



Christian Discher

**The
Voices of
Those
Remaining**



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When political authorities silence people, we employ our linguistic means to defend human rights. Using language against censorship functions as a political instrument. What has been documented from the past operates just like memories, warning us of our terrible potential and reminding us of our ability to reflect on ourselves.

Maren, without you by my side, I would have lost the fight against the overpowering forces in the psychiatric system and would have followed my companions into death.

Summary

Fateful circumstances brought Christian to the infamous psychiatric ward in Ueckermünde, East Germany. Locked first in the dark red brick House 12 and later in the dilapidated socialist building 40, coercive treatment, derogatory remarks by staff and questionable therapies were on the agenda. After returning to freedom, psychologists denied his abilities and pressured him. He fought against their plans for him and a system that forgets its most vulnerable people. But he heeded only his confidant's advice. Many years later, using his diary notes, he vividly describes his meetings with people who were treated in Ueckermünde in different times and political systems. One thing united them: they had never found a way back into society. 18 years later, Christian returned to Ueckermünde for further research and learned that the same doctors were still practicing.

About the Author

During his hospitalization in Ueckermünde, doctors certified Christian had an intelligence level below average. This stigma closed him off to society. For one and a half years, coercive treatment robbed him of his ability to communicate, and left him at the mercy of the staff. Having survived the traumatizing ordeal, he turned his back on his hometown and underwent treatment in a specialized clinic for traumatised individuals in the West. Later, he studied French and English and received a PhD in linguistics, where his research took him to Paris and Dublin. At present, he is actively involved in helping supporting marginalized people and critically studying the concept of inclusion.

Foreword

Acknowledgements

Mila

How it all began

Faith

Sabine

The church

The pastor

Neubrandenburg Psychiatry

Ueckermünde - the acute ward

Gerd and Peter: Life in GDR

Therapy

Martha and Robert

The Complex Therapeutic Program

Betti

After Ueckermünde

The Factory Workers

Renate and Elisa

Mrs. Hässel

The 12th grade

Steg: The self-help group

Those Remaining

The Külzstreet Clinic

Lübeck

After 18 Years: Back in Ueckermünde

Epilogue: Failed Inclusion as an Example of the Stigmatized: Why theory doesn't have all the answers.

Open Letter

Obituary for Elisa

Bibliography

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Foreword

In Germany, politicians and social research institutes claim to believe we live in a society where all people are and should be included: Universities receive millions of euros in funding to both begin and continue research projects focused on “inclusion” related issues. However, because of the great divide between theory and reality, results in research rarely become established practical behaviors or values. A closer look at the concept of inclusion makes it clear: Germany has a long way to go before it can be considered a truly inclusive society.¹ In the debate over discrimination and exclusion, the public has hardly received any information about the fate of those who, due to a particular psychological disturbance, are forced to live in psychiatric wards.

Mainstream media does occasionally report on certain cases, for example, a particularly dramatic institutionalization. Nonetheless, the difference between the “criminally insane” and mentally ill people is, in general, not made clear. At the same time, depression and eating disorders are widely recognized.² Such is also the case with schizophrenia and yet, after being released from treatment, a patient with schizophrenia is still rarely able to find a place in our society. It is clear that the diagnosis of schizophrenia or psychosis - now known to be rooted in a dysfunction of the nervous system - leads to paranoid thoughts and socially unacceptable behaviors, and turns the lives of those involved upside down.³ Fateful circumstances had brought Christian Discher to the infamous psychiatric ward in Ueckermünde at the age of 17 in 1997. When the ARD⁴ distributed the damning report *Die Hölle von Ueckermünde* -

Psychiatrie im Osten (The Hell of Ueckermünde- Psychiatry in the East) by Ernst Klee, there was immediately media furor. The inhumane, involuntary commitment to psychiatric hospitals that took place during that time caused worldwide shock and dismay. But what they didn't mention was that, years after the report was broadcasted, involuntary commitment and drug treatment were both still taking place at the same location.⁵

The discussion about Ueckermünde has since fallen silent. In his diary notes, Christian Discher records his memories of the inhumane treatment he experienced in Ueckermünde's psychiatric hospital. The book offers a deep look inside in the emotional life of patients confined and also describes their later experiences in aftercare.⁶ This book is written in honor of those individuals Ernst Klee reported on in 1993. It serves as a reminder of people with severe mental disorders who could never find a way back into our society.

