

Shirin Damerji: "Böhmen, Ur und Abraham"

[Bohemia, Great grand (-mother), and Abraham]

Family histories often find their way of expression through photographs, video films, documents, and in a very specific manner also through oral tradition. Entwined paths guarantee the passage of these from generation to generation. By doing so, content, events, and narrative threads change and the first-person perspective is put into relation with other family members. Consequently, each and every perspective shifts in emphasis; mean elements are softened, intrigues are schemed, beautiful moments shine brighter. Family histories thus lie in the eye of the beholder, or in the hand of the artist, who attends to her family's history with a drawing pencil. Surely, the family constellation Shirin Damerji refers to in her latest work "Böhmen, Ur und Abraham" is extraordinary, since her relatives come from different geographies and disparate social circumstances respectively.

Damerji had recorded her great grandmother Babie's story already quite some time ago. Yet, the typescript has now become a kind of graphic novel, which reveals a drawn picture story and some accompanying text. Her great grandmother's surname Abraham refers to the identically-named "father of many nations" of the Old Testament; Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all trace their origins back to Abraham. In a way, (Babie) Abraham constitutes a beginning too. She is not only the oldest relative Damerji got to know personally as a child, she also learnt to love and fear her. For great grandmother Babie was a "difficult woman," the artist reveals: "Babie was always on bad terms with at least one neighbour and the entire family was therefore not allowed to speak with the respective troublemaker ..." Damerji gives her great grandmother's adversarial life visibility by translating specific events, which she was told of, into a rigid graphic form. Thus, contours are emphasised, faces of unknown people and their emotions remain vague, as if the past is to formulate itself in the vagueness of a visual appearance. It is important for the artist however that facial expressions are clear in most of the works and thus, similar to a storyboard, different close up levels are used. Faces are drawn in close up in order to express their emotions in their coloratura. Elsewhere, Damerji highlights single details to increase the image's effect, such as hands which touch each other.

Only individual scenes were taken from an entire life; scenes, her great grandmother might told her multiple times about or which the artist remembered specifically as a child. Memory is created only in retrospect, origin will always be the present. The cultural scientist Aleida Assmann wrote the following on the definition of memory process: "Active memory is intrinsically reconstructive; it always originates in the present and thus, inevitably, causes a shift, deformation, distortion, reevaluation, regeneration of memory at the very moment of its recall." Memory functions through memory islands over which we jump back in to the past: from island to island, from image to image.

"Böhmen, Ur und Abraham" constitutes only a small fraction of a larger research project on the artist's own family history. This is why Damerji dealt with the love and separation story of her Iraqi father and her German mother already in the fairytale-like animated film "Chrilleriche" (2000) and with her Iraqi single grandmother in "Meine Großmutter der Naftatschi und die Ölfelder [My Grandmother of the Naftatschi and the Oilfields]." That her great grandmother was from Bohemia and maybe of Jewish faith (her surname gives rise to such speculation) might change Damerji's self-image, who for this very reason can look back at a religiously heterogeneous family. Such a religiously, geographically, and culturally ambiguous origin can free oneself from distinct allocation and determination. Damerji's family biography is thus a beautiful example for societies being hybrid and diverse constellations. Everyone carries the alien within. With the attempt of drawing a family tree, Damerji came across a vast number of direct ancestors. Tracing back 20 generations (she was still nowhere near Father Abraham, instead she had merely reached the year 1,500 AD) and also taking into account her parents, every human being would descend from more than 16 million ancestors. The chance to reach a culturally pure family tree, as currently envisioned by many patriots and nationalists, seems thus minimal.

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