

# Trauma and silence in migration: lessons for politics, the media and the general public

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Conference: The migratory experience: Adopting a three-generational perspective, Brussels, 26.4.2023

Wiebke Sievers, Austrian Academy of Sciences, Vienna

# Silence as the voice of trauma

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Silence is the common denominator found among all victims, signifying a state of survival functioning where words fail and verbal recollections may have destroyed a fragile ego. Silence in response to massive trauma constitutes also a self-protective, self-imposed firewall to avoid total psychic fragmentation.

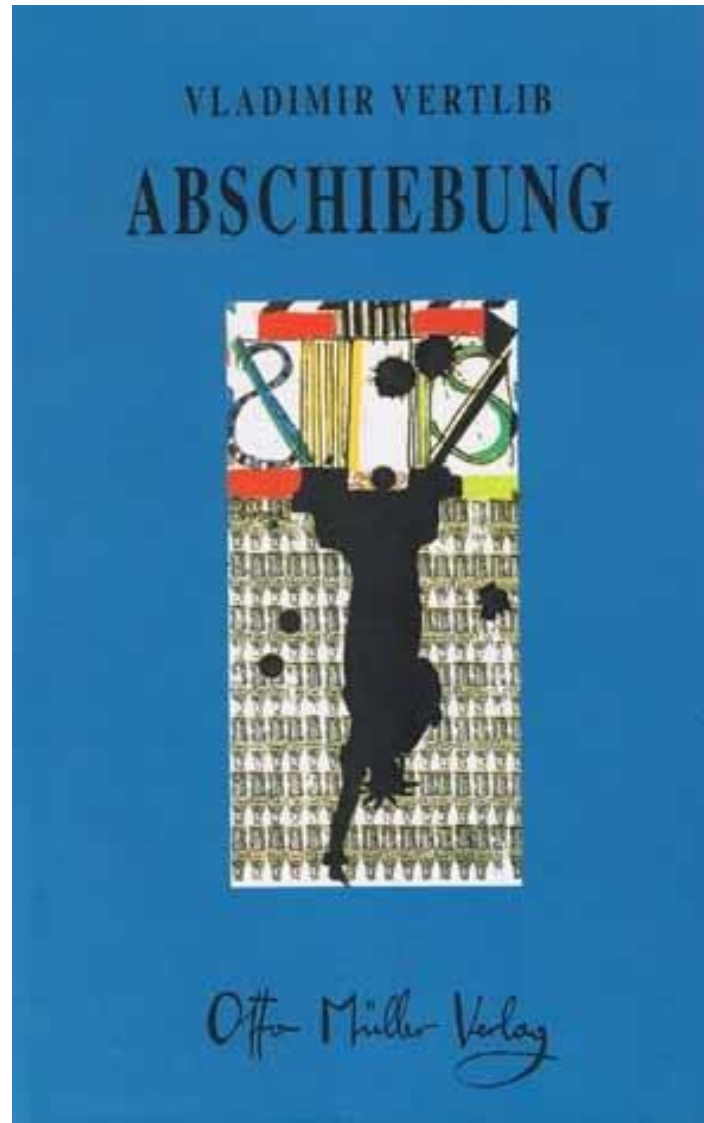
(Maria Ritter: Silence as the voice of trauma, *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 2014, 74, 180)

Vladimir Vertlib



• © Aleksandra Pawloff

Silence as a  
protective  
mechanism



# Inheriting silence

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Few people know that my parents and I lived in Israel and Austria. No one is allowed to know that we came to America on a tourist visa, let alone that we bought it. My father told me that if I told anyone, we would all go to jail. But first he would tear my head off.

(Vladimir Vertlib, *Zwischenstationen*, München, 2005, 202)

# The vicious circle of silence

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He was sorry that I had to leave, but otherwise he was completely uninterested in my fate and even more so in the circumstances in which our family had found itself, because he didn't really understand a word. How could he?

(Vladimir Vertlib, *Abschiebung*, Salzburg, 1995, 169)

# Lessons to be learned

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- Create an atmosphere in which migrants dare to speak
  - Cp. antisemitism
  - Prohibit anti-migrant mobilisation
  - Implement measures against xenophobia and racism (e.g. reporting, education)
- Provide platforms for migrants to make themselves heard
  - Facilitate the publication of their writing in newspapers, magazines
  - Support literature, films etc.
- Listen to what they have to say
  - Learning process
- Spread the word



