



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier  
at the presentation of the City of Mannheim's  
Schiller Award to Emine Sevgi Özdamar  
in Mannheim  
on 27 November 2022**

"One wall said: 'I'm going to leave the country. Migrate to Europe like Mari and Diana.' The other wall said: 'Good, get over there. Go on, run yourself ragged, like a racing dog, run off to this Europe.' The third wall, facing me as I lay in bed, said: 'Oh, child, what young blood you have, so welcoming to acts of madness.' Then the neighbour's clock strikes two and the narrator speaks the words aloud: 'I'm going to leave.'"

What narrative power, what imagination unfold in these few sentences. What a panorama you open up, Emine Sevgi Özdamar, at the very beginning of your latest novel, *A Space Bounded By Shadows*. A church, crows, mosquitos, all of which can speak. A beginning and an end as in a Greek tragedy, on a small Turkish island across from Lesbos – Turkey and Europe, the narrative arc is already charged with suspense. And it is very much the big, age-old issues that are at stake here: staying or going, the familiar and the foreign, displacement and loss. These first few pages alone touched me deeply, drew me into this story full of stories. I am certain that many of you here in this room who have read this wonderful book felt the same way.

Dear guests, it is a very special honour and a great pleasure for me to hold this speech today celebrating the winner of the City of Mannheim's Schiller Award. Thank you very much for inviting me! First and foremost, I would like to heartily congratulate the winner of the Schiller Award! Congratulations, Emine Sevgi Özdamar!

I well remember the last time we met, in February 2020. You were attending an event at Schloss Bellevue. It was a Heimat evening that I was hosting. And of course it was a Heimat evening of a rather different kind. It was all about literature, art and music by people whose families have not lived in Germany for generations, people who have come to

our country – and about what Heimat means. Heimat, home, homeland, a very German word.

That evening, Emine Sevgi Özdamar, you read from your story *Berlin, Stadt der Vögel* – “city of birds”. The narrator describes how she arrived in Berlin for the first time, decades ago, and the city appeared to her like the stage of a play, like a bounded space – an image that you have clearly carried with you for some time. That Berlin was a grey, tired city, with gaps in the rows of houses, bullet holes in the walls and lonely old women in the parks. The few foreigners there looked like colourful birds in the trees, you write.

What poetic power here, too, Emine Sevgi Özdamar. A power that captivated everyone on that evening. It was quiet, very quiet, as you read. Because the subject was, after all, one that has defined your life and that of most of the guests who were present: traversing and transcending borders, leaving home, finding a new home, perhaps carrying multiple homes in your heart.

The fact that we must accept borders, but that we can also traverse them, transcend them, shrug them off and free ourselves from them and that we can then be very free, this is one of the existential experiences of life and not least of your life. And perhaps this is one way to approach your work, Emine Sevgi Özdamar. Because borders have been at the heart of your life – and your artistic work. You have traversed and transcended many borders: geographical and political as well as cultural, aesthetic and linguistic ones. Spaces are bounded by shadows and the people in them are oppressed by these shadows. But their contours, their identity become all the clearer as a result. In these spaces, with these spaces, there are also entirely new possibilities, new freedoms that open up.

You left Turkey as a young actress in the mid-1970s and returned to Germany, to Berlin, to a city divided and marked by war, where you had previously lived as a very young woman. After the military coup, violence, oppression and tyranny cast a pall over everyday life, penetrated every corner of it. Turkey had once again become a country where killing was permitted. “I’m going to leave,” says the narrator in your latest novel – despite all of the contrary feelings within her. And you too left, Emine Sevgi Özdamar. Leaving, back then, meant leaving your family, your country, your language. You did not yet know that you would much later in life return to live in Turkey at least some of the time, on that very same island in the Mediterranean.

Allow me to jump back a little in time, to Germany’s history as a country of small states and princes. A young man described this “entire separation from my family and my fatherland” almost 200 years before you left Turkey, Emine Sevgi Özdamar. That young man fled here to Mannheim, to escape oppression, tyranny and imprisonment – astonishing parallels. The as-yet entirely unknown Friedrich Schiller also

transcended borders, geographical ones, in a Germany of many small states, but aesthetic and linguistic ones, too – with his debut *The Robbers*, performed for the first time here in Mannheim. It became a sensation.

