

What I Learned from my Grandparents, and Other Stories: Fragments of Biography, Autobiography and a History of Calcutta

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The Meanings of Lives

It seems not a little self-indulgent for a historian to tell a story with oneself in it, even if one is not completely at the centre of it; a story of one's own life and family that purports also to illuminate a history: of Calcutta, and of worlds connecting to Calcutta – Calcutta was formally renamed Kolkata in 2010, but that's not a part of the story I wish to tell. That renaming, a point on a meandering timeline that marked a process of denial of its history, appropriated to one language the history of a complicated city – one might have said “complex”, but everyone lives in a complex nowadays, so the word is ambiguous. As I have been told *ad nauseum* throughout my life, I have an unusual name for someone who comes from Calcutta, and I should be called upon to justify it. There's also another reason for the attempt, as a writer participating in public debates in the Age of Identities, and we might add, the Age of Youidentities, for we are not born with identities; we achieve them in some ways (identities) and have them thrust upon us in other ways (youidentities). Since we are all read through the lens of who we are perceived to be, and many arguments for and against our writing are made *ad hominem*, this piece of writing can usefully be added to anything already 'out there' so that the *ad hominem* arguments are at least a little better informed. And if, as a consequence of the perceived need for affect and/or self-reflexivity, so much academic writing is thinly-veiled autobiography, I like to think I have skilfully outmanoeuvred my fellow academics in this piece by tearing off that veil altogether.

But it is hard to tell such a story with any sense of linear chronology. Sufficiently fictionalised, one can imagine this to be potentially one of

¹ This piece started its life as a Christmas party academic lecture at Halle University in 2013, at the request of Professor Rahul Peter Das, when I was Indian Council for Cultural Relations Professor there.

those entangled narratives which have to be unpicked with a fine comb by a reader who gives up in frustration after page 237, when the author introduces seven new characters and a sub-plot in a new continent. This, however, is a true story written by a historian.

I was born in 1972, a year after the independence of Bangladesh from Pakistan, and shortly after the time Naxalites were being slaughtered under cover of that war in Calcutta by a Chief Minister of West Bengal who in his later life as Governor of Punjab reused the experience he'd gained to consolidate his reputation as the political founder of the "encounter killing". An air of defeated optimism marked my early childhood. My parents' friends' circle, and my grandparents' friends' children's worlds, had been decimated by death, imprisonment and emigration; and a classmate of my maternal grandmother's, whom I had known in my childhood mostly as a Scrabble player and a purveyor of crisp Bengali homilies, wrote a novel about the mother of a corpse with a number (this was later translated into German by my mother).² My maternal uncle was already a reasonably successful drummer, and his circle of friends would occasionally lose another member to a motorcycle accident or an overdose of something or other that I didn't understand.

All of which is a way of providing what Bengalis consider *paricaj* – to recognise, to introduce, and to situate someone in a social grid. It's also a matter of claiming and maintaining status, which might be expressed in a form of namedropping in which a familiarity with an important cultural or socially important figure is claimed: can you say you met Manik-da at breakfast? (I can't; but I did meet him at a gathering of the Calcutta Youth Choir, all of whom by which time were in their 70s or 80s). Were you in a theatre group with Partha-da? (I was, indeed.) And if the *dā* is mystifying when used for people who are in some cases not only too old to be your older brother, but could be your *māmā*, *kākā*, or *dādu*, this is of course not actually about the familiar or familial, but about establishing your contacts as part of your *paricaj*. You are only slightly more than the sum of your contacts: "do you know who I am?", said loudly and angrily in a dispute or a fight, can be answered by "I don't care a pubic hair for who your father is", but everyone knows it's actually about whether you or someone you know knows the Chief Minister's Secretary, or whether the Police Commissioner will take your call.

² Mahasweta Devi 2003. *Mutter von 1084*. (Transl. Aparajita Koch.) Bonn: Bonner Siva Series.

