In Lieu of an Afterword – My Weimar Honey and Gall
Ivan Ivanji

The newly designed permanent exhibition on the Buchenwald concentration camp is the last to be developed with the involvement of former inmates, an exhibition whose opening a few of the very last of us could attend. Nevertheless – or for that very reason – I did not wish for a requiem for those murdered in the SS state, for a kowtow to the last survivors who came staggering back to Buchenwald. Rather, I wanted a look forward to be made possible – a look forward based on an understanding of the past. We who are called “Zeitzeugen” (“contemporary witnesses”) said what we had to say. We are not the target group of the work carried out by the memorials – we know what happened. In my view, their work should be directed primarily towards young girls and boys, who should not be forced to visit places of horror by school decree but whose curiosity should be aroused about human beings’ means of being good or evil.

In the little town of Weimar, you can visit highlights of German culture. The Buchenwald concentration camp was located just a few kilometres from the centre of Weimar. There are wonderful and terrible things in many places on this planet, but there is no place where the most beautiful and most sublime things that human beings have accomplished are so close to the most evil and terrible deeds they have committed.

Petar Petrović Njegoš, poet and prince-bishop of Montenegro, wrote:

“Non yet e’er drank a honey’d draught
Unmixed with the cup of bitter gall,
and cup of gall for honey equally doth call,
that so, the mixture one may easier drink.”
Cheers!

For me, legends are a no-man’s-land between historical truth and fanciful invention. They are not true, but take on truthfulness if many people believe in them. Goethe’s oak tree on the grounds of the Buchenwald concentration camp between the inmates’ kitchen and the laundry is an example. I believe that what Johann Peter Eckermann – the poet’s confidant – said is true: Goethe’s oak was a beech and it was not located on the grounds where the concentration camp was built. However, an oak that was considered Goethe’s tree by important and otherwise trustworthy contemporaries such as Joseph Roth or Ernst Wiechert but also the camp SS and many inmates – such an oak did exist, a tree that supposedly guaranteed Germany’s continued existence. But it was not in its bark that the cocky young Goethe carved his name; it was not the tree he showed Eckermann when he was an old man.

The camp was called Buchenwald, “Beech Forest”; not Eichenwald, “Oak Forest”. According to an old saying, you should avoid oaks and seek beeches (“Eichen sollst Du weichen, Buchen sollst Du suchen.”) It does sound good, however, to claim and write that the majestic oak tree weathered the storms of time until it was hit by a bomb in August 1944. And after that oak was thus shattered, things were in fact over for Hitler’s Germany.

One thing is certain – that tree was not in the land where the lemons blossom.

I didn’t hear anything about Goethe’s oak when I was an inmate in Buchenwald. I was too unimportant, a nobody; stories like that didn’t get through to me. It took all of my strength just to survive the next day, the next hour. I could, however, have recited poems by Goethe, entire ballads, from memory. My father taught them to me even before I went to school. He used to read to me before bed. He studied medicine in Germany, and in the mid-1930s he still considered the Germans the nation of poets and thinkers. That’s probably why we didn’t flee Germany in time, why he and my mother were killed and I ended up in a camp.

Goetheplatz, a square in Weimar. A piece of city like anywhere in the world. Busses stop and charge on, passers-by – some in a hurry, some leisurely looking around –, tourists. For me, the
Frauenplan, another square in Weimar, bears a relation to Goethe, but not the Goetheplatz with its buildings that mean nothing to me, the crowds of people. When we happen to be standing there by the thousands or drinking our beer, I'm probably the only one who thinks about the fact that, 232 years ago, the twenty-four-year-old Johanna Catharina Höhn's head was chopped off at this site. Goethe had spoken out in favour of her decapitation. Did he ever change his mind? In *Poetry and Truth* he didn't mention the matter at all, even though the publicly administered sentence was reality, i.e. truth, whereas the touching scene of Gretchen in the dungeon described in *Faust* was poetry, theatre. The privy councillor did not suffer from pangs of conscience. And violence creeps its way into his poetry again and again, elsewhere as well.

