

Translated extract from

**SAID**  
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**Ein Gespräch mit Wieland Freund**  
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**SAID**  
**Living in Germany**  
**A Conversation with Wieland Freund**

**Translated by Michael Ritterson**

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## **about this book**

*living in germany* is the distilled transcript of a series of conversations which i had with SAID between february and december of 2003. for nearly all of them we were sitting in a large conference room at c.h.beck publishers with a view of a lovely garden in the schwabing quarter of munich.

most of the transcripts we have cut substantially, but we have left them in their original interview form. only the first two chapters, because they represent SAID's personal recollections, were later cast as monologues. our intention was to preserve the oral character throughout.

many persons have had a part in making this book a reality. our particular thanks are due to babette leckebusch, who transcribed our conversations, constanze hub, who helped organize them, and martin hielscher, who edited them. my role was limited to that of a journalist midwife. *living in germany* is SAID's book entirely.

*wieland freund, december 2003*

our world does not need lukewarm spirits, it needs burning hearts  
capable of granting moderation its proper place.

— *albert camus*

**border crossings**  
**a memoir**

autumn in teheran can be cold, but on this day it's warm. a vendor calls out his wares: boiled red beets. we children stand around his pushcart eating the beets.

if i want to describe my homeland i cannot speak about the flag, the national anthem, or pride. in this century that would be a joke. i have to speak about the senses. the colors and the smells that are unique to teheran.

i was an only child and often alone. frequently i walked one or two hours long through the city by myself. today in iran the villages are empty and the cities more than full, but back then you could still walk through the streets. i have remained a pedestrian even today, and when i think of teheran i think of those walks. at the time, we lived in the southeast of the city, in a venerable old neighborhood that was the first to have electric lighting. in the house where i was born, there was one room with a balcony that looked out on the inner courtyard. with its two flower beds, two birches, geraniums, and jasmine. my very first route to school took me along goethe street every morning.

i don't mean to be nostalgic. the images before my inner eye have become a little unfamiliar — a little frayed — because i haven't seen them in a long time. still, i miss the image of the donkeys. every fruit vendor had a donkey. and for each kind of fruit he had a song. his songs were melodic, almost elegiac. now and then they would be interrupted by the braying of the donkeys — to the delight of us children. the ice sellers brought their blocks of ice by donkey, and the salt vendor too, wrapping his salt crystals in newspaper. once a week the water man came. your turn today, he said. he came at five in the morning. the children woke up, gleeful: water's coming! it was pumped into a tank, which was usually in the cellar.

today, so i am told, the fruit vendor comes in a little delivery van equipped with a loudspeaker system. the vendor doesn't sing any more, he shouts, loudly and aggressively.

later we lived for a time in the south of iran. in a region that i would characterize as lower middle class today. all of our neighbors were officers like my father. we lived in small houses with flat roofs. life was played out in the courtyards. there was a palm tree

very close to the wall, so that if i climbed it i could lean my back against the wall. up there in the palm tree i learned how to whistle. i practiced until i could do it.

the house had only two rooms, the summers were hot, and at night i slept on the flat roof. it was at the time of the putsch, 1953, and my father had ordered us not to read any more newspapers — we had no radio. after the putsch many of my father's friends were arrested and executed. he had been friends with many of them since the military academy. he didn't want to read of their deaths in the newspapers.

but my life as a child was not threatened. perhaps sheltered is the right word for that childhood. later on, in school — schools were state-run, there were no private schools at the time — we sat side by side, armenians, bahai'i, zoroastrians, aramaeans, chaldeans, jews, kurds, lurs. i loved this iran of side-by-sides. my father was a liberal, but my grandmother was staunchly religious. and she was an anti-semite. for our comprehensive exams i studied with a jewish friend at our house. of course he would stay for the midday meal. my grandmother would wash his dishes separately. nonetheless, grandmother swore by dr. baruch, our family physician. when i was older and wanted to challenge her, i would say: but grandmother, he's also jewish. she would answer: yes, but a doctor is a doctor. dr. baruch remained our family physician for as long as i can remember.

besides grandmother my aunt, my father's older sister, also lived with us. and i loved her dearly. at midday she would lie down for a nap. after an hour i would tiptoe into her room, peel oranges for her, and prepare the tea. when the water in the samovar was boiling she would wake up and say: ah, my dear said is here; i know he's peeled oranges for me. later, after i left iran, she emigrated like many others to the united states. two years ago she died there. on the evening before she died she asked for a tape recorder. she left a message for me. the final sentence was: perhaps we'll see each other again.

