

Hans Ostwald, “All Tables Occupied” (1920s)

Abstract

Hans Ostwald (1873-1940) was a writer and observer of life in Berlin from 1900 through the 1930s. In the following account, he offers an impression of Potsdamer Platz and the famous Café Josty, where all tables are occupied, regardless of the time of day, and the mixing of genders, ages and classes still came as a shock to some café patrons.

Source

A dull reflection shimmers from the asphalt of Potsdamer Platz across the tables, across the groups, across the richly or conspicuously attired ladies, across the faces of the gentlemen. The sun beats down onto the square and is caught in the wide, mist-filled hollow lane of Leipziger Straße that opens up its maw behind the dull-yellow gate structures planted about with desiccating foliage and the green of Leipziger Platz. In the square the hackneys, the electric trams, the cars, the box-like commercial wagons push together into a confused knot, disentangle themselves, flee into the confluent roads – and head again to the square, like flies approaching the doom-bringing lamp. [...]

In front of the café’s enclosure there is a colorful to and fro of people. Young girls, slim, lightly and airily dressed. Women who reveal rich, shimmering undergarments and elegant shoes as they cross the square. Gentlemen coming from the stock exchange, from elegant offices and stores – and only few women and men who bear a trace of work on their clothes. [...]

This image is part of Café Josty. It is the background.

Without it – what would the Café be?

It is only this unifying center of the Western part of Berlin that makes possible this venue with all its charms, its people, and its colorful, variegated activities. – In the summer. Afternoon. Under green trees in the shade of the house a veritably confusing welter of figures. Exactly like today’s Berlin offers. Bright, blinding summer dress. Gentlemen in the most elegant street attire, with colorful vests, real Panama hats on their distinctive heads. Also in top hats or the latest felt. All tables occupied.

Two ladies come rushing up. Airy, pleated silk.

Soft fashion colors. Only the hats are green, the color of the sap of summery meadow grass. The faces fresh and flushed. But a few wrinkles at the temples and the fullness of the breasts and hips and the heavy womanly gait, which high heels do not entirely hide, do tell of a certain number of years.

And from the confident demeanor one sees that these two ladies are used to going out alone.

All eyes follow the tall figures who are looking for empty seats among the tables – and find empty chairs close to a table with older gentlemen. And as they now sit there one sees a slight touch of powder on their faces, and the diamond earrings sparkle like grateful presents. [...]

Not only the young men sitting nearby seek to catch glimpses and to grasp the figures. The ladies, too, let their eyes scan these enchanting dresses. Envy, curiosity, astonishment, the craving to emulate cast furtive and open glances.

Glances find their way to the two also from the table of the older gentlemen. The gentleman in light gray, whose red, aristocratic face glows between the two whitish ends of a beard, knows how to elicit a delicate smile on the face of one of them.

[...]

Suddenly a large, broad-shouldered gentleman passes by. His bony head with the mottled grey beard, with the patchy red face, the strong nose, the flickering eyes, and the thick-lipped mouth reminds one of a reactionary, agrarian parliamentary speaker who made enormous profits from industrial enterprises.

The old men greet him deferentially.

He is quite informally affable.

But he stiffens up outwardly when a small gentleman with a sharp face, blond goatee and mocking smile walks by very close to him. An aristocratic peer who is one of the youngest, most poisonous opposition tongues in the Reichstag and made the old gentleman aware of certain social contradictions in his life and speeches.

Close to the patio a table is occupied by artists. A blond, elegantly dressed young man, a former lawyer, now he writes humorous stories about criminals. A shabbily dressed, pale-haired sculptor with a young, girlish woman. A writer, with an enormous, dense abundance of curls, roundish face, pouting lips, who acts the rural landowner in a loden jacket, who has a magnificent hunting dog with him, pretends to be the greatest lover of nature but cannot live three days without his Berlin West. He writes stories of criminals and whores that are more than crude – but he rarely makes it out of the pretentious streets and luxurious locales of the West to be among the people. An illustrator who has worked himself up from his working-class background and whose rectangular head and creased, smooth-shaved mouth gives the pretense of a mixture of sportsman and criminal.

Not far from him sits a small, fat, commonly dressed man with his daughter; she in white cambric, with gaudy red, cheap flowers on her gigantic woven straw hat. Suddenly the fat man calls out quite familiarly: “Mr. Fuchs! Mr. Fuchs!”

He slaps the illustrator on the shoulders and steers him to his table and talks with the well-known artist – so loudly that almost the entire restaurant can hear him – about the days when he began his artistic career in the house of the fat man – in the South-East – upstairs, under the roof.

[...]

Close to a mother, who is seated with packages and several daughters lapping up whipped cream, two other girls are divulging their secrets: “Lissi, the officer I had last year is returning to the academy here in the winter.”

“Well – and your *Geheimrat*?”

“As long as he doesn’t catch on, I’ll just let him pay. . . I would be foolish not to!”

“You would be. My industrialist also has no clue that the little Japanese man visits me now and then. Well – you know, I can’t really wait until he cuts his old lady loose. . . Well – you know, he really is in a very bad situation.”

The young girls are pretending that they are not hearing any of this. But the mother looks at them. Such proper, well-bred, upper-class daughters, the kind that will not turn the heads of too many men. Lusterless eyes, pale, common stay-at-home faces don’t draw that response. [...]

“No,” says the mother, “no, in the past, when things had not gotten so big here, a different kind of public frequented this place. You’d still meet a lot of acquaintances, people who were somebody [...] But – you don’t know anything about that. Back then you were still chicks [...]”

In the front, at the enclosure, sits a circle of young men. Bleary eyed, with big-city faces. Highly elegant. There is something restless, tenacious, and haughty in their expression. They talk about Nietzsche, the latest horse races, the premieres coming up this winter; they assess the girls and women who pass by with expert glances – and laugh about one of their own who declares one of the ladies out there to be an actual lady.

Suddenly loud calls of: “*Abendblatt! Abendblatt!*”

And the newspaper sellers, who otherwise stand off to the side, hand their papers over the fence. As though they’ve gone mad, they run around the full restaurant, calling out loudly: “*Abendblatt! Abendblatt!*”

Many of the older gentlemen turn first to the business section. A tall, imposing man, who carefully puts on golden spectacles, examines it cursorily: he merely wants to see whether the papers are accurately reporting the panic he caused in the stock market today.

Above, in the small glass porch, where almost exclusively older gentlemen are seated, is a young architect. With him is a lawyer who is known for his cleverness. They are waiting for investors, who do arrive. One of them is roundish, with a guilelessly pinched face, to which a golden pince-nez imparts something respectable. The other black, bearded, with skittish, radiant eyes: real black-marketeers.

They are not a little taken aback when the architect introduces his lawyer. They had not expected him. And they do not pull out the contracts they had already drawn up.

[...]

Source of original German text: Hans Ostwald, “Alle Tische bestetzt,” in *Potsdamer Platz, Drehscheibe der Welt*, ed. Günther Bellman, Berlin: Ullstein Buchverlag, 1997, pp. 103–10.

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