This deep history of what it means to live in Calcutta has to be told in an East Bengali dialect, in which the professionals from mofussil towns who arrived in the 1930s talked to each other: small zamindars with smaller landed incomes that had soon become insufficient for the growing needs of a family, with inflation and the collapse of agricultural prices from the late 1920s, soon to be followed by the Great Depression, making a struggling middle class of persons with aristocratic pretensions.

Mizrahi Mosaic

In Nazi Germany, in order to be considered a Jew, one had to have at least one Jewish grandparent. I had two, making me more than enough of a Jew for the Nazis, but not enough for religious Jews or for most Zionists, who required a Jewish mother as part of the qualification. But grandparents are the next in line in my narrative; let me start a generation before. My paternal grandfather's father was a Muslim. Sheikh Muhammad Zakaria, a businessman of some description, arrived in Calcutta from Awadh towards the latter decades of the nineteenth century. Since he was homesick, he looked to speak Arabic with someone, which meant, in Calcutta, the Baghdadi Jews (oral tradition has it that there were Jews in the court of the Nawab of Bengal in Murshidabad, and they'd made their way to Calcutta after Murshidabad had been destroyed as a trading centre by the East India Company's predatory trade and military practices, as had the Armenian merchants). They had made their fortunes from the former East India Company monopolies of opium and tobacco – more opium, though; and the Baghdadi Jewish diaspora follows the opium route: Calcutta, Rangoon, Hong Kong, Shanghai. My great-grandfather married a Jewish woman (who he apparently courted by sending messages to her via the kites he used to fly across Calcutta rooftops: kite-flying was a part of Awadh that he had brought with him); she was a Cohen, which would be rendered only slightly inaccurately if described as the Jewish equivalent of a Brahmin, and she was also a direct descendant of the first Jewish settler in Calcutta. Sheikh Muhammad Zakaria thus stayed in Calcutta, produced offspring, and built himself a large house, which he later lost in a famous card game (it is said of him that he made and lost several fortunes in his lifetime). He dropped the "Sheikh", Anglicised his surname to Zachariah, and when printing visiting cards, a box of which managed to accompany me to Berlin, had the "Muhammad" shortened to "M". He also won the first bicycle race in Calcutta;



Figure 1: My paternal great-grandfather, Sheikh Muhammad Zakaria, c. 1893 (Photography by Chintamon Studios, Calcutta).

there's a picture from the *Statesman* (Figure 1), then a liberal British-run newspaper, of him in vest and shorts, leaning over the dropped handlebars of the racing bicycles that we still can recognise in the modern versions. He probably did not teach his children any Arabic; he was anything but a religious man, and Arabic learning in Calcutta was still in the hands of traditional Muslim institutions that he would have considered backward. Judaeo-Arabic (Arabic written in the Hebrew script), however, was widely used in Calcutta, and Calcutta was the world centre for printing in Judaeo-Arabic, not too illogical a phenomenon for a city with illiterate typesetters who could therefore set type in any

language. (In my childhood, and into the days of my university life around College Street and Harrison Road, small hole-in-the-wall printing shops existed with nineteenth century printing presses, mostly small and German-made, which in the days of colonial censorship and press regulations would have been easier to hide from registration and surveillance.)

My paternal grandfather, named Moses, was a quiet man, who I had just got to know when he died; I was five. I have vague memories of playing cards, a strange memory-and-logic game called "Master Mind", and chess, with him. He read a lot of poetry; he'd worked in the Tata Iron and Steel Company in Jamshedpur for most of his working life; he was a member of his local Masonic Lodge. After his death, a letter in his papers suggested that he had contemplated writing the examination for the Indian Civil Service, but had not done so, because he'd been misdiagnosed with tuberculosis and would therefore have been ineligible on health grounds for the ICS. The Tatas, who had long had the practice of employing former Civil Servants and government officials, was the next best to that atmosphere. He drove an Oldsmobile in Jamshedpur in the early 1950s, and switched to a more economical Fiat Millecento of 1956, the

same model of car that is parked outside the café where Marcello entertains his father on his birthday in Federico Fellini's *La Dolce Vita*. My father's elder brother drove that same car until the end of the 1990s, when it finally became impossible to put it back together or to find spare parts; among its idiosyncrasies was a tendency for the self-starter to jam, requiring a push-start with the clutch being sharply released in second gear as one pumped the accelerator. One of the more famous pushers of WBC 3352 was one John Birks ("Dizzy") Gillespie, but we're getting ahead of the story here.

