

Franz Hessel, “Sightseeing Tour” (1929)

Abstract

The writer and translator Franz Hessel (1880-1941) is best known today for his book *Spaziergang in Berlin* [*Walking in Berlin*] (1929). His descriptions of the city in the 1920s from the perspective of an attentive observer who explores the city on foot established the literary type of the *flâneur* (as described by Walter Benjamin) in Weimar era literary journalism – and later in literary studies. In this excerpt from a chapter of *Walking in Berlin*, Hessel does not walk the city’s streets, however, but instead joins a sightseeing tour of the city by bus. Hessel, who was of Jewish descent, fled from Berlin to France in 1938, where he was interned shortly thereafter in the Les Milles internment camp near Aix en Provence. There he suffered a stroke, the consequences of which led to his death in 1941.

Source

On Unter den Linden near the corner of Friedrichstraße, huge vehicles are parked along both sides of the street. In front of each stands a liveried driver with gold letters on his cap, inviting passersby to join a circular tour. One of the companies on the opposite side of the street is called “Elite”; on my side, there is “Käse.” Simple convenience or sign of a lower-middle-class disposition? — I choose “Käse.”

I am now sitting on leather-upholstered seats, surrounded not just by strangers, but by foreigners. The others all appear confident that the matter at hand will be squared away between 11:00 and 1:00. The family of hyphenated Americans to my right is even already talking about traveling on to Dresden this evening. In multiple languages the driver asks each fresh crop of guests if they understand German or are hard of hearing. This is not intended as an insult, but rather bears on the seating arrangements. In the front there is more air, while in the back the acoustics are better.

On a white banner in front of me is printed in red letters: Sight Seeing. What a pointed pleonasm! All at once, all of the passengers seated on the right half of the bus stand up, while I, together with all those on the left side, am instructed to remain seated and to surrender my face to the photographer who, standing in the roadway, removes the cap from the lens of his camera and, by capturing me in his group photo, ultimately turns me into a touristic artifact.

From far below, a native hand thrusts color postcards up towards me. How high and mighty we are, we circular tourists, we foreigners! The young man seated in front of me, who looks like a dentist, purchases an entire album of them, initially as a souvenir and later presumably for his waiting room. He compares the rendering of Old Fritz on the shiny paper with the real one cast in bronze, which we are slowly driving past. The latter is seated high on his horse striking an unforgettable pose, one hand braced against his side under his broad coat, dangling a walking stick, the famous tricorne hat set askew atop his head. His gaze is fixed far past us, towards the columns and windows of the university, which was once his brother's palace.

He doesn't look especially benevolent, at least not as far as we can tell, looking up at him from below.

We are almost at eye level with the crowded band of heroes and contemporaries encircling the pedestal. They are packed in quite tightly between the wall relief and the stone base, braced by the four horsemen at the corners of the pedestal, who would keep any interlopers at bay.

Now we are gliding past the front façade of the library on the sunny side of the street. Beneath the

awnings of elegant shops, items made of silk, leather and metal tempt passersby. The lace curtains in the windows of Hiller's restaurant rekindle memories of good times, of the nearly forgotten aroma of lobster and Chablis, of the old doorman who knew how to usher one ever so discreetly into a private dining room. I pull myself away—I'm a foreigner, after all—only to immediately get caught up once again. Travel agencies, the exhilaration of a shop window filled with world maps and globes. The magic of the green booklets with the red tags, of the alluring names of foreign cities. Oh, the many blissful departures from Berlin! How heartlessly did one continually leave the beloved city.

But now listen up. We are just turning into Wilhelmstraße. Our guide announces in oddly American-inflected German that we are now entering Germany's government street. It is quiet, almost like a private road. And how quaintly inviting do the two large-paned streetlamps look in front of the discreet, yellow-washed façades behind which Germany's foreign policy is made! What gentle oil-light must once have burned within them when they were new!