A lot has been written about Goethe's energetic approval of the death sentence because Grand Duke Karl August had wanted to pardon the child murderess but asked his councillors their opinion. Goethe arrived at his decision as a jurist and a statesman. That was logical; it wasn't the poet whose opinion was being asked. His task was to insist on what he considered lawfully right. Law and order. The Weimar Goetheplatz as the site of the execution once again proves the proximity of unearthly beauty and infernal cruelty, also in the past. And this proximity is visible everywhere, precisely in Weimar.

"And the rough boy picked the rose, little red rose on the heath": cries and sighs are of no help to "little rose, little rose, little rose red".

"And if thou'rt unwilling, then force I'll employ", says the Erlkönig.

"Half drawn by her he glided in / And was not seen again": the fisherman is drowned, murdered to beautiful words about the sun and moon.

"The soul of man / Is like the water: / It comes from heaven, / It returns to heaven, / And down again / To earth must go, / Ever changing."

Frauenplan – Ettersberg and back, please.

I can't get away from Goethe. I like to be in Weimar. And I've already long been impervious to the memory of the concentration camp.

My own memories are buried beneath the many bad and few good feature films about the Holocaust. The scenes of people crowded into cattle cars, the hissing of the locomotive as it moves across the screen from left to right, are stronger than what I remember about my own transports from Baja in Hungary to Auschwitz, Auschwitz to Buchenwald, Buchenwald to Magdeburg, Magdeburg to Buchenwald, Buchenwald to Niederorschel, Niederorschel to Langenstein. If I had the printout about my persecution history from the International Tracing Service in Arolsen, I would doubt whether my truth was true. The only thing that's certain is: when I was in the Buchenwald parent camp in 1944, I had no idea of the proximity to Weimar. To Goethe.

The first time I was in Weimar consciously was on 26 April 1968. A trip to the Buchenwald Memorial on the Ettersberg, a banquet in the Elefantenkeller restaurant of the Hotel Elephant and a secret night-time visit to Goethe's house on the Frauenplan. At the time I had no idea how deeply my roots would drill their way into Thuringian soil, in what macabre way I would find a kind of home here. In the GDR government airplane from Berlin to Erfurt, a steward dressed like an admiral provided me with juices and hard drinks. Below me on the earth my curious gaze discerned only a hilly landscape, villages, forests. I had left the Buchenwald concentration camp twenty-three years earlier in a cattle wagon with about eighty fellow sufferers, and now I was returning in a blue suit with a carefully knotted, red-spangled tie as the interpreter of the Yugoslav foreign minister. Can I say: to the scene of the crime? Can the victim return to the scene of the crime, or just the perpetrator?

A while later in a convoy of black cars, being accompanied up the mountain by uniformed motorcyclists: was I supposed to recognize anything? I recognized nothing. How could I? Everything had looked completely different back then.

In those days it was common for the host's interpreter to take over more of the work than the guest's interpreter. I was permitted to walk a bit behind the others. Behind our backs the cheerful calls of the chauffeurs and policemen. In German. Of course in German! But those very loud German voices brought my memory back.
That was how the SS had yelled too. When we passed through the camp gate and I saw the grounds sloping downhill in front of me, I knew where I was.

Foreign Minister Marko Nikezić was greeted by a former inmate:

“My name is Richard Kucharczyk, or, as one had to introduce oneself according to the regulations, inmate number 921.”

My minister turned around:

“We’ve got one here too!”, he called out, a bit awkwardly from my point of view. “Ivanji, where are you?”

So I had to step forward, and I said to number 921 that I was inmate number 58,116. I knew from his three-digit camp number that he had been one of the first up here in the camp.

The radio reporters were delighted. They stuck their microphones under our noses and asked us to repeat our little exchange. I growled at them, choking on a lump in my throat, and would have burst into tears if I had tried to say anything else. But that was only then. Since then I’ve been letting the media do whatever they want with me. After all, that’s a “Zeitzeuge’s” purpose in life.