My paternal grandmother, Rivka, was altogether a different person. Outgoing, energetic, capable of unreasonable tempers, unexpectedly egalitarian philosophies, and with a financial acumen that continues to be of benefit to the family fortunes, she came from a Baghdadi Jewish family that was more conservative, I imagine, than her future husband's family. She was born officially in 1905, but actually in 1900; I learned many years after her death from my mother that she'd reduced her age by five years out of consideration for her husband, who would otherwise have been younger than her. (This was, for me, the solution to a number of chronological problems I'd been having while processing her stories to me as a child when I was older and a trained historian who wished to translate these stories from pleasant family memories to social history). When she was born, or while her mother was pregnant with her, her father died; her father died in childbirth, as it were, and her mother married again, but was prevented from taking her daughter with her into the new marriage because the child was clearly cursed, having caused the death of her father. My grandmother was therefore entrusted to her Uncle Ezra and his wife Ramah, who lived in a sprawling mansion on Theatre Road. They were, or Ramah was, rich (until the Wall Street Crash of 1929, until the separation of Burma from India, which separated Ramah from her source of wealth, or after 1947, depending on the chronology one accepts, after which they were not, and had to subsist on the support provided by the Masonic Lodge, but fortunately the sprawling mansion was a rented house, rented for the princely sum of 400 rupees a month, and the Lodge could afford the rent). Her mother followed her new husband to Rangoon; mother and daughter were reunited during the Second World War, when Indians fleeing the Japanese invasion of Burma walked back to India with whatever they could manage to carry. (By the 1935 Government of India Act, Jews had been classified as "Europeans", without regard to their place of origin; but in a crisis, as my great-grandmother discovered, this Euro-

peanness evaporated very quickly when faced with the rationing and discriminatory availability of transport for the evacuation of Burma.)

The affluence of the family had not much joy in it for my grandmother; in her stories to me as a boy, she would always express disgust at her aunt's ability to buy a dress for 100 rupees and wear it only once – she found it utterly wasteful, and her experience of opulence accompanied by waste turned her into the stereotype of the cautious and thrifty Jew. It was probably the only really Jewish thing about her. She started working as receptionist and telephone operator in a British-owned paint company at age 16 (this was where it made sense that she was born in 1900 and not 1905; in 1916, during the First World War, there were more jobs for women than in 1921). Between the ages of 16 and 40, she lived a full and independent life, and she bought shares in companies she regarded as reliable. In the 1920s, she travelled through the Eastern possessions of the British Empire on ships, often as the Captain's guest, preferably in the company of two other young women of Jewish origin who were her



My grandmother, Rivka Zachariah, picture sent to her brother. Photo: Private.

friends and confidantes. A photograph (Figure 2) from that period, sent to her brother in England, shows her in 1920s flapper style: short, loose dress, short hair – a style she held on to until her death. She learned music from one Stenton Dozey (I render the name phonetically, because I never saw it written down), and regretted that she learned less of the piano and more song: she had a pleasant mezzo soprano voice, sang live on radio in the early days of All-India Radio in the 1930s, and was generally expected to be the life and soul of parties. Her voice resembled, so it was said, that of the northern English music-hall singer Gracie Fields, which she was particularly proud of. (Though by the time I

knew her, her range was limited and her hearing was fading, she taught my sister and myself a great many songs, and when she could no longer

hear at all, she could still sit at my piano, sight-read my music and play it better than I could.)

