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The Breathing Instructor

How Carola Spitz Fled Berlin and Took Mindfulness to New York with Her

(Original German Title: Die Atemlehrerin.

Wie Carola Spitz aus Berlin floh und die Achtsamkeit nach New York mitnahm)

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Sample translation by Lara Bulloch

pp. 9 – 20

1. The Studio of Physical Re-Education.

The relaxation expert is not relaxed. She looks out the window, to the East. She gazes at the trees, the meadows, the lake. Her neck hurts. The rent for this apartment is way too high. What a financial risk it was to move in. But what a treat it is to see so much of this vast sky, the sun and the clouds, with seagulls soaring here and there.

The split from Charlotte is eating her up inside. She, Carola, had once called her Charlöttchen, and Charlöttchen had called her Carölchen. They worked together for more than ten years. They were like sisters. Together they went through the hard times. Now they don't speak anymore. Carola observes how the wind makes streaks on the surface of the water and how these patterns change constantly. She looks at the broadleaf trees, the firs, the narrow paths that weave their way through the green. Directly behind the trees, about 800 metres away, she sees the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art on Fifth Avenue. Behind the Museum is the Upper East Side and the East River and Queens and Long Island and then the Atlantic and then Europe. She regularly takes the bus to Germany.

Her clients will be arriving soon. The straws are ready. Not those big ones meant for milkshakes, but the small ones used for cocktails. The Straw Experiment is important to her. She listens to the distant sounds of the cars ten floors below her. This light, empty room up here is her workplace: She'd christened it the Studio of Physical Re-education. She is fifty-three years old. Legally, her name is Carola Henrietta Spitz. To her clients, she's Carola Speads. In an old

passport she was Carola Spitzová, before that, Carola Joseph. She was called Molle sometime in her childhood, at a point when she'd been a little chubby. "Mollig", in German. Her mother continues to call her "Molle" even as an adult, even in her last letter from Amsterdam.

The bus crosses the park at 86th Street. Then there are only a couple of blocks and she's in Yorkville, or »Little Germany«. Schaller & Weber on Second Avenue stock German apple sauce, pickles and Pumpernickel, as well as Leberwurst from Kassel and Brunswick and »German Blockwurst«. ⁱ The pork inside doesn't bother her. Her husband's a Jew. She's a Jew. They also have a Christmas tree every year, just like back in Germany.

The building she's been living in for almost a year is called Rossleigh Court. It's on the corner of 85th Street and Central Park West. This means she has two addresses. For her private mail she uses 1 West 85th Street. She gets a lot of letters, many from the German authorities and her lawyers in West-Berlin. One of the lawyers, Herr Schwarz, is a specialist in matters of compensation. He himself lost his father in the Theresienstadt camp. ⁱⁱ She exchanges complicated and painful things with him.

Her professional address, that of the »Studio of Physical Re-education« is 251 Central Park West. Everyone in New York knows what that means. What a fantastic location it is. What the view must be like. Rossleigh Court may not be the most glamorous building in the city, but the luxurious towers of the Eldorado loom just a few blocks to the left. Down to the right: the Dakota. One day, a musician named John Lennon will move in there.

There are only buildings on one side of Central Park West. When you cross the street, you walk into another world, into the green park, where the air, filtered by the trees, is fresher than anywhere else in Manhattan. In the autumn of 1954, hundreds of thousands of coal heaters, thousand of incineration plants and buses and trucks and cars give off smoke. Commuters steer their automobiles over newly built access roads from the suburbs into the city. That's a very modern concept. You see soot everywhere. Some days you'd think the New York air was purely exhaust fumes. But not here by the park. ⁱⁱⁱ

Inside the house, it is still. The walls are thick. You don't notice the neighbours much. Rumour has it that the Croatian family on the eighth floor had relationships with the SS and therefore welcomed the prospect of a post war escape to New York. On the eleventh floor lives Alberta Szalita. During the war she worked as a neurologist in a Moscow hospital. There, in the autumn of 1943, she received a message that her husband, her father, her mother, four of her sisters and one of her grandfathers had been killed by German organised mass-shooting. Alberta Szalita emigrated to the United States. She trained as a psychoanalyst. She tried to come to terms with her relationships with the murdered, as impossible as that seemed. She ran away

from mourning, Szalita later writes in her autobiography, and the mourning has now caught up with her.^{iv}

It's a fate shared by many here on the Upper East Side. Most however stay silent on such issues. Many still simply run away from them. Carola could tell of the unbelievable fates of her mother and brother, or of her own experiences in Berlin, Amsterdam and Paris. She doesn't, though. She doesn't even tell Stevie, Alan and Johnny, her grandkids, about what happened back in Europe. Later, as successful men in their sixties, her grandsons will say that her grandmother hadn't wanted to compromise their American life. They come over regularly, the little boys, normally on Saturday evenings when Carola's weekend class is over. Sometimes they stay the night. Their granny tells them about the German shepherd she had as a kid and who was allowed to sleep in bed with her. Back then in Berlin.

