

THE NEED FOR ROOTS

The Need for Roots: On Ruth Beckermann's

The Paper Bridge

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Returning to my own home in Brussels from my parental home in Scotland, my head is full of familial cares and resounding thoughts on film as I attempt to write about the work of another filmmaker. Beside the pretence of relieving my mother of her full-time care work, this last visit was also selfishly spurred by my own filmic pursuits (as many journeys home have been). I went to visit my elderly father, a child evacuee from London during the Second World War, with a selection of films in tow: my own, *Hit Him on the Head with a Hard Heavy Hammer* (2023), which is based on his endeavour to recall in a little green-lined jotter, marked in blue ballpoint pen as 'Dad's memoir', his experiences of wartime dislocation and his reintegration into London afterwards; and Ruth Beckermann's *The Paper Bridge* (1996), a documentary that traces the Austrian-Jewish filmmaker's family history, their tales of migration while fleeing the threat of persecution in the 1930s and 1940s. The afternoon I landed, we sat and watched Beckermann's film first, postponing the question of how he would relate to the content that I extracted and produced from his written words. My father is forever seated these days, unable to take more than a few unguided steps. So we travelled together through Beckermann's film, setting out from Austria on mud roads into the north of Romania, landing briefly in Israel, and finally coming full circle to arrive back in Vienna. Saturated with imagery and thought, and worn from the ride, before nodding off he concluded: 'You know, history without roots is merely a ghost'.

Uprootedness

My father set me off on a train of thought that quickly led me to Simone Weil's *The Need for Roots*, written in 1943 but published posthumously in 1949 in French. Here, she describes our need for a sense of rootedness as the 'most important and least recognised need of the human soul.' She writes: 'A human being has roots by virtue of his real, active and natural participation in the life of a community which preserves in living shape certain particular treasures of the past and certain particular expectations for the future'. As the Jewish people were deprived of all human rights and the participation in society on every level – labour, education, politics, safety – during the Second World War, one wonders how the soul can overcome such oppression and how one can re-root in a land or re-plant in a world that rejected one's culture and became inhospitable to the core.

The backdrop of *The Paper Bridge* is mid-1980s Austria, when the country was finally reckoning with its active participation in the war's atrocities after decades of silence, cover ups, and denial. Haunted by her Jewish origins, one summer Beckermann decided to dig deep into the soil to understand her heritage and home. She begins with her family tree, mapping migration paths and fates, looking through family photos and notebooks. By winter, she is ready to leave behind the sureties of Vienna – her grandmother's, mother's, and her own hometown – and travels to her father's country of origin, Romania, where he joined the Red Army during the war. Without a clear path, yet a yearning to find connection, she journeys onwards and meets small enclaves of Jewish communities, interviewing individuals along the way, such as a rabbi-cum-kosher butcher, a knowledgeable village historian, and a multilingual Hebrew teacher with a class of merely one or two pupils. She bears witness to their plight to hold onto their customs in diminished communities. Poignantly, her first encounter doesn't involve speech; the

only interaction that she shares with us is the sight of men cutting down a huge tree at its base, the mass falling to the ground with a thud. Each impending meeting forms a branch of oral history that riles against the disorientation of data – the reduction of the persecution of the Jewish people to an 'object of study'.

The protagonists of this personal documentary aren't only willing strangers. Beckermann departs from a personal anecdote of her Viennese grandmother, Oma Rosa, who refused to wear the *Judenstern*, the yellow star, who left the comforts of her home and slept rough in parks and public lavatories, who fought her fate with silence, pretending to be mute. She tells us that her gran would sometimes go to the woods to talk to herself. Beckermann asks, 'Can you forget the sound of your own voice?' Although silence is often a weapon of assault used against women – to curtail their voices, their freedom of thought and speech, or to emotionally abuse them – silence, a friend reminded me, is also often women's first, and most desperate, weapon of defence against violence. How better to preserve oneself from being the target of an attack than to become untraceable, inaudible and, perhaps in time, imperceptible?

Shadows

The Paper Bridge opens with a climb into a derelict attic in Vienna, where horses' hooves can be heard on the trot below. As Beckermann tells the folkloric story of Hagazussa, a woman with special powers, we are transported out of the city into a rural scene – a horse drawn cart on a foggy dirt road. Hagazussa, whose name is also an old High German word for a woman who straddles the material and the spiritual – also known as a witch, a hag, or a *Hexe* in German – was tormented by inhabitants of her village who tried to drive her away. In self-defence, she slowly changed form and became transparent, seeping into the day and night, only to appear as a mere shadow at dusk. Invisible, she would return to the village, observing its people and their customs, and appear at their homes, imperceptible, on rooftops and in cellars. And Hagazussa had plenty of stories to tell, such as a foreboding tale of materiality and faith: villagers on the banks of the River Pruth had an iron bridge, seemingly stable until its fatal collapse. Some believed in building a second bridge out of cigarette papers. Unlikely as it was, their faith allowed them to cross the bridge while the sceptics met a watery end. Connecting the mystic mist of Central Europe to the former centre of an empire, we then find ourselves thrust back to modernity as we glimpse Vienna's landmarks from a tram circling the decorated Ringstrasse with the image of the invisible outsider in our minds.

