

THROUGH THE EYES OF RACHEL MARKER
by Moira Roth
July 22, 2009, Berkeley

#1. Chronology of Rachel Marker

#2. Evolution of the Rachel Marker narrative (including main sites of composing it: Berlin, Prague, Paris, Northern Greece, Spain and Berkeley)

#3. Plays about Rachel Marker

#4. Fact and Fiction: Rose Hacker and Alice Sommer

#5. Related Publications

#1. Chronology of Rachel Marker

Rachel Marker is born in Prague, and early in her life lives through World War 1 in Switzerland; she attends the first night of the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich, and witnesses from afar the battle of Verdun.

On June 12, 1924, the day of Kafka's funeral in Prague, she begins to write daily letters to him as she sits in a cafe that faces the Astronomical Clock in Prague's Old Town. Each day she gives the letters to a waiter who accumulates them in a trunk that once belonged to Kafka.

In these letters to Kafka, Rachel Marker tells him about literary, scientific and political events of the period between World War I and II.

She describes people she meets in Prague and Berlin (which she visits occasionally during this period), some historical and some fictional, and she tells him about her own writings and feelings.

In 1924 at the café she meets three people, whom she names the Golem, the Young Alchemist and the Cartographer, and also at the café encounters the Mute Players, a group of young mute actors.

She writes a play for the Mute Players that takes a year to perform (July 4, 1924–July 3, 1925): "365 Days of Silent Acts." In 1926 Rachel Marker and the Mute Players collaborate on a City of Maps event, and in 1939 they produce a theater piece based on the 1919 play, "The Transformation," by Ernst Toller, who had committed suicide in New York in May, 1939.

In 1926 she begins a series of texts about the Library of Maps and its inhabitants, that involves the history of astronomy and alchemy. She sends Kafka fragments of these texts along with descriptions of the spaces of the Library.

In 1933--the year of Hitler's election, the Reichstag Fire and the Leipzig Trial, the Enabling Act and the creation of the first concentration camps--many German writers and artists leave the country, including John Heartfield, who comes to Prague. In her letters to Kafka, Rachel Marker describes some of Heartfield's photomontages about the Leipzig Trial.

In 1936, she visits Spain, to seek out Goya's Black Paintings, and witnesses--while staying in a village outside Madrid with a Spanish woman whom she met in Zurich in 1916--the first few months of the Spanish Civil War.

In her 1938 letters to Kafka, Rachel Marker describes the Nazi Anschluss with Austria, and Freud's escape from Vienna to London after the Nazi occupation. It is also the year in which she re-reads Kafka's *The Trial*, and re-unites with the Blind Woman, a friend from her childhood. Her letters of this year end with the death of Karel Capek and his book, *The Crossroads of Europe*: "I fear, Franz,

however, that we have now left this crossroads, that a direction toward inevitable war has now been taken."

In March, 1939, German troops invade Prague, and Czechoslovakia becomes a German protectorate. On September 3, Britain and France declare war on Germany. In her letter to Kafka for this day, Rachel Marker writes that she is trying her hand at a play. She sends him the script of "The Golem, The Angel of Death and the Singer" that includes a dirge sung by the Golem and the Angel of Death, and ends with the offstage Singer's "lament."

In her September 4, 1939 letter, she tells Kafka:

"The play has become so vivid in my mind that today, as I sit with the Mute Players at the café, I imagine I hear the sound of that lament. The words are indistinct, and I am not sure if the language is Czech or German, but I have a sense of great loss as well as longing--although I am uncertain if it comes from the singer, or myself, or if it is my own voice that I hear."

Shortly after war is declared, Rachel Marker leaves Prague for Paris; there she lives a solitary life in an apartment opposite the Montparnasse Cemetery. She has stopped writing to Kafka, and instead keeps a journal.

In this journal are factual entries about the course of the German Blitzkrieg through Europe: Denmark and Norway are occupied in April and Holland and Belgium in May of 1940.

At the same time Rachel Marker continues to write poems and plays.