For the 1920s, this was a life that seemed perfectly reasonable, even on the verge of respectable, though by the 1930s it was already a bit suspect, with the backlash against the social and sexual freedoms of the 1920s beginning. Much of what that life must have been like for her must be inferred, for it could not altogether have been told to a boy of 7 or 8. And there are objects that direct a trained historian's attention to more. She had a lamp in the shape of a Berlin bear in her collection (I have it now); but that was the extent of her allusion to Weimar Berlin that I could identify: the lamp itself might have been a later acquisition, perhaps in a shop in Jamshedpur after the Weimar Republic was no more, but Weimar was certainly a world she knew of. She also had a collection of mildly anti-German jokes and songs from the First World War era in her repertoire, and of course the obligatory Great War marching songs: I learned "Pack Up Your Troubles in Your Old Kit Bag" from her. Then there were the eastern aspects of her memorabilia: a hand-fan of Malacca cane weave, and other assorted objects. These she held on to for a whole lifetime: the cane is now tired, but the fan survives.

She married, aged 39 (officially reduced now to 34), in 1939, and had four children, three sons and a daughter. The daughter, the second-born of her children, died in infancy during the brief evacuation of Jamshedpur, a steel-producing town, for fear of Japanese air-raids during the War – a death she blamed on the Indian aspiring Führer, Subhas Chandra Bose, who had been employed by the Tatas as a strike-breaker during the 1920s and 30s, his "Bengal Volunteers" replacing and intimidating workers on behalf of their employers. My grandmother believed that in his days as a Japanese collaborator, Subhas had shared details about Jamshedpur, which had made it easier for the Japanese to choose targets. This was probably unlikely: Jamshedpur was hardly an unknown target. But I always had the feeling that my grandmother never shared the general enthusiasm for the Netaji that others around her seemed to do, nor for his family.

Internationalist Encounters, Communist Sub-Plots

The only one of my great-grandparents I actually knew well was my maternal grandmother's mother. She came from a family of small zamindars in what had once been the Bengal Presidency and was now Bihar, in

an area that we knew as children from her stories, but more from those of her older daughter, my grandmother: the much-loved "*Biśan'purer galpa*". Uma (that was her given name) married at 14, as one did in those days, and was 90 when she died, in 1995, which made her younger than my paternal grandmother or officially the same age, if her date of birth had been calculated correctly (it often wasn't in those days). She didn't, therefore, finish school; she spoke and wrote Bengali, Hindi and English, and was an avid reader, a self-taught artist whose paintings were in great demand but which she never sold but gave away, and something of a genius with needle and thread in the 'folk' art of *kāthā* stitch, the Bengali art of drawing with thread. Her themes were not particularly 'folk', however, sometimes to the consternation of her contemporaries. As her eyesight faded in her 80s, she regretfully gave up her art, and slowly also her reading; she liked listening to plays read aloud by her elder daughter, and if she knew the play, she would accompany the reading by synchronising the reader's lines with her own voice, playing the role from memory. Poetry she remembered more vividly, and it was usually enough to give her the opening line of a poem by Rabindranath or Tennyson to have her recite the rest. I was one of the beneficiaries of her fading eyesight, having been given the right to raid her carefully-arranged personal bookshelf for books I wanted to read. In retrospect, I ought to have taken more of them, but I had an eye for the hardback 1920s editions of English-language books in her collection, and read a novel from her collection called *Piccadilly Jim* about an American in London and New York, when I was in my early teens.

But it was her husband, who apparently stayed alive long enough to hold me, his first great-grandchild, in his arms once before he died, whose life I encountered again in a peculiar way, in the records of the Intelligence Branch of the Calcutta Police: he had apparently, after a degree in electrical engineering from Sheffield University, proceeded to Berlin to an apprenticeship with a German company. There, in the 1920s, and in the heyday of the Weimar Republic, his peers included the group of Indian exiles who were considered to be closely associated with the Communist Party of Germany and with the Berlin India Committee, which had plotted with the Kaiserreich to try and overthrow the British Empire during the Great War: the remains of this great failed venture now attempted to continue the good fight from their Berlin base. I do not know this from my family's stories about him (as far as I can recall, not much was said about Tarun Kumar Roy in the family after his death, or

at least not to me, for I had not known him) – I discovered it from a serendipitous find in the police archives in Calcutta.

