her flawless beauty is chained with a choking necklace and two narrow headbands that keep her hair plastered down. The spirited nature of the young woman is a challenge alluring to men who want to snare, possess and control her. The patron would have appreciated this portrait of his mistress. It establishes the fact that she belonged to him, the prize of her high carat beauty substantiation of a despot's supreme authority. Leonardo paints her against a background of total darkness that hides any clue where she might be sitting. She looks sideways towards the light illuminating

her features. Is she startled by what we cannot see? Is that why she wants to leave the sitting and be elsewhere?

Patronage is ownership. Artists depend on patrons for career, and it is significant that Leonardo Da Vinci considered himself a designer and engineer above being a painter. He intended to make a living from his technical practical skills. A man of exceptional intelligence and endlessly inquiring mind Leonardo knew where his priorities lay. Despite his rare talent as a painter, he did not depend on art to pay the bills. Could this have been the side of his creative imagination he insisted on keeping free from pecuniary considerations? The paintings express a personal vision, beauty that shows a disturbing gender-fluid ambiguity unspoil by the need to please. The patron controls the artist; the artist controls the subject who is possessed by the patron. Art is turned into matter of monetary value. Patrons now and in the past tend to be wealthy and influential. These owners regulate art and determine its subject and style. The relationship between art and owner is about control. Occasionally successful and esteemed artists take risks. Velasquez turned the tables on his royal patrons in *Las Maninas*: a celebrated painting which influenced future generations of artists. The artist depicts himself in the act of painting alongside family members, servants and pets. This diverse group takes precedence over the main focus of the commission, the power couple who can dimly be seen reflected in a distant mirror. It is a spectacular work of art that defies expectation and the accepted traditions of royal portraiture. All the figures are caught in mid-movement, like a snap shot, an apparently unrehearsed tableau. Most striking are the maid and the grazioso, the dwarf. The maid attending to the princess looks shy at being the subject of a portrait. The grazioso challenges with a direct stare, as though about to give one of the Fool's satirical gibes to King Lear. He is of course not only looking at the King and Queen, but straight at us. As John Berger memorably observed in his celebrated provocative and influential perspective on how we look at images, *Ways of Seeing*, such paintings pose

challenging questions not only about power relationships, but the purpose of art itself. In his book and TV series Berger takes art out of its elite and mostly affluent sphere controlled and interpreted by chosen experts, in order to help everyone understand art's political and social context as well as its aesthetic and spiritual qualities. Da Vinci's *Lady with the Ermine* invites similar consideration with subtle psychological insight that compels us to draw our own conclusions about the woman's situation. We can appreciate an ideal of beauty while considering the matter of who is defining, deciding and owning it. This legislating of beauty is about control.

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'Take control' has become the banner headline for nationalist movements. It memorably swayed the Brexit debate. The Teutonic accents of the Labour MP Gisela Stewart who helped lead the debate to success lent an extra chill to the words 'take control', raising memories of the not so distant past when the words used in Germany led to catastrophic lethal consequences on a global scale. Painting and music in particular occupy an important space in the battleground of totalitarian, despotic and nationalist regimes regulating what kind of art is acceptable and what should be forbidden. However, even banned degenerate art despised by the nationalists in Germany had its value and could be sold abroad to raise funds for the government. The profits from confiscated paintings that had once belonged to communities being forced to flee or sent to die in concentrations camps paid for bombs to drop on the enemy. 'Take control' means that the price of failure to meet the demands of those in control can be punishment or death. The Soviet composer Dmitri Shostakovich kept a suitcase packed in readiness for that knock on the door which meant exile and incarceration in a Siberian gulag which he never expected to survive. Those who control art own it. Not even their artists are free.

Leonardo depicts his patron's mistress with a perfection that satisfied the owner. The artist also manages to portray her situation and let on even more than the owner probably realized. On the one hand there is sensuality in her expression and gesture. The lips are ready to comply with what is expected of them. The fingers know how to touch and arouse. The eyes indicate curiosity and intelligence with a hint of independence, so seductive to someone who aims to be her master. However, neither the sublimely beautiful young woman nor the exquisitely painted ermine are free.

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Philippe Sands' *East West Street*, an indispensable history of the judicial process around the concepts of genocide and crimes against humanity, includes a chapter devoted to Hans Frank, the Governor General of Nazi-occupied Poland and those parts of Eastern Europe controlled by the Third Reich. He administered the Holocaust. Philippe Sands' portrait of this significant figure in the Nazi hierarchy illuminates the way in which the bonds between culture and ideology create a lethally toxic politics. Hans Frank represented German high culture to a degree not shared by most other Nazi leaders, rabble rousers and street thugs whose tastes in art were not so sophisticated. Hermann Goering the Reich's Marshall famously declared: 'When I hear the word culture I reach for my gun!' Joseph Goebbels, the Minister for Propaganda reckoned himself to be cultured and expert in the arts when in fact his interests focused on light entertainment and were ideologically driven: a thug in culture uniform. Hitler the Reich's Führer famously worshipped Wagner: an irony because the composer in his time represented the shocking avant-garde whereas Hitler's cultural likes tended to be conservative. The substance of Wagner's revolutionary art interested Hitler less than the mythology of the composer's music dramas that are ideologically opaque but whose potent expressiveness leaves them open to a variety of tendentious interpretation. On the one hand George Bernard Shaw identified socialist thinking in the figure of Siegfried, a working

class hero exploited by business, and on the other hand Adolf Hitler saw the embodiment of Aryan nationalism. Hans Frank expressed intense pride in his white 'Aryan' German nationalist heritage and European culture. Taking advantage of his unassailable position as the Führer's lawyer elevated to being Governor General of Eastern Europe he seized priceless works of art, including Leonardo de Vinci's *Lady with an Ermine*. He hung this booty in different homes not so much out of greed for acquisition but because he adored them. He did not call such behaviour 'stealing' but 'stewarding'. With the arrogance of a self-proclaimed super-race, a conceit still shared by former European colonial powers which once conquered many countries with awe-inspiring civilizations, taking what they wanted, and to enhance their social status furnishing museums back home with spoils they continue to claim they are 'stewarding', he claimed an elite appreciation of great art which bestowed rights of ownership. A classical music enthusiast he played the piano with a sensitive touch according to experts including Richard Strauss who composed a song in his honour. One of the chief architects of the Holocaust, the one who took responsibility for carrying it out, Hans Frank enjoyed listening to Bach's *St Mathew Passion*. This towering Western musical monument to suffering, guilt, forgiveness and redemption also meant a great deal to Hersch Lauterpacht, the Jewish lawyer and a judge on the United Nations International Law Commission who would successfully help the prosecutors at Nuremburg bring a case of 'crimes against humanity' against Hans Frank and other leading Nazis. They were found guilty. This judgement at Nuremburg would be the first example of punishment being meted out to national leaders compelled to face justice for 'crimes against humanity' in an international court. Not only Bach linked the governor general and the lawyer, but also the grim fact that Hans Frank turned out to be directly responsible for the murder of most of Lauterpacht's immediate family in the region of L'viv, now in the Ukraine, then the administrative centre of Hans Frank's brief in Eastern Europe during the war.

While artists and musicians were proud to consider Hans Frank a friend, he wrote extensively and contemptuously about Jews whom he judged to be a race of people ripe for extermination. He considered it a sacred duty to purify the human race of this human pestilence. Phillippe Sands describes how at the end of the war, after the defeat of the Third Reich when its surviving leaders were summoned to judgement at the war crimes tribunal in Nuremberg with its focus on dismantling the racist master-race ideology, Hans Frank briefly broke down. After his arrest he tried to commit suicide. During interrogations before the Nuremberg trials, he wept. At the start of the proceedings he spoke and appeared to accept responsibility for what he considered a crime that he claimed Germany would need a ‘thousand years to repent’. The other Nazis were either self-serving, like Albert Speer who cannily turned himself into a victim innocently seduced by an evil ideology and so managed to escape execution despite having taken advantage of his high position to exploit slave labour on an industrial scale. Others remained loyal to Nazi ideology, like Goering who contemptuously mocked the trial and then successfully committed suicide to avoid the humiliation of execution. Hans Frank, having at first acknowledged the enormity of the crime for which he initially accepted responsibility, changed his mind at the end of the trial and pleaded innocence. His co-defendants did not consider their actions a crime and although expressing distaste for the evidence screened in the courtroom to remind them of the horrific consequences of their ideology, they were mainly upset by the humiliation of defeat and keen to assert they took no direct part in atrocities. At the end of *Night and Fog* one of the first significant documentaries about the Holocaust and made in the second decade after the event by the French film director Alain Resnais, one by one criminals stand up to declare their innocence. The final question posed by the director is simply: ‘Who then is guilty?’

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The Nuremberg Trials focused on punishing political leaders, the main perpetrators of crimes, and those who ordered them to be carried out. Artists who accommodated themselves to the ideology, mostly for reasons of opportunism, survival and ambition were not punished so severely. The conductor Herbert von Karajan, a card carrying member of the Nazi party, happily admitted that he would have done anything to secure his career. Others like the singer Elizabeth Schwarzkopf refused to talk about the matter. Film makers, actors and other musicians suffered the indignity of 'de-Nazification', which meant a hiatus in their work that lasted just a few years, but on the whole they remained unapologetic, and with few exceptions shrugged off the process as being 'victor's revenge'. These people only felt aggrieved that working for the Nazi regime adversely affected their future careers. Some continued to look back with unashamed nostalgia to a time when they were given lavish funding and support by a regime that saw the arts as an important tool of propaganda and spared no expense.