Julya  
Rabinowich



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Julya Rabinowich

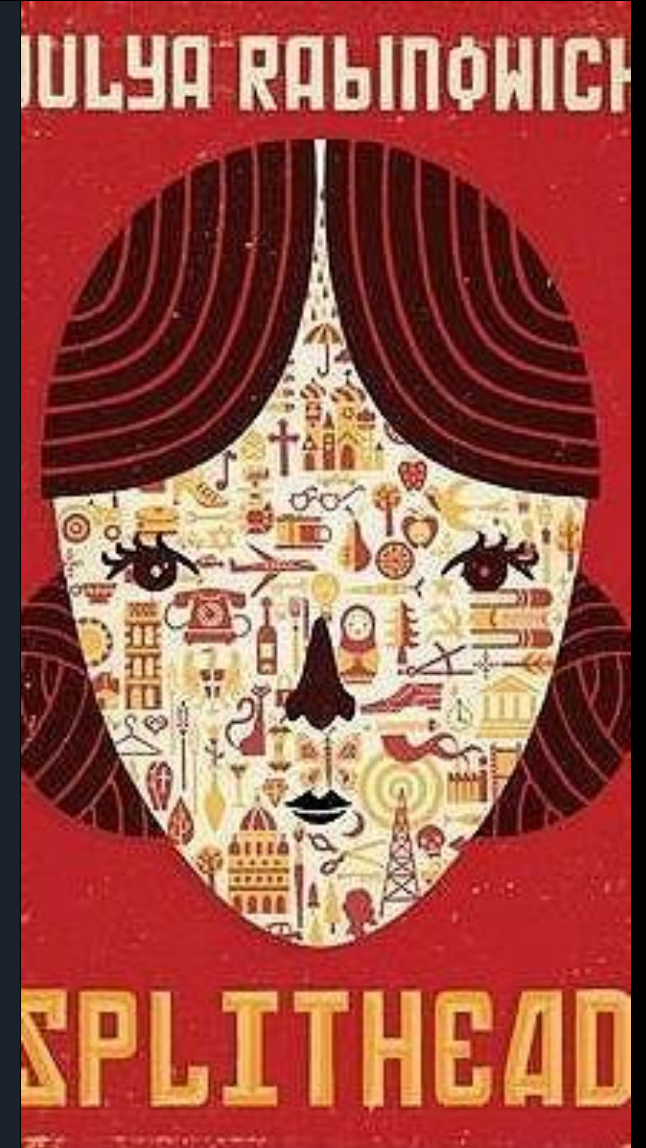
# Spaltkopf

Roman

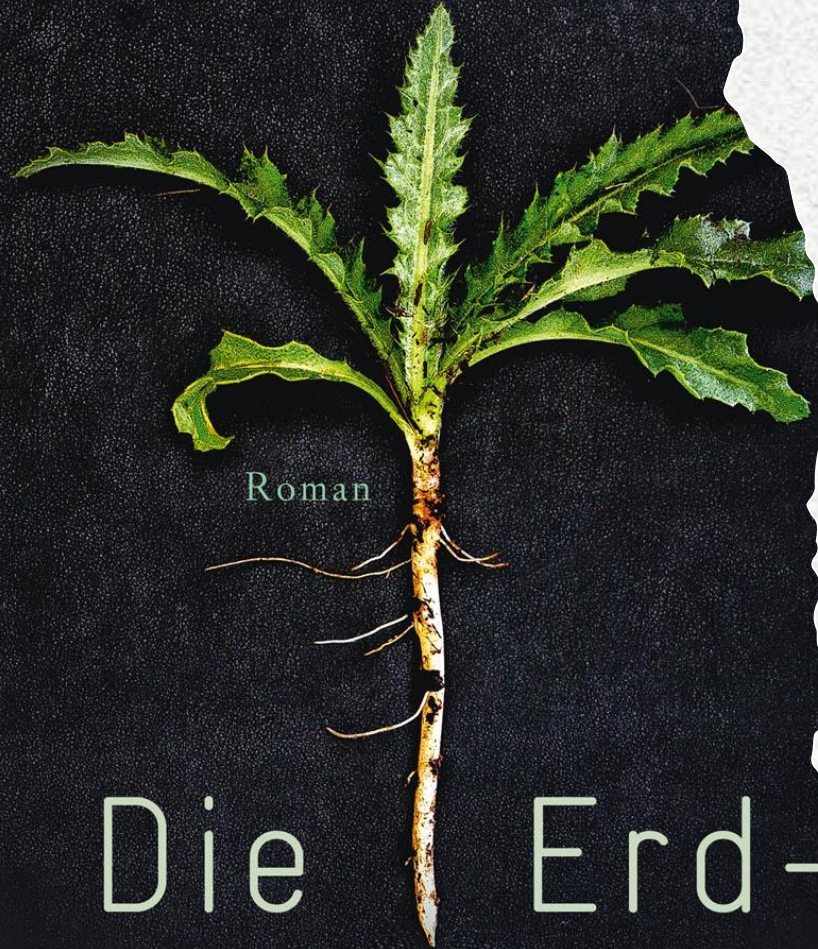


Deuticke

Splithead as the silent  
voice of the trauma



Julya Rabinowich



Roman

Die Erd-  
fresserin

Deuticke

Trauma and  
silence in asylum  
procedures

# Traces of trauma

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Mother was mopping our doorstep with her bare hands even in the freezing cold. Her skin cracked and popped, little red lines in the dark brown. The fingernails red and the fingers. She washed the doorstep every day **to keep it clean and fresh for father, so that when he returned he would find a cosy home.**



A Georgian palimpsest from the 5th or 6th century. [www.opentext.ge](http://www.opentext.ge).

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# Lessons to be learned

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- Involve therapists in asylum procedures
- Raise awareness of what trauma means among those deciding on refugee status



# The political relevance of literature

- Uncover the mechanisms that lead to the silencing of migrants
- Provide insight in trauma and its effects for those claiming asylum