

## *East West Odyssey*, by Eva Livia Corredor

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Eva Livia Corredor. 2008. *East West Odyssey*. 288 pp. + xi. Illus.

A professor of French language and culture at the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis, and the author of *Györgi Lukács and the Literary Pretext* (1987) and *Lukács after Communism: Interviews with Contemporary Intellectuals* (1997), Eva Livia Corredor was born near Budapest but fled Hungary with her family as a child in 1944 to escape bombings during World War II and, later, communism. Published in 2008, her autobiography, *East West Odyssey*, traces the author's roots in pre-war Hungary, childhood and adolescence in Austria and Germany, university years in Paris, a reluctant immigration with her family to the United States in the 1960s, graduate studies at Columbia University, and her subsequent professional itinerary at numerous prestigious American universities.

Given Corredor's Hungarian identity and origin, her autobiography connects with two trends in current life writing. First, autobiographies of exiled Eastern European intellectuals who, reaching maturity, feel the need to go back to their past, revisit their younger selves and recover what can be considered, in view of the numerous historical and political changes in Eastern Europe over the last fifty years, a lost and forgotten world.<sup>1</sup> The second trend is academic autobiography,<sup>2</sup> in this case, that of an accomplished

university professor who documents her professional development and key moments in university life.

The book's inspired title emphasizes from the very beginning the geographical dislocation the author underwent as well as the inner journey those moves brought about. Both the physical and inner voyage the autobiographer experienced are anchored in the mythological and European framework announced by the title, and the structure of the book develops its promise of the title nicely. As the contents page makes evident, the autobiography is divided into chronological chapters (the first three) and thematic ones (the final four). All the chapters are in turn subdivided into clearly mapped thematic vignettes. This well-constructed design emphasizes the mobility of the narrator, thus offering an autobiographical self that conforms to the basic paradigm for most immigrant autobiographies. But as the book makes clear, this immigration story is neither the American Dream pattern of early Eastern European exiles (Mary Antin, for instance) nor the more recent displacement patterns which characterize many American ethnic writers (Eva Hoffman, for example). Deriving probably from both Corredor's early East European upbringing, her French education in Paris in the late fifties, and the total immersion in French culture from adolescence onwards that her teaching implies, the mobility that *East West Odyssey* conveys is that of the flâneuse and not, as one might have anticipated, the archetypal wanderer the title suggests. The narrator is a contemporary flâneuse, a mobile urban observer who imagines herself anew everywhere she goes: these places are numerous, located both in Europe and the United States, ranging from small Austrian towns, to major European and American cities, to famous American college and university campuses.

The first chapter, "The Uprooting of a Family by War and Exile," tells the story of a displaced childhood and, as the section titles within the chapter illustrate, we are offered the image of an idyllic and "shielded" (25) childhood in pre-war Hungary ("A Sheltered Childhood"), which is soon shattered by war and history ("World War II"), leading to an early exile ("Exile"). Her story and those of her family members are emblematic of the lives of numerous Eastern Europeans who have been knocked around by history and dislocated by culture and geography.

Corredor details her family background: her paternal grandparents were wealthy landowners and wine producers, while her maternal ones seem to "have spouted vertically, infused by artistic, metaphysical, lofty, creative movements of the soul, dreaming of things beyond the daily existence" (13). Her father's successful and highly admired medical career in the wealthy

Budapest suburb Budaörs, as well as her mother's artistic inclinations, is discussed at length. This first chapter abounds in vivid pictures of numerous great aunts and uncles, other relatives, and neighbors; Corredor writes a large family history set in pre-war Hungary, albeit spottily researched (12).

Moreover, she sketches nostalgic descriptions of many places now gone, literally, politically, and culturally: pre-war ice-cream parlors in Budapest, visits to her maternal grandparents in Solymár, and the family veranda in Budaörs. Corredor also recounts childhood experiences from visits to the Gellért Hotel pool with its artificial waves to her early pets and the first "house balls" she attended (25–30).

She also draws emblematic sketches of surviving family members, (distant uncles and cousins), and in so doing so she points, almost obsessively, to how these people have been scattered all over the world, "spread out over several countries and even continents" (45). By painting her family background on a large canvas and including numerous family pictures, Corredor seems desperately to want to rescue from oblivion her pre-war Hungarian family and community that was decimated first by World War II and then by the communist regime. At the same time, she vividly illustrates how historical events became in Eastern Europe what Eva Hoffman calls "the dramatic highpoints that structure the stories of countless numbers of people"; Corredor shows how, in Hoffman's words, history "impinged on people's lives in pressing and immediate ways" (15, 11).<sup>3</sup>

Corredor complements her text with a large number of captioned photographs that give an "objective" equivalent to the narrated events. The abundance of pictures turns Corredor's autobiography into a museum exhibit in which her life story is displayed visually as well as verbally. If this profusion of photographs sometimes verges on narcissistic self-representation in the second part of the book, the numerous photos in the first chapter can be seen as traces of a living past that at the same time mark its destruction. The "first" and "last" family portraits in Hungary (9, 27), her parents' engagement picture (5), the author's early pictures in the family yard with childhood friends, or those of her nanny (22–27) not only document chief moments in her life while also standing as proof of her Hungarian existence, but are also "indexical traces" that record both life and death:<sup>4</sup> they represent the idyllic family environment she lived in that can no longer be recovered not only because of the passing of time, but also because of the cruelty of history.