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In the two decades after the Second World War the connection between high culture and depraved brutality embodied by Germany during the Third Reich made people suspicious of 'high art'. It became associated with an arrogant master-race syndrome: a particular form of traditional culture untainted by liberal cutting edge experimentation used as confirmation of superiority. The present term of abuse, 'liberal elite', resurrects these suspicions. Those two words reject the provocative unfettered imagination and free thinking which living and past great art encourages and fosters. The particularly malign form of fascism with its attack on liberalism and practised by the Germans in the Third Reich resonates again with the anti-elitism of populists today: witness the attacks on first of all the 'fake news' free press, not owned by billionaire power brokers, then on the independent judiciary and once that has been made into an arm of dictatorship, dismantling the democratic processes of government while

claiming to carry out the will of the people. Culture control inevitably follows, as the arts challenge this populist ideology. Witness the decade following the First World War in a defeated and punished Germany before National Socialism seized control. Despite a ruined economy those years witnessed a flourishing of all the arts whose revolutionary zeal and visceral power gripped, provoked and inspired artists the world over. Pain and despair at the political and social chaos fed the theatre of Berthold Brecht. As with all the arts, style broke with past conventions. Far from setting out to ‘entertain’ and please audiences, the dramatist’s Entfremdungs distancing effect had the intention of making people uncomfortable. They were compelled to think as well as feel. The result had the effect of upsetting audiences in the manner of Ancient Greek tragedy. In Brecht’s *Mother Courage* the depredations of the Thirty Years War over three hundred years earlier reflected the post-War conditions in Germany, with emphasis on moral breakdown epitomised in the shocking moment when a mother finds herself having to betray her own son. This is the substance of tragedy which triggers a deep emotional response, a trauma of recognition. Similarly the twelve tone music of Schoenberg rejected the comforting musical language of late Romanticism and opened the imagination for generations of composers to come. *Mother Courage* is shockingly moving because of rather than in spite of the Entfremdungs effect, as is Berg’s opera *Wozzeck*, with its un-ingratiating sound world to ears unfamiliar with the new system of composition, and which also finds a story from a past age only too painfully reflecting the new situation in Germany. Schoenberg had made his name composing works in the post-Wagnerian vein such as the tone poem *Verklaerte Nacht, Transfigured Night*. When people later complained to him that they missed the passion of this potent example of late-romanticism and asked ‘Why did you stop writing like this?’ he sighed and answered: ‘But I never stopped,’ implying that his new music was as passionate as anything he had ever written. A century later we can hear that. In the same way after the Second World War the

revolutionary Darmstadt School of German composers again shut the door on tradition and assaulted the ears of audiences who did not know what to expect and preferred the Classical repertoire; but now we can listen to Boulez, a revered light of this new school, and hear sounds which used to perplex and grate the uncomprehending ears of most concert goers as delicate, refined and beautiful.

The conservative tastes of totalitarian governments, whether under fascism or Stalinist Russia, ignored rather than banned the new music, and in Germany persecuted the composers for their race rather than their music. Music can challenge politics. Shostakovich and Prokofiev with their powerful musical personalities came to upset those in command who thought they knew best what music and art the country needed. Stalin famously came to reject Prokofiev, even though the composer had returned from his sojourn in the West to take advantage of the finance given to the arts in support of the revolution and readily accepted commissions that extolled the regime. When Hitler heard the First Symphony, written in tribute to Haydn, he scoffed: 'Even a blind hen sometimes finds a grain!' On the whole music and musicians adapt to circumstances or cultivate territory that does not challenge other spheres of activity. Audiences shouted and fought at the premiere of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, well before the outbreak of the First World War, and started a tradition of people leaving their seats and concert halls in protest at music they didn't care for. However one has to go back to the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century to find cases of music like Verdi's *I Lombardi*, rousing audiences to such frenzy, this time of appreciation, that they rushed out onto the streets and started revolution.

Word and image are a different matter. Music, however avant garde, has an independent gypsy spirit that soars above politics and society. It needs interpreters like Daniel Barenboim to open ears of audiences to its challenges and wider significance: conducting a German orchestra in the music of an apparently archetypal Englishman Elgar, misinterpreted as

quintessentially patriotic and insularly British to reveal the composer's European credentials at the time of Brexit which continues to fuel British nationalist xenophobia, and persuading an Israeli orchestra to perform Wagner in Tel Aviv despite the fury of Holocaust survivors in the audience. This pointed relationship between music, society and politics requires particular advocates who are thin on the ground.

There is a marked difference in the artistic revolutions after the First and Second World Wars. The first revolution was intended to shake up society and make the world and the human race wake up to the consequences of the political and social cataclysms war brought about. Artists could not help but be aware of social injustice that fuelled the war machine with its subsequent cost of millions of lives. They let the influence of Marx and Freud inspire and nourish their creativity. However the madness and physical as well as human destruction of the Second World War inhibited idealism because the consequences were if anything more apocalyptic. Artists could only see madness. A scene from one of the most powerful films about the war, *Ivan's Childhood* by Andrei Tarkovsky points the camera at an old man demented by the scorched earth policy of the retreating German army, stroking a hen in his arms. Yefrem Klimov in his even more disturbing war film *Come and See*, forces us to look at a mass of human bodies piled against the wall of a farmhouse. Neither director makes any comment. This is war and this is what the world and the human race have come to. The rest is survival.

Whereas music on the whole developed independently of ideologies, changes of style in the visual arts after the First World War delivered a punch in the eye to traditionalists, because paintings and sculptures that go beyond pleasing patrons deal with life in a manner that cannot be misinterpreted or ignored. Otto Dix painted the moral, political and social squalor of post-First World War Germany without flinching from depicting the ugliness of bodies and faces distorted by injury, trauma and self-disgust. The female sculptor Kathe Kollwitz

focused on urban and rural poverty while managing to infuse her figures with sympathy and grief. Such depth of emotion, anger and satire fused into a flourishing of the arts so potent with daring and progressive experimentalism that fascism in the second decade following the war reacted with violence. Writers, playwrights, composers and painters were pilloried, a number murdered, others hounded and forced to emigrate. The visual arts suffered particular humiliation in a public exhibition mounted by the Nazis to mock the avant-garde: its title Degenerate Art. Hitler may have been an admirer of Richard Wagner's epic music dramas but the majority the Third Reich officials tended to be bored by long nights at the opera, preferring light entertainment including popular stars like Zarah Leander and Kristina Söderbaum, who both portrayed the fascist ideal of womanhood, obedient but strong, motherly but also virginal, seductive, suffering and victimized, dependent and dependable because these women needed to acknowledge the superiority of the men who governed their lives. While venerating Wagner for his celebration of German art in *The Mastersingers* and the Teutonic mythology that could be interpreted as racist in the *Ring Cycle*, Hitler mostly enjoyed the operettas of Lehar, particularly *The Land of Smiles*. The racial undercurrents of this operetta were not intended politically by Lehar. The Chinese male lead would be made famous by Lehar's favourite tenor, the Jewish Richard Tauber. The female lead may have fallen for the foreigner who serenades her with *Dein Ist Mein Ganzes Herz*, known in English as *You Are My Heart's Delight*, but tellingly by the end of the operetta she is unhappy in an alien environment and begs to be allowed to return home to her own kind. This theme played itself out in the leading films of the period, including *Heimat* and *Habanera* both starring Zarah Leander, in which career abroad in the first and marriage to a foreigner in the second are portrayed as leading to unhappiness and eventual return to beloved homeland. German nationalists interpreted these outcomes as confirmation of their prejudices, just as they were

able to find evidence of Wagner's anti-Semitism in operas where such expressions are more veiled than overt.

The combination of cultured sophistication and extreme malignity in a person like Hans Frank shocked people at the time and continues to challenge our understanding of the part played by good and evil in human nature. What links art with an ideology which demonises any different race of people as a pollutant of white Europeans and their perceived superior culture? The fact that Jews happen to be among the finest interpreters and also practitioners of this culture only infuriates those who consider these people to be vermin. This resentment led to book burnings, sackings, persecution and finally mass murder at a time when Europe, especially Germany, considered itself to be the world's premier civilization. The bonfire of writers included the work of the Jewish Heinrich Heine, one of Germany's most admired poets, who a century earlier had only too accurately prophesied that burning of books leads to burning of people. Incidentally, when Wagner learned about a synagogue destroyed by fire with the congregation trapped inside, his friends overheard him observing in a spine-chillingly prescient manner that this might be a good way of 'solving the Jewish problem'. However he entrusted the premier of his final opera *Parsifal*, in which themes of purification have been controversially interpreted as being racist, to Hermann Levy, a Jewish conductor. Wagner did joke about converting Levy to Christianity, offensive enough but unrelated to the pseudo-scientific racism that would soon poison political ideology with theories about preserving the purity of Aryan blood. Martin Luther had several centuries earlier already considered that conversion would not and could not remove the taint of Jewishness. So, despite conversion the music of Felix Mendelssohn, who composed evocative and perennially popular settings of Christian hymns including *O for the Wings of a Dove*, and of Gustav Mahler creator of the monumental Resurrection and 8<sup>th</sup> Symphonies was banned and thrown on the bonfire of cultural purification.

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## BEAUTY

Political correctness has largely inhibited bigotry and legislated against its free expression in public discourse. Present nationalist trends in Europe and the United States are once again liberating it as a legitimate topic for discussion. What role does art play in the process of demonising the foreigner, the ‘vermin’ refugees and migrants, those from other continents with a different skin colour, and the eternally wandering Jew, the citizen of the world who has been described recently by our British prime minister as being a ‘citizen of nowhere’? Art examines the truth about our lives and experiences. The visual arts have also traditionally presented us with ideals of beauty.

Leonardo de Vinci’s *Lady with an Ermine* is the most famous painting seized by Hans Frank and the one he wanted to keep above all others because she represented an ideal. Frank even tried to persuade his son to style his hair in the same way. The contrast between the lady’s refined beauty and a nationalist caricature of the alien foreigner such as a coarse-featured Jew with exaggerated fleshy hooked nose and drooling hanging lip could not be more extreme, even though the lady is Italian, a dark-haired beauty who could have come from any region around the Mediterranean, including present day Israel, rather than a paragon of Aryan perfection.

Hans Frank represented a culture of colonialism which for several centuries has entitled white Europeans to rule the world and violently subjugate other nations: ‘lesser’ ‘non-white’ races. Those who control empires take possession of what they want, material and human. At the same time colonial masters like Hans Frank and present-day nationalist leaders fiercely believe that the purity of European, largely Christian culture should not be tainted by foreign influence.