And there is another connection to Friedrich Schiller: your passion for theatre. “Man only plays when he is in the fullest sense of the word a human being, and he is only fully a human being when he plays,” we read in Schiller’s *Letters On the Aesthetic Education of Man*.

Playing and being fully human, first in the theatre, later in films, has shaped your life and your artistic work, Emine Sevgi Özdamar. In Turkey, where you first stood on a great stage at the age of twelve and later attended acting school in Istanbul. In Berlin, where you worked with Benno Besson and Matthias Langhoff at the Volksbühne theatre, in the city’s East. There, too, you transcended a border, one that was especially hard to transcend: the Wall. You lived in West Berlin and worked in the East, crossing back and forth quite naturally in the divided city. And naturally, the performances there were in German. The language of which you understood not a word when you first came to Germany in 1965 at the age of 18.

To a Germany that was welcoming tens of thousands of people arriving in overcrowded trains to work here following the 1961 Recruitment Agreement between Germany and Turkey. Back then we Germans called them “guest workers,” before Max Frisch enlightened us: “We called for workers, but people came.”

You, Emine Sevgi Özdamar, have broken down this term into its constituent parts in wonderfully ironic and laconic fashion. You think of a guest worker as two people, as a guest and as someone who works. Something you also experienced yourself and later translated into literature. For a few months you earned a living in a factory in West Berlin. Your path then took you back to Turkey once more before bringing you back to Berlin again. Because you dreamed of something else: of playing and being fully human.

You then spent time in Paris, in Avignon, in Bochum, Frankfurt and Düsseldorf, where you worked as an actress, director and author – and all of the places and all of the people that you encountered there appear in your work for us to encounter, first in your plays and later in your novels.

In *A Space Bounded By Shadows*, we encounter them anew. What a brilliant work of memory! When I speak of a novel, that too only just approaches a description of your book. Because you have masterfully subverted the genre of the novel. You play with your own memory and with literary narrative and when it comes to language you have created something entirely new: with your very particular, sparkling, poetic, sad and very funny, in short your exuberant language!

This work takes us on a journey between Turkey, Germany and France. It steals us away to so many worlds and is populated by so many people that you can almost get dizzy at times. You are always deeply devoted to these people, to your characters. And we as readers always see all these worlds and people with both a foreign and a familiar gaze, a gaze that imbibes the world. A gaze that one can only have if, like you, one constantly moves back and forth between all these worlds and has lived in several countries, in many places, perhaps even has one's homeland, or Heimat, there.

Heimat – this term so often abused in German history is not easy to fathom and definitely not to ordain. It is an enigmatic term, one that is bound up with feelings, memory and familiarity, with places and people, with smells, food, language. People have always migrated throughout history. And people have also been migrating to our country for centuries – and especially in recent decades. They are in search of a new homeland here. And all of them bring their homeland, their Heimat with them. I still firmly believe that a person can have several homes or Heimate in his or her heart. Heimat also exists in the plural!

And this is also how I have read your book, Emine Sevgi Özdamar. This book is also a quest for a time long past, a time that was also very happy for you – or indeed for the narrator. In this story, you take us to the grey Berlin of the Wall years – and to the, in your mind's eye contrasting, vibrant bohemian Paris of the seventies and eighties. A Paris that had not yet been shaken by Islamic terrorist attacks. You take us to a post-war Europe that, at least west of the Iron Curtain, was characterised by a belief in utopias and the power of art. In this part of Europe, looking back from today's perspective, "hell was put on hold", as you put it. But it is also a Europe of exiles and strangers. One of the dead and of mourning.

Creating something new with language is reserved for the realm of art. But what does it mean to acquire a foreign language in such a way that you can not only communicate in it, but that you live, dream, work, write in this language? That you become an artist in this new language?

In your novel *The Bridge of the Golden Horn*, the first-person narrator describes what her first German words were when attempting to buy sugar, salt and eggs in Berlin: "Shak, shak, eeeh, clack, clack, clack." As one who grew up in Germany and always spoke, read and thought in German, I can hardly imagine what a long road you have travelled before writing such artistic books, Emine Sevgi Özdamar, before becoming a writer decorated with important literary prizes.

For you, Emine Sevgi Özdamar, German is the language in which, as you so wonderfully describe it, words have no childhood. A language in which words have no childhood – this is true not only for you, but for everyone who grew up speaking another language. And yet you chose this language, with a radicalism we can all only admire.