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For loving support during the process of research and writing, I would like to thank my husband, Thomas Paulick. I also offer thanks to my godson Alexander for all the wonderful times spent together. And thanks to my friends- I am truly grateful for having found you. I want to thank Ioana Grün for both our longtime friendship as well as supporting and assisting me with this translation.

Mila

The social worker entered the holding room. “Mr. Discher, your health insurance will take care of the bill for transportation.” I smiled and thought: What’s that supposed to mean? Looked after by Dr. Robin, the nurses loosened my straps. The paramedics put them on again as I was lying on the gurney. We took the elevator downstairs. In the smoking area in front of the door, a crowd of patients milling around stared at me. I took a last look at the blue sky before the back door of the ambulance opened. They slid me in and started the siren. We took off towards Ueckermünde.

Of course, everyone had heard of it. From an early age, we children learned about who was brought into that sort of place. While having lunch, we could even watch the people from my grandparents’ kitchen table. Nothing remained hidden behind the curtain. Anyone heading to the new housing development walked directly past our window.

“Look who’s out there, walking around!”, was Grandfather’s standard conversation starter.

“Isn’t he the one they locked up recently?” Granny said, curiously peering out the window while setting the table.

“Yes, in the village they say he has done bad things. Mrs. Mueller always says he has links to those from the other side, the West, you know!” My mother also couldn’t hold back a comment.

“He’d better watch out. He’ll be going back to Kükenmühl⁷ if he keeps on like that,” said my grandfather.

This was all an open secret that I hadn’t yet understood. But that day, I just could not help asking. I took the opportunity

and butted into the conversation. Not used to my grandparents speaking to my mother in their dialect, I usually asked in High German. "Where are they all going, and what do you mean by those from the other side?" I asked.

"The children will be taken to the juvenile detention if they do not obey their elders. The adults go to Kükenmühl. But you're too young to understand that," she answered.

Though I could understand my grandparent's dialect, I wasn't able to translate Kükenmühl, but I eventually found out what it meant. For the people in the village, the Kükenmühl was nothing more than the mental hospital in Ueckermünde.

As a child I often visited my grandparents in Leppin. The trip along the B96, southeast of Neubrandenburg, not far from the dreaded place, was a relaxing highlight on weekends. My grandparents told me exciting stories about the castle grounds where children should never go alone. Since the beginning of the war, treasure was hidden there, buried inside of a hill underneath the fir trees. It was the perfect setting for a wild game of cops and robbers.

I remembered Grandfather's words of warning as I left the house. "Never go with your friends to the old forest. It's a very dangerous place."

We, the children, were magically drawn to that spot and often visited in secret. It was there I met Mila for the first time, a fearless girl who knew her way around Leppin. She had long red hair, bright green eyes and must have been the daughter of the castle owner. Even though I was surprised an eleven-year-old girl was wandering around the forest by herself in the dark, I was still thrilled to meet her. Once, when I had lost track of my friends, Mila helped me find my way out of the thicket. Grateful and proud to have found a new friend, I let her walk me to the front door where

she whispered, "Don't tell anybody about our encounter."

Before she disappeared into the darkness, Mila turned around and said, "Let's meet again tomorrow."

I knew that trouble was waiting for me at home.

After all, I hadn't stuck to my parents' rules. But I didn't keep the secret of our meeting to myself. Full of excitement, I entered the living room looking for my grandparents.