At the end of the war, surveying the rubble of defeat, Richard Strauss composed *Metamorphosen*, a lament not for the millions killed but in memory of the beloved opera houses in Dresden and Vienna which had once mounted premieres of his major works and now destroyed by allied bombs lay in ruins. Arturo Toscanini the conductor said of Strauss: ‘As a composer, one hat off; as a man ten hats down’. We can only surmise about Strauss’s attitude to the nationalist regime he worked for, but it is known that he did help Jewish players to flee the country. Musicians continued to respect him. Culture meant more to Strauss than anything that might be happening in the world. For Toscanini, though fanatically dedicated to his art, humanity and justice mattered at least as much. At the height of his fame when the Third Reich seized control he refused to conduct in Germany, rejecting further requests to conduct at the Bayreuth and the Salzburg Festivals where he used to be the star attraction. He adopted Wagner’s granddaughter who fled Germany for publicly attacking Nazi ideology and had therefore put her life in danger. A Jewish conductor, Otto Klemperer, gave one of the most striking interpretations of *Metamorphosen*, in contrast to the piece’s first recording by Herbert von Karajan the ambitious conductor who candidly admitted to being prepared to sell his soul for success. Karajan’s performance is probably close to the composer’s intentions: a lament for the strings only, in marked contrast to the massive orchestral forces he normally used. A theme from Beethoven’s *Eroica* Symphony’s Funeral March appears towards the end of *Metamorphosen* to remind listeners that Strauss considered himself the heir of a great tradition, and to make clear the piece is a lament. However Klemperer pays attention to the title which implies transformation. The characteristic sinuousness of Strauss’s melodies and richness of harmony become vigorous under Klemperer’s baton: green shoots wrap around the ruins and reach up to the light. Klemperer had more reason than Karajan to be despairing, given his forced emigration from the country of his birth, and the tragedy that happened to so many of his Jewish colleagues. Karajan may

have been inhibited by national and personal guilt although it is more likely he shared Strauss's dismay at Germany's defeat and destruction. Klemperer's upbeat and robust interpretation indicates not only stubborn resilience but also a thoughtful approach to a lament which goes beyond tragedy. The strings dynamically twine upwards in an expression of defiance and hope. Aryan Karajan's performance is about sorrow, disappointment and resignation of defeat; Jewish Klemperer's rebuilds. Although known mostly for his unsentimental approach to the classical and romantic repertoire, he made his name championing the avant-garde, notably the political music dramas by Brecht and Weill, arranging as an orchestral suite *The Threepenny Opera* their satire on a society ruled by crime and corruption. Brecht has been mocked by those who want to know why his work for all its success did not prevent the rise of fascism and the Holocaust. The comedian Peter Cook used this criticism to remind people of satire's limited effectiveness. Following the plainness of this perspective European civilization as a whole should come under similar judgement. Klemperer's interpretation of *Metamorphosen* indicates a response to such simplistic criticism. Step by step the world makes progress. Movements of change come and go, trying to improve the human condition and especially the way people behave. Often history shows how it is a case of one step forward and two steps back. When genocide, violence, destruction and annihilation keep repeating, it takes many steps back. At such times Klemperer makes Strauss's music about transformation and resurgence sound like the accompaniment to Martin Luther King's celebrated quote from the 19<sup>th</sup> century Transcendentalist Unitarian American preacher and abolitionist Theodore Parker, who also inspired Abraham Lincoln, describing how 'the arc of the universe is long but it bends towards justice.'

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Muslim survivors in the Balkans dealing with the shock of being systematically ethnically cleansed in the Bosnia War were even more traumatised by the destruction of their heritage

such as the famous bridge that soars high over the River Neretva in Mostar, and another jewel of Ottoman architecture, the Ferhadija Mosque in Banja Luka. These structures had embodied their spiritual home, even for people secularised by the period of communist rule. It surprised me time and gain to hear how after sharing tales of torture, rape and killing of family members the survivors expressed even more grief at the flattening and removal of their cultural monuments. Those still living might eventually come to terms with deaths of relatives and personal trauma, but far harder would be living in a place where the deliberate destruction and attempt to eliminate their culture and heritage had made them feel no longer at home in their own country.

Diasporas carry the culture of homeland with them wherever in the world they settle. Jews take ‘word’ with them in the form of scrolls: the Torah that makes up the first five books of the Old Testament, along with the Talmud which is a repository of laws, advice, sayings and stories that are open to infinite speculation, discussion and interpretation. As Simon Schama points out in his *Story of the Jews*, the nature of the Jewish faith with its notion of a single invisible unknowable but all-encompassing deity, means that tradition and culture can be transported anywhere, not requiring plastic form or specific location, except space to preserve the scrolls. God prepares those who have faith in him for perpetual uprooting and exile. A meaning of the Hebrew name Yahveh, Jehovah, is breath: the breath of life which cannot be seen, is intangible and pervades all existence everywhere. Adam and Eve may be destined to be thrown out of home naked and without possessions time and again, but this breath will never leave them wherever they land up. Such is the unique character of this particular community’s sense of itself.

Other Diasporas, such as Muslims fleeing the Bosnia War, prize artefacts such as musical instruments and traditional clothing. Mirza Basic, who by literally a hair as a boy escaped with his life from Banja Luka, conducts a choir in London specialising in Sevdah, the folk

music of his homeland. During performances he wears a fez and national costume. Flight and the destruction of homes and places of worship mean that such Diasporas can carry only a minimum of belongings with them. While Jews carry the word, other communities choose objects. Aristocrats fleeing the Russian Revolution prioritized family heirlooms. Princess Ludmilla Anghelopoulo, daughter of a general in Imperial Russia and married to a Greek banker, remembers escaping the Bolshevik Revolution as a three year old with her mother carrying bags full of icons through the cornfields of the Ukraine. Muslims fleeing war take a prayer mat with a compass sewn into the fabric so they face the right direction at the allotted times. Returnees from all faiths in the Balkans brought small delicately decorated cups in copper holders, pots for making coffee, and fine glasses for tea, to be ready for guests. Despite homes destroyed by bombs and shells, roofs and the glass in windows missing, and the surrounding land made deadly dangerous by mines, they could still share with visitors and make them welcome, generosity as characteristic of the Balkan people as their propensity to suddenly take up arms against each other at regular intervals in their history. However these returnees are a minority, the majority remaining in the foreign countries to which they fled, and remembering homeland with wistful nostalgia. A restaurant in Cologne decorates its walls with paintings of traditional scenes from Bosnia at a time before the war, a Bosnia that no longer exists. The owners are however unwilling to identify themselves as a particular community. For them the insistence on naming what group they might represent is the worst insult.

While preserving traditions uprooted from the soil of origin, refugee communities come to absorb the culture they pick up from their hosts, contributing to, and also enriching it; Jews in particular, because as the myth of the eternally Wandering Jew testifies, for almost two millennia they had no country to permanently call their own. Cultural assimilation in whatever country accepted them became second nature, even with constant awareness of

inevitable expulsion. As Simon Schama pithily states, Jews are a suitcase people. They are forever ready for the next pogrom as their hosts in recurring bouts of nationalist racist fervour evict them from their new homes which turn out to have been only temporary, on loan at the whim of the host country. A place to live doesn't necessarily mean security. A Kibbutznik once explained to me, answering my question as to why she chose to settle in Israel: 'This is home. Here we are not guests.' Sharing home is however not an option. Home means nationalism, Eretz Israel as chanted by generation after generation, ownership of land and political control. This means turning the communities already living there into second class citizens, guests in their own homeland.

The ideology of nationalism rejects foreign influence and aims to 'take back control', but this sharing of different traditions even as for instance during the Crusades between political and religious enemies has for centuries been the catalyst for culture. Islamic architecture influenced and inspired the structure of Christian Gothic cathedrals and Serbian Orthodox churches with their characteristic cupolas.

Racist nationalism either chooses to remain ignorant about this mutual cross-fertilization, or simply rejects it, focusing on what it considers its own allegedly pure, superior and unique culture. In the last two years of the Second World War the accompanist Michael Raucheisen gathered the best German singers of the time in a recording studio to create an encyclopaedic collection of Lieder. This monument to a form of art song consisting of words and music by the country's greatest poets and composers past and present is considered by nationalists to express the heart and soul of Germany, the epitome of its culture. Raucheisen, an enthusiastic supporter of the Third Reich, recorded song after song in a Berlin studio at a time in 1943 when the tide of war began to turn against Germany and the crushing losses at Stalingrad now pointed towards inevitable final defeat. The legacy of these artists raises yet again the question of guilt by association and the way in which music carries on regardless of politics.

My grandmother Claire Hensl who owned the exclusive right of refugees, who have lost close relatives and loved ones as a consequence of aggressive ethnic cleansing, to denounce those who followed the regime and turned a blind eye to atrocities, criticised me and others for jumping to judgement: ‘You don’t know what it was like! You weren’t there!’ These performers earned their living and tried to keep out of trouble. At the same time they turned culture into an expression of nationalist defiance by committing to disc this nostalgic documentation of a tradition that seemed to be facing annihilation. Recording went on even throughout the final cataclysmic days of the war and explosions can be heard in the background. The artists must have feared the worst, what with rumours of atrocities being committed by the approaching Soviet army. The urgent intensity of the interpretations gives extra poignancy to this legacy. However something is missing from this monument, a gaping hole. The most romantically German of all the composers committed to these discs, Robert Schumann set poems by the Jewish Heinrich Heine for two of his most important song cycles, one of them *Dichterliebe*, *A Poet’s Love*, being not only a cornerstone of the repertoire but one of the most passionate expressions of the German romantic tradition, and glaringly absent from this collection. Non-German readers may not be aware of the Swiftian satirical wit of Heine whose work is steeped in the most refined irony that offsets the sweet romanticism of his lyrical poetry. The young poet’s earliest poems also inspired Franz Schubert in the last months of his life to compose some of his greatest songs which comprise what became known after Schubert’s death as *Swansong*, *Schwanengesang*. Schubert’s legacy is not complete without this towering masterpiece of a cycle. Just one Heine setting sneaked into the 1943 recordings, which indicates that Raucheisen either could not bear to leave it out or recorded it in defiance of Nazi dogma, but the rest were put on disc a few years after the end of the war, Germany still in ruins. In those the bass Hans Hotter interprets the Heine settings in his inimitable magisterial tones that manage also to express frailty: an

indication that his voice for all its power is a fragile instrument. Given the context of the recordings there is a clear sense of life being insecure. These Schubert settings of Heine go way beneath the surface irony to express a frightening nihilistic darkness that chimed with how the artists must have felt about the war and its aftermath. In one the titan Atlas is compelled to carry the weight of the whole world on his shoulders. In another a boatman rows fearfully through the mist to a sinister town on the other side of the river with a daringly impressionistic and evocative accompaniment that prefigures Debussy almost a century later. Most terrifying of all is the song about a young man looking in despair at the house of a long lost love. Gradually the man becomes aware of another man in the same spot where he used to stand, also wringing his hands. With a terrible shock he realizes this figure is his doppelganger. The song consisting of Heine's few words and Schubert's distillation constitutes a whole opera in around three minutes. Written over a century before the Second World War, these songs of helplessness in the face of mysterious and irresistible forces become chillingly relevant in the sonorous world-weary tones of the bass singer most famous for depicting Wagner's half-blind god Wotan, whose ruthless duplicity like that of the Fuehrer also triggered *Götterdämmerung*.