i left teheran in november 1965. the days leading up to my departure were hectic. a whole list of things had to be taken care of. an ordinary iranian needs a police permit to leave the country, but i was the son of an officer, so i had to go to the secret service. my father accompanied me. one particular officer had charge of my case. he knew my

father. he ordered tea and chatted with us. then my file appeared. i was seventeen and there was actually a file on me! the officer said: since he's your son, i don't think there'll be any problem. my father was surprised: no problem? what are you talking about? he replied: the high school. you know the teachers there are communists. it was true. the teachers, all of them former communists, had been in prison for years and were thus no longer permitted to work as government employees. they had gone as a group to the shah and had requested permission to open a private secondary school. and the simple fact that i attended that school had been reason enough for the secret service to keep a file on me.

i had to pass the last airport police checkpoint without my father. i turned one more time to look back to him and saw tears streaming down his face. then my cousin and i boarded the iran air plane. when we were airborne i rang for the flight attendant and asked for a pack of cigarettes, american winstons. i had smoked secretly before that, single cigarettes that i had the street vendors light for me, so my father wouldn't catch me with a pack. now, in the plane, the winston in my hand was liberation.

the flight went via beirut, rome, and geneva to frankfurt. germany is cold, very cold, people had said. they had dressed me to the teeth; my money, a thousand marks, was sewn into my clothing, as if germany was just teeming with thieves; and to top it all off, i was carrying a wool blanket over my arm because the suitcase was full. but it wasn't at all cold in frankfurt on that day, the nineteenth of november 1965.

in frankfurt i was immediately struck by the different tempo. the people walked differently, they were literally *busier*. the airport in teheran was a place for idling. people went there to drink coffee. not so in frankfurt. in that hectic and impersonal atmosphere we waited. a relative was supposed to pick us up from the airport, but he didn't appear. after quite some time a lufthansa stewardess spoke to us. she was very attractive, and we were utterly abashed because we'd been waiting so long. she spoke good persian: are you looking for a hotel? she gave us her card and wrote an address on the back. we were supposed to show the card at the reception desk.

the hotel was near the main railroad station in frankfurt, on kaiserstrasse, i seem to recall. we were uncertain: should we go back out into the city? no, better to stay in the safety of the hotel room. but in the evening we did go out after all. so as not to lose our way we just went up and down the main street — over and over again.

the following day we came to munich. that is where i've stayed. for almost forty years.

only once did i return to teheran. in germany it had gone almost without saying that i joined the iranian student union. in 1973 i had been elected secretary general of the cisnu (confederation of iranian students national union), at that time the only effective opposition to the shah's regime outside of iran. with that, any return to iran was out of the question. the shah had pushed a law through parliament which imposed a ten-year jail sentence on any member of the cisnu as a communist. his majesty was avenging himself for his loss of image.

in 1979 i was working at the "international youth library." at home i had taken the habit of sleeping with the radio nearby. on the sixteenth of january i awoke and heard the news: the shah was to leave iran today, it was announced. once i had sat with a woman friend in front of the television showing pictures of his majesty's army: 600,000 soldiers, tanks, helicopters, hovercraft. my friend had asked me: and you intend to bring down this regime? on this morning, after the 7 o'clock news, i turned back over in bed. i didn't believe what i had heard. then at 8:00 they said: the shah has left iran. i turned over again. when it was reported that his majesty had arrived in egypt, i got up and went to work. he's not really gone, i said. it was hours before i could grasp the fact that the shah really was gone, that my exile was over and i could go home again. and i went home. what i experienced on that trip is recorded in my book, *where i die is where i am a stranger*.

in teheran i got in touch with a publisher of children's books. i had worked with him once before. you come back after fourteen years, he said to me, you're not religious. we're sorry, but you'd only cause us trouble with the mullahs. i stayed in teheran for seven weeks. as if to prove to myself that i had become a foreigner here. i went into a pharmacy and, as i came through the door, said: good morning. everyone turned and

looked at me. my general greeting was a german habit. an iranian would not have said hello until it was his turn to be served. once, at supper in a restaurant, and before i had uttered a single word, the waiter said, you're from overseas. and he did not want to tell me how he had known that. it made me angry. but time leaves a different mark on you here than it would there. i had been unaware that i was a foreigner. fourteen years is a long time.

today, twenty-four years after the islamic revolution, i sit here in my second exile, in germany, and *trachte* — as they say in yiddish — how it is that i've become a foreigner. sometimes i sit together with iranian friends and tell a joke that even the forty-year-olds don't understand, because it alludes to something they've never known. when i have visitors from teheran they note that my persian is correct and pure, but antiquated, as if in a sealed container. i never use foreign words when i speak persian. in teheran, persian is full of americanisms.