This summer the sirens wailed here. New York expected to be struck by A-bombs. The city had previously been far away from Europe's wars. In the Nuclear Age that's another story. Operation Alert took place one Monday in June 1954, when three H-bombs were detonated in the city. One hit Queens, one the Bronx and one Manhattan, right at the intersection of First Avenue and 57th Street. New Yorkers rapidly vacated the sidewalks and searched for the designated shelters. The practice was supposed to strengthen their belief that their country could deal with anything, even the biggest attack imaginable. If it had really been a case of bombs, said the realists, then more than two million people would've met their death.^v

Her clients seek another type of shelter. For them, that is Carola's studio: a place where they feel safe. Some get out of the Subway at 86th Street. They leave the rumbles, the creaks and the darkness behind them, climb the stairs into the daylight, walk alongside the building and turn right at 85th Street. The entrance is right there. In the lobby a sign says: ALL VISITORS & DELIVERIES MUST BE ANNOUNCED: PLEASE COOPERATE WITH THE DOORMAN. A while later the sign THIS IS A SMOKE-FREE BUILDING will be placed next to it. The clients cooperate with the doorman.

The term »Culture Shock« was coined by Cora du Bois, one of Carolas clients. Du Bois is an anthropologist, one of the best of her time. She did her fieldwork on the island of Alor, alone in what for her was a completely alien world. Du Bois observed that the first two months in another culture are lost time. First you have to process the shock of the foreign, become accustomed to the manners, the unfamiliar food, the body language. Du Bois wants to find out whether you can shorten this time. Is it possible to change yourself more quickly? Can you react

more flexibly? Carola's teachings seem to prepare one for exactly that. Therefore, Du Bois recently invited her to give a lecture in front of anthropologists.^{vi}

Carola has a lot to say about Culture Shock. Certainly more than two months have passed since her arrival in the US. She's lived here for fourteen years. She's been an American citizen since 25th March 1946. She's still at odds.

At the beginning it was the narrowness of the Subway. Employees were stationed on the platforms, purely to shove people into the jammed carriages, their backsides, shoulders, heads. Back then she lived in Washington Heights in northern Manhattan, and she worked in Midtown. On her way to work she got on at 191st Street, almost at the beginning of the line, and even then she had to squash herself into an already crammed compartment. On her journey home from 57th Street, things were far worse.

Now other things horrify her. She notes the »impossible struggle for survival« and the excesses of American capitalism. The way people live only "for their own personal gain", she says, is »simply indescribable«. She's surprised when people here simply behave »properly« for once. In the newspaper, she reads about kids who beat their parents to death, about parents who kill their kids and about contract killings, carried out for a couple of dollars.

Anybody who is scared, says the expert Carola Speads, will be changed by their body. It's a natural process. The body wants to help to overcome the emergency that fear creates. But what happens when the fear doesn't disappear? Then, the alertness of the body changes into something else. It tenses up. The muscles are strained, the joints stiff, the breathing shallow. The tension can lead to a kind of struggle that will overwhelm you, resulting in a great flaccidness. It's a vicious cycle, says Speads. Because a fearful person can't properly command their muscles, tendons or breath, they adopt other postures, so that the tension and flaccidness will spread further, and the person will become fearful once again.