Incidentally the Third Reich rated Schubert as one of its most revered and beloved composers, perhaps unaware that apart from the Heine, he also set a psalm in Hebrew for the synagogue in Vienna, a unique commission for a gentile, and just one sign among many that Schubert in fact represented the antithesis of intolerant nationalism.

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## GOOD SORTS AND BAD SORTS

*I must not spend too much time with refugees otherwise I cannot hate them anymore*

A German neo-Nazi in a TV interview

The neo-Nazi put his finger on the main matter. Keeping separate from people builds walls and ideologies that demonize and then kill. Knowing others, especially strangers and foreigners, makes walls unnecessary, imagines and creates gardens of possibility. Frances Lee's film *Gods Own Country* explores this theme with a poignant optimistic conclusion. It dares to suggest that we need the foreigner. The stranger is actually our salvation and love is an important facet of this relationship.

Art is imagination made visible and tangible. The nature of art, that we can see and touch it, makes it vulnerable.

The story of Hans Frank's relationship with Leonardo de Vinci's *Lady with an Ermine* sheds light on the role of culture in political ideology. The idealized angelic beauty of this image contrasts with the imperfect demonic ugliness of the caricatures of those considered to be polluting ethnic purity. In Frank's case he even tried to 'perfect' his own son by telling him to style his hair in imitation of de Vinci's lady.

It may surprise younger generations that in the immediate post-War decade, despite shocking revelations about the Holocaust, which targeted mostly Jews but also political dissidents and gypsies and homosexuals, anti-Semitism, homophobia and racism continued and remain endemic in the UK as well as across Europe, in fact on the rise again as I write. Forty years after that war Polish people interviewed in Claud Lanzmann's *Shoah* continue to justify the killing of Jews because 'they killed Christ': the reason for centuries of bloody violence planted over sixteen hundred years ago by fanatical and politically motivated bishops determined to prize Christianity away from its parent faith. Judaism had to be portrayed in the most grotesque fashion, including a mythology of blood drinking and child murder. This nurtured the familiar caricature of the Jew that persists to this day and shows no sign of disappearing. Despite all that is known and proved about the Holocaust, suspicion and dislike

remain, as I experienced growing up in the immediate post-war years. Insults in the school ground were specific. 'Ugly Jew' focused on appearance. 'Pansy poof' for gays focused on what is still considered by many to indicate 'degenerate' effeminacy. 'Filthy foreigners' for all coloured people focused on bigoted and false assumptions about dirty habits, physical and sexual. In most cases the children targeted had to accept the identity of an obscene caricature that demonises and disgusts. Those with strong characters and sense of their own worth could reject such identities. Others turned into examples of what became known as the 'self-hate' syndrome, a potent internalising of the grotesque misrepresentation. To avoid this perpetual undertow of persecution many changed their family names, making the excuse that their real ones were too difficult to pronounce.

Self-hatred manifested itself throughout my childhood and adolescence. Being a Jew identified me as ugly and being gay made me a degenerate. A welcome change in my sense of self-worth happened by chance in both cases. In my late teens on a gap year project to work on a kibbutz, the fitness and beauty of all the people surprised me: no sign of grotesque caricatures. A few years later on my first visit to a gay club and expecting to find timid pale men trying to be inconspicuous, again the fitness and beauty of so many men astonished me as they strode around with assurance, claiming liberty to express their desires. Like the ugly duckling in Andersen's fairytale, after being harassed and rejected by those who cannot tolerate difference, suddenly I found and accepted myself, even with pride. That fairytale is derided for its sentimentality, but those who experience discrimination and insults aimed at their fundamental nature recognize the truth at its heart. The story is told with Andersen's eye for the telling detail and describes a dysfunctional world neurotic about preserving ethnic purity, strikingly so in the episode with the cat and the hen which satirizes the attempts of outsiders to conform. The emotional final punch is what discomforts: the duckling has come to accept its ugliness and approaches the beautiful swans not only in expectation of being

attacked, but inviting violence. As so often Andersen puts his finger unerringly on basic and disquieting truths about the human condition, in this case the 'self-hate syndrome'.

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## CLASSICAL MUSIC AND THE PROMISED LAND

Hans Frank with his refined cultural tastes inspired the clichéd figure of Nazi leaders in post-war films. For years classical music became a short-hand warning signal. A few bars of Mozart indicate the presence of a villain.

Emphasis on white beauty and superiority still dominates the film industry and has till quite recently taken racist attitudes for granted. When the glorious Hattie McDaniel won an Oscar for her supporting role in *Gone with the Wind*, she was described as being a 'credit to her race'. She shrugged this insufferable patronisation off with the sharp and witty observation that at least she earned more playing servants than being a servant. A 'credit to ones race' remains endemic not only in the film industry but every part of life. Non-whites are forever required to 'prove themselves'. Present legitimisation of racist attitudes by no less than the President of the United States indicates that far from the world moving to a more liberal and fairer society, it is leaping back to a past in which race knew its place. Depiction of Jews became a trickier proposition after the Holocaust, especially in Hollywood where mostly Jewish moguls controlled the film industry. As an example in the 1970s the United States refused screenings of Wajda's *The Promised Land* a film which describes the oppressive influence of wealthy Jewish families controlling manufacture in Poland at the turn of the last century. The film does not shy away from portraying Jews as grasping and exploitative of their workforce and includes a grotesque portrait of a hysterical and emotionally demanding wealthy Jewish woman confirming the grotesque stereotype that incited Josef Goebbels'

hatred. Wajda vigorously denied being anti-Semitic, which given the potency of the film proves how endemic such attitudes remain decades after the end of the war.

The fact that xenophobia, racism and phobias against Jews and Muslims are once again considered legitimate points of view earning understanding and respect revives deep rooted feelings of insecurity and not belonging. Even in the UK which prides itself on British values of tolerance and liberalism the toxic fall out of Brexit with its emphasis on controlling borders and restricting immigration, witnessed an immediate spike in racist attacks and made many Jews consider leaving the country, going so far as to apply for citizenship in Germany from which their parents and grandparents had been expelled. For them these insecurities are being complicated by a blurring of legitimate criticism of Israel, labelled anti-Zionism, and the stoking of traditional anti-Semitism which is about hatred of the 'other' and suspicion of international Jewry which allegedly seeks to undermine nation states. Theresa May's infamous remark about 'citizens of the world being citizens of nowhere' targeted refugees, dismissively labelled as economic migrants, and may not have had Jews specifically in mind, but it revived that age-old myth of Jews feeling no loyalty to the country they live in and the wealthy ones controlling global capital for their own interest. The blurring of anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism is presently disrupting the revival of socialism. Right wing movements which used to persecute Jews now support the Zionist State of Israel in its never-ending conflict with Islam. Left wing movements coming to the defence of Palestinians are automatically labelled anti-Semitic.

Being aliens in their homeland is not felt by Jews alone. In *Black Men Walking*, a British film just released this year, one of the main characters cries out: 'How long do we have to be here to be English?'

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Given Martin Luther and his Reformation's incitement to anti-Semitism that influenced subsequent centuries of violence towards Jews it is ironic that the Lutheran Church commissioned Felix Mendelssohn to compose a symphony in celebration of the Reformation's Tercentenary. Mendelssohn may have converted from Judaism to Christianity, but as said earlier Luther doubted whether Jews could ever change their nature. The composer, famously good-looking, multi-talented, refined and educated, represented the polar opposite of the Jewish caricature embedded in folk lore by the Grimm's Fairy Tale *The Jew in the Thorn Bush*, in which the Jew is depicted as ugly, whinging, deceitful and treacherous in contrast to the pure Nordic stock of honest German peasantry. The Jew as well as being an alien poison threatening racial purity is seen as disruptive, sly and self-interested in contrast to the honest open hearted German peasant.

Theories about beauty and ugliness form a persistent discordant accompaniment, like a ciphering diapason, to this debate about the relationship between culture and ideology. From a psychological point of view projection plays a significant but neglected role in racism. Demonization is the end result, but initially envy of the 'other' is what triggers hatred and fear. For instance, a virulent strain of racism against Africans stems from male sexual jealousy. Boys from coloured communities in the southern states of America would be routinely lynched just for looking at a white woman. The fetish of African American sexuality became the theme of the first works of art to probe the roots of racism. Deliberately shocking mainstream films like *Mandingo* explored this theme in the guise of melodrama. When done well as here by directors wishing to convey political or social messages this genre can subversively alert audiences to embarrassing and painful truths.