do you know the story of rip van winkle as told by max frisch? a man from the american south falls into an enchanted sleep lasting for years and sleeps through the civil war. one day he awakes and walks into the next town to have a beer. his clothing, his language, the coins he tries to pay with, are foreign.

once in teheran, in 1979, i rode through the city at five in the morning with a friend who owned a car. thus i visited all the neighborhoods i had lived in. the house where i was born was run down, unoccupied, the window panes broken. another house had since been divided into three apartments. you stand in front of that and know that you've lost something. you don't step across that threshold again.

a year earlier i had walked through the narrow alleys of rome and had found a door in a shade of blue that i knew from teheran. in palermo i bought a packet of sunflower seeds and sauntered through the streets spitting the shells as i had done at fourteen in teheran. and in piraesus i once bought an ear of corn from a street vendor with a handcart. i sprinkled salt on it the way it's done in teheran. and so, standing at the harbor in piraesus, i ruminated on my homeland.



only long after my return from the teheran of the islamic revolution did i write a book about my mother. while i was writing it i came to the realization that there is no longer a place for me in iran. up to that point my life in germany had been a temporary one:

“for abiding is nowhere,” writes rilke in the “duino elegies.” but following the book about my mother, the composure of the vanquished took control of me. homeland is a concept of the unconscious. if they had told me in teheran in 1964, this is your homeland, i would have replied, it’s just a city. but even today i count in persian. when i am sick i want to read persian. when i’m tired i want to speak persian. but history has not decided in my favor. not because i matter particularly, but because history often decides against people.

in the summer of 2002 i had a heart attack. i don’t mean to sound mawkish, but a heart attack is half a death. it’s as if death had knocked at the door and left its calling card. after that life changes completely. you throw off ballast, for the next journey, and you want to put things right with yourself — with your heart. i lived in iran for seventeen years and in germany for nearly forty. i write in german. i’ve just now applied for a german passport. when paul klee fled hitler and went to switzerland he applied for a swiss passport. the swiss bureaucracy took its good old time. the notice of approval of the passport arrived about a week after klee’s death.

perhaps i’m trying to challenge death — with a new passport.

### **i’ll never go back there literature and politics**

*let’s approach a difficult subject with a simple question: should literature be political?* simple question, simple answer: literature can be political, but it doesn’t have to be. for example, it’s said of me that i’m a political writer. but that’s not correct. i’ve also written some non-political things. i can’t express myself in political terms when the subject doesn’t touch me. and touching is always — if you’ll excuse the expression — a physical matter, not one of the intellect alone. i can’t write a poem on the capture of saddam hussein today. i can’t make a radio play out of the united states’ attack on iraq. i

don't envy the author who feels obligated to make some statement on every major or highly charged political event. erich fried was one of that kind. but that's the way a lot of second-rate poems were produced.

*would you have given that same answer in 1968?*

back then i would probably have answered fanatically: literature must be political. that's what the times demanded. but since then many years have passed, and i've come to understand how destructive such an attitude can be — for literature as well as for politics. a certain distance is good for an author.

*well, the student movement was actually quite hostile toward literature. how could a person back then get to read literature at all?*

by reading secretly. one night i lay in my sleeping bag reading in my office in frankfurt. early in the morning three agitated iranians arrived there. i got up and let them in, and one of them picked up the book i'd been reading. it was heinrich böll's novel, *the clown*, and he said: but comrade secretary general, this is a novel. he did not say: this is a bad novel, or: this is a bad author. it was simply the type of book that repelled him. that's the narrow-mindedness of political activity. you can still see this narrow-mindedness today, even in the major parties, i might add. more so among the social democrats, if that makes any sense; while the christian democrats have become more receptive to culture. but it wasn't always like that. as far as adenauer and strauss were concerned, writers were undercover agents for moscow.

*and what actually remains of the literature written in times of hostility toward literature? bernward vesper's the journey? a number of peter schneider's books?*

i don't think very much remains of what was then called literature. personally, i would no longer have any desire to read it. although vesper's book has its place even today. but let's take another example: hans magnus enzensberger. i remember him, back when he enjoyed appearing on television, reading a poem with the title "the shit." "the shit" stood for the american president richard nixon, who authorized the bombing in vietnam. today

enzensberger is on a different track. nevertheless, i think he would say he's remained true to himself.

