



FRANZ HESSEL

WALKING
IN
BERLIN

A FLANEUR IN THE CAPITAL

'An absolutely epic book,
a walking remembrance.'
Walter Benjamin

The Suspect

Walking slowly down bustling streets is a particular pleasure. Awash in the haste of others, it's a dip in the surf. But my dear fellow citizens of Berlin don't make it easy, no matter how nimbly you weave out of their way. I attract wary glances whenever I try to play the flaneur among the industrious; I believe they take me for a pickpocket.

The swift, firm big-city girls with their insatiably open mouths become indignant when my gaze settles on their sailing shoulders and floating cheeks. That's not to say they have anything against being looked at. But the slow-motion stare of the impassive observer unnerves them. They notice that nothing lies behind my gaze.

No, there's nothing behind it. I simply like to linger at first sight; I'd like to capture and remember these glimpses of the city in which I live ...

In the quieter outlying districts, incidentally, I'm no less of a spectacle. There, in the north, is a square with wooden scaffolding, the skeleton of a market, and right beside it, the widow Kohlmann's general store, which also sells rags, and above the bundles of wastepaper, bedsteads, and fur rugs, on the slatted veranda of her shop, there are pots of geraniums. Geraniums — vibrant red in a sluggish grey world — into which I'm compelled to gaze for a long time.

The widow gives me the evil eye. But she doesn't complain — maybe she thinks I'm an inspector; something's amiss with her papers, for all one knows. But I mean her no harm; I find I'm curious about her business and her views on life. Now she sees I'm finally walking away, as I head toward the cross street, to stare at the backs of the children's knees as they play at hitting a ball against the wall. Long-legged girls — enchanting to watch. They hurl the ball by turns, their hands,

heads, and chests twisting as they do so; the hollows of their knees seem to be the centre, and origin, of their movements. Behind me, I feel the widow craning her neck to look. Will she alert the law to this strange fellow's behaviour? Suspicious nature of the observer!

When twilight falls, old and young women lean at the windows, propped up on pillows. I feel for them what psychologists *describe* with words like 'empathy'. But they won't allow me to wait alongside them. I wait alone and for nothing.

Street merchants spruiking their goods don't mind if you linger by them, but I'd rather stand next to the woman with an enormous hairstyle from the previous century, who is slowly spreading her embroidery across blue paper and staring mutely at her customers. And I'm not really one of them; she can hardly expect that I'd buy anything from her.

At times, it is my wont to go into the courtyards. In Berlin, where buildings may be several courtyards deep, life beyond the front dwellings becomes denser and more profound, making the courtyards rich in spirit, those poor courtyards with a bit of green in one corner, the carpet rods, the garbage cans, and the pumps left over from the time before running water. Ideally, I manage to visit them mid-mornings, when singers and violinists emerge, or the organ-grinder man, who also whistles on his free fingers, or the wonder who plays a snare drum on his front and a kettledrum on his back (a cord runs from a hook around his right ankle to the kettledrum behind, up to a pair of cymbals on top; and when he stomps, a mallet strikes the kettledrum, and the cymbals crash together).

Then I stand next to the old porter woman — or rather the doorman's mother, old as she looks, and as accustomed as she seems to sitting on her little camp chair. She takes no offence at my presence, and I'm allowed to look up into the courtyard

windows, where young typewriter ladies and sewing girls from the offices and workshops crowd to see the show. They remain, blissfully entranced, until some bothersome boss comes and they have to shuffle back to their work.

The windows are all bare. Only one, on the second-to-top floor, has curtains. A birdcage hangs there, and when the violin cries out, from the depths of its heart, and the barrel organ wails resoundingly, then the canary starts to warble, the only voice from the silently staring windows. It's beautiful. But I also like to spend my share of the evening in these courtyards: the children's last games — they're called to come upstairs, again and again — and the young girls who come home, only to want to leave again. I alone find neither courage nor pretext to intrude; it's too easy to see I'm unauthorised.

Around here, you have to have purpose, otherwise you're not allowed. Here, you don't walk, you walk *somewhere*. It's not easy for the likes of me.

