

Three days in the Karl-Markus Gauß Archive in Salzburg

The sound of music is getting to me. Behind and beyond the strong walls of the Festung Hohensalzburg history is in the making. I got to sniffle around in the secret Karl-Markus Gauß Archive, a place where no man has ever set foot before. Only the rough Austrian winds dare to come in, carrying on their wings the untamed spirits of the river Salzach, and a few ghosts (mainly friendly). Well, a bunch of scholars are said to have tried as well, but no independent account has been provided so far to confirm or infirm the rumour. For what it's worth: This is the hidden entrance to the foundations of good essay writing, the long-lost treasure chest everybody who has ever been conducting research on the topic Karl-Markus Gauß Unlimited has been looking for from the onset of time. Voilà, it is full of folders.

The Salzburger Pfingstfestspiele are just ending. The Literaturfest Salzburg is a go. Soon enough people here will be celebrating as well The Long Night of the Churches, never asking for whom the bells toll.

I am looking at the famous Salzburger Dom, the Franziskanerkirche and the Franziskanerkloster. Not quite sure which one to pick. Lay back and listen to the Glockenspiel, that's the law of this kingdom.

Aller guten Dinge sind drei, so the saying goes.

In other words: Stay three days and you're okay. Eventually one has to leave though ('cause otherwise you could easily fall off the wall and all the archbishop's horses and all the archbishop's men couldn't put all these folders together again: zu guter Letzt, as they used to say in the Middle Ages, in the good old times when Letzt was still a noun and meant farewell supper. No kidding.

So I spent three days looking for some answers. Looking at the hills. Looking at the river Salzach. Looking at the Kapuzinerberg on the right side of the Salzach (and taking a hike to understand it better) and at the Festung Hohensalzburg on the left. All at arm's length.

I was using, of course, my Canadian telescope ("Made in Bayview Village, North York, 'Toronto"), knowing that Karl-Markus Gauß' parents had once contemplated the idea of moving to Canada (his father was supposed to be writing out of Toronto for a local ethnic newspaper, probably for Deutsche Presse, formerly known as Austrian Publications / Der Österreicher), and young Karl-Markus would have become ... oh well, a writer, too.

What else?

Wer bin ich - als Kanadier? Who am I - as a Canadian? This is the question (okay, one of the questions) Karl-Markus Gauß is asking in his journal *Der Alltag der Welt* (Szolnay, Vienna 2015), playing with the thought: What if?

Which is to say, there is an alternative reality in which Karl-Markus' parents actually followed through on their plans and did move to Canada. In the world of imagination, in the world of fantasy, in the world of essay writing, in the world of literary journalism (yes, in Gauß ' world, in our world) the alternative reality is indeed

very much part of the real paradigm, as real as a tale can be. The hills are alive, and so is the story. Be it out of good old Toronto or out of good old Salzburg, the question stays the same: Who am I? Right to the point.

So this is about negotiating one's own identity - and the collective identity of an ethnic group, of a nation, of a continent. It is about the many shades of self-representation played out against the backdrop of overlapping destinies when the sun sneaks in through the cosy window treatment of my Salzburger wigwam and comes into this place I call the book-lodge, the room of books: into this very secret chamber I am standing in right now.

I guess I could pick up the tab and answer Karl-Markus Gauß' rhetoric question, for I myself have been living in Canada for almost eighteen years now. I started off by writing for a German-language newspaper. I have been writing for ... now wait a moment! Could I have been Karl-Markus' father? I mean, in another life.

I am eating both maple sugar pies and Mozartkugeln. I am singing the Canadian anthem, but I didn't forget the Austrian one (nor did I forget the Romanian one, for that matter). I am cheering for the Blue Jays. I am listening to the call of the loon on a warm summer night near Lake Ontario (and, yes, I am listening as well to the call of the loonie when the markets are dancing with the bear and the bull). And I'm watching Alle meine Enten. They're good swimmers. They're as Canadian as it gets. So is Karl-Markus.

But then again: Who am I - as a Canadian? Who are we? Are we there yet? Are these the waters getting to the Inn, to the Danube, to the Black Sea? Safe to sail? Mark Twain? Is this our continent? Why do we keep moving about? Is it an ever-closer union? Is it a never-ending story? I know exactly whom we should ask. But not just yet.

The holy grail. Europe's center point. Many an adventurer has been looking for it over the years. To no avail. Europe's middle point is not where they were looking. It's here. It's got to be beautiful. It's got to be something huge.

I just can't see it - yet.

Somewhere in between these walls there is a clue. A thread. A train of thoughts. Why Salzburg? Why Austria? Why not Canada? Why not Toronto?

The answer is written in the books: Austria erit in orbe ultima. Austria is going to last ever after.

Crystal-clear.

First: because Salzburg is, of course, the capital of the free world of music. And second: "Well, you know, we were Donauschwaben", says Gauß in his non-assuming, outgoing way, always ready to embrace his past, Europe's past, and to embark on an awesome journey that would tell the whole story of a continent that doesn't quite know for sure where exactly it is sailing.

And you've got to picture the Gauß family making their way - in post-war Europe - up the Danube, the "most intelligent river in Europe" (Gauß) and then up the Inn and the Salzach - to the very place the powerful archbishop of Salzburg, the man who once was in control of the salt trade (before he got invited out), set up shop back in the day. You've got to picture them looking for some place to lay anchor and figuring that this would be as good a spot as any.

Karl-Markus was the first Austrian-born of his kind, the first Austrian-born in his family, his childhood impregnated with sound: with the sound of music, with the sound of words, the sound of feeling that one belongs. Because of his background and his upbringing, because of his multi-faceted roots and his ability to grasp complex notions of self-representation, because of the vast semantic fields he passed through from an early age, this author happens to know a little bit about the subtleties of communication, about language, about literature - and what it does to people. His charming, provocatively sophisticated style serves him well in his ambitious endeavour to master the power of discourse in order to give us some sense of the shores we're heading to as individuals, as a community.

There are many stories spread out here: stories of ideas. And not only in layers. There are actually distinct threads, and there is a narrative. There is a man behind them. He is watching out for his continent. He has heard the voices, he has seen the writing on the wall. He has put it all together. Is there anybody going to listen to his stories?

Yes, of course there is. And I dare say it's us, the multi-dimensional Europeans. I mean, I've seen through the early drafts, the correspondence, the notes, I sensed the insidious intertextuality of all that underlying research and questioning and trying and checking out and dialoguing - and yes, I guess one could indeed say: "It's us. Us Europeans." We're heading somewhere. Within and without such ample and well-thought narrative that's truly embracing all parts of the whole story and does never ever make use of a convenient razor to cut corners when it comes to the mysterious craftsmanship of telling the time with tales of the time.

It's not just the words, Karl-Markus would say. It's not just the bells. It's not just the salt and Salzburg's magnificent past and promising future.

It's not just the pure light coming in through these generous windows that open to such picturesque and inviting landscape, coming into and out of these books, upon the almost magically reassuring surroundings up and down the Salzach, this space of inquiry, of multiple reflection.

The truth is out there, but the wise are not rushing to stake a claim. It's but one turn of pitch and toss. A gifted storyteller from the old archbishop's lands is keeping track of the wins. And if he is having his way, at this turn of history, at this European turn of ours, it's going to be everyone's win. So let's throw in our coin and fill the unforgiving minute with sixty seconds' worth of distance run.

My two cents on Karl Markus Gauß and his city. Schilling. Groschen. Taler. Kreuzer.