*enzensberger leaving america and moving to cuba, martin walser's association with the german communist party back then — was that really credible?*

from my perspective, no. although I would make a distinction between enzensberger and walser. i haven't taken walser seriously from the beginning; he is just too often "misunderstood" for that. back when he appeared with the german communist party i didn't believe he was a communist. nor do i believe that he is an anti-semite because of having written the novel *death of a critic*. martin walser is just a clever pr manager for his own books. enzensberger i took more seriously when he wrote *the havana inquiry*. The book also appeared in persian, by the way, in a large printing, which could be of some significance. i received the translation and sent it to enzensberger. he was surprised: this had been published in the islamic republic? they knew that he was opposed to the republic. then i wrote him a long letter: in iran the only thing that mattered was that the book was directed against the usa. but that aside.

you've touched on a sore point. intellectuals, writers in particular, think they have something to say, and perhaps they really do have something to say, and that's why they seek a political connection. but it almost always fails. a writer doesn't know the ways of politics. he has a different rhythm, a totally different course. so the only example in germany of — in my view — a successful collaboration was the one between günter grass and willy brandt. in that relationship grass played the supporting role and wrote the speeches for brandt. we can still remember the images: willy brandt on the campaign trail, and grass standing behind him. if it had to be one way or the other, then that would be a happier role than to be the candidate and stand in front.

*klaus harpprecht reports that grass was pushing for political office at the time. and that he really annoyed brandt with that ambition. does that exemplify a successful collaboration between literature and politics?*

heinrich böll once characterized writers as the conscience of the nation. a very problematic statement. for woe to the nation that relinquishes its conscience to a handful

of people. if klaus harpprecht's report is true, i'm thankful today that willy held his ground. a günter grass who stays in the background and functions as an ethical adviser is a thousand times more valuable than a günter grass as secretary for cultural affairs and education in the ministry of the interior, which had responsibility for cultural affairs back then. as i see it, politics is a part of the culture and not vice versa. and for precisely that reason the writer has a different rhythm from the politician's. when he is able to disagree creatively with the politician, then we all gain something.

*i find the association of a number of authors with the spd in the sixties generally noteworthy. in fact that party is a pretty dull bunch when it comes to literature; its appreciation of literature has grown only slightly since the celebrations on the 1905 centenary of schiller's death. how in heaven's name could they have imagined that this spd was capable of a literary alliance?*

from today's standpoint you are correct. but at the time willy brandt made all the difference. he spoke with authority. his biography alone afforded him the necessary intellectual equipment. which cannot be said of gerhard schröder or franz müntefering. schröder would love to have grass writing his speeches for him. but why is the spd such a literary and cultural backwater? the cabaret artist dieter hildebrandt, an spd member himself, said thirty years ago that the spd relates to culture as a farmer in the desert relates to homosexuality. that's putting it crudely, but he was right. the spd has no relationship to culture. when i went around to raise money as p.e.n. president, there was never anything to be had from the spd. cdu politicians, on the other hand, were more ready to lend support. it's as if a social democrat needed to apologize for giving to support literature or culture. the spd is afraid of culture. it suffers from cultural-contact anxiety. it has no sense for art.

*don't we need to keep a certain distance from the "willy myth"? wasn't he also a product of his party in cultural matters? he loved march music and the singer heino. i can't stand march music and heino. but i venture to doubt that willy was a product of that party. after all, he was the only cosmopolitan in the bunch; the rest of them were utterly provincial types. so the question might rather be asked: to what extent was the*

spd of the seventies a product of willy brandt? furthermore, it isn't a question of a myth, but rather of a singular personality who played a considerable role in shaping today's europe with his *ostpolitik* and still always touched people directly — a quality which politicians since then have entirely lost. with willy it's the same as in a love affair: i don't intend to reform my beloved, i accept her flaws as part of our love.

*in november of 2001 you and other artists and authors were invited to the chancellery. gerhard schröder was looking for — what's the expression? — a closing of ranks.* yes, the late stefan heym was there, so were christa wolf, christoph hein, volker schlöndorff, günter grass, and others. grass had put together the list of participants. the chancellor was concerned with the reasoning behind his famous statement of “full solidarity” with the united states after september 11, 2001. schröder wanted to convince us that he had acted in the interest of the country and had acted rightly. his principal opponent was grass. but schröder deprived grass of all his weapons. he played his part with a great sense of form, with much humor and poise. he knows how to listen, he can also laugh at himself, and he was altogether disarming. finally schröder asked that our discussion not be leaked to the press. then in the corridor christoph hein said to me, you know what that means, don't you? — he wants it leaked to the press. thus, when i left the chancellery i knew that i would never go back there. because otherwise i would be doing pr for the chancellor. sure enough, details of our meeting were in the papers the next day.