I count my blessings that, on occasion, a friend takes pity and allows me to accompany her when she has errands to run — to the stocking repair shop, for example, where a sign on the door reads 'Fallen stitches taken up'. In this dreary mezzanine, a hunchback scurries through her musty, wool-laden room, which is brightened by new, glossy wallpaper. Goods and sewing supplies lie atop the tables and étagères, around porcelain slippers, bisque cupids, and bronze statuettes of girls, the way herding animals gather around old fountains and ruins. And I'm allowed to look closely at all of it, and glean a piece of the city's and the world's history from it, while the women confer.

Other times, I'm taken along to a clothing mender who lives on the ground floor of a courtyard building on Kurfürstenstraße. A curtain, which doesn't quite reach the floor, divides his workroom from his sleeping quarters. On a

fringed scarf hanging over the curtain, Kaiser Friedrich is colourfully depicted as crown prince. 'That's how he came from San Remo,' the mender says, following my gaze, and then goes on to show me his other monarchist treasures: the last Wilhelm, photographed and very much framed with his daughter on his knees; and the famous picture of the old Kaiser with his children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. He says he's 'glad to re-sew my lady-republican's green jacket', but at heart he keeps 'with the old lords', especially as the Republic only cares for the young people. I don't try to convince him otherwise. My understanding of politics is no match for his monarchist objects and objections.

He's always very kind to my friend's dog, which sniffs around at everything, curious and always on the trail of something, just like me. I myself like to go walking with this little terrier. We both get completely lost in thought; and he gives me occasion to stop more often than such a suspicious-looking person as myself would normally be allowed.

Recently, however, things took a bad turn for us. I had gone to pick him up from a building where we were both strangers. We went down a set of stairs in which a grillwork elevator shaft had been installed. The elevator was a grim interloper in the once serenely wide stairwell. From the colourful windows, plump heraldic ladies stared incredulously at this mobile dungeon, and their grips loosened in astonishment around the jewels and emblems in their hands. The smell must have been confusing, with its jumbling of various pasts, distracting my companion to such a degree from our present surroundings and customs that on the first step of the steep staircase, which led down to the foot of the elevator, he *forgot himself!*

Such a thing, my friend later assured me, could only have happened to such a civilised creature in *my* presence. I could

tolerate that assertion, but I was harder hit by the accusation made by the building's porter at the moment of the event, who unfortunately stuck his nose out of his box just as we were forgetting ourselves. In proper recognition of my complicity, he turned not to the pup but to me. Pointing with a grey, menacing finger at the site of the misdeed, he barked at me: 'Eh? An' ya wanna be a cultured yuman bein'?'

I Learn a Thing or Two

Yes, he's right. I really must 'culture' myself. Just walking around won't do it. I'll have to educate myself in local history, take an interest in both the past and future of this city, a city that's always on the go, always in the middle of becoming something else. That's what makes it so difficult to pin down, especially for someone who makes his home here ... I think I'll start with the future.

The architect welcomes me into his big, bright atelier and leads me from table to table, showing me plans and plastic models for construction sites, workshops, and office buildings, the laboratories of a rechargeable battery factory, drafts of an aeroplane exhibition hall, drawings for a new residential development that will save thousands of people from housing shortages and the misery of the tenements, raising them up into the air and light. He also tells me about everything Berlin's master builders are planning on doing, or in some cases what they're in the middle of doing. It's not just the city limits and suburbs that they want to transform with big orderly settlements. The new Potsdamer Platz will be surrounded by twelve-storey high-rises. The impoverished Scheunenviertel^[3] will disappear. Around Bülowplatz^[4] and Alexanderplatz, a new world will appear in massive city blocks. New projects are constantly being developed to solve the problems of real estate and traffic. In the future, neither the speculator nor the architect will be allowed to mar the city's style with their single edifices. Our building codes won't permit that.

