

Ruth C. Cohn and her Languages – a Collage

Thinking about the March 18, 2023 meetup TCI Community of Planetary Citizens, with the theme, *What happens when I cannot speak my mother tongue?* I found a quote from Ruth Cohn¹ that may be of interest. Ruth Cohn wrote this text in the second half of the 1970s, thinking back to the years 1968-1974 during which she traveled back and forth from the U.S. to Europe. I let her speak for herself:

Alternating languages on my travels was a stirring experience for me every year. I was always a different person when I spoke German or when I spoke English. This difference at the change of language has remained for me to this day a miraculous experience from which I was shocked at the same time. - But the wall of repression inside me² has broken down (*Gelebte Geschichte der Psychotherapie*, in *Meine Rückkehr nach Europa*, 381. *Lived History of Psychotherapy*, in *My Return to Europe*, 381).

In her own experience, Cohn is a different person when she speaks German than when she speaks English. German is her mother tongue, for years she did not speak it, for years she published articles in English, also her poems of that time were mostly written in English, and now, occasionally back in Europe, at the invitation of colleagues for conferences on (group) psychotherapy, she hears and speaks German. That does a lot to her.

To understand these reactions better, we must go back to 1933. In Switzerland, after fleeing Nazi Germany in late March 1933, she consciously and radically distanced herself from German. In her introduction to the collection of poems "..... zu wissen, dass wir zählen," (...to know that we count)³ she writes:

My despair about what was happening in Germany motivated me to speak Züritütsch so well in a short time that people soon hardly thought I was a German, but at best someone from another canton.

That she managed to learn to speak Züritütsch, the dialect of Zurich, so quickly is certainly due to her flair for languages. Züritütsch as a protest.⁴ Even as a child, she liked to express herself in her mother tongue. She wrote a poem in Berlin dialect, also translated in English⁵: 'The Tale of an unemployed Youth' that reveals her social commitment. About her flight to the U.S. in 1941, she realizes:

Finding a new home meant expanding my school English into the American language of everyday life and literature.

For Cohn, Swiss time is what she calls a transition in language to living in a foreign language. Her *Lived History* reveals that she certainly had to get used to English as a vehicular and professional language. To my knowledge her first article in English, *Masturbation and love*, dates from 1951.

Let's look again at the first quote: 'miraculous experience from which I was shocked at the same time.' What was going on when she spoke German? As mentioned above: in the same chapter in her *Lived history*, we read how hearing German and especially German spoken by children evokes feelings from a very long time ago. On the one hand, she misses the security of her inner homeland: the conversation with herself and with others in tone, sound and subtlety of the mother tongue that cannot be translated. On the other hand, she feels her distaste for the German of the 1920s and 1930s, evokes images that infuriate her:

The stretched arm up of the Hitler salute was seen by some as salvation, by others as a threat.

The Führer promised prosperity for Aryan followers and hatred and death for opponents, communists and non-Aryans (read Jews), Gypsies and other 'Untermenschen'.

Cohn's relationship to her native language is ambivalent; she still suffers from her repressed unprocessed feelings.⁶

Finally, an excerpt from the article *The Beyond Within*, written by Ruth Cohn herself in English, 1972.

It happened during my stay in a German hotel where I recovered from a flu last Christmas and fought a 36 hour battle of writing a poem. It was my first poem in my native language in twenty-five years. This poem *Entwurtelte Weihnacht* ('Uprooted Christmas') guided me via the *Kristall nacht* (Crystal night – symbol of extermination of Jews) into areas of myself which I had not known about. They were the Unfinished Business of anti-German prejudice derived from the evil of the Nazi holocaust. This poem led me to something else which was even more important than its content: I was reclaiming my own language – the language of first sounds, first loves, first songs, first writings and readings and my childhood's certainty that I would be – or even was – a poetess. I had cut this part out of my being from myself when Hitler's doors slammed shut. I had turned my ears away from German sounds around me and even more radically so, had killed them – or so I believed – within my soul.

When this poem happened to me it broke open a tunnel between my German-language-childhood and my American-English adulthood. All these years there had been two of me. One whose associations were the German child, and one whose inside connections lived as an English-American adult. Never the twain could meet. They were like two streams coming from the same center, yet running parallel to each other, cutting their strength into halves. Then my own Berlin Wall between these two Me's, built by fear and prejudice, broke down. – It was then that I found myself entering a new phase of life (Ruth C. Cohn, *The Beyond Within*, 1972 in *Voices*).

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¹ For those who do not know Ruth Cohn: Ruth Charlotte Hirschfeld was born in Berlin on August 27, 1912. At the end of March 1933, not yet 21 years old, she takes the train to Switzerland to find a haven of safety in Zurich. In 1941, she manages to flee with husband and child on one of the last ships from Portugal to the United States. During the following years, as a psychoanalytic psychotherapist, she developed her approach she described in "From couch to circle to community" (1969). In 1974, she settled in Switzerland, Hasliberg Goldern. The last years of her life she lived in Düsseldorf, where she died in 2010. - More about the years in the US in my article: *Ruth C. Cohn, pioneer and trailblazer*, soon on my website: www.phienkuiper.nl.

² Repression: German: Verdrängung, Dutch: verdringing, French: refoulement is a psychoanalytic concept: pushing thoughts, images, memories or desires into the unconscious or trying to hold them there.

³ Ruth C. Cohn (1990) *zu wissen dass wir zählen. Gedichte, Poems*. Mit Scherenschnitte von Annemarie Maag-Büttner. Zytglogge

⁴ Thanks to Matthias and Michaela Scharer (2020) *Ruth C. Cohn. Therapeutin gegen totalitäres Denken*. Patmos.

⁵ Kuebel, Mary Ann, C. Thomas Abraham (2009) *Living Learning. A Reader in Theme-Centred Interaction*. Kottayam.

⁶ How to deal with such feelings, according to Cohn, more in a next post.