In the Elephantenkeller, the friendly German interpreter again bore the brunt. I was seated next to a nice person with whom I conversed about Goethe’s relationship to Corona Schröter. To this day, I can’t understand why all German Germanists deny the ménage à trois between Goethe, Karl August and the beautiful actress. But the man had the key to the house on the Frauenplan, and after everyone else had gone to bed I had the honour of paying my first official visit to Privy Councillor von Goethe in the middle of the night. How many people have ever had this fortune? Only someone who has a relationship like mine to Goethe and his work can understand what this meant to me. And if you do the math, I have Hitler to thank for it. Isn’t that crazy?

Many years later again, on the sixty-fifth anniversary of the liberation of Buchenwald, my wife and I were given suite 100 in Hotel Elephant. Of course the furniture was different, there were different pictures on the walls, but the view overlooking the garden was the same. Hitler had slept here and looked out of this window. Why had they given me this room? “Because you can deal with the demons!”, they told me.

Goethe often drank his wine at the Elephant restaurant. According to his duke Karl August, he was able to hold his drink. Hitler was an anti-alcoholic. In my fantasy, the two ghosts could nevertheless meet in the hotel corridors after midnight and ... Three dots will have to suffice. In the Hotel Elephant, the ash man who has hitherto haunted two of my novels also appeared to me. At least for that reason, I tell myself I have a right to say:

“My Weimar!”

Nietzsche Archive. Villa “Silberblick”. Not just a sense of awe about the obscure mind of that magniloquent philosopher, but also admiration for the furnishings by Henry van de Velde. Hitler also paid a visit here to kiss the hand of the house’s mistress, Nietzsche’s sister, one of those practices polite Austrians are so adept at. Here once again, honey and gall together. Hard for me to say which taste was stronger in the little glass I was offered.

In the Buchenwald labour detachment in Niederorschel, H. G. Adler gave me Nietzsche to read from the library of kapo Hermann. That somehow doesn’t seem like a fitting statement by a “Zeitzeuge” about his suffering – is that what you’re thinking? In the worst winter of the war, 1944/45, le docteur Charles Odic, the camp doctor, gave me quarter; I was often in the infirmary. In a room where the moribund lay, the doctor showed me that the lice leave dying bodies. When you saw white dots nervously fleeing across the grey blanket, it was a sign that death would occur within a few hours at the latest.

“Everything transitory is but a parable”, says Goethe, but Nietzsche answers: “The intransitory is but your parable ...”.

Here I have all my ghosts in one place again: Nietzsche, Hitler, Goethe:
“Shrill shriek the crows / that to the town in whirls roam: / soon come the snows – / weal unto him, who – has a home!” Read on the recommendation of H. G. Adler in the Niederorschel detachment of Buchenwald and learned by memory.

Bauhaus. Reverence. I’ve never built anything in my life, but I can read plans and I even once taught descriptive geometry. When I associate the Bauhaus with Weimar, however, it’s not the museum on Theaterplatz square that I see before my mind’s eye, but, immediately, the Hotel Elephant. I know which window of the lodging Walter Gropius was at with curtains drawn when he and Alma Mahler-Werfel, the indescribable lover of the century’s best artists, looked on horrified as the Reichswehr commander ordered shots fired at the protesting crowd. I know how appalled the good citizens of Weimar were at the “doings” of the Bauhaus students: “At not—at—all-secluded lakes and Saale beaches, men and women bathe the way God made them!” A good century earlier, Goethe and his friend the grand duke—and probably the beautiful Corona as well—had also bathed naked in the Ilm, but quod licet lovi ...

On streets and squares, I encounter the heroes of my books, Gropius and Alma, Franz Ehrlich and Siegfried Wahrlich and their girls—historical figures I can vividly imagine, but also invented characters that are just as vivid, or more so, to me. And I think I know when and where they ate, drank or bought their shirts. In that sense I’m a Weimarer, like them. And I also know the difference between a Weimarer and a Weimaraner. Even though I love dogs, I wouldn’t want to own a specimen of that of all canine breeds.