The architect describes his colleagues' ideas: since the city will gradually reach one of the banks of the Havel River in Potsdam, one of them draws up a plan with train lines and arterial roads in which he includes the lovely wooded areas

and scattered lakes, ultimately incorporating them as Hamburg has done. Another colleague wants to build a large imposing square between the Brandenburg Gate and Tiergarten, so that the Siegesallee^[5] that now cuts through the park would mark its limit. On the fairgrounds, the exhibition centre would be shaped like a gigantic egg, with inner and outer rings of halls, a new athletic forum, and a canal with a waterside restaurant between garden terraces. The Potsdamer and Anhalter train stations would be relocated to a sidetrack of a suburban train line to make room for a broad avenue with department stores, hotels, and parking garages. With the completion of the Midland Canal,^[6] Berlin's network of waterways is changing, and the corresponding renovation and construction of riverbanks, bridges, and facilities is a significant challenge. And then there are the new building materials: glass and concrete. People now use glass instead of bricks and marble. There are already a number of houses whose floors and stairs are made of black glass, and their walls are made of opaque glass or alabaster. And there are iron buildings, clad in ceramic and framed in gleaming bronze.

The architect notices my bewilderment with a smile. So he gives me a quick demonstration. Down to the street and into his waiting car. We hurtle down Kurfürstendamm, past old architectural horrors and new 'solutions' and redemptions. We stop in front of the cabaret and the movie palace, which form such an emphatic unit precisely because of their quiet dissimilarities, both wheeling cheerily through the air, constantly tracing the stirring simplicity of their own lines, though the one is short and squat while the other towers over it. The master next to me explains the work of masters. And in order to illustrate what he is describing, he gets out of the car, leads me down a deep twilight-red passageway into one of the theatre's auditoriums, and shows me how the entire

room is circular, and that the walls are covered in an uninterrupted expanse of patterned wallpaper.

Then we drive down a cross street through a middle-class bit of Charlottenburg, past Lake Lietzen, to the radio tower and exhibition halls, which he expands to larger fairgrounds with a few words. Before he'd finished, we reached Reichskanzlerplatz^[7], and he describes an entertainment centre that is planned here, both blocks full of cinemas, restaurants, dance halls, a big hotel, and a tower of lights that would soar over all of it. We turn onto a street parallel to Kaiserdamm and stop in front of a vast new development. My guide himself is the building contractor here. Foremen approach us and debrief him. Meanwhile, I gaze into the rambling chaos at the two pillars of the entryway, already clearly recognisable even in their bare brickwork. Then I walk with the master, over detritus and debris, to the edge of the site, beyond which the abyss of the middle yawns. The floor plan, which one must normally read from the notation of 'frozen music' on a drawing table, now lays spread out before me. Here are the two large depots where the train cars will bed down. Tracks will stretch out *this* way. All around the edges, gardens will emerge where children of the officials, drivers, and conductors will play beneath the windows of the many bright apartments. We drive along one edge of the big rectangle. At one point, the street is just coming into being and plants run riot over our path. And all around us, a whole city grows from the contractor's words.

After making so many unfinished things visible to me, he can now show me things in their completion. Our car hurries across the bridge over the Spree River near the Charlottenburg Palace and along the canal to far-flung Westhafen. A glance at the grim Plötzensee Prison walls. From the endless Seestraße, we reach the churchyard wall and the tenements, and then Müllerstraße. A terrific

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of three halls supported by iron framework.⁶ We stride through the entryway and, from within the courtyard, we observe the three-storey wings of the apartment buildings, the four-storey front building, the hulking pillars in the corners. Then we poke around everywhere, first in the glass-and-iron hall where the train cars are housed. We gaze up at the train-station dome, and down into the strange world of the walkways and rails. Then the administrative offices, then the repair shops, and finally up an inviting flight of stairs into one of the lovely apartments.

While walking around the complex, I comprehend, without being able to express myself in the proper structural engineering terms, how its creator was able to lend this enormous brick thing — which must be a train station, office, and home all at once — an unforgettably unified character by repeating certain motifs, emphasising certain lines; by bringing forward sharp edges on the rising surfaces and other such elements.

On the north-eastern side, we gaze across fields and into the distance, at the giant building's tiny neighbour, a little house 'so wind-worried', as the poem⁷ goes, standing far afield. People call it 'the shrimp'. The juxtaposition of these towering halls and that hut is like an emblem of the silhouette of Berlin.

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In the evening of that overfilled day, I was welcomed into the home of an elderly lady who produced keepsakes from her chests and escritoire, things that had once belonged to her

⁶ Hessel is describing the Seestraße train depot.

