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Language

by Margarete Stokowski

TRANSIT Your Homeland is Our Nightmare

Translated by Jon Cho-Polizzi

Allegedly, in China, at the end of 2018, the first genetically altered humans were born. This news unleashed a worldwide shockwave of criticism, and the Chinese government forbade the scientist in charge of the project—and his team—from pursuing further research. But despite the many ethical discussions these developments inspired, one might also suspect that some people in this country might not find it such a terrible idea if certain children were born with a tiny genetic switch. A switch which could prompt multilingual children in Germany to unlearn specific languages—the wrong languages, that is: Languages considered “foreign” here, not sexy expat languages.

Bild-Zeitung sounded the alarm again that very week: “Only 1 in 103 children speaks German at home” read the headline. A principal in Neukölln complained: “We’ve been Arabized!” and “We’re out here on the frontlines!” Sure. Skip straight to the War references. Why not? The principal continued her horror story to report that many of the children weren’t being given any kind of upbringing at all. According to *Bild*, these children first needed to be taught basic essentials like: “When you meet someone, say hello.” As if we should be surprised that children weren’t going out of their way to talk to such a principal!

At the same time, Princess Charlotte, the daughter of Kate and William, was being praised by the British media because she could supposedly already speak two languages as a two-year-old. What luck that the nanny from whom she’d picked up a few fragments spoke Spanish and not Arabic! Otherwise, this situation could have unleashed a real “God save the Queen!” scenario.

For a long time as a kid, I thought that “growing up bilingual” meant speaking French or English at home in addition to German—not doing what the Polacks and *Kanaken* did. *Bilingual* sounded like something valuable, but as a child, I had the feeling that my mother tongue was something which should best be discarded. Like old clothing from a flea market which could eventually be replaced with fancy Adidas gear if I just saved up long enough. Polish was synonymous with poverty—synonymous with: better off without it.

“You don’t learn Turkish, you unlearn it,” Kübra Gümüşay once wrote in a column for *taz*. “What would have happened if we had seen future and potential in migrant children instead of problems?” she asks. “Would we have stopped reducing failures down to their ethnic backgrounds—attributes the children can neither select nor control?”

The author Emilia Smechowski describes in her book *Wir Strebermigranten*ⁱ how her family arrived in Germany in 1988—the same year as my own family’s immigration. Her parents tried to become German as quickly as possible, which also meant that it became uncomfortable for them when their daughters spoke Polish on the U-Bahn:

My father's face grew hard. I didn't know what I'd done wrong. My mother looked around us, panicked. [...] "Shhh!" was her only response, and as we exited the train, she hunkered down in front of us and said: "Girls, from now on there's one rule: In Germany, we speak German!" This "Shhh!" became the constant background noise for our first months in Germany [...]. And a solemn Polish child became a silent German kid.

I know this childrearing practice from my own grandparents who arrived before we did in Germany and wanted my siblings and I to speak only German outside our home. But as a small child, you first need to learn to recognize the difference between the languages. There is a favorite anecdote in my family about us children sitting in front of the television learning German with *Sesame Street*, and two-year-old me yelling "Głośniej!" [louder!] over and over because I didn't understand that the Muppets were speaking a foreign language.

This attempt to discourage Polish outside the home eventually led to us children developing the peculiar habit of only answering in German like perfect little (sweet) potatoes, even when Polish was spoken with us. It wasn't until twenty years later, during my studies, when I spent a summer working at a cemetery in Poland that it occurred to me that speaking Polish was not some kind of defect, but rather an additional qualification. To put it bluntly, this was a harrowing realization. An entire country stood open to me: I could speak there, sing there, work there—everything (the only Polish words I didn't know were "fuck" and "toke," but I learned these quickly, too).

There is no fundamental problem for children attending school in Germany to speak a different language at home. This only becomes a problem when the educational institutions these children attend prove unable to adjust to the reality of people with different backgrounds living in this country. I spoke with Beate Lütke, a Professor of German Language Didactics and German as a Second Language who said: "The languages with which a child grows up are essential components of their familial, social, cultural, and communal identity. It is therefore critical that these languages are valued and appreciated not merely in the private sphere, but also in public—particularly at daycare and in school—that they are employed as part of a comprehensive learning process."

Of course, it's no coincidence that *Bild* sought out a horror story from a school in Neukölln—a city district of Berlin which remains affected by poverty, and in many cases, the poverty of a migrant population who may not always be able to seek out the neighborhood of their choice. On the other hand, I know Germans with the know-how to register themselves at different addresses to continue living in hip, "edgy" districts while sending their children away to better schools in other neighborhoods (if by "better" one means fewer poor people and fewer immigrants).

Multilingualism is a reality for many people—not only in Berlin—a reality which could be facilitated and advanced by our educational system, rather than divided into categories of good and bad through racist criteria. Dr. Lütke has criticized the way in which schools "rarely utilize their multilingual resources" in Germany. On the contrary:

Some children even hide the languages they speak at home out of fear of discrimination. Even though we know that learners profit from the positive evaluation and acknowledgment of all the languages they bring with them to a comprehensive language learning process—not to mention their own personal development.

And not just these child learners alone would profit from a new perspective on multilingualism. Because, unfortunately, hiding one's native language often continues on

into adult life: Many (post)migrant adults neglect to list their competencies in languages like Arabic, Polish, or Turkish on professional résumés simply because it may not occur to them to consider this an additional qualification. On the other hand, when white Germans learn one of these languages in classes or during the course of their studies, they receive the highest praise—particularly in the context of social work: It’s as if they had somehow found a magic key to better communicate with members of “problem demographic groups” and mediate integration demands. Don’t get me wrong: It’s actually a very good thing for these often-stigmatized languages to be recognized as valuable and worthy of learning. But the absurdity of this situation is that power imbalances only manifest themselves that much stronger when one group associates sanctions, shame, and pain with a language while another group is ascribed qualities like open-mindedness, linguistic prowess, or originality for their association with the same language—and rewarded accordingly on a professional level. It would be better not only to refrain from dividing languages into categories of good and bad in the first place, but also to stop judging languages by their speakers.

I know I’m not exactly known for allowing men to have the last word very often, but in this case, I’ll conclude with a quote from another expert: Hans-Jürgen Krumm, Professor Emeritus of German as a Foreign or Second Language at the University of Vienna, whose research has shown: “The less multilingual a country is, the less respect that country shows to its minorities.”

ⁱ Emilia Smechowski, *Wir Strebermigranten*, (Hanser Berlin, 2017).