Before I could open my mouth to tell my mother about Mila, she interrupted me, "Where have you been? Don't you see what time it is?"

"He is not listening to us. He has always been a stubborn boy," my grandfather barged in.

"I met a girl, we played together and then it got dark," I told them.

"This is not the right time to meet and play with girls. Where are the other boys?" my mother barked.

I looked at the floor. "They're at home."

"You'd better get home on the dot next time! Otherwise, I'll forbid you to go outside again!" she warned. I understood her worries. I was usually on time and obedient to all other grown-ups.

Mila and I were inseparable from that day on. As the years passed, playing in the forest stopped being important.

Meeting places and topics of conversation with Mila changed.

How it all began

“Time brings people closer to each other, and everything in life has a particular meaning. You have to understand life and define it for yourself,” said Mila as we were musing about our existence. Sabine, a friend of mine, once carefully mentioned, “You seem to be on a different level when you talk about Mila.” I hadn’t noticed that. I was just lucky to have found a friend like her. Her presence made me feel completely free and understood. This made our friendship a special one, a connection that couldn’t be broken and was viewed with suspicion by our peers. Nobody understood that I wanted this friendship purely for myself. Mila also didn’t try to get to know anybody else from my neighborhood. My family didn’t understand. I was forbidden from talking about her at home; our relationship was too intimate. Although I was always careful, everybody was very worried. Fortunately, I never had to study much for school. I had an excellent memory: if necessary, I could memorize facts with ease. That is why I had a lot of spare time to play sports and plan my future. I wanted to spend it with Mila by my side. Although I had a small group of social acquaintances, I was mostly a loner at school. I had no reason to make deep friendships. Mila was my closest confidant. Still, I was never alone in the schoolyard. Most of us hung out in the smoking area. I quickly jumped into conversation with the others when they met during breaks. In the infamous corner, the usual suspects were always smoking. Anna, who I had known since childhood, was one of the crew. Anna and I lit a cigarette.

“Hey Anna!” With a mischievous grin, I blew the smoke in her face.

“Look who’s coming!” she said, indicating a girl on the other side of the yard.

“Fatso Viki’s headed to the bakery,” I shouted across the schoolyard. The gang cracked up and I cackled the loudest. Humiliated, with her head bowed down, she ran past us at top speed. Viktoria didn’t have an easy life. She was well known at school but by no means popular, and I let her know it every time she crossed my path. She was the outsider of the upper grades, and an easy target because she never defended herself against our taunting. “Leave Viktoria alone!” Bea said, for the umpteenth time. We had teased Viktoria in the past far too often. But although Bea often didn’t like my behavior, we still spent time together occasionally.

During the school breaks we had enough time to spread the latest gossip. Physical appearances and new clothes were among our favorite topics. We also never missed discussing plans for after high school. Everyone knew that I wanted to move to Frankfurt in order to escape our small town and begin a new life in the big city. We even briskly exchanged views on Dr. Sommer’s⁸ wise advice. I preferred to stay out of such conversations. But when it came to making fun of others, I was loudly present again.

We had already quieted down when I saw Sandra behind me. She had just carefully poked her straw into an orange juice carton and begun to drink. Still in a heady state from the gossip about Viki, I impulsively squeezed the carton. The complete contents squirted out in a high arc over Sandra’s face. “Christian, you asshole!” she said in a shrill scream. I almost collapsed with laughter. Anna tried to hold back her nasty grin and turned to the side. Everybody joined in.

When I saw Sandra's crushed expression, the laughter stuck in my throat. Suddenly, I was sorry. I had made her life miserable many times, even though I actually really liked her.