Below is an excerpt from a copy of a Special Branch, Madras, officer's report, dated Dhanushkodi (port), 4th October 1929. It was routine for police authorities to keep a complete record of all Indians entering and leaving India, and for historians it can be quite convenient that such invasions of privacy left traces, indeed even narratives, albeit refracted through the report of the interviewing policeman, or the unknown police informer, to whom the information was divulged. The report states that:

T.K. Roy, s/o Taraknath Roy, 87 Park Street, Calcutta – Indian student returning from abroad.

This individual arrived at Dhanushkodi from London via Colombo on 4.10.29 having graduated as an Electrical Engineer from Sheffield University. He took an apprentice course in a German factory and spent about a month in Berlin. His travel and studies abroad for nearly two years and his own observations of the state of affairs in India have, he says, convinced him that India cannot exert any influence among the nations so long as she remains a subject country and that British administrators in India do not represent the real mind of the British people at large. Roy is of the opinion that the average Britisher knows nothing about India and its importance in relation to his own country. All the friction between the ruling and ruled nations is due entirely to the exploitation of British Bureaucrats in India. From the trend of his talk it would appear that Roy is rather disaffected with the British administration of India.

He further said he happened to see Raja Mahendrapratap in company with one Chatterjee [a margin note adds: Virendra] at the Indian (Hindustan) Association Berlin about a month ago. He was pointed out to be the Indian Ambassador abroad. Roy learnt that these two individuals were exiles having been forbidden by the Government of India from entering India. This Chatterjee is reported to be connected with the Pacifist Movement which draws together the Subject Countries and Minor States in an alliance against the great powers. Roy says the movement indirectly fights against Imperialism.

These two exiles met the Indian students at the association in connection with a tea party; had personal talk with the members assembled, enquiring about their welfare and native place. Roy was not much impressed by the personality of Mahendra Pratap; but learnt that this exile has been fomenting trouble against the British in China and Afghanistan.

The report goes on to say that nothing incriminating was found in his luggage and that he went to stay a day or two with another Mr Roy, an engineer, in Madura.³ The same Tarun Kumar Roy, recorded a couple of years earlier as the son of late Tarak Nath Roy of Arkandi, Faridpur, and of 67 Dhurrumtolla St, Calcutta, had successfully applied for a passport to visit England via Italy, Switzerland and France in 1927. No objection was raised, the only information on record being from an Intelligence Bureau agent who stated that on 21st May 1924 Tarun Kumar Roy had been present at a meeting organized by the communist Nalini Ranjan Gupta, and attended, among others, by SC Sengupta, friend and assistant of the communist leader Muzaffar Ahmed.⁴ It is possible that the police did not associate the two – one way of avoiding surveillance was usually to transliterate your name differently in English, adding or subtracting your middle name a few times, and/or juggling your known addresses – but more probable that he was watched for that reason; and he was alert enough in the interview with the police on his return to India not to pretend that he had not met the subversives he was suspected of having met, saying instead that he had indeed met them, but had not been particularly impressed by them.⁵ The information he divulged was already in the public domain.

I shared with my last surviving grandparent, Ganesh Bagchi, the news of his late father-in-law's suspected communism. "I have new respect for the old man", Ganesh said on the phone to me (he was nearly 90 by then). He added that my great grandfather had returned to Calcutta and had become the Chief Engineer of the Calcutta Electric Supply, which was a good opportunity for sabotage for a communist who would have been an enemy of the state; but he never, to the best of our knowledge, used this opportunity.

Ganesh, my maternal grandfather, was somewhat romantic about his connections with the Communist Party, though his active involvement seems to have ended in his student days in the 1940s, when he was an occasional courier of illegal literature, internal communications and the occasional parcel with unknown contents for the still-young Party, also helping with famine relief organised by the communists during the Bengal Famine

³ IB SI No. 44/1928, File No. 53/28, ff. 150-149, West Bengal State Archives (WBSA), Calcutta.