First, she works on a series of poems called "Messages of the Just" and then on a play for the Mute Players, who have joined her in Paris. This play, "Letters to the Dead," is set in a cemetery, and will take the Players and their descendents a hundred years to perform.

On June 14, 1940 the Germans enter Paris.

After this nothing is known (so far) about what happens to Rachel Marker during the war. There is only one isolated post-war episode (she visits Vienna briefly during the period of its occupation by the four Allied powers, to seek out Breugel's painting, *The Tower of Babel*) before she finally re-appears--having lost her memory--in Berlin after the 1989 Fall of the Wall.

She regains her memory in the Bertolt Brecht Archives and at Brecht's grave, and begins to take a photograph each day of the city's shadows.

The photographs are found in a room in the Mitte and published as "The Book of Shadows."

#2. Evolution of the Rachel Marker Narrative (including main sites of composing it: Berlin, Prague, Paris, Northern Greece, Spain and Berkeley)

I began these texts revolving around a fictional character, a Czech Jew, named Rachel Marker, while staying in Berlin for three weeks in the summer of 2001, see my story, "Rachel Marker and Her Book of Shadows," *Art Journal*, Fall 2003.

In this 2003 *Art Journal* issue, I wrote a postscript to the text:

I discovered Rachel Marker—or did she discover me?—while staying in Berlin for three weeks in the summer of 2001. I had just finished (and was about to publish in the *Art Journal*) the ninth essay until now in this *Traveling Companions* series. In "Obdurate History: Dinh Q. Lê, the Vietnam War, Photography, and Memory," I brooded over this notion of history, be it personal or public, which "stubbornly and insistently returns to confront us."

Equally, I was drawn more and more to reflecting on my own European background, especially my childhood in England in the context of World War II, and my particular Jewish connections at that early age. (Although not Jewish myself, my mother and I had shared a house together for some ten years, beginning around 1941, with Hans Redlich, an Austrian Jewish musicologist, and his wife, and it was during that time that I first met my now unofficially adopted mother, Rose Hacker, who is also Jewish.)

This was the context of my 2001 German visit. I wanted to set up a situation in a foreign city (Berlin) in order to seek out a solitary time in which to walk, read, think, and (hopefully) write. I brought only one book to read, *Borges' Fictions*, which during the three weeks I was to return to endlessly. (I did the same thing in January of 2003, while in Prague, only reading Franz Kafka's novels, short stories and diaries.)

Deliberate too was my decision to see very few friends, to bring no computer and only to go to places I could reach by walking.

I would constantly walk over the river toward the areas around the Brandenburg Gate, the Potsdamer Platz, and the Alexanderplatz, and during these three weeks of walking around the city, I unsystematically came across many sites of history and monuments. Probably most moving for me was a 1996 monument I found by accident in a small park. "The Abandoned Room" by Carl Biedermann and Eva Butzmann commemorated the 50th anniversary of the 1938 Kristallnacht pogrom, and consisted of a bronze table and two chairs, one overturned, resting on a bronze "floor." (Incidentally, I returned to Berlin for a short visit in January of 2003, and saw, for the first time, Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum, which for me is one of the most amazing visceral and tangible expressions of "obdurate history" that I have ever experienced--one walks down the two "streets" in the bottom of the building, one toward the Holocaust and the other toward Exile.)

I rented a high-ceilinged room, whose window looked down on a cobbled courtyard in an old building in the Mitte (formerly an area in East Berlin) very near Chausseestrasse. It was this room, the courtyard, and the surrounding construction sites and neighborhood (all of which I extensively photographed) that became the “set” for Rachel Marker’s struggles to regain her memory, and record the city’s shadows. I started to compose “Rachel Marker and Her Book of Shadows,” while staying in my Schlegelstrasse room, writing by hand in a small notebook.

When I returned to Berkeley in July of 2001, I quickly finished the story and immediately wrote a sequence, “The Death of Rachel Marker.” (It turns out in this second text that she is the creator of the Library of Maps.) At this time, I also contacted Shimon Attie as I had been told about his work by a friend. I was deeply moved and interested in his extraordinary 1993 “Writing on the Wall” project he had created about the Scheunenviertel, the old Jewish quarter in East Berlin, near the Alexanderplatz. Thus it seems natural now, a year and a half later, when contemplating this *Art Journal* text to invite him to share the space with me.