One of those brown entrance gates ornamented with carved foliage once led to the apartments of the celebrated ballerina Barberina when she had already retired from dancing and had become Baroness Barbara von Cocceji. And over a century later, from 1862 till 1878, Bismarck lived here. That was the small study with the dark-green curtains and the floral carpet alongside the dining room in which the Ems Dispatch was composed. Later he moved into the Palais Radziwill, where the Reich chancellor still resides peacefully, behind a formal garden, just as the Reich president does a few buildings away.

But our tour guide does not allow us to dwell in this peacefulness, but rather wrenches our gaze towards the imposing building complex across the street, himself calling out in amazement: "All Justice!" "And here," he continues, "filled from the basement to the rafters with gold: the Finance Ministry." This is a joke at which only the actual foreigners can laugh. I find consolation in the beautiful expanse of Wilhelmsplatz, in the fluttering flags at the Kaiserhof Hotel, in the vines entwining the pergola at the entrance to the underground station, and in General Zieten's bent Hussar back.

A jumble of towers, crenellations, bulges, and cables: "Leipziger Straße, the biggest commercial street in the metropolis!" But we merely cross it and continue down Wilhelmstraße, past many antique shops, past the headquarters of the Architects' Society. The palace of Prince Heinrich, where we stop for a moment to admire the beautiful hall of pillars in the old courtyard and the old windows. And its virtuously sober auxiliary buildings are all of the same light-brown hue that struck the poet Laforgue as the predominant color of palaces in the capital when, in the Eighties of the past century, he lived in Berlin while serving as a reader to the Empress, and which he referred to as the *couleur café au lait*. For the world of Wilhelmstraße and many of the older parts of the city, this still applies today.

Our busy vehicle does not stop at the familiar old museums on Prinz-Albrecht-Straße. We glide past the round belly of the High-Renaissance Ethnological Museum. Its name is merely mentioned in passing, with nothing said of the Turfan and Gandhara, of the Inca and the Maori. Instead, the speaker announces far in advance: "Vaterland. Café Vaterland, the biggest café in the capital!" The foreigners goggle at the large gaudy dome atop the building, and those with previous experience of Berlin's nightlife advise others to view this gigantic establishment with all its separate attractions, this culinary ethnological museum by Kempinski and its panoramas, at night when it is fully illuminated.

[...]

But now we reach Potsdamer Platz. The most important thing to say about it is that it is not a square in the conventional sense, but rather what in Paris is known as a *carrefour*: a crossroads, an intersection—we have no proper word for it. One would need a topographically very well-trained eye to recognize from the shape of the intersection that a city gate once stood here, where Berlin ended and the roads split off in different directions.

There is so much traffic in this relatively tight space that one often wonders at how smoothly and comfortably it flows. Another calming touch are the many colorful baskets of the flower girls. And in the middle of it all stands the famous traffic tower, which watches over the play of the streets like a referee at a tennis match.

How strangely sedate and empty do the huge letters and images on the advertisements adorning the façades and roofs of the buildings look in the bright light of day. They are waiting for nightfall to reawaken. How sharply and smoothly does the super-modern front of the remodeled building that houses the venerable confectioner's Telschow trace its glassy lines. For the moment, the Josty-Eck retains its old-timey look. But on the opposite side of Bellevuestraße, something new is going up, at first still hidden behind a high, heavily-postered wall: a department store with a Parisian name. Will it be as beautiful as Messel's masterpiece over there, behind the greenery of Leipziger Platz: the Wertheim department store?

Bellevuestraße, into which we are permitted to cast a quick glance, is increasingly becoming Berlin's Rue la Boétie. Art shops abound, and with them, the shop windows of the fashion boutiques are also becoming more refined, more like still lifes. Even the large and small private cars that wait in the curve of the driveway in front of the Hotel Esplanade profit from this. Their bodies—increasingly pleasing combinations of coat and hat—have wonderful colors.

The light at the traffic tower turns green. We circle Potsdamer Platz and drive along Leipziger Platz, past the white columns of the two little gate-temples.

Source: Franz Hessel, „Rundfahrt Berlin,“ in id., *Spazieren in Berlin*. Leipzig and Vienna, 1929, pp. 56-147. Available online at:

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