Chapter Two, "The Ups and Downs of My So-called 'Best Years,'" records her years in Paris when she studied at the Sorbonne—she was a

hard-working student excelling in everything she did. She signed up for a three-year program in Hungarian at the Ecole des Langues Orientales Vivantes and obtained her diploma in only two years; she also “accumulated,” in her words, certificates in translation and interpretation. At the age of twenty-one, she was “fluent in four languages and knew the proper form and expressions of business correspondence in addition to having earned a prestigious diploma from the Sorbonne,” and had deepened her “knowledge of French civilization and history” in the process (72). With detachment and a sense of humor, she reviews the numberless odd jobs she had after completing her studies, as well as the circumstances in which she met and married her husband who, Corredor says, “had lived on a far away tropical island which provoked both apprehension and a certain curiosity in my mind” (80). This description of her future husband seems a bit ironic when conveyed by a professor of literature well schooled in poststructuralist theories. He seems the strange ‘other,’ defined only by his medical studies, troubled early medical career and many short-lived marriages; the halo of mystery that surrounds him is surprising given the naturalness with which she writes about everybody else in her life. This ghostly presence hovers around and above the text throughout the entire book, in stark contrast with all other family members and close friends whose exact coordinates (necessary or not) we are almost always given. In the case of Corredor’s husband, however, the reader is left only to guess his name and the tropical island he came from. The birth of her daughter, her early but happy motherhood, and her reluctant move to the United States in 1962 for “practical reasons” (88) related to her husband’s medical practice are all events described in minute detail in this second chapter.

It is interesting to notice how Corredor’s image of the United States contrasts utterly with the Europe she left behind, “a civilized society where we would not be treated like dirt” (94). In view of the subtle cracks in her marriage that the move to the United States brought about, America for Corredor is no promised land but a dystopia where she is seen by neighbors as a “war bride” (94), is constantly “invaded by in-laws,” and feels like a “servant woman,” an “objectification” of who she was (95). Consequently, she feels a “foreigner, not just in a foreign country but also in a foreign family and culture” (96) and thus yearns to return to Paris.

This second chapter seems to bring out all the major disappointments of Corredor’s life: her first jobs in New York, which revealed the disheartening nature of the United Nations, the “most noble institution created after World War II” (106); a painful miscarriage; and the eventual

dissolution of her marriage, which meant the “crumbling of her universe” (110). However, the chapter distinguishes her autobiography by movingly blending motherhood and its ethics, the almost insurmountable difficulties that the “professional” single mother encounters, her maternal responsibilities, and the numerous joys and rewards her daughter gave her. In this chapter, more than in any other, the reader is offered probably the most defining facet of Corredor the autobiographer—not only the displaced (Eastern) European exile, but the dedicated and self-effacing mother whose leading principle was “always a mother first” (117).

The third chapter, “Making a Life in Academia,” documents her PhD studies at Columbia University, her “developing reputation as a Lukács scholar” (147) and her numerous teaching appointments at many famous United States colleges and universities, including Barnard College, Fordham University, Reed College, the University of Washington, and the United States Naval Academy, where she taught for seventeen years. The “hurdles on the road to a PhD” are elegantly mentioned as well as the not-always supportive professors, colleagues, chairs, and deans whose names are rarely given, but whose identities are really not difficult to guess for anybody familiar with American academia from the 1970s onwards. Her career as a teacher of French and German is also passionately recorded and rendered—it “is not enough to be a native speaker or acquire fluency in a language,” Corredor writes; one needs a “skill to impart knowledge in your students” (150). The chapter adds a third facet to Corredor the autobiographer, the dedicated and passionate professor who was at times “director and disk jockey” (157) for the performances her students organized, and the cook for special French dinners she offered her students. It is, as Corredor herself affirms, the “personal humanistic mission in the midst of the military environment” of the Naval Academy that made her an enthusiastic teacher who survived her professional evaluations with relatively little hardships and “made it” to full professor (171).

If, in the first chapter, dedicated to her early life in Hungary and then to her exile in Europe, she testified to a lost world she almost always missed, in presenting her academic career, Corredor the autobiographer is again an “actor in or the witness to history” (Eakin, 142). From this point of view, she shares with other exile’s autobiographies the impulse to testify to her experiences, to show what was happening to her. In so doing, she draws connections between the personal story and public history, inserting herself into the larger framework as a witness. In this chapter, she thus bears testimony to the late 1960s and their impact on the American academia.