⁴ SB office letter signed SHH Mills to MF Cleary, Personal asst to director, IB, Simla. Dated Calcutta 17th October 1927. IB SI No. 44/1928, File No. 53/28, f. 158, WBSA, Calcutta.

⁵ IB SI No. 44/1928, File No. 53/28, f. 158, WBSA, Calcutta.

of 1943. He had a brother who had been an “anarchist”, a term given to members of the youth organisations founded in the aftermath of the first partition of Bengal in 1905, and who were usually worshippers of the goddess Kali, and he had another brother, Debesh Bagchi, who composed music and was a compatriot and friend of the musician Bhupen Hazarika, who would probably be best known outside of specialist music and film circles for a Bengali adaptation of Jerome Kern’s “Ol’ Man River”, one of the songs of the Popular Front. (Debesh was an alcoholic who died young in the 1960s, leaving behind debts that swallowed up my grandfather’s, his brother’s, Mercedes Benz, brought back with love and a sense of status from Kampala, and driven far too fast through the streets of Calcutta by my grandmother at a time when there were few women drivers in the city).

Ganesh came from a large family of poor Brahmins from East Bengal, coincidentally also from Arkandi, Faridpur, like his future father-in-law. He went to a school that was quite highly regarded, South Suburban School in Calcutta, and in 1939, won a prize at his school which included a copy of Adolf Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* in English. He then proceeded to St Xavier’s College, where the Jesuits taught him to speak English with less of a strong Bengali accent, and gave him Daniel Jones’s pronunciation dictionary, which in turn gave him an improbable BBC accent that stayed with him for the rest of his life. As the only one in his family to get a proper education (there were minor government officials in the family, but they had not been as educationally accomplished), he was expected to serve the family by marrying well, and a marriage had been arranged with a suitable family, part of the dowry being a place paid for at Cambridge University for him, but plans went wrong. Ganesh met Sudarsana Roy, my maternal grandmother, at Calcutta University as they both started their MA degrees; he refused his arranged marriage, his family disowned him, and before too long my grandmother was pregnant and had dropped out of her MA. They married, of course, her father asking “what was the big hurry?” when he was told about the impending arrival of his grandchild. It was quite clear that Ganesh had “married up”.

My grandmother, with her Brahmo Samaj background, was of an elite that Ganesh’s family could not match. Tarun Kumar Roy had educated his two daughters well, Sudarsana at Santiniketan, where she studied Arts shortly after the death of Rabindranath, the university’s founder (though she had met him when her father went to see him when she was a teenager), and Sunanda, her younger sister, at Presidency College, Calcutta, in the first batch of women students. (Sunanda studied botany and

zoology, and both sisters later taught at the same school in Calcutta.) Sudarsana was a very well regarded singer, and many assumed she was studying music in her Santiniketan years. She also belonged to the communist elite – most of her cousins were party members, and as a 16-year-old with the voice of an agitprop singer (she never needed a microphone to be heard), she had sung at meetings of the Indian People’s Theatre Association, and done her part for the Popular Front before university and war took her away from that for a while. The Brahma Samaj and the Communist Party – this was a pairing that was not unusual at all; but it is hard to write about in academic terms. At any rate, my grandmother was something of a communist elitist, believing in the importance of a political education rather than the “instinctive” correctness of the “working class” – or from a different perspective, was a strong opponent of Stalinist populism: perhaps this was connected to a strong strand of Brahma rationalism. She was also on the other side of the famous Brahma Samaj debate on whether Brahmans were “Hindus” – for her, Hindus were irrational, superstitious and backward, and she was not one of them. Her sister disagreed.

