

Creating the Statue out of the Mass of Clay

AN INTERVIEW WITH URSULA HEGI

Laura Jackson (University of Washington) spoke with the German-born novelist Ursula Hegi on February 2, 1995, when Hegi was on the University of Washington campus to give a talk titled "Breaking the Silence: On Being German in America." In this interview she speaks about how she sees the writing process and about her current project, a non-fiction work on the experience of being German in America. She refers in this interview to two of her most recent works, Floating in my Mother's Palm (1991) and Stones from the River (1994), both of which are set in Germany. Stones from the River brought Hegi a nomination for the prestigious PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction. In this book she traces German life from 1915 to 1952 from the perspective of Trudi Montag, a dwarf who runs a pay library in the fictional town of Burgdorf. Stones from the River was published in hardback by Poseidon and will appear in paperback with Scribner's. It is due to be published in German translation in the near future. Hegi was born in Germany and lived there until she was eighteen. She is an Associate Professor at Eastern Washington University in Cheney, Washington, where she teaches creative writing.

Laura Jackson: Let's start by talking about writing. In your talk today you mentioned that writing is very much a productive process.

Ursula Hegi: It is very much a process. When I write, I never set out to make a point. I believe that there is a place for writing about ideas, and that is in non-fiction. In fiction we need to tell the stories of certain characters and we need to get to know the characters really well, so that we can discover their stories. I stay with a piece of writing until I understand what it is about, doing fifty to a hundred revisions, working with the material and lifting the meaning to the surface. I didn't set out to write about the silence of the postwar years in



Floating in my Mother's Palm, but looking at the book now, I think that—among other things—is definitely a very strong theme. But if I had set out to write about the silence of the postwar years, that would be propaganda—having the idea come first. As writers, we have our beliefs and we have the essence of who we are. That emerges in our fiction if we go very deeply, but we can't have the fiction be a mouthpiece for our ideas. If I really want to make a point—if I want to write about an idea, I do that in nonfiction and I come straight forward and say it.

LJ: But certain ideas come out in the fiction, so in effect doesn't the fiction work as a mouthpiece for the ideas?

UH: No, not a mouthpiece. A mouthpiece is more message-oriented. I think with strong fiction—ideally—as a reader you're left with a message. As a writer you're left knowing something that you didn't know or understand before.

LJ: You mentioned silence, and I wonder if we can talk about silence for a moment. Writing itself is a way of overcoming silence. We heard in your talk today about the silence of different generations, for instance the generation that experienced the war but did not want to talk about it. Do you now belong to a generation more willing to break the silence? I'm thinking in German literature of the many father books and mother books that emerged in the 1970s and 80s.

UH: Hmm. I don't think I can talk about the whole generation. But I can talk about my current project and the people I am talking to who are not writers, but who are, because I am asking them, talking about the silence. They are talking about growing up in Germany and leaving at different ages. For many of them it is the first time they have put it together like this.

LJ: When you interview them?

UH: Yes, and when they talk about their lives. They say things like "Gee, I've never told anyone this" or "I didn't really remember this until just now." They start remembering something and that leads to other memories. After each interview I ask them why they wanted to

talk to me. I get a sense of how they feel about the interview and I also give them the option of sending me a letter and asking me to make it part of the interview, so that there isn't a silence at the end of our time together, so that it is open for as long as I'm working on the book. I realize that I am answering your question based on a narrower group of people.

LJ: You said that people wanted to talk to you. Tell me about the selection of interviewees for this current book project.

UH: Initially I knew just a couple of people I could talk to, so I asked friends and colleagues—I asked anyone I knew to spread the word, so as a result I got several teachers and book editors in the beginning and it is okay to have a couple of them, but I really wanted a wide range of interviewees. I talked to one person who is a counselor, one who is a minister, I talked to a woman who did some volunteer work but who was very much a woman married to an American soldier moving from base to base—a military wife, as she called it.

LJ: So, people from all walks of life?

UH: Yes.

LJ: And your specific purpose was to talk to individuals who were born in Germany and who now live in the United States?

