

Erica Melis/Tell: Her Times, Her Flights and Happiness

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Our biographies reflect the times in which we live - which we live through. The reflections are often not clear or easily readable; they overlay and they are distorted by our own movements.

Erica and I were born only one year apart, and we grew up partially in the same place and under quite similar circumstances.

As I recounted Erica's stories in my mind and considered all the stations in her life, I found reflections of almost all the major events and developments of her time in its path. --- And I also saw how long and how full Erica's much-too-short life was.

It begins with the recovery of the world and our country from Nazi rule and the Holocaust – from the worst war of all time and the awful end to the commencement of the nuclear age. Then comes the new start after liberation, the division of Germany, the Economic Miracle, the end of colonialism, the Cold War, the Berlin Wall, the 1968 revolution, the destruction of the environment and the environmental movement, feminism and women's emancipation, the new civil rights movements, German reunification, the fall of the communist world, the end of modernism, the digital revolution, globalization, the turn of the century, the internet era, the information and knowledge society and the beginning of the Age of Asia, – all that in this one life not only made an impression, but also left its marks.

Without Nazi terror and the persecution of the Jews, Erica would not have been born in Cuba in 1949, where her parents, Jewish left-wing intellectuals, lived in emigration. Without the hopes that were connected with the anti-fascist beginning of the GDR, she would not have moved from the Cuban sun to the relatively cold East Berlin in 1951. The returning metropolitan emigrants met with hardened communists and frightened communist party school graduates who had traded their ideals for obedience under Stalinist terror and despatched their hopes into the distant future.

That Erica did not particularly thrive in this environment at first probably had to do less with ideological and more with climatic coldness, a lack of sun and the typical diet at that time.

Her father's experience in Latin America did give the family a place in the sun for another two years: From 1956-58, her father was sent to Uruguay for diplomatic service. Erica credited some of her favourite childhood memories to the stay in Montevideo.

Soon after their return, Erica's parents both passed away within a year. After that, she lived in her uncle's family - for some years in Wendenschloss, a picturesque part of Köpenick – lying idyllically between the lakeshores of Langer See and the forest – where I also spent a portion of my childhood. Yet it is not only the idyllic location in an otherwise less than idyllic country that Erica shared with my past and the past of many of my friends.

Erica's uncle was one of the loyalist part-line journalists in the GDR and was promoted from Director of Broadcasting to Director of the Agitation Division of the Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party at the beginning of the 60s. Like so many of us - certainly not consciously - she had to learn and experience daily, in the most important years of her development, the contradiction between social ideals and humanist traditions on the one hand and the interpersonal realities of the extremely hardened people in the GDR leadership on the other.

She attended Heinrich Hertz Oberschule in Berlin Adlershof, a GDR High School that acquired the reputation of an elite school due to its focus on mathematics and its excellent science education. Afterwards, she studied mathematics at Humboldt University.

In 1969, she married Charles Melis, a somewhat older co-student in the department of "Economic Cybernetics and Operation Research" at Humboldt University. In 1971, their son Andre was born, and their daughter Rahel followed in 1974. The children did not prevent her from pursuing another degree and scientific work: They did not try and would also not have succeeded.

At Humboldt University, she obtained a doctorate in logic and philosophy of science in 1981. In her interdisciplinary dissertation, she wrote about the applicability of intentional logic in the philosophy of science.

In the GDR, Erica was neither in conformity nor opposition. She was critical, at times full of hope and then very sceptical again, but always actively reflective. Naturally, the research in her department at Humboldt University could not be measured against the high standards of international science. That much was very clear to her. And her role in life, although formally emancipated, was not determined by herself in such a way that she could fly. Yet she wanted to fly.

The years before the fall of the wall saw growing inner dissatisfaction: with her marriage, with the society around her and with the way her institute conducted science. Her dissatisfaction did not relate to her children or friends or even the city of Berlin. Rather, it was the lack of opportunities to live and work as she dreamed and desired. And so she separated herself, forcefully and with consequences: first from her husband and then from her city and place of work.

The latter was made possible by the opening of the wall. She came to Saarbrücken for the same reason that many of us have come here or stayed despite numerous temptations: Here, on the Western edge of the Republic, between forest hills, rusty headframes and prosaic roadside villages with their asbestos boards, a scientific centre of computer science, artificial intelligence and applied sciences had been able to develop on the university campus surrounded by the municipal forest. And this centre was at the fore of global science.

Erica's research area also had excellent scientists. Jörg Siekmann's research group produced important findings on the design of automated theorem proving needed for computational applications of logics, other areas of mathematics and also for the modelling of every-day deductions. Through Manfred Kerber, one of the group's leaders, Erica came to Saarbrücken.