East African Interlude

My grandfather has told his own story at least twice in public, in a thinly-veiled autobiographical novel called *No Room for Love* (Bagchi 1999) – a reference to the lack of physical space in the city of Calcutta that allowed people privacy – and then in an autobiography published in the last years of his life (Bagchi 2015), so there’s not much point my telling his story for him in any detail. Soon after independence, he and his wife voluntarily returned to life under colonial rule with their two young daughters, going to Kampala, Uganda, to teach. My grandparents’ place became a refuge for interracial couples seeking protection and space (“room for love”) away from the racism of the East African Indian community, often of Gujarati origin (much to the annoyance of the children, who found themselves sharing rooms to make room for the new guests). The couple had their third child in Kampala, a son, who was referred to in the family as *mtoto mwafrika*. My grandfather became the first non-white Principal of the Teacher’s Training College, and started to write political plays for an East African audience, with my grandmother in the leading roles.⁶

⁶ Two of them, *Of Malice and Men* and *The Deviant* were published (Bagchi 1970 and Bagchi 1961).

Both Ganesh and Sudarsana went to London for a teacher's training course, and thence to Aberystwyth, Wales, where they were supposed, in a nice ironic twist of colonial hierarchies, to teach the Welsh to speak the King's English – my grandmother, ever the actress, could of course do a decent English accent (my grandfather's English accent he owed, as we know, to Daniel Jones), but for her friends' entertainment, she would recite Edward Lear's *The Owl and the Pussycat* in a Welsh accent:

The Owl and the Pussy-cat went to sea
In a beautiful pea-green boat,
They took some honey, and plenty of money,
Wrapped up in a five-pound note.
The Owl looked up to the stars above,
And sang to a small guitar,
"O lovely Pussy! O Pussy, my love,
What a beautiful Pussy you are,
You are,
You are!
What a beautiful Pussy you are!"

Sudarsana's cousin was also in England then, married to an English-woman, and the two couples travelled through Europe in the summer after my grandparents' course ended. My grandfather had wanted to acquire a Volkswagen Beetle for the journey, but his Jewish friends reminded him that it had been a Nazi car, and so he settled for a Morris Minor, with the number plate PLR 137 (it was referred to as "Poor Little Rabbit"). They returned to Kampala via India, where they had left the children with my great grandmother.

They were something of a social sensation in Kampala, and were peripheral members of the now legendary Makerere circle which contained the writer then known as James Ngugi,⁷ the Goan-origin writer Peter Nazareth,⁸ my grandmother's favourite dance partner Erisa Kironde,⁹ and Murray Carlin, whose *Not Now, Sweet Desdemona*, about a theatre group rehearsing *Othello*, is a tense story of interracial attraction and politics (Carlin 1969). One of my grandfather's students in Kampala, Rajat

⁷ On the Makerere theatre circles, Peter Nazareth, and in passing on my grandparents, see Ngugi wa Thiong'o (2016), Chapter One.

⁸ Cf. Peter Nazareth (1972); John Scheckter (1996).

⁹ Erisa Kironde was a writer and politician, one of the targets of Idi Amin's regime. See his post-Amin reflections (Kironde 1979).

Neogy, was destined to make a name for himself, as the founder of the journal *Transition* in 1961, which was partly funded by the Congress for Cultural Freedom, a CIA front organisation, and included Wole Soyinka as a prominent member of the editorial board.¹⁰ (My grandfather, who outlived Neogy by just over twenty years, had genuine affection for him, even if Neogy's bet with his friends that he would sleep with my grandmother was, in my grandfather's account, one that Neogy lost.)

