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Baggage

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Journal

TRANSIT, 9(1)

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Publication Date

2013

DOI

10.5070/T791022649

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Baggage

By Deniz Utlu

Translated by Cara Tovey

On a Christmas day in the early 1960s, my father, emaciated from an almost deadly case of tuberculosis, set his wooden suitcase—his baggage—down on a pier in Hamburg. He had hired a ship to go to Canada, but he had to go ashore in Germany because of his illness. I do not know where he found accommodations during Christmas before he checked in to the emergency room of a Hamburg hospital. I only know what was in his wooden suitcase and how unexpectedly important the contents became for him in these days.

The only things that he had brought with him were clothing and *Zwieback*. He had argued with his mother because he did not want to take the *Mardiner Zwieback* with him, but he eventually surrendered.

My father could not have known that silence reigned over Germany during Christmas time and that all of the businesses would be closed—especially at a time when there were hardly any Turkish, Spanish, Greek, or Italian stores there. For three days he nourished himself with the *Zwieback* from his baggage. *Mardiner Zwieback* is dried, rock-hard bread preserved in bags—for difficult times. The bread has to be softened with water so that it becomes edible. I imagine my father as a coughing young man, who, covered in blankets, sat all day long somewhere in the foreign city of Hamburg taking *Mardiner Zwieback* out of his wooden suitcase and dunking it in a jug of water. Maybe it was the *Zwieback* from his baggage that gave him strength, in his weakened state, to survive the cold Christmas days in a foreign city.

The meaning of his baggage had altered with the change of place and time. What was merely useful in Mardin, was essential in Hamburg. This quality of baggage, to transform with a change in place or time, often has significance in the context of migration. In a new place, an item, which at home was meaningless, becomes a symbol for the years spent, for the people loved—loaded with memories. When my father later (long after I had been born) went back to his hometown—which seldom happened—he always brought a package of *Zwieback* from Mardin with him.

I do not know whether when he left he wanted to leave his city, his country only for a while or for forever. After the labor recruitment agreement in the fifties and sixties had ended, many people came to the newly founded Federal Republic with the intention to work, to earn money and eventually to return home. For many it happened differently: beginning a routine in a new country creates a new everyday life. One's own status changes, one's own terms change, as more time passes in the new country than in the old. What did these people pack as they trotted off and left behind their mothers and wives and husbands, often children too? How sure were they that they would return? At what point in time did they know that their departure was binding? Did they ever know it? At least to some extent, answers to these questions, can be found in the inventory of their baggage: I interpret food in baggage, for example, as uncertainty about the foreign country in which the journey would end.

It is known that the generation of those, who came to Germany under the recruitment agreement, were convinced for a long time that one day they would return to their homeland. Most came only with a suitcase. Over the years they bought and

hoarded goods in their basements and attics—they stored furnishings for the entire apartment, packed and ready for travel, in order to later haul them back to the country of their parents and thereby lead a comfortable and well-earned life in the time that remained for them. In a certain way this aspect of baggage is a paradox. If “baggage” is all those things that are processed for transport and travels by cars, airplanes, busses, and trains, how then can something that had never traveled be baggage? This paradox spreads to the concept of “immigrants:” Why are people, whose lives are centered in a specific place and do not think much of it, who are able to leave this place—at least no more than others are able to—labeled “immigrants”? But baggage is still suitable as a metaphor for migration only with an ironic connotation: baggage has to be supervised and controlled by border officials or civil police. Baggage is troublesome, a burden, usually located in darkness (in trunks and loading areas), and easily lost.

As a child I often observed at the airport, how the travelers in front of us in the line for the baggage check-in gave suitcases and bags to one another. Most families presumably flew to Turkey only in the summer, just like us, but the area in front of the counters for baggage check-in looked like a warehouse with so many suitcases lying around. Because there was a certain weight limit per person, those with too many bags tried to distribute their suitcases among family members with fewer bags, or they tried to bargain with the people at the counter. For the most part, the excessive baggage probably contained presents for friends and family—not uncommon were also items for a future apartment, as part of an imagined new life in the old homeland. For most of the people that I know, this dream was not fulfilled, and it did not conform to the idea of what they had expected. Part of the return trip is having oneself taken back as baggage by children and grandchildren. Even my father, who had come with his wooden suitcase long ago, was in a wooden suitcase himself, when he flew back.