Incidentally the theme of miscegenation is at the heart of *Showboat*, Jerome Kern's classic musical, written and composed by a Jew and dealing directly with the relationships between black servants, their bosses and the river on which they work. In this case love rather than

raw sex is part of a wider theme about cultural cross-fertilization. The musical's most famous song *Ol' Man River*, sung with totemic authority by the star Paul Robeson, is an anthem about the racism endemic in American culture. Kern and Hammerstein both émigré Jews whose families escaped European pogroms empathised with the black experience. The musical updates operetta and absorbs influences from the new culture including the now discredited 'blacking-up' to perform black American music, a norm in entertainment well into the 1970s. James Whale's acutely insightful film version of *Showboat* brings out the musical's bold social and political subtext. In one toe-curling scene Irene Dunne's Magnolia nails the embarrassment of the blatantly racist *Gallivantin Around* number with the sheer verve of her performance: James Whale's subversively indicating how Black America inseminated White American culture. Dramatically the most shocking moment occurs at the wedding of Steve and Julie. He cuts her wrist and then his own with a sharp knife to mix their blood, so when the police arrive he can correctly announce that there is no case of miscegenation to answer. The whole film pivots on the relationship between racism and culture. The extremes are expressed musically: on the one hand *Ol' Man River* in the tradition of a Spiritual, sung by Paul Robeson while the camera lovingly swoops and swoons around him, and on the other *After the Ball* in the style of White European operetta. When the showboat's singer Julie teaches Magnolia *Fish Gotta Swim*, the cook Hattie McDaniel's Queenie wonders pointedly how a song she grew up with comes to be in the repertoire of a woman passing herself off as white. Helen Morgan's Julie in both her singing and performance conveys the stress of a person caught between two different communities, neither of which completely accepts her. When Magnolia's marriage to a gambler breaks down and destitution threatens her and her baby daughter, she auditions as a cabaret singer and performs this song. It is a poignant moment which Julie overhears in her dressing room. Understanding the situation, and tired of fighting with her bullying manager quietly leaves the way open for Magnolia to take her

place. Julie disappears from the story, leaving us to imagine her fate. Themes of forgiveness and redemption thread their way through a narrative which, as in the painful case of Julie, James Whale deliberately refuses to tie up neatly. When *Ol' Man River* swelling mightily over the final credits reminds us of Paul Robeson's Joey, the social and political point of the musical is made resoundingly. Like other charismatic figures in dramas, for instance Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet* and Marian Crane in *Psycho*, he is cut out of the story well before the half-way mark of the narrative. Questions are left unanswered. Our messy individual lives cannot be tidily boxed away. The music and words of those long gone whom we loved and were influenced by continue to haunt and influence us. They are like the river which 'just keeps rolling along'.

Sexuality plays a part in anti-Semitism too. Twelve years after the war a German wife confided in me that a Jewish man had tried to seduce her husband, implying a sinister depravity typical of the race. The information disturbed me with the realisation I might also share this degeneracy. On the other hand Jewish women have long been celebrated for their beauty, as the roster of Hollywood film stars proves. In a telling scene from Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*, a Polish woman looks suspiciously and with disapproval at her husband outside the house that once belonged to a Jewish family, all murdered, and which the elderly couple now occupy with a sense of entitlement, implying that Jews never had a right to live there. The husband is remembering the Jewish women of the town, commenting on their refined manners, grace and especially their beautiful hands. To his wife's dismay he admits to missing them.

Another cause for envy comes from Jewish success at education and profession, excelling in finance, business, law, medicine, sciences, arts and education, where to the continuing disgust of non-Jews they seem to occupy so many of the top jobs. The family on my mother's side in Vienna exemplified this resented superiority. Her great aunts and uncles, children of the then

liberal Chief Rabbi Friedmann, rose to be eminent doctors and top lawyers. The great aunt whom I knew and adored used to be headmistress of one of the city's main girl schools. She knew Sigmund Freud personally as well as leading socialist politicians who pushed through key reforms in the decade after the First World War before the Third Reich annexed Austria. The family's international contacts meant most of them were able to flee and settle in America. Oxford University invited the great-aunt I knew to take up a post there, a situation which enabled her to help my mother escape on one of the last Kinder Transports. This great-aunt used to ponder an observation shared by many Jewish refugees, wryly remarking: 'We tried too hard and succeeded too well.'

The story of three young entrepreneurs climbing the first steps of the business ladder in Wajda's *The Promised Land*, a film based on a famous Polish novel set at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and considered an accurate representation of Polish society and its anti-Semitic attitudes, implies that only by marrying into this Jewish business aristocracy can they hope to succeed in life. The filmmaker Rainer Werner Fassbinder introduced two different traditional Jewish caricatures at the start of his epic TV series *Alexanderplatz* about a jailbird trying to adapt to the predatory lifestyle of Germany in the chaos of defeat after the First World War. Within minutes of release from prison he is taken up by a wheedling Jew who seems to want to help him but might have a distasteful unspecified ulterior motive. Without making any anachronistic judgement of anti-Semitism, both Wajda and Fassbinder, who had no inhibition about provoking outrage, focus on the nauseating 'otherness' of the European Jew, inciting the audience to share in the hatred and impulse to exterminate. These characters may be fictional grotesques, but they represented how people felt about the Jews. Even in England where it is assumed the Holocaust could never have been allowed to happen, the tide of Jewish refugees in the Second World War aroused widespread distaste. They were referred to disparagingly as 'Central Europeans' who were mostly only grudgingly accepted, even

when they brought necessary skills and benefits. Mention of them would be made as of a bad smell in the room.

The Jews portrayed by Wajda and Fassbinder are creepily needy. In *The Promised Land* the Jewish bosses over-compensate for their business success with cultural pretensions, and in *Alexanderplatz* the poorer Jews make every effort to preserve their faith identity which only accentuates their alien presence, while craving in a humiliating manner to be accepted and loved. These grotesques bear no relation to those Jews of the same period who shone brightly with talent and self-confidence, scientists like Einstein. These eminent men were honoured; those less talented aroused revulsion. All were compelled to flee National Socialism.

Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* includes a portrait of two Jews, one rich and the other poor. It has been described as the most blatant expression of anti-Semitism ever composed. It is no more anti-Semitic than the films by Wajda and Fassbinder, because it portrays the way people traditionally thought about Jews. This attitude goes back centuries and is part of German mythology, like the Grimm's fairy tale *The Jew in the Thorn Bush* a figure of suspicion and contempt, a perpetual outsider. He looks strange and behaves differently: someone who cannot be trusted, out for his own advantage and needing to be punished, preferably in a humiliating manner. He is the figure on whom a community can project its fears and hatreds. There is little doubt that Mussorgsky, like Wagner, hated Jews, but the music describes more than phobia. It is about a rich man patronising a poor man, who pleads in the whining tone associated with all oppressed people, begging for money that is being refused.

Many of the characteristics of this caricature I have identified in myself, an example of what Zionists call a 'self-hating Jew.' Allegedly specifically Semitic neuroses are however common to all people in all races everywhere. The need to concentrate spiritual as well as

physical and emotional ugliness on a specific person or group provides a classic example of Freud's theory of projection, exemplified in the dialogue between the rich and poor man in Mussorgsky's *Pictures*. Shame in this personal interaction, experienced universally, creates the need for projecting it on to oppressed minorities, when it can be exaggerated and turned into a specific racial feature, so justifying contempt and persecution. In pre-Civil Rights America the black community would be seen as rapists and lynch fodder: violent misogynist patriarchal attitudes being projected onto 'slaves' who presumably should never have been liberated. These 'slaves' would then be contemptuously characterised on stage and music hall as grinning black faces grovelling for approval. Meera Syall's '*Blacked-up Men*' a biting satirical song and dance sketch for a TV comedy show back in the 1990s nails the social politics by throwing the contempt back at the viewer and drawing attention to the white 'agenda' driving the 'blacking-up' theatrical device. Lenny Henry as a young man starting out on a career as a stand-up comedian in the 1970s went beyond satire by rebelling against the racist stereotype expected of him. He challenged the audience directly and while fully prepared for the inevitable consequences, appeared mid-performance stark naked. In European Muslim communities a small minority of mainly petty criminals now present a more dangerous, violent and destructive challenge. As a result the whole Muslim community is suspected of being a breeding ground for terrorism and sexual predators, misgivings reinforced by popular series like *Homeland*. The implication is that bad behaviour of a minority of Muslim men reflects on the whole community. The recent attacks on George Soros imply that Jews continue to be seen as grasping capitalists with no allegiance to country and who control global business and finance which override national interests. Now in an age of resurgent nationalism across Europe and the US, allegiance and patriotism are once again demanded. Foreigners are viewed with suspicion as having neither. When the Prime Minister declared: 'Those who call themselves citizens of the world are citizens of

nowhere’, the notion begs at least one significant question: is the world ‘nowhere’? Are foreigners to be deprived of their citizen’s rights? Are refugees, asylum seekers and economic migrants to be considered unworthy and ineligible? How should the arts begin to answer these questions? Art is supposed to reflect the human condition, to encourage understanding and empathy. Yet now as in the past, when people have most need of this understanding, art not only fails, it is even dragooned into lending moral support to those who destroy and kill. Friedrich Schiller’s words ring out in Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony: ‘Seit umschlungen Millionen...Alle Menschen werden Brüder’ ‘Be embraced, Millions... All people will be brothers’. The leaders of the Third Reich cheered these words at the very moment they were administering the murder of millions. These leaders were described and are still remembered by family and friends as being ‘decent’ people: an epithet specifically used to describe Heinrich Himmler and Otto von Waechter, both responsible for administering the Holocaust. These leaders genuinely shared the emotion of Schiller’s words and Beethoven’s setting, with the unspoken proviso that humanity only meant part of the human race, the one legitimised by race and nationality. The rest are not their brothers. Far from being embraced they deserve extermination. What Beethoven and Schiller would make of this interpretation of their creation is open to question. It is safe to assume that these children of the European Enlightenment, the age of reason which sowed the seeds of future social and political revolution and liberation, meant what they said.

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## LUTHERS’ NIGHTINGALE

Subtext is at the heart of Wagner’s *The Mastersingers of Nuremburg*. The Prize Song may provide the dramatic climax to the narrative of man getting woman, but before that triumphant moment comes a declaration of the power of art to unite people. Hans Sachs the

cobbler poet is the heroic saviour of the day. Being an older man in this case is not about getting the woman. The instincts of an artist bring resolution to social and personal conflicts. He earns the love of the whole community. When the crowds catch sight of him arriving alongside his fellow mastersingers to the song festival on the green there is growing excitement and repetition of his name. After a pregnant pause all the people lift their voices as one in his song: 'Wach' auf!' 'Awake! The nightingale sang.'

