

## ANNA STEEGMANN

## THE NEW (TORN) AMERICAN

"The naturalization ceremony is a solemn and meaningful event," the letter said. I was to dress in proper attire to respect the dignity of the occasion, "no jeans, shorts or flip-flops." It was Friday, December 19, 2008. WQXR predicted heavy snowfall, hazardous driving conditions, a possible blizzard. Flip-flops were out of the question. I settled on my interview outfit, white turtleneck, navy pant suit, and moon boots.

The morning host on the radio announced "A Lincoln Portrait" by Aaron Copeland. As the music floated along, solemn and mysterious, the wailing contrabassoon transported me to my homeland, the poor blood-soaked continent of Europe. I thought about rape camps and ethnic cleansing during the Yugoslav wars, the millions killed during two world wars and the constant threat of nuclear war during the Cold War. Gruesome pictures of nameless horrors flashed through my mind. The brass section soared toward a dramatic climax and the pounding tam-tam sent tremors through my body. A male voice rose above the orchestra. *Fellow citizens, we cannot escape history.*

*This music, these words are no coincidence,* I thought. *As I would not be a slave, so I will not be a master,* the voice proclaimed. I thought about our European emperors and kings, our counts and rulers. Being born into the right class guaranteed wealth and success; being born into the wrong class guaranteed the life of an uneducated laborer. My grandparents, my mother and father had to leave school at the end of eighth grade to work in the fields. My mother-in-law came to the U.S. in 1950 with her young family. A refugee from the Soviet Union, she had ended up in Germany at the end of WWII, one of millions of displaced persons stranded like flotsam and jetsam all over the continent. In the Ukraine they had told her: "You were born in a basket; don't try to fit yourself into a suitcase." She loved the United States, the "greatest country on earth." In Irvington, New Jersey it did not matter that she was born in a basket; she could aspire to a suitcase or even a steamer trunk.

Words were twirling in my head: *Heimat, Mutterland, Vaterland. Heimat is untranslatable,* I thought. *It is not the same as homeland. Heimat is deeper, graver. Heimat carries the weight of a profound attachment; it holds centuries of German consciousness.* Wasn't I forever bound to my *Heimat* by my birth, my childhood, my experiences, my way of looking at the world? Could I truly become a citizen of another country? Was I betraying my *Heimat* by becoming an American citizen?

The A-train was crammed with early-morning commuters. Students were horsing around and banging into each other with their backpacks. An older woman with a Caribbean lilt warned us that the world was coming to an end. We were all going to perish unless we turned over our lives to the Lord. She was competing with a homeless veteran rattling a paper cup and asking for donations. I overheard snippets of Urdu, Creole, Spanish, and Russian. David Dinkens, New York's first African-American mayor, had called our city a "gorgeous mosaic." I felt proud to be a New Yorker, proud to belong to such a racially and ethnically diverse metropolis and country. I would never find this mix of people on any German bus or subway.

I pictured the faces of my students at The City College of New York. Razwan, Mohamed, Nor, Selah, Daler, Chukwudi, Adelina and Agnieszka expected a bright future in America and were willing to work hard to get there. Our classroom full of immigrants and children of immigrants was a miniature United Nations where white students and American-born students were the minority. *It is impossible to find such a college class in Germany,* I thought, *impossible to find such a class in all of Europe.*

During my last visit to Germany my nephew had invited me to visit his English class. The students in his *Gymnasium* (high school) were all German with the exception of one Turkish student (the proper German term is "a pupil with migration background"). His father owned a *Döner Bude*, a kebab stand. I wondered if his father had been denied better work opportunities. My nephew lives in Duisburg, a city of 500,000 inhabitants, where 16.5% of the population are foreigners and in some districts 25%. I have met plenty of Turkish taxi drivers with graduate degrees in Germany, but I have not found Turkish doctors, teachers or policemen. No doubt, this is the result of an educational system that separates the wheat from the chaff at the end of fourth grade.

I came to New York on a tourist visa in 1980. Smitten with the city, I cashed in my return ticket and stayed on as an illegal immigrant. The pre