If I hadn’t been invited to give a speech about Franz Ehrlich, the author of the inscription “Jedem das Seine” in the gate of the Buchenwald concentration camp, I never would have been able to write my novel Buchstaben von Feuer. It was a real trouvaille: I found out that, when Ehrlich was a Yugoslavian prisoner of war, he and I were both in the same little Serbian town, Pančevo, in the course of the winter of 1945/46. We didn’t meet, but my uncle, whom I was living with at the time, was the head of the building authority and in that capacity also responsible for the German POWs, and I am quite certain that he had—he must have had—contact to “this German architect”.

It is also in part to the creator of the camp gate, a member of the Bauhaus, that I owe my ties to the concentration camp and to Weimar.

It is my path, my walk, every time I’m in Weimar. From the Elephant, a look across the marketplace, then left, then down Schillerstrasse to Theaterplatz, the Theater-Café, with the theatre in front of me. And Goethe and Schiller cast in a stupid pose. I don’t find the theatre beautiful. I don’t like the monument. But nevertheless, I love this view, it excites me, it brings back thoughts, verses, recollections from the depths of my memory. History. The Weimar Republic. Hitler attending theatre performances. Semprún speaking in the theatre auditorium. And before, not on the same floorboards, but at the same location, the premières of Goethe and Schiller in their own productions. I think I know what I’m talking about when I say Bach and Goethe and Schiller and Wagner and Liszt and Heinrich Heine and Thomas Mann and Stéphane Hessel, Jorge Semprún, Imre Kertész. And Sauckel. And Hitler. And me in their midst.

“A melange please! You don’t know what that is? Honey and gall. And then the menu!”

Goethe and Schiller? Bronze? That’s not how I imagine the two of them. As far as stature was concerned, Schiller was taller by a head. The monument makes them both the same height. I consider not only Goethe’s writings, but also his magnum opus, his entire life as a synthesis of the arts, more significant than Schiller’s. The monument makes them both the same height. I have a cake server with an illustration of the monument, salt and pepper shakers as busts of Goethe and Schiller. There is an unfathomable number of ashtrays, plates and vases displaying this monument. I’ve no objections to them. But now I think of the skull Goethe thought was Schiller’s and kept on his desk. To me, that’s the relationship between the two. Goethe was a decade older but survived the sickly Schiller by more than two decades.

The then mayor of Weimar had tried to find Schiller’s mortal remains in a “chaos of decay and rot”, and ultimately decided in favour of a
relatively intact skull. Goethe had this utensil brought to him and placed it on a blue cushion under a bell jar on his desk. He kept the skull of his dead younger friend in his private possessions for more than a year. After World War II, it was possible to prove, with modern methods, that it was by no means Friedrich Schiller’s skull. Is that important? It’s as unimportant as whether Goethe’s oak on the Buchenwald camp grounds was a beech. Is what you believe important? Is it important how the living Goethe really behaved towards the dead Schiller?

After the liberation of the concentration camp, two shrunken heads were found, made from the heads of two Polish inmates who had been executed. Macabre. They are not displayed in public. Of course not, but isn’t the supposed skull of Schiller on Goethe’s desk just as horrible?

My message to the generation of my grandchildren and great-grandchildren is above all that they should not remember my time with horror or forbearance, but should think about how to help people in need, now and in the future. And I’m afraid that’s still going to be necessary for a very long time to come.

I love Weimar despite the many contradictions, despite the necessity of drinking the honey of art mixed with the gall of the SS state. Or do I love it not despite but because of this proximity of good to evil? The top of the world in an embrace with the depths of despair?

Weimar, the city of culture. Weimar, the address of the Buchenwald concentration camp. Today the location of the memorial and the foundation. My Weimar!

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