It is generally understood that the nightingale refers to Martin Luther and the revolution he initiated. For people ignorant of this historical background it is a song about dawn and nature. Everyone knows and joins in the chorale showing how communities, even one as diverse as the perpetually in-fighting city of Nuremberg, can at least unite harmoniously in music. The cobbler poet reflects on the riot that ends the second act: 'Why this conflict? What for? About such small things. Unnecessary rage over so little'. Then he identifies the source of the conflict as jealousy and thwarted love: 'A bird did not find his mate.' At that moment art comes to pour balm over pain. The cobbler poet teaches an untutored aristocratic 'bird' to sing the prize song which will bring lovers together, not just through a melody born out of passion, but also in a composition which blends old and new. Wagner is making a point about the relationship between art and society, tradition and progress, and above all how communities can solve disputes and at least try to learn to live in tolerance. There is however a painfully sharp thorn with this rose. The aristocratic interloper might be expected to be the unwanted outsider, but it turns out to be a pillar of the community who is disliked, feared and mocked. Critics have assumed this character to be a Jew, but Wagner had in fact a leading music critic in mind, someone who disapproved of his operas, and therefore became the butt of cruel jokes at the critic's expense. There is no forgiveness and reconciliation at the end for him and the character is banished from the final tableau of communal rejoicing. This presents a problem for liberal minded producers who try one way or another to let him take part, but a

jingoistic exhortation at the end of the opera to reject foreign influences only emphasises the need to discriminate and exclude. This celebration of German civic life contains a controversial message however much we might like to think that Wagner is encouraging the creative expression of a community by forging its own language and not imitating others.

Bearing in mind the kernel of the work's ambiguous message, all the more toxic because of the doubts and controversy it raises, the last act does also present audiences with an analysis of the creative process. The cobbler poet guides the young aristocrat through the composition of the prize song: 'Make up your own rules, then follow them.' When the winner refuses to accept the award, he is reminded that he should respect tradition and take a role in its development. Wagner's work indicates how successfully he managed that, even though he did not wholly follow his beloved cobbler poet's advice. Wagner notoriously attacked Jewish composers who had influenced and supported him. Ideas from Mendelssohn appear in Wagner's work. A figuration in the *Fair Melusine Overture* is transformed into the Rhein leitmotif that opens the *Ring Cycle*. The *Dresden Amen* from the finale of Mendelssohn's *Reformation Symphony* becomes a key theme in Wagner's *Parsifal*. Meyerbeer supported Wagner financially and professionally when the fledgling Dresden-based composer fled from arrest for political agitation to Paris. The grand operas of Meyerbeer directly influenced Wagner's *Rienzi* and the major works that followed.

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Instrumentalists had a chance to escape being killed in concentration camps, because the cultured officials in charge of the extermination program thought that victims being marched to the gas chambers would be calmed by Strauss Waltzes. It is known that the officers also liked to listen to music after carrying out torture and murder. In the years following the Bosnia War many Serb soldiers talked about the stress of having to slaughter Muslims.

Although believing in the necessity of ethnic cleansing, they complained about Post Traumatic Stress Disorder after committing murder. Some however enjoyed the activity, as for instance the militia at the notorious 'white house' in the Omarska killing camp, who took pleasure in rape, torture and murder. They needed no music played by prisoners to make committing crimes more agreeable.

Jewish musicians gained a reprieve from the gas chambers in Auschwitz by performing on command, and were constantly aware of the precariousness of their own fates. Dr Josef Mengele once ordered the cellist Anita Lasker Wallfisch to perform Schumann's *Traümerei*, *Dreaming* for him, during a break from his work carrying out medical experiments without anaesthetic on children. The situation and the particular choice of music are telling. Mengele devoted his research in Auschwitz to investigating the limits of human endurance and existence and specialised in twins, useful for comparisons during the trials. Genetic disorders were his speciality, discharging Nazi ideology to preserve the purity of a fit and healthy Aryan race. Jewish children destined for slaughter provided him with a plentiful supply of human guinea pigs. During one work break Mengele chose to listen to music composed for a child. *Traümerei/ Dreaming* has long been such a popular piece, part of Robert Schumann's piano cycle *Scenes from Childhood* that there are many transcriptions for different instruments. Wallfisch performed one made for the cello. In a documentary series about the relationship between music and politics in Germany during the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich as well as in the former USSR under Stalin, she talks to Suzy Klein and describes the encounter. Wallfisch arrived, played for Mengele and then without further communication left. Mengele had chosen a famous piece of classical music, made familiar in countless films of the time. Even if he knew it described an innocent scene from childhood, he probably did not make any connection between that and his gruesome work. As Pushkin showed in his play *Boris Godunov*, even the cruellest child-murdering tyrants can also be

sentimental loving fathers. The Argentinian film *Wakolda* is a semi-fictional account of Dr Mengele's final years in Argentina where living under a pseudonym he lived protected by unrepentant Nazis. The film examines the psychology of a man dedicated to creating a master race free of physical imperfection. Eugenics has not been buried with the Second World War. Despite revulsion at this inhumane practice, eugenics is once again considered a legitimate subject for discussion. Conferences are attended by journalists and scientists who insist the subject has nothing to do with racism but about research into controlling population growth and improving the quality of the gene pool, which just paraphrases the identical aims of former discredited ideologies: to purify humanity of physical and mental imperfections.

The relationship between culture and politics runs parallel with ideas of good and bad, allies and enemies, us and them. Each party considers right to be on its side, whatever ideology is followed. So any method of eliminating 'enemies', now described generically and conveniently as 'terrorists', is justifiable, whether by drone attack, indiscriminate bombing of civilian populations, 'collateral damage', ethnic cleansing or genocide. 'Others' are described by political leaders as 'bunches of migrants' or as 'vermin' by the media. 'Them' may not be the enemy as such, but are considered by many as less than us, not as 'human', therefore dispensable and allowed to suffer and perish. In Charlbury, Oxfordshire, where I ran a coffeehouse for several years, when a passing train killed a girl from an Indian family who had moved to the town, the local women shrugged off the tragedy saying: 'She wasn't one of us'. They only felt pity for the train driver.

In a world where competition, achievement at the cost of others and material wealth are the indicators of a quality life, where the individual is considered the only person that counts and the idea of solidarity, cooperation and community is rejected, notions of 'them' and 'us', 'losers' and 'winners' necessarily focus on the 'beauty' of success and the ugliness of failure.

The successful and not the ‘them’ become the judges of what is good, right, acceptable and beautiful.

While it is easier to dismiss swathes of the human race we don’t know as unworthy, as soon as we do know them even the hardest attitudes change. It comes as a surprise to discover that these despised refugees and migrants are not only qualified and skilled, but they are actually at least as intelligent and sympathetic, if not more so, than we are. They also turn out to be more attractive. Their beauty outshines and shames us. It becomes abundantly clear that they are a gift to us. The places to which they are fleeing need them, and would benefit from them and be reinvigorated. Inter-marriage would indeed strengthen rather than weaken the future gene pool. When Polish families moved to my town Crediton as part of the free movement of people from the European Union, the fittest men of the town fell in love with the beautiful daughters, married them and are raising many children. One of these Devonian men works as a fitness trainer at the local gym and now commutes regularly to Poland to visit other members of his wife’s family there. He is experiencing more of life than he ever imagined when growing up in this small provincial town, far from the rest of the continent. Minds are opened, traditions and cultures blend. The children are beautiful and healthy. This is how the global village functions. Constant movement of people revitalizes the world population.

Erecting walls and enforcing border controls do the opposite.

The Iron Curtain symbolized a border with a region impossible to penetrate. My first cross-Europe journey in 1991 gave me an opportunity to visit all parts of the continent that had been closed to me throughout my life. Seizing what I correctly guessed would be a short-lived opportunity to witness life in countries of Eastern Europe on the cusp of radical change. I observed the brutally rapid invasion of triumphant Western market forces, in the shape of canny businessmen sharks running rings round former communist managers of industry, desperate for cash investment but untutored in the ways of capitalism. Adorned with bling

and surrounded by trophy beauties and henchmen, gangsters occupied prominent tables at the best restaurants. There were already taking charge of the situation politically and socially without making any attempt at discretion. I noticed the movement of people across borders, mostly determined young men carrying their belongings in sports bags, travelling westward to find employment. (My book *The Road to Chartres* describes this in more detail.)

Before visiting Poland and the Ukraine on a planned detour through South West Germany I encountered the influx of the first refugees from the war in the former Yugoslavia. Mainly Bosnian Muslim children and teenagers fleeing the violence were being collected by relatives already working as guest workers in Germany and therefore in a position to care for them. On a train from Lake Constance to Freiburg in the Black Forest, apart from a few skiers most of the travellers were locals, predominantly poor people with all the features familiar from inbreeding: an extreme example of when a nation resists immigrants and is determined to remain unpolluted by foreign blood. Quarter of a century on from that journey, refugees, economic migrants and asylum seekers from across the Middle East and North Africa have been flowing into relatively isolated regions of Europe, because these are the places most in need of their labour. The majority of Germans acknowledge the positive advantages of this human immigration and are grateful for the well-qualified, ambitious and above all energetic young people who have risked death and walked hundreds of miles from the Middle East. A vociferous minority, and in some countries in the East of the continent even a majority of Europeans resist this foreign visitation. Dismissive and ignorant of recent history as experienced by their parents and grandparents, they enthusiastically herald without shame a return to racist and extremist political agendas.