UH: People who were born in Germany around the time I was born in Germany. I was born in 1946. I am interviewing people who were born between 1939 and 1949. My interviews don't start off with questions. I say "Tell me about your life." That's my opening sentence. Some say, "Aren't you going to ask me questions?" and I'll say "afterwards" because I do have things that I want to get to, but I find that most of them cover them when they talk about their lives. Most of the questions that I ask at the end are questions that I haven't asked anyone else before but that I am noting down because it comes out of the material. I'm approaching this project as a storyteller—as a novelist, not as a scientist. And it doesn't matter at what age they came over here, and it doesn't matter if they are American or German citizens. What matters is having been born in a country—Germany—

that has the history it has and then coming to the United States. These are the things we have in common, but there are many things that we don't have in common. They are all very different stories. I have done twelve interviews so far and I'm doing two more over the coming weekend.

LJ: Tell me about your approach as a storyteller.

UH: As I listen to them, I take notes on themes I see emerging again and again. There is one woman, for example, for whom fear is an absolute life theme. This comes through over and over again. When it appears for the third or fourth time, I write it down and I start looking for it. Maybe three or four other themes start emerging. With some people I have up to a hundred pages of material, and of course I'm not going to use all of it.

LJ: With a single person over a hundred pages?

UH: Yes, with some of them. Then I look at what I am going to use. It's like having a huge mass of clay and somewhere in there, there's a statue. And you take away everything that does not look like the statue. So I really need to think about that person's life story. If you and I interviewed the same person, what I see might be quite different from what you see as the life story, depending on who we are as individuals, depending on our differences. Any two people doing an interview would quite likely come up with a somewhat different story, so there's a selection of what stays in. For example, there is one man who grew up in an orphanage in Germany, was adopted out several times and then sent back. He mentions it here and here and here. It keeps coming up throughout the interview. The thing is to pull it all together, and right now the interview starts off with the piece. I don't interpret within the piece, although I'll write an introduction, but each piece is a first-person narrative. "I did this, and I did this. This is what happened to me." I'm really after preserving the different voices, staying with the speech pattern and having this person tell her or his story. You may look at this afterwards and say, "But that's not how I would say it." I might tell my own story in a very different way than you would tell my story.

LJ: Have there been surprises in the course of the interviews?

UH: I didn't have a whole lot of expectations. What I'm finding is that in telling the story I am really getting to know the people through their words. Dorothee Wierling [DAAD Professor at the University of Washington] and I were talking earlier today about the lines between fiction and non-fiction, and I think there is a definite line.

LJ: Tell me about the line between fiction and non-fiction. Is *Stones from the River* a product of fiction and non-fiction?

UH: The difference there is that, in much earlier drafts of *Stones from the River*, I did tons of research.

LJ: Archival and interviews?

UH: Yes. And I would write down for example what happened during *Kristallnacht*—details, details. It was just a lot of notes and maybe some fiction and then lots of notes. As I moved forward in the novel going through it again and again, I found this a real difficult and challenging point. I've never done as much research for a novel as I have done here because I am writing about a period of time that I have not lived. So everything I had to support and wait until I understood it. If you want to look at fiction as the building, I had the building but I also had the scaffolding that helped me to build this building and if I were to leave the scaffolding on the building it would be very ugly. So it was a real challenge and took a lot of revisions to massage the research into the text. Let me give you an example. Right after *Kristallnacht* when the synagogue was burning, Trudi hears someone sing the Horst Wessel song and it is a woman who's very excited and she points to the flames to show her child. That came from reading about the Horst Wessel song and about how the Jews were assessed a communal debt to pay for the cleanup. If I just put that in there as fact, it's not going to be fiction. It becomes fiction through the characters. That is what one of my writing teachers used to call the "furniture of the world."

LJ: The "furniture of the world?"

UH: Yes. The furniture of the world has to be correct. If I write about Germany in the 1940s, I have to use the correct furniture. If I write about the state of Washington in 1990, those details are accessible to me. They are part of my awareness, what I see, what I smell, what I feel. And it's much easier to make that furniture authentic. Even though you're writing fiction, the background has to be authentic. For example in *Floating in my Mother's Palm*, I made a mistake in the hardcover edition. The American soldier has a beard. Someone came to a reading and said that the soldiers didn't have beards. The paperback was still in the process of coming out, so I was able to change it. I went back to the four or five references with a beard and the man now has no beard. With *Stones from the River* there were thousands of details. The German-American writer Ilse-Margret Vogel sent me her photo albums, so I was able to see what she wore when she was three years old. She would have been Trudi's age. I asked her what they ate and how they heated the house. It all needs to come through the characters, not through the author telling how things were, but through the character's awareness.

LJ: Your work assembling information and collecting life stories reminds me of Trudi, a collector of stories in *Stones from the River*. Is she a character you identify with? Or do you identify with Hanna in *Floating in my Mother's Palm*?

