

TONSPUR 76: Karen Werner

“Haus”, part I: “Covenant of the Tongue”

As said in the invitation to this event, “HAUS”, part I: “Covenant of the Tongue” began as an inquiry into Karen Werner’s family’s house on Novaragasse in Vienna’s second district. Novaragasse was named in 1862 after the battle at Novara west of Milano when Austrian General Radetzky defeated Sardinian and Piedmontese troops in 1849 and prevented a national union of Italy — if only for another ten years. Thus Novaragasse celebrates war and violence along with Habsburgian nationalism.

A hundred years ago, Novaragasse formed a central part of Jewish Vienna, namely of the famous Mazzesinsel. Violence returned to Novaragasse not as a commemoration, rather as brutal reality in 1939 when Jews were concentrated here, in the city’s second district, and forced to live in so-called “Sammelwohnungen” or “Judenhäusern”, crowded communal apartments, before deportation. One such “Judenhaus” was Novaragasse 40, in which Karen’s great-grandmother and grandfather lived and where Karen’s mother was in utero.

221 people were deported and killed from Novaragasse 40. The idea that the house is haunted, that’s there a ghost who occupies it amongst the residents does not seem far fetched.

But what is a ghost asks Karen her students and gets multiple answers. The one which struck me most — maybe you singled it out, too — was “something different”. Is difference a ghost? Must difference be something that haunts us? In principle certainly not. In case of the “Sammelwohnung” certainly yes. Because Nazi-politics aimed at “othering” Jews and other others. One of its goals was to identify (with the help of pseudo-scientific academics) and set up cultural, social and biological differences between Jews and non-Jews. And they succeeded in establishing these differences. Being forced into a “Sammelwohnung” was one of the differences at an earlier point — being murdered at a later one. So, yes, difference may well be a haunting spirit.

What else can constitute a ghost? History can become a haunting ghost. History based on state sanctioned wrong, arbitrariness, brutality, and history based on individual indifference, heart-heartedness, and cruelty. Memory can become a haunting ghost. When it is incorrectly dealt with, when it is a fudged, embellished, sugarcoated memory which does not allow to call oneself into question.

History and memory can become a haunting ghost for survivors and their descendants, too. Because they were not willing or able to review the past, to solve the burden of often conflicting memories, to open up to response.

Karen looks for response. She finds it in the Sefer Yetzirah, the Book of Creation, a cosmological, anthropological and linguistic work which was written between the sixth and ninth centuries. It is a cabbalistic work, a basis of Jewish mysticism. It describes the 32 paths of creation, namely the 10 Sephirot, the 10 principal numbers, and the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

The book begins as follows: “By thirty-two mysterious paths of wisdom Jah has engraved [all things], [who is] the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, the living God, the Almighty God, He that is uplifted and exalted, He that Dwells forever, and whose Name is holy; having created His world by three [derivatives] of [the Hebrew root-word] sefar: namely, sefer (a book), sefor (a count) and sippur (a story), along with ten calibrations of empty space, twenty-two letters [of the Hebrew alphabet], [of which] three are principal [letters] (i.e. אבש), seven are double-sounding consonants and twelve are ordinary [letters].”

So far Karen has concentrated on the 22 letters of the alphabet and uses them according to cabbalistic tradition to create her response to the violence of the past and the violence of memory. She calls her work “Covenant of the Tongue”, based on Yetzirah’s idea that between the 10 fingers of the hands (also identified with the 10 sephirot) is the “covenant of the tongue” (lashon in Hebrew, which also means “language”). As the last paragraph in Yetzirah reads: “When Abram came, he looked, saw, understood, engraved, permuted and carved, and he was successful. And the eternal Creator revealed Himself to Abram, and took him in His bosom, kissed him on the head, and called him Abraham. He made a covenant with Abraham between the ten toes of his feet — the covenant of circumcision, and between the ten fingers of his hand — the covenant of the tongue. He bound the twenty-two letters to Abraham’s tongue and revealed His secret to him. He drew them in water, burned them in fire, and agitated them with wind. He ignited them with seven planets, and arranged them among the twelve constellations.”

Thus, the 22 letters are nothing less than the Torah itself. This idea was not a new one and not an invention of Cabbalah. The holiest part of the Hebrew bible, the Torah — the Five Books of Moses — was regarded in Late Antiquity as a divine instrument of Creation. This is formulated e.g. in Midrash Rabba to Genesis, an interpretation of the First Book of Moses from the beginning of the 5th century: “The Torah was to God, when he created the world, what the plan is to an architect when he erects a building.” According to tradition, the Torah was dictated to Moses by God on Mount Sinai in the language with which he had already created the world, Hebrew. For this reason, Hebrew is known as the “holy language”. And the Hebrew alphabet was not only passive but it actively discussed its issues with God. E.g. can we read in the same Midrash: “Before the world was created, the letters of the alphabet presented themselves before God.

The letter Aleph then announced: I should be used to create the world, since I am the first letter in the alphabet. But God replied: No, I will create the world with the letter Bet, because it is the first letter of the word brachah (blessing). If only My world will be for a blessing! For this reason, the account of the world's creation begins with the letter Bet — Breishit. The Aleph, as the first letter in the alphabet, was given a different honor: it was selected to begin the Ten Commandments — Anochi.”

Medieval cabbalists like Abraham Abulafia called for mediation via permutating the letters of the Hebrew alphabet combined with specific bodily and breathing techniques to re-create, to get aware that language has an ultimate creative potential. This is what Karen does with her “Covenant of the Tongue”. Through permutations of the sounded letters, she manages to chisel and engrave the air through the portal of her mouth. But she does not only mediate bodily and vocally, but also linguistically, socially, historically, spatially and temporally. These different dimensions of mediation form the different layers of the “Covenant of the Tongue”, which are accompanied by psalms and benedictions.

It is a multilayered response to the violence people, **crammed** in the house at Novaragasse 40, had to suffer. I wish it will help not so much in exorcising the haunting spirit **but** rather in understanding its provenance and in accepting its **existence**.

Felicitas Heimann-Jelinek, November 2017