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Hard times can inspire artists to their sharpest insights. In 1945, battered and impoverished in victory, the British set about producing a now classic film. The narrative of *The Third Man* is set against the moral corruption in the aftermath of war. With world weary and sharp dialogue by Graham Greene, charismatic performances and a haunting zither score, as well as chiaroscuro cinematography that spotlights the moral dilemmas, the film is too well known and written about to require analysis by me as well. I refer to just one of its many famous sequences, specifically Harry Lime's speech allegedly worked on and made iconic by the actor Orson Welles for his brief but potent performance in the role of the wide-boy dealer in dangerously adulterated medication. The character lives in the darkness, physically and morally, which makes the moment when light suddenly and shockingly illuminates his face especially telling in a film where extremes of black and white are key to the narrative. He makes an irrefutable point about human behaviour: a sophisticated and memorable riff on the truism that humanity contains the seeds of both good and evil. This despicable charmer takes his childhood friend and eventual nemesis for a claustrophobic ride on the city's famous Ferris wheel, one of the few landmarks then still left standing undamaged in Vienna. The two men overlook the city in ruins and cannot escape each other. The criminal justifies his opportunism by reminding his friend that one of the most violent and corrupt periods in history happened to be also the time when the visual arts in particular flourished as never before or since. The Renaissance remains and will forever describe an age of unmatched skill and beauty in painting and sculpture. The following flippant reference to Switzerland and the cuckoo clock, as enunciated inimitably by Orson Welles, tends to take attention away from the previous troubling insight, a juxtaposition which elicits the reflex response: 'give me the cuckoo clock any day if the price of great art is political corruption, social injustice and perpetual conflict.'

Leonardo de Vinci's *Lady with an Ermine* represents Renaissance painting at a peak of technical perfection. The artist worked for rapacious, violent and dictatorial rulers, designing weapons of war for them. While patrons were engaged in barbaric manifestations of human behaviour, they were commissioning art that focused on platonic ideals of physical and spiritual beauty. The mistress of Ludovico Sforza as painted by Leonardo provided such an ideal: flawless beauty way beyond the reality of how most people look, and also beyond reach. The Renaissance set out to be a rebirth of Graeco-Roman values. Until then, throughout what historians call the Middle Ages, art reflected the glory of God and creation in design and vibrancy of colours. Gold leaf and jewelled pigments, some made from ground precious stones were intended to provide a marked contrast to the squalor of everyday life experienced by most people. Cathedrals rose with gigantic proportions and abundance of embellishment from the surrounding mud and grime. They towered over the dwellings all round. Artists recorded this reality. Paintings of the construction of these monuments to the divine also showed the hovels and sheds where the architects and workers lived in the shadow of the cathedral they were building. Depiction of real life in Renaissance paintings constituted a sub-genre, popular in Spain and the Netherlands. Velasquez portrayed everyday life and people bestowing on them as much dignity as he gave his royal patrons. Breughel provocatively courted censorship and persecution to an extent that when he died his frightened wife tried to destroy the work most likely to upset the Church and the government, which were then in collusion. The paintings recorded in minutely observed detail the everyday life of poor working people working and playing at home, in the city or the fields, and frequently depicted within a wider perspective: struggling to make a home fitting in with nature against a backdrop of landscapes stretching to distant horizons. In *The Tower of Babel*, perceptive viewers can make out the hovels clustered in the foreground under the shadow of the monumental edifice. Architects and builders kneel in fear and submission

before royal visitors. Ships, sails billowing, trade with distant lands across an ocean that recedes beyond the horizon.

Caravaggio used manual workers, street people and prostitutes as models for his depiction of biblical scenes, elevating them into the roles of saints and heroes. These models were rarely shown in their daily business. His paintings place them in a sacred dimension offering a disturbing perspective on biblical themes, a sense of hard labour, dirt and sweat, ordinary and disregarded people, some probably criminal, in the presence of Christ, at his crucifixion and post-resurrection appearances. The subversive quality of these pictures inspired future generations of artists to paint their subjects in ways that open the eyes of viewers to the reality and truth of everyday life and the human condition.

Whereas Michelangelo celebrated muscular masculinity Leonardo feminized male beauty blurring genders so portraits of saints like John the Baptist could be women. Both painters pursued an ideal. The perfection of art as displayed in Leonardo's *Lady with the Ermine*, portrays the reality of the girl's situation and authenticates it. Beauty is the privilege of the rich and powerful. Owning the painting is a mark of authority and superiority. This accounts for Hans Frank's obsessive desire to possess it, to sit and gaze at her incessantly. The picture fixes her in one place for eternity, and she cannot escape his imprisoning stare.

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## THE FETISH OF BEAUTY

Those with money, power and influence decide and impose standards of ugliness and beauty against which all are judged. The Ancient Greeks exalted lithe athleticism, the Ancient Romans muscularity. The Third Reich commended what came to be called the Aryan Übermensch, tall, athletic and blonde, to the extent that young people were chosen for their

looks to breed a perfect race free from pollution by foreign ethnicities. Though those who enforced these rules could hardly be described as representatives of Aryan beauty, the supreme examples of Teutonic perfection still saluted their unfit leaders with enthusiasm, proud to represent that particular ideal for their adored but unlovely masters. In Leni Riefenstahl's two films that document the worship of the Third Reich leadership, the one focusing on the military, the other on athletics at the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin, the film maker celebrates fit youth. In *Olympia*, her second film made in 1936, these paragons of physical beauty had to include the African American athlete Jesse Owens who won four gold medals as the fastest runner. Riefenstahl recorded the dismay and annoyance of the Fuhrer, disgusted that a member of an inferior race should beat the Aryan ideal. The earlier film, *Triumph of the Will*, made in 1934 to document the gigantic rally in Nuremberg celebrates German military strength in mind-numbing lengthy parades. The Aryan supermen with their chiselled jaws and honed physiques brim with patriotic pride and shout out the regions of the country which they represent. Enthusiastically and joyfully they salute the little man with a smudge of black moustache, a feature ridiculed by everyone around the rest of the world and memorably by Chaplin in *The Great Dictator*. Hitler appears on the streets of Warsaw at the beginning of *To Be or Not to Be*, Lubitsch's outrageous and hilarious film comedy made by Hollywood at a time when it looked as though Germany might win the war. The shoppers are amazed and curious. What is this bogeyman doing in their midst? He turns out to be an actor in disguise. How could anyone take this pompous but unimposing figure seriously let alone be frightened of him? Today the most powerful man on the planet is also a figure of physical ridicule, so this fact is clearly no bar to achieving the highest office. This leader's wife is however a model. The rewards of success and power include ownership of beauty. Therefore the powerful define standards. Beautiful people do not have a say in the matter. They are there to be judged, to compete with each other, and to feel inadequate

because perfection is always beyond reach. Beauty that appeals to power is a prison, like the one trapping Ludovico Sforza's mistress in Leonardo's painting.

The actor and national treasure Miriam Margolyes makes self-deprecatory remarks about her appearance: a 'fat old lesbian Jew'. Being fat, old, queer and Jewish is considered by those who define beauty to be its opposite. Substantial fleshiness may be a sign of wealth and beauty today in some African countries, and used to be so throughout the world. In countries with advanced economies dependent on a tiny minority of the rich power brokers becoming richer and the vast majority of the poor poorer, beauty is now measured in terms encouraging anorexia. The Duchess of Windsor once remarked: 'One can never be too rich or too thin' - an apt inscription on a headstone for our present civilization. People who fail to comply with straight normality cannot conform to what is considered attractive. The caricature of a hook-nose dark-skinned and fleshy lipped Jew has been an anti-Semitic trope for centuries, the antithesis of the Christian European nationalist ideal. However Jewish men and women, as the long roster of Hollywood leading men and sirens testifies, have been and are famed for their beauty. Miriam Margolyes jokes about the necessity of choosing between her looks or her mind in order to negotiate her career, and with a seraphic but ambiguous expression on her beautiful face she decides that maybe her mind is the better bet. I have known Miriam from my student days when I enjoyed the privilege of acting the faithful retainer Pisanio to her wicked queen in Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*. Her sense of humour meant that hardly anyone sharing a scene could resist laughing, 'corpsing' in theatrical jargon. I can say categorically that her beauty has grown with age. She describes herself as short and fat, but being just herself and refusing to alter her appearance, beauty shines through every pore of her body, especially the expressive eyes of a kind strong-minded woman interested in everyone she meets and with a rare gift of empathy. This is the essence of beauty: not the decorative charm of a trophy ornament owned to attest the authority of a successful man.

Mirian Margolyes puts me in mind of Cleopatra, one of the most seductive characters in history who, far from being conventionally attractive according to contemporary accounts and images, would be considered ugly by current standards. Yet she effortlessly inspired a lasting mythology about a powerful woman having beauty bestowed on her regardless of whether she fits the model which is generally defined by men. Powerful men do not need to be handsome. That their consorts are expected to provide the beauty indicates how the way women in particular are expected to look is skin deep. Power and wealth matter more to men. Beauty in the shape of a partner or mistress who represents only their ideal is no more than an adornment. A powerful woman is beautiful by her authority and needs no adornment of a trophy partner.

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Fortunately nationalism can never claim to itself sole ownership of art. The Third Reich tried to do just that and used its heritage as proof of racial superiority, but not before burning books by Jewish writers and banning performances of music by Jewish composers.

Performances of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* required new stage music to the consternation of directors who said, 'but we already have the perfect score,' referring to Mendelssohn's famous piece. The defeat of the Third Reich led immediately to Mendelssohn's jewel of a violin concerto being reintroduced into the repertoire, and Offenbach's *Tales of Hoffman*, which had traditionally enjoyed particular popularity in Germany, given performances where recordings show how delighted the singers are to be reclaiming the opera. Defeat also led to cultural stagnation which from my perspective as a child regularly visiting Germany and Austria lasted for at least two decades. German cinema screened anodyne romantic comedies and self-pitying melodramas starring actors who had avoided the process of de-Nazification, but managed to include the Swedish Zarah Leander who had been an icon of the Third Reich. These productions were so disinfected but also

nostalgic for folksy innocence that gifted and attractive actors like Elke Sommer escaped the dirndl by working in the UK and the US. The classic films about Germany demoralised by defeat were made by foreign directors: Rossellini's *Germany Year Zero*, Carol Reed's *The Man Between* and former refugees from the Nazis like Billy Wilder. It took the post-war generation of children to grow into adulthood before making the traumatic discovery of what their parents had done, and had then kept quiet about. The arts exploded, in the shape of filmmakers including the enfant terrible Rainer Werner Fassbinder who nailed the country's moral morass and hypocrisy more brazenly than most. Iconoclastic composers like Stockhausen broke with Germany's musical traditions. The painter Anselm Kiefer dealt upfront with his country's recent history. Edgar Reitz followed these cultural developments from the First World War to the new Millennium in his epic *Heimat* trilogy, with sharpest focus in the second series on the immediate post war generation and especially the arts, a period about which he had direct experience. I happened to be present at that moment of discovery in the mid 1960s so shocking it ignited an unquenchable fury with the system, both personal and institutional, against family, government and all authority. This rage led directly to the formation of young terrorist groups like the Red Army Faction. One of their supporters described to me the fury which made them turn first of all against their parents: 'We hate you!' In the mid 1960's German cinemas screened Resnais' *Night and Fog*. I will never forget the look of stunned horror on the tear-stained faces of young Germans, my contemporaries, as they staggered out on to the streets. The film accompanied exhibitions with photos from the period of the Holocaust which they had never seen or known about.