UH: I think they all have a part of me. Certainly the writer part of me is very much in Trudi. There is part of me in Hanna. There is even part of me in the man who hangs himself in *Floating in my Mother's Palm*, who is a still a little boy in *Stones from the River* and Trudi's closest friend. I need to move into the characters—inside their skin—when I write about them. When I was writing from Trudi's point of view, I was her height [Trudi is a dwarf]. I knew what it felt like to be that height. And there were times when I was close to tears, because I need to become the character—each one of the characters, even the man who hangs himself. In *Floating in my Mother's Palm*, there is his perspective just before he kills himself. I need to know how that feels. I even had someone show me how the rope would be tied so I would know the details. I go into it very deeply and sometimes to a place that is very scary, but I also know my way back to myself. I do take a lot of risks.

LJ: One of the things that impressed me about Trudi was the fact that, as you said, she was very conscious of her shape and of her differentness. I recall that at one point her friend Max says to her something like "Trudi, you're not as different as you think. Your differentness is just on the outside, where everybody sees it." I wonder if you could comment on that—this sense of being different or otherness. The Abramowitz family for example is known to be a Jewish family and yet they are also very much a part of the community in Burgdorf.

UH: The otherness gets emphasized, because I think as soon as you take a group of people and put a label on them it puts a distance between them and the rest of the world. It dehumanizes. Just a few days ago in the paper there was an article about the liberation of Auschwitz in which a rabbi talked about his fear regarding individuals like Rush Limbaugh, who make people the "other" and this is very dangerous. Trudi's otherness is there for all to see. Many of us have this feeling of being different, and it is most evident in the teen years, but most of us can hide that. Most of us can, at least on the outside, be like the rest. Trudi never has this chance to retreat the way most of us can, despite feeling our own otherness. We can still be part of the group, at least externally. Trudi cannot, so I think she has a much greater understanding of what it means to be the other. She has felt it all of her life.

LJ: Do you think that it is part of human nature to seek a sense of belonging and to fear one's own otherness?

UH: Good question. I think it is something all of us run into with just about everyone we know.

LJ: In *Stones from the River* you portray some young people who were attracted to the Nazis because of a need to belong. Do you see a similar need to belong in the United States today?

UH: I need to think about that a moment. It's a really complex question. I can take it back to a personal level—to the situation I described earlier where I was protesting the Gulf War and suddenly became the other with a line of police between us and a rapidly growing audience

who looked at us with contempt and hate. I didn't know any of them personally, but because I was there on the other side of these military and policemen who stood for something, I obviously, in their eyes, was in the wrong. If we look at a kids' playground at a school, it happens, all the time. It has happened to all of us, this playground situation, and I think it is just played out in a larger arena as we get older.

LJ: There are things happening in contemporary politics in the United States that have the effect of alienating certain groups. There is a growing need for involvement in politics. If I think of *Stones from the River* for a moment, you describe a population who reacted slowly at first when the National Socialists came to power. As Klaus Malter says, "If only I had said something sooner." Do you see today as a time when we need to start saying something?

UH: It's important to say something. It's essential to make our positions known, but not to silence another group of voices with whom we disagree. But I came to that conclusion relatively late, so I can kind of understand it when people don't.

LJ: You mentioned in your talk today a discomfort with nationalism. *Stones from the River* seems to represent a process of working through your national identity as a German. Can one have a national identity and have it not be a negative thing?

UH: I have seen very positive national identity in a lot of people, in my friend who comes from Holland, for example. She very much identifies with her community of origin and that is why she is comfortable being Dutch. Another friend from France is more critical of France than my Dutch friend is of Holland, but she also very much identifies with her community of origin and is much closer to France than I am to Germany. She teaches French and goes back very often. She lives very much both the American and the French cultures. So I think it has a lot to do with identification with one's country of origin.

LJ: You were born after World War II and yet you feel the events of the war as a very heavy burden. Is there ever a time when Germans

can say they have the "Gnade der späten Geburt," and that they can distance themselves from Germany's role in the war?

UH: First of all, I think it's a terrible thing to say, it's a whitewash. And to the rest of your question: I don't know. I think it is important never to forget what happened. One way to not do that is to talk and to write. What came out last week in terms of newspaper and television coverage of the liberation of Auschwitz is very important. It is painful for many of us, Americans and Germans, to look at the documentaries, but I think we need to do that . . .

LJ: And remember.

UH: And remember.