⁷ 'Der Knabe und das Immelein' by Eduard Friedrich Mörike.

forebears in an old house on Stralauerstraße: a big English doll in a greyed muslin empire dress and still-pink silk shoes with ribbons bound about her ankles in a crisscross pattern; little plates and candlesticks of carefully carved wood that these forebears played with as children in the garden near the Spree River and the wooden Waisen Bridge,⁸ where Chodowiecki⁹ gazes into the water in Menzel's¹⁰ famous painting. The elderly lady removes, from a tin, home-ownership documents with wax seals. She allows me to open fragile family registers belonging to her great-grand-aunts, in which poetic dedications in hair-fine, flourishing script stand opposite to tinted bouquets, and delicate landscapes by artist friends. The landscapes are ornamented here and there with horsemen in yellow frocks and bucket-top boots, or an equestrienne in violet dress. The form and colour of the bouquets is kindred to that on the plates and vases and bowls at the Royal Porcelain Factory Berlin.

She even places a bridal crown from the year 1765 in my hands: flower-shaped wire braided with green silk. I'm allowed to touch an agate tobacco tin. The gracious owner of all of these treasures takes small family portraits down from the walls: female heads with curling, lightly powdered hair and daintily tinged scarves, men in wigs with dark-blue frocks. And then she tells me about the Berliner parlours, the more

⁸ Waisen Bridge (Orphan Bridge): so named because of its proximity to an orphanage, the wooden bridge was replaced with a stone one in 1894 as part of efforts to make Berlin a more suitable royal seat.

⁹ Daniel Nikolaus Chodowiecki, a Polish-German painter and etcher, lived in Berlin; director of the Berlin Academy of Art.

¹⁰ Adolph Friedrich Erdmann von Menzel (1815 – 1905), a 19th-century German artist

beautiful predecessors to the 'front rooms' with mahogany furniture and the blue and red salons that our grandparents had. These parlours were shuttered sanctums in which children could only set foot on special occasions. We open up one of her favourite books, *Childhood Memories of an Old Berliner* by Felix Eberty,¹¹ and read:

The walls were painted light-grey. Only the wealthiest people had carpets. As a wedding present, Wilhelm Schadow, a boyhood friend of my father's who would later become director of the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, had painted a beautiful, vivid rendition of the four seasons, grey-on-grey accented with white highlights, so that it seemed as if they were in relief. An exquisite carpet woven with strawberry leaves, flowers, and fruit covered the floor and the furniture was delicately fashioned of white birch wood. A small chandelier of four lights hanging on beaded glass chains seemed exceedingly sumptuous to us, an untouchable work of art, which we would have all-too-well liked to hold in our hands, if it hadn't been strictly forbidden; the possibility of satisfying this desire was within reach, because the height of the ceiling would have allowed us to touch the gleaming glass morsels with the aid of a chair.

We speak of even older Berlin interiors. She has paintings of rooms where *l'hombre* tables¹² stand decked in needlework,

¹¹ *Jugenderinnerungen eines alten Berliners*. Berlin: 1878.

¹² A *l'hombre* table is a three-sided table made specifically for playing the card game of the same name, the popularity of which peaked around the beginning of the 1700s.

with embroidered sofas, the servants with the prettily painted porcelain cups, an English repeater¹³ on the bureau, a 'well-conditioned' varnished grand piano from the Frederician era in the corner. She remembers the high beds that were accessed by a series of steps, canopy beds *à la duchess*¹⁴ as well as *à tombeau*,¹⁵ canopy rope and fringe, nightdress and gloves, hand-designed tapestries with figures in the French style. She produces an endless supply of possessions: daguerreotypes, copperplate engravings daubed in India ink, cut-out figures ...

A bronze flower-basket hangs over us, green-glass leaves and pale glass morning glories spilling over the top. This item is from the thirties or the forties of the previous century, when a new relish for Rococo sprang up. The light flickers in the night wind as if it weren't electrical, but rather the light of an oil lamp. It's late for old ladies. And I realise how tired I am from so much Berlin.

13 A repeater is a type of watch or clock that chimes the hour (and sometimes the quarter hour) at the push of a button; popular before electrical lighting, as the time could be read in the dark.

14 Canopy bed *à la duchess*: a bed whose canopy posts are not visible.

15 Canopy bed *à tombeau*: a bed whose posts are taller at the head than at the foot, resulting in a sloping canopy, often hung with thick draperies; also known as a tent or field bed.