The culture hailed by Hitler and Hans Frank as the standard bearer for their thousand year Reich of racial purity turned out however to be even more ardently treasured by survivors of the race they tried to exterminate. The tradition of classical music and literature did of course carry on in Germany throughout those immediate post war years. I sensed guilt and apology

at performances, dutiful and routine, but with transcendent exceptions. Karl Richter brought a blistering intense performance of the Bach *St John Passion* to Oxford. The cry for forgiveness never sounded so sincere and desperate. A particularly brooding Bruckner 4<sup>th</sup> symphony, the *Romantic*, under the baton of Hans Knappertsbusch in Stuttgart caught chilling dark undertones beneath the rustling of forest leaves. The horns sounded sinister, suggesting violence and brutality rather than consolation of union with nature. Recent history haunted every bar of this performance as though the conductor and players were exorcising evil. Of all the interpretations I heard since none came close to the sickening terror in heart and belly felt in that provincial concert hall. Culture had been tainted by nationalism. Blood stained familiar sounds and images. Far Right groups unapologetic about their Nazi past, continued to gather at centres like the Bayreuth and Salzburg Festivals. Musicians who became famous during the Third Reich and who had taken the place of former Jewish colleagues who were killed or had fled abroad could pursue their careers there. A group of former army officers insulted me during the interval of a recital of Mozart violin sonatas at a Salzburg concert. They objected to me not wearing proper shoes. ‘Disrespectful!’ one of them shouted at me his face crimson with rage. The Mozart and these officious elite members of the audience were incompatible so I left. A number of leading German musicians who appeared at these Festivals were welcomed in the UK and the US. Audiences packed with former refugees cheered these artists to the rafters, ready to forgive errors of judgement such as being signed-up members of the Nazi party. The music mattered more. This spiritual homeland nourished nostalgia for the culture and traditions of their parents and ancestors. These refugee families, like my own, clung to the art of their homeland with an intensity I rarely came across in German audiences which seemed mostly interested in matters of social etiquette. Appearance and a veneer of culture mattered more than the substance of art. For refugees the music of Beethoven, Bach and Schubert continued to be particularly loved in a

way that went way beyond the notes and a specific German aesthetic. Speaking to their own lives and everything they had suffered, the music expressed the depths of thought and emotion for which they had insatiable hunger. Audiences made up markedly of families like mine at chamber concerts in Bolton listened to émigré ensembles such as the Amadeus Quartet which had settled in the UK. Jewish faces sunk into scores paid intense attention to every note, as though their lives and souls depended on it - which happened to be nothing less than the truth of the matter. I experienced the same phenomenon in the Balkans after the Bosnia War, where survivors, of all communities were traumatised by the destruction of their mosques and churches as much if not more than by the deaths of relatives. Wiping out the cultural heritage of a community and its memory is an attempt at total elimination and erasure of people. The new post-war city guide to Banja Luka, the administrative centre of the Republika Srpska, the mainly Serb entity of Bosnia, which had tried to ethnically cleanse all its Muslim inhabitants, barely mentions the region's Islamic heritage, and then disparagingly. The mayor of the city while hypocritically celebrating the happy tradition of harmonious coexistence between the communities countered our suggestion of rebuilding the city's main mosque by telling us that since after the war there were so few Muslims living there, any mosque would be unnecessary. We worked hard to convince him that Banja Luka could improve its reputation in the *Rough Guide* to the Balkans as the 'worst place' in Europe, and brought him and his cabinet to a Reconciliation Consultation at Coventry in 2001. He then presented the mayor of Coventry with an old guide book to Banja Luka, which included photographs of all the mosques in the city, every single one of them destroyed in the war. The mayor had at last acknowledged the truth about his city. These processes of reconciliation do bear results which make such projects worth the effort. Not only did the Serb mayor of Banja Luka change his thinking. The then vice-president of the Republika Srpska, who shortly after became president, having initially also denied even the presence of any mosques in his city,

eventually admitted to us that as a student he had been a student tour guide showing people the interior of the celebrated Ferhadija Mosque, a jewel of Ottoman architecture famous throughout the Balkans. This great mosque dynamited and razed to the ground during the war has been rebuilt, thanks in part to the Consultation at Coventry, an attempt at reconciling the communities in the city of Banja Luka. Everyone can one again experience its beauty. The designer of the mosque, Sinan, born into a Serbian Orthodox family before converting to Islam in the 16<sup>th</sup> century became famous as architect of the Sulejmanija Mosque in Istanbul, a rival to and built around the time of Michelangelo's St Peter's Basilica in Rome.

Mirza Basic, a refugee from the Bosnia War, acted as one of our interpreters at the Coventry Consultation which changed attitudes of both the mayor and the vice-president. He remembers singing in a choir that performed for Radovan Karadjic, the Bosnian Serb leader chiefly responsible for the war and the atrocities that took place. The boy Mirza used to regularly visit the mosque before the war began forcing him and his parents to flee the country. He told us how he used to kneel, pray and gaze up at the interior of the dome. He felt a sense of peace. Then the Serbs blew up the mosque. Before escaping he saw his beloved mosque in ruins.

Young Balkan men and women have always been famous for their beauty. Phidias the ancient Greek sculptor of gods and heroes chose young men from that region to be his models. Today in Banja Luka and Sarajevo young men and women looking at their best can be seen following a time-honoured Mediterranean custom processing down the main street in the early evening. The men follow the women who pretend indifference. This is all part of the courtship dance with many subtle gradations of flirting, and is meant to be observed by the older generations, their parents, sitting in cafes that line the road and remembering their youth. The lady with the ermine can be seen in the faces of the young women: the self-possession, spirit and finely moulded features, the jet-black hair, smouldering dark eyes and

pale skin. Banja Luka before the war used to be a predominantly Muslim city where the women were famous for their beauty throughout the whole of the former Yugoslavia from the Slovenian Alps in the North, along the Adriatic Coast of Croatia, down to Kosovo, Macedonia and the border with Greece. People used to travel to Banja Luka, to see the women as well as the tree-lined boulevards, medieval castle, historic mosques and churches of a city nestling against a range of hills, covered in forests. The Vrbas River emerges in dramatic cascades from a deep gorge and continues its more placid way across the plains of Northern Bosnia to join the Sava and Danube. The war of ethnic cleansing and attempted genocide of its Muslim inhabitants reminded Europe of the Jewish Holocaust, which the world still mistakenly thinks can never be repeated. The city lost its reputation. The Ferhadija Mosque resurrected in 2015 is encouraging Muslims to come back. The community of Bosnian Serbs in whose name they had been driven out are gradually accepting their return. The Bosnian Serb President Dodik along with his cabinet and the Serbian Orthodox Bishop Jefrem, all of whom had supported the ethnic cleansing either actively or passively, were not only present at the inauguration ceremony but gave significant speeches about reconciliation. There are few Jews still living in Banja Luka because the Holocaust had wiped almost all of them out, but the Rabbi of his tiny community also attended. Now people from all over the world can visit the tree-lined city and witness the three main communities, Serbian Orthodox, Catholic and Muslim alongside the few remaining Jews, living together again as they used to in the past when the 'worst place in Europe' had once been famed as a jewel of the Balkans.

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For the few years he administered genocide the man in the suit sitting alone in a dark room man had sole possession of one of the world's most beautiful paintings. Wealthy powerful men still own art and regulate beauty. They buy famous works of art for many millions of

dollars. The equivalent value of a small country's national budget is spent acquiring a piece of painted canvas that could be burnt to ashes within seconds. The trophy is then secreted away in a bank vault never to be seen by anyone but the buyer for whom the acquisition has less to do with its aesthetic than its financial value. Possession confirms status. Cost confirms artistic value.

A fourteen year old boy once sat under the decorated dome of a mosque designed by one of Islam's most celebrated architects and felt peace descend on his soul. Another attempted genocide drove the boy from his beloved home town and a river that he had come to know intimately, finding quiet places to fish, swim and sunbathe. Mirza escaped literally by the hair on his skin. As a rule, underage boys accompanying parents on their flight to other countries would be taken off the transport driving them to the border with Croatia. Militia men searched Mirza's bus for underage boys and came across him sitting with his parents. On close examination they discovered that he already had an emerging moustache. Premature hairiness saved his life. As evidenced by the recorded massacre at Srebrenica, the fate of underage boys along with older men was certain death. Those who wanted him gone destroyed the mosque because it represented a culture considered alien by nationalists. The ethnic cleansing of the nation meant wiping away all trace of this culture, even though it had long become an intrinsic part of the nation's heritage.

Leonardo's painting of *The Lady with an Ermine* has been returned to a place where visitors from everywhere can gaze at the young woman who will perpetually look over her left shoulder while stroking the rodent which waits for a moment to wriggle free. The painting is no longer a private possession. Everyone can admire the woman's beauty and understand her context. She can be liberated.

The mosque stands once more: a clear signal that though art can be destroyed it also can and must be recreated, whenever and for evermore. May another fourteen year old boy sit in the same place, look up, feel peace descend and never have to flee his home again.

Peter Pelz June 2018