Being attached to or at least residing “at a commuting distance” (139) from the French departments of the great East Coast universities during the “revolutionary 60’s,” she experienced the turnover of chairs and the hiring of young, liberal-minded faculty, who “opened up the humanities departments to a myriad of avant-garde intellectual and artistic movements” (139). She watched how New York became the “center of the intellectual arena” and the United States the place of a “flourishing intellectual dissemination” (139) that she first experienced in Paris and always longed for. This chapter offers insight into the teaching profession, pedagogical issues, and the nature of the scholarly communities in which she lived on numerous campuses across the United States.<sup>5</sup>

Chapter Four, “The High Time of Theory,” begins the second part of Eva Corredor’s autobiography, the part thematically organized. This chapter presents many sketches of the numerous scholars she met and lectures of the academic stars she attended from the late ’60s onwards, as well as the contemporary novelists she worked with. The list of names is totally overwhelming (Claude Lévi-Strauss to Andreï Makine), and while there is no apparent connection between them or explanation for such an all-inclusive list besides the fact that these people crossed her path accidentally (or not), the portraits she draws are informative and entertaining. It is worth mentioning here her sharing of a “certain nostalgia” with René Wellek and his wife for Eastern Europe and the total admiration she expresses for Julia Kristeva, who “was not only a uniquely talented intellectual, but also *wife, mother and an attractive, elegant woman*, one of the few truly brilliant mentors we had as young females in academia” (190, my italics). If her special affection for René Wellek, the Czech intellectual and literary theorist, brings to surface her own Hungarian roots, which she never forgot, her high appreciation of Kristeva (herself a Bulgarian) points to the second important facet Corredor puts forth in her autobiography, namely, herself as a mother. This particular aspect is slightly surprising from the part of an academic who lived and admired the changes that the 1960s brought to the academic discourse and feminism; I have in mind here the way in which she almost sets Kristeva against “some women who gained renown in theory, but also became practising lesbians” (188).

In the book’s second part, the changes of the 1960s she witnessed in the United States as well as the numerous personalities she met and worked with are incorporated into her own life story, thereby validating and reinforcing her own identity: “I had to get used to admitting [to] myself that, at least to a certain extent, I had earned a place among them” (200).

The final three chapters, “Travels,” “Unique Life Choices,” and “The Search for Answers,” take up the last sixty pages of Corredor’s *East West Odyssey*. They portray a sensitive, charitable, highly humanistic and even idealistic autobiographer concerned about contemporary problems, who attempts to come up with solutions to many of them. However, while reading this part of the book, one wonders as to their meaningfulness in the overall construction of Corredor’s text. The information Corredor provides often becomes redundant (some stricter editing would have, in fact, benefited the entire book), and the recollections and sketches resemble more and more a long letter in which she accounts for everything she ever did and all the people she ever met. The duty to recall and record, a common denominator for all who have lived through times of turmoil, makes Corredor employ what Svetlana Boym called “restorative” nostalgia. There is always danger here, as Boym warns us: this form of nostalgia is often devoid of humor, “takes itself dead seriously,” and insists on piecing together the “shattered fragments” of history in order to “conquer and spatialize” time (49).

One final note on the book’s title: while it engages with contemporary writing about displacement, one learns from the book proper that Corredor finds herself comfortably at home on the move across the “wonderful Atlantic Ocean,” which “connects” with her family and the country in which she was born (ix). Her odyssey, we find out, has also more recently continued in the reverse direction, with her sojourning regularly in Paris, where she has “put down roots,” buying a small studio. In this sense, her itinerary is definitely less of an odyssey with her original home as endpoint, and more of a long journey undertaken by a contemporary flâneuse in love with Paris.

Corredor’s autobiography charms the reader in several ways. Most importantly, it is an exemplary story—Corredor as protagonist has the perseverance, resourcefulness, and adaptability necessary to survive the devastating life changes she went through, and we get to see all of them in action. As such, the classic life-story developments we witness make Corredor’s text a model narrative for general readers and, just as importantly, a good story for her grandchildren, for whom the book was first initially written.

## Notes

1. For the trend of Eastern European exiles writing their lives, see the autobiographies of Eva Hoffman, Andrei Codrescu, Susan Suleiman, Anca Vlasopolos, and Vesna Goldsworthy.

2. For the burgeoning field of academic autobiography, see Davis 2009a, 2009b, and Franklin.

3. Tony Judt and Karl Schlögel share similar views about the impact of Eastern European history on personal destinies and life stories.

4. For photographs as indexical traces which can invoke absence as well as presence, see Hirsch.

5. According to Rocío G. Davis, academic autobiographies offer “multilayered perspectives on the state and role of the university in our evolving societies, the teaching profession, the place and value we give research, pedagogical issues, the development of disciplines, the possible shapes of academic discourse, and the nature of scholarly communities” (2009b, 160).

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