

Berlin Program for Advanced German and European Studies

Adriana Altaras

reads from

Doitscha

Moderation: Irene Kacandes

Report



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Reading and discussion of *Doitscha: eine jüdische Mutter packt aus*

Report

On November 25, 2015 the Berlin Program for Advanced German and European Studies welcomed Adriana Altaras as she read from her most recent book, *Doitscha: eine jüdische Mutter packt aus* (Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2014). Altaras is an actress, theater director, author, and well-known figure in the German public sphere who resides with her family in Berlin. Her first book, *Titos Brille: Die Geschichte meiner strapaziösen Familie* (Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2011), was turned into a film in 2014. The reading and discussion of *Doitscha* were moderated by Irene Kacandes, Professor for German Studies and Comparative Literature at Dartmouth College and current President of the German Studies Association (GSA). During the event Altaras read passages from different points in her book after which she responded to questions posed by Kacandes. Following Altaras' final reading, the discussion was opened to include questions from the audience.

Over the course of the evening, Altaras and Kacandes' conversation centered on a couple of recurring issues. One of which was the relationship between her first and second book. Her first book explores her parents' history and their journey from the former Yugoslavia to Italy, and finally Germany. Whereas her debut novel looks at Jewish life in Postwar Europe more broadly, in her second book she turns to her own family—her husband and two sons—and their present life in Berlin for her subject matter. Though all of her material in *Doitscha* is taken from events that occurred in real life, Altaras maintains that the book is not a memoir but rather a mixture of memoir and fiction. During the discussion she referred to her new book as an “operation on a living object”. Rather than reflecting on events in the more distant past whose significance is perhaps easier to discern, in *Doitscha* she attempts to analyze her family's changing dynamic *in medias res*. To do so she inhabits different characters in the novel, relating the same events from the perspective and voice of her immediate family, her aunt, and even from the point of view of her therapist.

Doitscha departs from *Titos Brille* in another important aspect: in *Doitscha*, Altaras is not only interested in illuminating Jewish life in modern Europe, but specifically the relationship between Jews and Germans in contemporary Germany. Altaras explained that she wrote in different voices—“in multiple tongues”—to facilitate her exploration of this complex relationship. In *Doitscha* this is most clearly articulated by her son David. He struggles with his identity as both German and Jewish, the son of a Jewish mother and a German father, and this inner conflict manifests itself in verbal and physical battles with his father who he rejects as embodying all of the worst of German stereotypes: the serious, stoic, rule-loving, and inhibited German. During the reading Altaras read passages that examined this conflict from the perspective of Adriana, David, and David’s younger brother Sammy. Kacandes posed a question to Altaras about whether it was this very personal focus of the book that allowed her to explore more political aspects of modern life in Berlin. Altaras explained that for her the political often only emerges out of discussing the personal. This particular conflict between David and his father shed light not only on the relationship between Germans and Jews, but also contemporary concerns about state surveillance, the relationship between the United States and Germany, and the multicultural nature of modern Berlin.

The role of humor in Altaras’ literature and life was also a recurring topic of the discussion. *Doitscha* plays with exaggerated stereotypes of both Jews and Germans for humor and Altaras explained to the audience that approaching serious issues from a humorous angle has been extremely important for both her literary works and her own personal approach to dealing with her family’s past. During the talk she discussed a speech that she also describes in *Doitscha*, which she was asked to give by the Central Council of Jews in Germany on the anniversary of the *Novemberpogrom* of 1938. Altaras explained why she is not a fan of the kind of commemorative celebrations and memory culture imposed by official organizations. She feels there are three general ways of remembering the past and dealing with the trauma of Holocaust—yelling, crying, and laughing—and she revealed to us that she chooses laughter and humor over somber remembrance. Although her methods for using humor to deal with the past have not always been immediately welcomed, Altaras maintains that Germany needs a new paradigm that goes beyond the victim-perpetrator dichotomy when dealing with the Holocaust. In her eyes, humor and laughter are essential elements of navigating the evolving relationship between Germans and Jews today. She explained how the growing community of Israelis living in Berlin provides an exciting example of

how Jewish life is emerging again in Berlin and thriving in totally new ways. All of the possibilities that exist in Berlin for participating in Jewish life, both within and outside of the religious community, suggest that we must rethink the models used to examine the relationship between Germans and Jews in Germany.

The prologue to *Doitscha* begins with a host of ghosts swirling around and murmuring to the character Adriana. She describes them as *Dybbuks*, the malicious souls in Jewish mythology who are detached from their bodies and haunt the living. For the real Adriana Altaras, the *Dybbuks* that haunt her seem to be less evil spirits than the benevolent ghosts of past authors who guide her writing. Altaras declared that her one of her idols is the writer Isaac Bashevis Singer, one of the most famous Yiddish-language authors whose short stories and folktales explored Jewish life in Europe and the United States and the relationship between the Jewish community and their non-Jewish neighbors. In *Doitscha*, Altaras certainly aspires to this same tradition of writing about and examining Jewish life as she inhabits these traditions and voices from the past and as she continues a long tradition of considering the possibilities of Jewish life in Germany.

Report by Tara Hottman, Berlin Program Fellow 2015-2016

THE BERLIN PROGRAM FOR ADVANCED GERMAN AND EUROPEAN STUDIES promotes a new generation of young North American scholars with specialized knowledge of modern and contemporary Germany and Europe. The program supports scholars in all social science and humanities disciplines, including historians working on the period since the mid-18th century. Since its inception in 1986 at the Freie Universität Berlin the program has brought more than 300 fellows to Berlin. In order to foster a deeper understanding of Germany and Europe, our colloquium invites distinguished individuals involved in academic, cultural, and public affairs. Among our guests have been Christa Wolf, Emine Sevgi Özdamar, Marion Brasch, Joachim Gauck, Carsten D. Voigt, Robert Leicht, Necla Kelek, Hans-Ulrich Wehler, Klaus von Beyme and Charlotte Frank (one of the architects of the Bundeskanzleramt). Each year, our Summer Workshop and the GSA Distinguished Lecture at the Freie Universität Berlin as well as our Alumni Panel at the GSA Annual Conference in the U.S. provide a forum for scholarly exchange and seek to strengthen ties between fellows, alumni and the academic community in Berlin and beyond.