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“Identification”

by Kurt Tucholsky / Peter Panter

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Translated by Jon Cho-Polizzi

Translator’s Introduction

This translation came about as part of a collaborative project between Dr. Charlton Payne and myself in the context of Professor Deniz Göktürk’s graduate seminar ‘Framing Migration’ in Spring 2016.

The source text of the following translation was originally published as “Der Ausweis” in the *Berliner Volkszeitung* on June 23, 1920, under one of Tucholsky’s many pseudonyms: Peter Panter. It was republished in the fourth band of *Die Gesamtausgabe der Texte und Briefe von Kurt Tucholsky*, first published in 1960 by the Rowohlt Verlag in Reinbeck bei Hamburg.

Translation

“The password, boy!”

“Long live Brandenburg!”¹

“Enter!”

When a German wants to travel somewhere, he needs identification. In this country there is quite possibly not a single house or other place in which identification is *not* necessary. It’s always the same story: the clueless traveler is assaulted by a gruff man snarling angrily: “Identification?”—forcing back those without this shred of paper and permitting those possessing it to enter on into the Promised Land. Where do you get this identification, anyway?

To get identification—sometimes called a passport or a registration card or an entry card or personal documents—to get identification in Germany you must first visit a bureau. In this bureau there sits a man eating his breakfast. You knock cautiously, enter quietly (that you don’t remove your boots at the door is only an indication that you have not yet become Chinese enough), you stare about yourself in this holy place with unending reverence, and at long last you dare to open your mouth: “Good day!” Nothing. The official opens his sandwich. Cheese. *Mother should have...* the official is vexed. You say nothing. A large fly bangs its head against a windowpane. After a great while you feel a revolutionary surge

¹ There is a second, performative aspect of identity in the German source text: The “password” is an expression given in the local dialect of Brandenburg, a shibboleth of sorts, providing further verification of affinity which cannot accurately be reproduced outside of a German-language context:

»Hie gut Brandenburg allewege!«

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of emotion and clear your throat. Still nothing. After an even longer time the cheeseman turns, stares accusatorily at you standing angrily behind the counter, and nods his head with a noise which sounds something like a “heh.” You utter a line. You wanted—let us just say—to drive to Silesia with a stuffed St. Bernard and your old auntie and require for this journey an export permit and an entry permit and—Lordalmightynotagain—identification.

The tragedy begins. The cheeseman creates so many difficulties for you that you lose any desire to ever again in your entire life drive to Upper Silesia until after your old auntie and the taxidermied St. Bernard are utterly consumed by the worms. You had thought it would be easy—but the man teaches you better. Monstrous anxiety piles itself high before you—for what purpose should the existence of this man behind the counter serve, if not to exact your misery? After an endless back and forth you receive your identification.

All jokes aside. Particularly since the War, an identification-epidemic has broken out across Germany. In the field, it was one of the more easily administered to illnesses among the officers (the more serious were treated with Salvarsan²)—for any and every humdrum of the army grunt it was necessary to produce identification. The man wanted to collect a pair of pants from his closet? Identification. A petty officer wanted to shoot a crow? Identification. Was one was permitted to die without identification?—one certainly never saw a sign which read: “Entry to Battlefield without Personal Identification Forbidden.” In most cases things became so convoluted in the field that after much ado one typically received one’s identification with relative ease, so that it was actually much the same whether one passed a particular forested border or whether one made the signatory’s life difficult first. In this way countless papers were smeared and much time was squandered.

For aside from the importance which every German bureau is accustomed to ascribing itself, aside from the fact that a great part of this bespectacled nation is only capable of fulfilling its duty within the confines of an office—and when there is no duty to be fulfilled, one is created—aside from all of this, the Prussian mind is so construed that it simply cannot proceed without lists, registry apparatuses, and - identification. For it is well-known that English ledgers read more simply than German ones do and yet business carries on across the Channel, as well. What is lacking here is a healthy common sense. We have identification instead.

This identification affair is part of the wartime- and controlled market system, and the funniest (and saddest) aspect of this is that “bureaus” know precisely that they will always lose their paper war against life, the practical challenges of the day will not be just, and that in the end all these racketeers will slip right through the cracks. So who *is* affected? Only the fools. The clever ones always have identification. Wherefrom? They just do.

Identification sickness has struck deep in the bones of the populace. It was set loose through the unholy compulsion of the people to always (and everywhere) play bureau. Whenever six otherwise intelligent and reliable humans in Germany come together and create a bureau—dear Lord! Hermann Wagner once hit the nail on the head, explaining: “The objectives of our profession were to contend in competitive conflicts against equivalent agencies, to ingratiate ourselves upon superordinate departments and to clarify to subordinate departments their subordinate status.” Such business does little more than establish its own immoderate importance.

² First marketed in 1910, Salvarsan was the initial marketing name of arsphenamine, the first effective synthetic drug used to treat syphilis.

One means of achieving this is identification. The oft touted "Prussian discipline" collapses without oversight to regulate life. I have never in my own life seen such disorderly knaves as those old military stags—petty officers who for eight, ten, twelve years experienced the benedictions of Prussian spirituality upon their beings. They should have been a picture of discipline! Mealtime. They were clumsy as young hounds when they tumbled in without the help of prohibitive warning signs or identification. Without identification the entire World War would have been no fun for them at all.

We recognize identification in a thousand different forms. In the hundred unnecessary registration and deregistration certificates, in that restlessly absurd police registration system which only blooms in this blessed country (and which inhibits not a single criminal, yet burdens thousands of respectable citizens)—we find it in the senseless communications and reports which no one reads and which only become important when they go unfinished—we find it in the lists and minutes which everyone finds necessary to complete—in the ragged forms and permission slips which must be produced, filled out, signed, stamped, and submitted. And meanwhile the country drowns in disarray.

This is not a question of political party, this affair with identification. If only one day the concept would disappear from the German imagination that every little shit bureau should be the center of the universe—that people have nothing better to do than to enact these ridiculous formalities—if only we could rid our heads of this!

All who read this will quite possibly nod their heads, smile, and say "Yes: He's right!" But does this rid us of even one single identification? Everyone considers all these identifications unnecessary—every identification but one's own. And cheerfully—instead of working—our nation smears up further forms.

And I shouldn't be surprised if one day, when Erich Ludendorff arrives in heaven (and where but to heaven *would* divine justice send him otherwise?), the decorated general should not bump into a chubby patrolman with a pair of tiny wings upon his back who—pulling himself together and straightening himself up—exclaims most subserviently and with an air of the utmost obedience: "I must request to see your identification, sir!"