Fading out of sight was a privilege not only of Hagazussa, but also of Oma Rosa, who was able to disappear in plain sight, to gain papers and passage to Palestine for herself and her daughter. Beckermann's mother tells us that she returned to Vienna only for love, as Beckermann's immigrant Romanian father sought his livelihood there after the war. She remarks that, for him, Vienna was a place of freedom, where he was able to start anew in 1947. However, she reflects on the difficulties of returning to the city that had turned its back on her family, throwing them out, as she puts it, and sending as many of them as they could to concentration camps. The territory known since 1948 as Israel harboured her during war time and is still the place in her heart that she considers as her home. Even though she spent only eleven years there, and the rest of her life in the city where she was born, a sense of unbelonging shadows her.

Wordlessness

Discussing life and death with one protagonist, Beckermann reflects on 'how close the fear of losing one's parents is to the fear of forgetting the past, and vice versa: the fear of forgetting as a result of the death of their generation.' In the film, Beckermann takes on the burden of the second generation of survivors: seeking out and recording memories of their parents' pasts. After seeking searching for the remains of Jewish culture in Romania and visiting the Jewish settlements in Israel, where she calls out the effects of so-called 'progress', Beckermann returns to Vienna to encounter the political unrest during Kurt Waldheim's campaign for re-election as the president of Austria in 1996. Post-war silence thus also takes up a political sword in *The Paper Bridge*, as we see documentation of a protest over the former Wehrmacht officer's election campaign. On the streets, she captures the chants of the divided crowd – 'Waldheim, yes!' 'Waldheim, no!' – and the vile antisemitic rhetoric employed in defence of the right-wing politician by deniers of his involvement in war crimes. As with many officers, he was never prosecuted for his involvement in and knowledge of Nazi crimes. All the while, he held strong to his defense that he was only 'doing his duty'. Having written and published a memoir, *In the Eye of the Storm: A Memoir* (1985), in which he omitted years of high-ranking service in the military, suspicions of his war crimes grew and led to the so-called Waldheim Affair in 1995–96, when an international commission investigated his case. Although his personal involvement could not be proven, the case gained international attention and shone a new light on Austria, a country that had masqueraded as a victim of Hitlerite Germany till the mid-1980s.

To grow roots again, one must begin on hospitable ground – a ground weeded of its perpetrators of war, where they are outed, removed from public office, and prosecuted. The fact that the likes of Waldheim were able to remain in or rise to such high-ranking positions in Austria simply undermined the position of the Jewish communities there, hindering restitution and compensation. By documenting the populist-antisemitism of the moment, the holocaust denial and historical amnesia, Beckermann underlines the danger of silence, of concealing the past, and the necessity of remembrance.

Bridging

In her essay 'A Short History of Silence', Rebecca Solnit writes: 'Some species of trees spread root systems underground that interconnect the individual trunks and weave the individual trees into a more stable whole that can't so easily be blown down in the wind. Stories and conversations are like those roots'. Solnit argues that stories can save lives, that words have the power to inform, fight, rescue, heal, liberate.

The opening lines of my father's memoir set me off on a journey to Wales and England last year: 'I can't recall a time when anybody in authority took me aside and explained my presence in a hostel in Monmouthshire, South Wales (Ebbw Vale), though I gradually grasped there was something over the horizon called WAR and that London (of which I had no memory whatsoever) was not safe. My mother in this seemed a victim, someone tossed around by events'. With his words and a 16mm film camera, I took to the streets of London and approached people to participate in the retelling of his story – an intergenerational story of migration.

The day before leaving Scotland, I finally hooked up my laptop to the television to show my father my bid at understanding his roots. As I perched on the sofa opposite him, anxiously listening to the story unfold as if waiting for a bomb to detonate, he sat attentively listening to the voice of his daughter and the voices of strangers reading his writing, speaking fragments of his life. The film ends with volunteers reading from his pages on Thomas Hardy's poem 'The Self-Unseeing' (1901), in which 'he is returned to his childhood home—father and mother dead'. He wrote:

Here is the ancient door
Where the dead feet walked in

She sat there by the fire
He stood there bowing it higher and higher

Blessings emblazoned that day
But we were looking away

Looking that day in the same direction, facing one another, with my father also facing his past, we travelled through memory to his childhood homes, to the Welsh countryside that sheltered him in wartime and to the street where he grew up after the family's return to London. When it finished, he sat there quite bemused that his story was being told onscreen: the story of a child who grew up displaced, in poverty, without an education to speak of, and how he found his way into the world of thought through his participation in the labour union when working in a television factory in Croydon. After a little prompting from my mother to signal his appreciation, he gave his nod of approval and talked through concepts of the film: the notion of retelling through the memoir form and the ways the film's fragmented structure allude to the ephemeral nature of memory.

In my father's memoir, the writing itself shows signs of a failing motor system, of 'micrographia' – a symptom of Parkinson's disease. The cramped script draws tornado-like shapes on the paper, leaving blank spots growing wider by the page. The lines drawn become rhythmic, bodily even, displaying signs of creatureliness and decay. Yet in writing the memoir, he mustered his strength and made an effort to bridge our generational divide, allowing me to travel to the past at his side. His memoir, one could say, was our paper bridge. Leaving home for home, I departed full of gratitude for yet another journey through thoughts and films.