In twenty-four years, in 1978, she will publish a book about breathing. The modern person, she writes, lives in a literally breathless time. She shines light on the difference between disturbed breath and satisfactory breath and demonstrates that all aspects of life are influenced by breathing. Those who master the art of satisfactory breathing, say Carola Speads, will also get a handle on life in general.^{vii}

Even if she is exasperated with New York: She, the breathing expert, has come to exactly the right place. Here Leo Kofler developed the modern technique of breathing. As a singer, he'd never made the biggest career due to breathing issues, therefore Kofler simply played the organ in St. Paul's Chapel near Wall Street, directed church choirs and wrote the

absolute standard work about breathing on the side. On a November day in 1908, Koffler put a pistol in his mouth and pulled the trigger. His *The Art of Breath*, however, lives on.^{viii}

Carola's career began in Berlin in the twenties. Everyone in her circles knew the Kofler: his »lung sweeper« (breathing through a tiny opening in the lips, which, according to Kofler »results instantly in an invigorating effect«), the sip exercise, the muscle exercise for the crescendo and decrescendo, plus the exercise supposed to improve the elasticity of the rub cartilage. Not to forget the guiding principle in the sixth segment: »take breaths through the nose«.^{ix} For Carola however, that was and is too little. She doesn't want to just guide singers to better singing, or actors to a sturdier voice. She rejects the notion that one can perform better or worse or right or wrong. She wants to investigate breath and the body; her studio is a place of science.

Below, the clients are walking through the lobby, past the mailboxes and toward the lift that leads to mindfulness. There are six elevators in Rossleigh Court: two for suppliers and four for inhabitants and visitors. High up in the building, the clients turn left and enter the dressing room: two small compartments. These cabins remind some clients of doing Physical Education in High School. They take some things off and put relatively few things back on. The women enter the studio in bright swimming costumes, the men wear swimming trunks. Carola sits on the windowsill. She's ready to breathe with them.

Everyone breathes, but who really thinks about breathing? Poets maybe, because poetry has so much to do with breathing. Every line of a poem is limited to the length of a breath. Elizabeth Bishop, ten years younger than Carola, wrote an ode named »O Breath« in which she watches a naked woman breathing. She observes how the little hairs on the nipples of her lover move in the course of one breath. One breast has four little hairs, the other five. It's a complicated poem about the desire to know more about the other, not to be able to look inside them, but to simply watch this movement: the breath of these hairs. »O Breath« does not flow. It falters, gets caught up. The asthmatic Elizabeth Bishop concentrates on the difficulties of breathing. She shows how words and ideas form when the breath doesn't come naturally, but rather irregularly, painfully, heavily.^x Maybe the only people who think about breathing are those who have difficulty doing so. Everybody else takes it for granted.

After her arrival in New York in 1940, Carola quickly teamed up with Charlotte. She'd already been friends with her in Germany. They had a lot in common: they'd both been gymnastics teachers, had both been born in 1901 and both had come from well-off families. They'd also

both almost lost everything when they emigrated. Elsa Gindler was their biggest influence. In the School for Gymnastics, Kurfuerstenstrasse, Berlin, Gindler hadn't focused on exercises, repetition and corrections, but rather on the mindful exploration of one's own body. By doing so, Gindler said, you could find a way out of cramping. Because this method was virtually unknown in the USA, Charlotte and Carola tried to use this niche to earn their living. They rented a tiny studio near Carnegie Hall. Carola's name didn't seem right for advertising purposes. It sounded, when spoken in an American accent, like »Carola spits«. So she changed her name and Speads and Selver began to promote their gymnastics.

At the start of the forties, seventy thousand German refugees had made to do the same as them: somehow arrive in New York and somehow earn money. Social decline was the norm. There was a popular joke about the Dachshund, who said to the other Dachshund that he'd been a St. Bernhard in Europe.^{xi} Older refugee had a particularly hard time. That was the case for Carola's neighbours in Washington Heights, the Kissingers from Furth. The Father, heavily depressed, never got used to living in America. As a result, his wife had to slog away as a cook, and his son Heinz, later Henry, a classmate of Carola's daughter, as a worker in a shaving brush factory. Who's to say what could become of a refugee boy like Heinz/Henry Kissinger, with his heavy German accent?

Carola and Charlotte both had their German degrees as Gymnastics teachers as a reference, but this diploma was worth a lot to them and meant almost nothing here. As German experts in bodywork, the obstacles were even greater. German refugees just seemed so physically strange to Americans. One recognised them by their heavy, rigid walk and their facial expressions. This serious, worried, almost paranoid expression was dubbed the »German look«. The New Yorkers, far more laid-back, weren't aware that these sullen Germans had lost their assets and careers, that their closest relatives did not make it out of Europe and that they were tormented first by rumours and then by increasingly accurate news of mass murders. Instead they saw the refugees' absurd, apparently centuries-old coats and how stiffly the Germans took off their hats with a sweeping gesture when they were greeted, bowed on reflex in this city where no one ever bowed, or worse still, clicked their heels together. The Germans couldn't do small talk, didn't have a clue about baseball, but still assumed they knew everything about the world. They seemed insistent on shaking one's hand goodbye, despite the fact that that wasn't the »done thing« here.^{xiii} Perhaps then, as two Germans, in World War II, it wasn't the most convincing business model to teach relaxation to Americans.