*günter grass, hans magnus enzensberger, martin walser. when literature and politics are the topic of discussion, these are the first names mentioned in germany. these are in a sense the founding literary figures of the federal republic. which is connected, not least of all, with the lasting influence of group 47, the organization bearing conspicuously in its name the date of the so-called zero hour. it has now come to light that two prominent critics from that group were nazi party members as very young men: walter jens and walter höllerer.*

let's not approach this problem from today's perspective, but the other way around. imagine yourself, as best you can, in the year 1947: the war is over; the vile dictatorship has been defeated — once again by outside forces, unfortunately; a group of authors

wants a new beginning. do you think that someone like walter höllerer, whose record of service to this country's literary life is undisputed, would have been in the position, in 1947, to stand up and declare: by the way, i was a member of the national socialist party, and i regret that? i think not. i remember hans baumann, the writer of children's books. baumann was seventeen when he wrote the song "es zittern die morschen knochen." i knew him. he was a regular visitor to the international youth library. always looking shamefaced until finally someone said: my god, herr baumann, can't you just write about it? you were only seventeen! but he couldn't do it. how liberating it could be to process it that way. but this "getting it out on the table" that would have a liberating effect on all of us — isn't that really asking too much? i don't know whether i would have had the strength to do it in baumann's situation.

i think group 47 was forced to promise more than it could deliver. the group provided this country with a new self-image. that was beneficial, no doubt about it. today fifty years have passed, and fifty years is a magic number: things come out then that didn't come out before. wouldn't we both be very sad if more inconsistencies came to light in addition to the cases of jens and höllerer? i wouldn't be surprised if they did, at least. but didn't this group achieve enough as it is? outside the field of literature, too, for this country? do you have the impression that this group really deceived us with false information? i have no such impression.

*the editor of the series text + kritik, heinz ludwig arnold, speaks of three leaps taken by west-german literature up to 1990. he identifies a moralization of literature in group 47, a politicization in the period of the student movement, and finally the privatization of literature in the third phase. you were not writing during the phase of politicization, but you did immediately after that. at that time did you fit into any trend in german literature? did you also cross over into the private sphere? like nicolas born, peter handke, jürgen theobaldy, and so many others?*

my first book was a little volume of "love poems." and that after i had been an explicitly political writer for ten years. of course there was a huge uproar. in vietnam, they said, people are dying every day, and you write love poems. and to add insult to injury, i had even made reference to vietnam in one of the love poems. my reason for doing this was

— and we've talked about this before — that i felt myself abandoned. loneliness is what gave rise to that book. at the time i didn't give much thought to how the book would be received.

*“after the high-flying hopes that we had pinned on the student movement,” wrote peter rühmkorf in 1972, “the plunge into the cellar was all the deeper. saw no daylight above me and no prospect ahead of me, and so i withdrew (once again) into private life, back to my chamber, back to the books, back to culture.” is rühmkorf also describing the path you took?*

yes, absolutely. although my second book was a political one. but still: if i can be an activist and change the fortunes of this or that country, then i don't write books. i retreat to the books, alone and lonely, because i cannot do the other thing. you certainly know the statement: if pablo picasso had fought in the spanish civil war he would never have painted *guernica*. rühmkorf is right. and he's very honest. in the best of all cases, one takes the position he held as a political activist into his chamber and uses it as a standard by which to measure himself. in the worst of all cases, one lays aside the position he's gained. we were just now speaking of enzensberger. any time he came out with something new he did it with utter intensity. two days later — i exaggerate — he drops his new-found position and does something entirely different. not so rühmkorf, for example. not so uwe johnson and many, many others. we see here — so i think — two basic positions in literary life. the one says, or imagines: i am the standard. the other says: i have a position. personally, i'm more on the side of the writers who hold to their position than of those who occasionally change their course. and i believe that writers who — to oversimplify — come out of politics, have it very hard.

*the distancing of german literature from politics went so far that a german federal president — it was, of course, former president richard von weizsäcker — said it would be desirable for literature to be a little more engaged, to show a little more interest in politics.*

richard von weizsäcker is right when he calls for more engagement in literature. only a freethinker can make that demand today, when many formerly activist writers have

surrendered to comfortable non-involvement. and that's not all. converts have to make up the deficit and end up worse than their former adversaries. the admirable thing about richard von weizsäcker is that, as a conservative, he never surrenders his position. unfortunately, there is an army of populists of various stripes in germany today, but only a handful of conservatives.