But for Erica, Saarbrücken was not the place of her arrival, but rather a powerful start. She had also sought out a field of research in which women had played only a very

marginal role until then. She dedicated all her energy to learning new areas and was therefore able to apply her interest in the role of analogies in logical deductions to the automated planning of proof. She read, published, corresponded and quickly gained respect and then also support.

That she now ended up falling in love with, of all things, the director of the department by being so successful initially frightened her as much as it gave her joy. This liaison could chain her down again, and the strong partner would certainly not be able to remove his shadow so that she would have to stand in it from then on.

Nonetheless, ultimately self-confidence and optimism won out – the decision to marry was made. Though with the plan to vanish abroad almost immediately after the wedding without her new spouse. Erica was serious about becoming part of the international scientific community.

From her one-year guest appointments at Carnegie Mellon University and the University of Edinburgh, she brought back exceptional publications, additional experience and new ideas. She was able to combine ideas from Alan Bundy at the University of Edinburgh with the approaches of the Saarbrücken Group and achieved a breakthrough in knowledge-based proof planning.

In 2000 she obtained her postdoctoral degree (Habilitation) at Saarland University. After changing the focus of her research to e-learning, she successfully built up her own group. She established international cooperative programmes with top European centres and set up the foundation for the joint research laboratory at Jiao Tong University in Shanghai.

Wolfgang Wahlster already spoke about Erica's impressive achievements at the German Research Centre for Artificial Intelligence so I will not go over her success there again.

With her energy and ambition, Erica succeeded in doing what she wanted: She became an internationally recognized scientist in an area that is changing the world. Her contributions are demonstrated by more than 80 international publications in scientific journals.

And on all these flights, she did not become either a nerd or a one-track specialist. She engaged in literature, music, theatre and painting; she played sports and baked; she travelled and wandered. This, naturally, fits the profile of a multifaceted and balanced person, as is typical for Erica's background and circle of friends. A conception of life that incorporates science, society and art, the last of which played an important role for Erica and brought her great joy. Erica also created amazing paintings. At her website you can admire the most beautiful ones.

The release, of which Johannes spoke, and science, art, professional success – that all sounds like a beautiful fairy tale, the great sorrow of which is that it came to an end too quickly: "In a still torn world, a society that is still finding itself again after the collective suffering and extensive transformations of the last century, including new values, hopes and plans, in this dislocating time, a strong, smart and beautiful woman succeeded in freeing herself from the historical weight of her origins and socialization. She took the historical developments and events of the great change like a surfboard, as it were, on which she courageously surfed with great talent against all adversity into happiness..."

Almost true, but not quite. The wrong word in this fairy tale is *happiness*. Everyone that knew Erica over the last ten years would confirm that she was strong, intelligent and beautiful, that she was often satisfied and even more often dissatisfied, but never did she give the impression of being truly happy. Yet happiness was also not a category in which she thought and felt. I can understand that very well, since it was very similar with me for a long time. Happiness was something else that you have here and there, or that happens by itself if you achieve your goals.

I believe that Erica only in the last phase of her life realized that setting herself increasingly high goals and accumulating success in various aspects of life does not alone guarantee true happiness.

Happiness does not come by itself when you achieve many goals, but only when you pursue the goals in a mixture and way that they contribute to happiness. And happiness has more to do with a fundamental attitude than with the achievement of a goal.

That made me stop and think, and maybe some others, too.

And despite this change in attitude and gaining the ability to be happy, in a time when the happiness that you enjoy had long since left her, Erica continued to think about science, her research group and her projects. She did not want to direct and control, but made a great effort to contribute to the success of the e-learning centre. Yet she appeared to have fundamentally changed her priorities.

In our last meeting, Erica gave the impression that she now knew something about the subject of happiness that we do not know. I believe that this helped her greatly. In our last talk, just a few days before her death, she was very much at ease.

Maybe Erica with this change in attitude toward being happy was also a reflection of the times, which are now already reflecting the changes from the future. A new set of priorities. But also a striving for spirituality, which is not in conflict with the discoveries of natural science. For Erica, this included her interest in Jewish traditional spirituality and, in the last phase of her life, also Buddhism, the lore of Asian wise men and Weltanschauung of Californian technology pioneers.

All of us who deal with technologies and the opportunities of a knowledge society (including e-learning, semantic technologies, the internet, etc.) are aware that society in our new century will soar to completely new levels of development. We are experiencing the beginning of the next great leap in the evolution of humans from the nude monkeys, which wreaked havoc in the past century, nearly ruining our little planet. And like Erica, we are happy to be able to contribute a little to this development.

I would not be surprised if a more conscious reflection on happiness and perhaps a new form of spirituality came with this new state of evolution. Then Erica's life would still have been largely defined by the past century, as it had to be, but then it was perhaps illuminated in its last phase by a more beautiful future, which we wish for Erica's and our descendents from the depths of our heart.

Erica, we thank you for letting us get to know you and we already miss you, although you are still so close.