But Speads and Selver didn't give up. They adopted, because they had no choice, the style of New Yorkers. They had a brochure printed that set out the most important selling points

in capital letters. They boasted that »THIS WORK HAS BEEN TESTED IN LONG YEARS OF TEACHING AT UNIVERSITIES; HOSPITALS AND ART SCHOOLS«. That it had been developed »IN COLLABORATION WITH MOST DISTINGUISHED SPEICALISTS«. They presented Gindler's mindfulness approach (which, as they knew all too well, was not a method, could hardly be summarised and promised no simple results) as a »NEW METHOD« and summarised under the heading: »THE RESULTS ARE«. They promised their prospective American clients more vitality, efficiency and flexibility. They went to doctors, psychoanalysts and orthopaedists, leaving the brochures in their waiting rooms, hoping for success. But the market for people with flexibility problems was not particularly dynamic, not even in New York.



ⁱ Richard Panchyk, *German New York City*, Charleston: Arcadia 2008, p. 94-97. For reasons of clarity, references to images and texts from the estate of Otto and Carola Spitz as well as to the interviews with contemporary witnesses conducted by the author have not been documented in the annotations. Explanations on the most important documents and conversations can be found in the chapter »Sources«. In the entire book, only unambiguously documented direct quotes have been reprinted in quotation marks. [...]

ⁱⁱ On the biography of Schwarz see Arnold Lehmann-Richter, *Auf der Suche nach den Grenzen der Wiedergutmachung: Die Rechtsprechung zur Entschädigung für Opfer der nationalsozialistischen Verfolgung*, Berlin: Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag 2007, p. 55.

ⁱⁱⁱ Eric A. Goldstein and Mark A. Izeman, »Pollution«, in: *Encyclopedia of New York City*, edited by Kenneth T. Jackson, New Haven: Yale University Press 1995, p. 914-916.

^{iv} Alberta Szalita and Darel Benaim, *The Force of Destiny*, New York: Jay Street 2005, p. 105.

^v Robert A. M. Stern, Thomas Mellins and David Fishman, *New York 1960: Architecture and Urbanism Between the Second World War and the Bicentennial*, Cologne: Taschen 1997, p. 97; Guy Oakes, *The Imaginary War: Civil Defense and American Cold War Culture*, New York: Oxford University Press 1994, p. 165.

^{vi} Du Bois has used the term publicly at least once (Chris Fuller, »Cora Du Bois and Twentieth-Century American Anthropology«, in: *Anthropology of this Century*, available online here: <http://aotcpres.com/articles/cora-du-bois-twentiethcentury-american-anthropology/> [all online sources have last been accessed in September 2019]).

^{vii} Carola Speads, *Breathing: The ABCs*, New York: Harper & Row 1978.

^{viii} N. N., »Organist Kofler a Suicide«, in: *The New York Times* (28. November 1908), available online here: <https://www.nytimes.com/1908/11/28/archives/organist-kofler-a-suicide-former-choirmaster-of-st-pauls-shoots.html>.

^{ix} Leo Kofler, *Die Kunst des Atmens: Als Grundlage der Tonerzeugung für Sänger, Schauspieler, Redner, Lehrer*, Kassel: Bärenreiter 1986 [1897].

^x Brett C. Millier, *Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It*, Berkeley: University of California Press 1993, p. 231-232.

^{xi} Tyler Anbinder, *City of Dreams: The 400-Year Epic History of Immigrant New York*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt 2017, p. 500 f.; Deborah Dwork and Robert Jan van Pelt, *Flight from the Reich: Refugee Jews, 1933-1946*, New York: Norton 2012, p. 268 f., p. 272 f.; Michael Winkler, »Metropole New York«, in: *Exilforschung 20*, edited by Wulf Köpke, Munich: Edition Text + Kritik 2002, p. 178-198, here: p. 179.

^{xii} Lori Gemeiner Bihler, *Cities of Refuge: German Jews in London and New York, 1935-1945*, Albany: SUNY Press 2018, p. 112-114.