You devoured German plays, German literature. You dwell, you said time and again, in German writers and playwrights: in Heinrich Heine, Bertolt Brecht, Heinrich Böll, Herbert Achternbusch, Franz-Xaver Kroetz, Thomas Brasch, Hannah Arendt and many others. They became your homeland. "I loved living in a country that was viable," you write. "After all, I didn't have a viable country. That is why I now dwelled in German writers." I can hardly imagine a more beautiful and at the same time sad declaration of love.

Losing your language, your native language, your mother tongue, is an existential experience for anyone who has to leave their country, and this is even more true for writers. "In my language, tongue means language. The tongue does not have bones: it twists in the direction we twist it in," or so you write in your first collection of stories, *Mother Tongue*.

How desperate were German writers such as Lion Feuchtwanger, Klaus and Thomas Mann, Nelly Sachs, Mascha Kaléko, Hilde Domin, Stefan Zweig and many others who had to flee National Socialism because they had lost their language, their mother tongue, the language in which they thought, spoke and wrote. "You can lose your fatherland, but your mother tongue is a possession you cannot forfeit, the homeland of the homeless," wrote Klaus Mann in exile.

Today, in our globalised world, it is more commonplace than back then for people to speak several languages. But losing your language, and with it a piece of your identity, is and remains an existential experience that plays a role in many works of our more recent literature. You, Emine Sevgi Özdamar, have found a new language – in a dual sense of the word. You were one of the first writers from Turkey to write in German. Write? That, too, is but an approximation.

If I may borrow this metaphor, you dwell in the German language and do so as masterfully as only few do whose mother tongue is German. And even if you do not aspire to this role, you have inspired and encouraged many writers in our country whose mother tongue is also not German and whose works enrich our literature today. And you did this at a time when the term migrant or migrant literature was far from commonplace. "I also owe my decision to engage in literature to Emine Sevgi Özdamar," the poet Dinçer Güçyeter, who was awarded the Peter Huchel Prize this year, wrote just recently.

But to label your art as migrant literature would in no way do you justice – nor would it do justice to the many other artists who have become an indispensable part of our literature. Such stereotypes and thought patterns have shaped our perception for far too long. You, Emine Sevgi Özdamar, have played with the image that many Germans so easily formed of you in an ironic and astute way – and when I say play, I mean not only in a literary sense, but also quite literally: as a Turkish woman in Germany, you were always instantly the Turkish

cleaning lady – it couldn't be any other way, even as an actress on stage. And you played her, this Turkish cleaning lady, holding up a mirror to us, the Germans, with irony and wit!

To be stereotyped, to be rejected as a "foreigner", to be discriminated against, defamed, excluded or even be a victim of hatred and violence is an experience shared by many people who have come to Germany. "In a foreign land, people are cast back on themselves because they are constantly reminded that they are foreign," warns the chorus of crows in *A Space Bounded by Shadows*.

Even people who are already living here in the second, third or fourth generation tell me time and again how much they suffer from being regarded as "foreigners", not recognised as being part of our society.

The people who have come to us have not only changed themselves. They had to do that. They have also changed our country; they have changed us. Without them, Germany would not have achieved prosperity after the war. They have also changed and enriched our culture, our music and literature, our cuisine, our way of life. They have transformed Germany into a more open and more diverse country. Today, we are not a country in which people with a migration background live. No, we are a country with a migration background. This is a reality that the Germans only acknowledged late in the day.

All those who have come to us have brought their history and their stories with them. But they are still heard far too little. I firmly believe that their stories must become much more a part of our common perception of who we are. Their stories are part of us. They are part of our history, our common history.

Literature is memory, as Franco Biondi, the writer who also lives in Germany and hails from Italy, once put it. You, Emine Sevgi Özdamar, have given us your history and so many wonderful stories. And you have given us something else: memory and a very distinctive story of our history. One that makes our literature and therefore all of us so much richer. I would like to thank you from the bottom of my heart for this today. Allow me to congratulate you on winning the Schiller Award. And if I may express a wish: please treat us to many more sparkling, poetic, sad and funny, exuberant stories! Let us as readers dwell in many more of your stories, Emine Sevgi Özdamar.