Sandra, a pretty and intelligent girl who lived in the boarding school and was living practically on her own, was very popular with the boys. Her long black hair fluttered through the air when she walked across the schoolyard. I always knew that I could rely on Sandra. She had a friendly disposition, and quickly made friends with everybody. Although everybody wanted her, she was always around me for some inexplicable reason. I had already noticed that my athletic looks were appreciated by the blushing girls, who used to whisper behind my back when I walked past. My self-confident appearance often masked my insecurity, which I fought against day by day. Sandra and I spent plenty of time together. We were a pretty good team. We loved going to the movies, chatting about everything or just listening to music. I was never quite sure how I felt about her. This also explained why I usually skillfully dodged her timid attempts to get physically close to me, keeping her at a safe distance. I knew that, unfortunately, she wasn't the one for true love. But I didn't want to give up the time we spent together.

Guilt-ridden, I quickly took out tissues to wipe the orange juice from her neck. We went to the restroom.

"What the hell was that, Christian? Are you nuts? What did you think you were doing?" she asked. She was absolutely right. Why did I let myself get like this? "Sandra, I'm sorry. You know me. Why did you wave around your orange juice in my direction? I just couldn't help myself." I smiled sheepishly.

A loving glance was enough to bring a smile to her face. "Oh man, I am so thirsty. Do you have some orange juice?" she

said. We roared with laughter. Sandra was simply too good for me. Bea was waiting for us in the classroom, angrily tapping her foot.

She wanted to confront me.

“What was that? You have shit for brains!”

“Okay! I already feel guilty and stupid enough. Besides, I already apologized to Sandra,” I protested.

“I’m not only talking about Sandra, I’m also talking about how you treated Viki. Did you even know she’s diabetic? No one cares about her. It’s not her fault she’s so big and fat. Maybe you should try putting yourself in the shoes of people you constantly feel superior to.”

“Take it easy and relax!” The school bell rang. I didn’t like getting criticism from others. I was still thinking of Bea, when class began. I didn’t know why I was like this, or why I could lose control so easily. Bea had got to the heart of it. I felt my growing guilt. I had to talk to Mila about this. After class, I rushed past Bea and went on my way to meet her. When I got home I quickly put my school bag down, sprayed cologne on my neck and set off for Tollensesee⁹. Mila was impatiently waiting for me by the water. We sat at the lakeshore and I told her in detail about what had happened at school.

“Christian, I know that you really don’t care about what happens at school. After all, we have each other. But you really shouldn’t be so rude, and need to stop making fun of others,” she said.

“I don’t know why I always do it. It just happens. Afterwards I feel really bad. I’m a really bad person, but I promise you, from now on I will try really hard not to be so mean to others.”

I had a hard time because of my behavior, and was dogged by remorse every day. Besides my intense friendship with Mila, many changes slowly appeared in my life. Although

Mila gave me support and I was also striving to better myself, I got more quiet every day and withdrew into my room. By now, I was fed up with the constant teenager topics. Everything revolved around appearance and sex. Added to this, I was also constantly bickering with my nagging parents, and still treated the people around me badly.

The fact that I was constantly looking in the mirror was tightly connected to my inner insecurities. My desire for physical perfection was excruciating. I started to eat less and trained daily to shape my body into the form of a picture-perfect model. I wanted my Slavic roots and high cheekbones to be noticed by everyone. I used to get on the scale to check my weight several times a day, and also drank dehydrating teas, hoping to further my weight loss. All I wanted was to live by my own rules and begin a new life. Four weeks before the summer holidays began, my good humor and lightness disappeared, along with my progress in weight loss, traits which Mila had always admired in me.

"I feel so fat and ugly," I complained.

"Oh bullshit Christian. You are an athlete and look amazing," Mila tried to reassure me.

Meanwhile, at a little over 6 feet, I only weighed around 158 pounds. Almost 30 pounds less than two months before didn't pass unnoticed. But I felt like I was always just one diet away from perfection.

"But all models have high cheekbones, right Mila? Do you think I'm too fat?" I pressed her.

"No, definitely not. Stop starving yourself! You're getting thinner and thinner! This is not healthy. Who wants to become a model nowadays anyway? You have so much potential for other things."