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From the Best of All Possible Worlds, with Love...

Having been unable to compose a decent academic essay for this volume, I was very happy when the editors told me that a contribution could also consist in some personal remarks. It is with great pleasure (and I use this well-worn phrase of academic introduction with all my heart) that I am rendering now this personal tribute.

I first met Ludmilla Kostova during my time as a post-doctoral assistant at the Otto-Friedrich-Universität Bamberg. Christoph Houswitschka, Chair of English Literature and supervisor of my “Habilitation” thesis, had invited her. Such invitations used to be not only academic events, where local scholars and students had the opportunity to listen to and share thoughts with inspiring international colleagues. They also included the pleasure of socializing, enjoying local beer and food, maybe a stroll to local sights or trips to the vicinity – while deepening the after-lecture discussions and, most importantly, meeting the person behind the academic, too. Ludmilla was one of the guests we were eager to host more than just once. She became a regular visitor to Bamberg, even stayed at my flat, and I was also happy to meet her on conferences such as ESSE or Euro-Academia. After leaving Bamberg to become Professor for English Literature and Culture at Siegen, Ludmilla was the first international guest I invited there. When I kept complaining how Siegen cannot compare with the charm of Bamberg, Ludmilla came up with one of her unforgettable comparisons – whereas she once remarked that strolling through Bamberg was “like walking through a three-dimensional picture postcard” (the most accurate simile I have ever heard about the pretty Franconian town), she now reminded me of *Candide*’s view of Westphalia as the “best of all possible worlds” – with all the connotations this phrase and context entails. For all the years since, I have remembered Ludmilla’s remark, whenever dissatisfaction or despair about unpleasant local developments began to become overwhelming, and it has helped to accept and cope with the situation. We also began an exchange between the English departments of St Cyril and St Methodius University at Veliko Tarnovo and Siegen, in the course of which I had the chance of visiting this beautiful Bulgarian town and the village Arbanassi, with its stunning Nativity church. I also had a very good time during the lectures and discussions with Ludmilla’s bright students, PhD and Postdoctoral candidates. Equally, my colleague Marcel Hartwig enjoyed the hospitality of Veliko Tarnovo, while we were happy to host visits of numerous young Bulgarian scholars from Ludmilla’s retinue, plus a number of incoming students. Alas, it turned out that

Siegen students were not as eager to follow the call to the East, therefore the exchange ended on the “to be discontinued” list when exchange programmes came to be scrutinized after the pandemic. Another unhappy event that, nevertheless, re-established contact with Ludmilla was the unexpected and premature demise of our mutual friend Christoph Houswitschka in February 2022; to me, this tragic event was something like an irrevocable ending of the world of academia as I knew it. The best of all possible worlds, as I would sincerely call it.

Ludmilla Kostova is part of that, of my idea of the best of all possible academic worlds, and she is so for several reasons. If asked for the three things I will always remember about Ludmilla, the following items immediately come to my mind.

The first one is her erudition, which is both broad and deep to an extent that is rarely found nowadays. When attending a conference together, she was always the one who knew about interesting sights, and who did not only hang out in restaurants and bars (although we also always had nice lunches and dinners together). Whatever topic we talked about, whatever place we visited – Ludmilla could always find a literary connection, and, in most cases, she also revealed links between the history of that place and the history of Eastern Europe in general and Bulgarian history in particular. She raised my awareness that there is more of interest to a scholar of English literature than only the anglophone world or “the West” (whatever that may be. It is due to Ludmilla’s impact that my courses frequently include parts where we explore the inter- and transcultural transfer between the western and eastern parts of Europe.

The second one is her personality. I hope Ludmilla is not offended, if I am writing that I have always appreciated her humour, her curiosity, her smiles (when I think of Ludmilla, she is having a smile on her face) – and her wonderful nerdiness. Ludmilla made me realize the importance of fridge magnets, and it is thanks to her that my dishwasher is accordingly decorated (because my fridge does not have a magnetic door). One of the unforgettable experiences with Ludmilla occurred when Christoph, Ludmilla and I visited the bazaar in Istanbul. Ludmilla was eager to find and purchase a particular type of coffee – cardamom coffee – while Christoph and I were largely busy to keep together and not to get lost in the labyrinth of stalls. Despite our watchfulness, however, Christoph suddenly noticed “Oops, Ludmilla is gone”. We spent what we believed to be ages, harrowing the various stalls without finding the slightest trace of her. Our fantasy began to run wild, imagining grotesque Hollywood-style scenes of thugs abducting our friend within a rolled-up carpet – when, all of a sudden, Ludmilla materialized in front of us, smiling as brightly as could be, because she had successfully completed her quest for the coffee of her desires. She had not even noticed that we had been separated – apparently, she had the right priorities.

Last but not least: Rikki. Or, more recently: Roddy. Or, more generally: dogs; small, cute and “naughty” dogs. The latter is Ludmilla’s term; maybe strong-willed is more apposite. Some people may argue this feature belongs to personality, but I believe that being attached to a pet is a personality trait worth mentioning in its own

right. After all, Rikki and my own Gustl (an Icelandic pony, who has been accompanying me for 28 years now) used to exchange greetings via e-mail. I had the honour of meeting Rikki once and am glad to have learnt Ludmilla has found a worthy successor to him in Roddy. In Philipp Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy, one of the protagonists lives in a world where animal companions (so-called daemons) reflect the soul, or the innermost personality of a human being. I leave it to Ludmilla to ponder whether and/or in how far Pullman's concept may be applied to the faithful companions of our lives.

Academia is a world where people of a sedentary character like me often find it hard to accommodate with the ground rules. The more warmly do I appreciate all those people who have crossed my path and have walked some distance by my side, whose company has not only been intellectually satisfying but also personally wholesome. There are colleagues one likes to meet to discuss shop and/or academic things, and there are colleagues one likes to discuss both academic and personal things, and to simply spend time with as friends. I have always considered Ludmilla to be in the second group, I am happy and privileged to have met her and will always appreciate the thoughts we shared and the time we spent together.