The family returned to Calcutta in the wake of Ugandan independence in 1963, thereby avoiding being expelled by Idi Amin a few years later; my grandfather was involved in discussing employment quotas for Indians (which since the 1961 Indian invasion of Goa suddenly also included the Goans, for whom he attempted to speak). He said he found Milton Obote a reasonable interlocutor, and both my grandmother and he had long had an aversion to Indian racism against Africans, which would now create a backlash against Indians who remained. His farewell speech said he was going back to India "to forget that I am an Indian". But there were more things to forget: my mother recounts having to unlearn a very British English in order to fit in better in the Calcutta of the 1960s: she developed instead, in the elite school she attended that had once been whites only and now contained a fair number of Anglo-Indians (formerly known slightly derogatorily as Eurasians), an accent that used to be called "Bombay Welsh", as well as a more Bengali variant of English, both necessary survival skills for a young schoolgirl. She had learned classical ballet in Kampala, and she continued her dance education in Calcutta (which included more 'traditional' Indian forms of dance, and later, modern dance and Graham technique, taught by a Brazilian in the Calcutta of the 1970s). Bengali had now to be more than a distant, written language, and the language of parents' conversations; it had to replace Swahili as the language of the house and the household (though my grandmother and mother still spoke it to each other when I was a child, mostly to communicate something I ought not to overhear and understand – as a result of which I acquired a few useful words in Swahili to break their code). Swahili in Uganda was, to make things complicated, a sort of British East African *lingua franca*, so their speaking it would

¹⁰ Cf. Paul Theroux's obituary for Neogy (Theroux 1996); Theroux was part of the circle around Neogy and the journal. See also Robert G Gregory (1981): 440–459, and Robert G Gregory (1992), for the connections between Ganesh Bagchi, Peter Nazareth, Ganesh's friend and fellow playwright, and Neogy and the journal *Transition*. *The Deviant* (cf. note 6) was published in *Transition*.

not have entitled them to make any claims about authentic connections to Kampala; but even then, I could tell they missed it intensely.

Escaping the 1960s

The story goes on, of course, and as it gets closer to our own times, becomes slightly more familiar. But most historians like to tell stories of dead people, even if, as in this case, most of the material comes from second-hand oral testimony. Since the rest of the cast of characters is still alive, this would be the point at which to wind down the narrative. They who are alive cannot be spoken for, they must be spoken to, *sie können sich vertreten, sie müssen nicht vertreten werden*. Beyond this point, the family histories retold to me, my own childhood memories, and the nostalgia for a Calcutta of diverse fascinations, not the Kolkata of homogenised upper-caste and middle-class Bengali boredom and panic about cultural contamination, will get the better of me. For it must be so that a change in name reflects or produces a change in the semiotics of belonging: the “return to authenticity”, Calcutta to Kolkata, or James Ngugi to Ngugi wa Thiong’o, is a mythical journey that cannot be undertaken.

The postcode “Calcutta 16”, where my paternal grandparents lived in a little alleyway whose name and oversized houses belied its size (“Park Lane”), and my maternal uncle, *mtoto mwafrika* and drummer, played in his first bands in the 1960s and early 1970s, was a metonymy, metaphor and microcosm for that diversity. Park Street and its jazz scene, restaurants and bars, and the party life of Parsis, Jews, Anglo-Indians, Muslims, *bhadralok*, and various groups living in or passing through the city, have had enough romantic retellings. At one of these parties, my father was gifted a Samurai sword by his rather drunk host, but walking home at three in the morning carrying a sword in the time of Naxalites was hardly to be advised, so he left it behind to collect on another occasion, and by the time the man was sober, he’d forgotten the giving of the gift. As the 1960s made way for the 1970s, death, exile, the Emergency and load shedding were our best-remembered companions. Fragments of memories of passers-through-our-lives come back and forth: a man called Puloock (in my mind unreasonably associated with the man from Porlock who obstructed Coleridge’s view of Xanadu), invited to stay for a few days, who stayed for six years. And a large and jovial Canadian, whose plans to travel through India included the ambition to learn Hindi; he never left Calcutta, and all the Hindi he ever learned was “*idr kidr charas*

milta?". Optimism, for us, was largely through books, many discovered in one of my favourite spaces to read, Christel Das' magnificent library at the Goethe Institut on Ballygunge Circular Road, which brought the wealth of learning of the German-speaking world into our lives, and which was cancelled and torn to pieces in a wanton act of bureaucratic vandalism after she retired. The moral of the story is therefore the tone of the beginning of these reflections: an air of defeated optimism marked my early childhood.

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