Ever since this 2001 visit to Berlin, I have intermittently written about Rachel Marker--as a sort of “witness” to the 20th century--and some of the most intense bouts of writing have taken place in Europe.

In the winter of 2002-2003 I visited Prague (I had visited the city for the first time in 2001), and began to “see” Rachel Marker’s earlier life in the city. While there, I wrote handwritten fragments in my notebook, and after this, upon my return to Berkeley, I began to create Rachel Marker’s daily letters to Franz Kafka.

I returned to engaging with Rachel Marker in Greece in the summer of 2003 (see her presence in “The Unfinished Mappa Mundi and Tiresias,” #39, in my Library of Maps series).

In the fall of 2004, I wrote “The Voice of Rachel Marker” —the Zurich-Verdun and the Blind Woman/Rachel Marker sequences—and edited versions of these were published in *Camerawork: A Journal of Photographic Arts*, Vol. 33, No. 1, Spring/Summer 2006.

In 2005, I introduced another figure called “Moira Marker,” who keeps a journal in Paris, Prague and Berlin in 2005-2006 (later on I added a section of a 1968 journal) as she attempts to locate Rachel Marker’s archives, and trace her life. In 2005, I also began a novel which I called “Through the Eyes of Rachel Marker.”

I wrote extensively in May-June of 2006 when I visited Germany (Potsdam, Tübingen, Nuremberg, Munich and Berlin), and later Prague and Paris, traveling mainly by train, and writing in the various cities—in cafes and cemeteries. It was at this time (while in Prague, staying in its Old Town, and writing in a café opposite the Astronomical Clock there) that I introduced the characters of the Mute Players.

A few days later, while staying in Paris in a studio apartment opposite the Montparnasse Cemetery, I composed "Letters to the Dead," a script that Rachel Marker writes for the Mute Players. This play is to last one hundred years, and will involve the Players choosing a series of words significant to them, and each day laying individual letters for these words on graves in various cemeteries.

In July, 2006, when I returned to Berkeley, I continued to write intensely, and completed the end (at least for now) of the narrative--in which Rachel Marker lives in Berlin, regains her memory, and each day takes a photograph of the city's shadows--changing my earlier text, "Rachel Marker and Her Book of Shadows," from the third to the first person voice. I also included one diary entry (March 14, 1999, somewhat based on one of my published *Traveling Companions* texts) as Moira Roth in which I introduce the stories of Rose Hacker and Alice Sommer.

On July 18, 2006 at the Nabolom café in Berkeley, which I go to daily, I decided to add a last line to the narrative to explain that Moira Marker is Rachel Marker's daughter. On July 31, I decided on "shadows" as the first word that the Mute Players choose to begin their "Letters to the Dead," but later changed the word from "Shadows" to "Exile."

In December, 2008, I attended a feminist art conference in Spain, and after that stayed on, and began to write about a new episode in Rachel Marker's life in which she goes to Spain.

While staying in a watermill outside Madrid (and I used this site for Rachel Marker's 1936 visit to Spain) I composed the first few letters to Kafka in which Rachel Marker describes coming to Spain to seek out Goya's Black Paintings, and instead finds herself confronted with the Spanish Civil War. She reads Lorca's poetry, listens to Republican broadcasts, and begins to study Spanish--I intend in her letters to Kafka to mix in Czech and Spanish words connected with war, memory and history. Note: I may also create another play script out of this new episode.

Beginning around June 10, 2009 for a week or so, I intensely edited all the texts, published and unpublished--deleting, rewriting and adding--plus inserting a lot of images (maps and historical photographs, etc.) garnered from Google Image searches (prior to this, I had always glued postcards and photos, etc. onto the pages of the texts, and had to re-xerox them each time I edited).

July 22, 2009, Berkeley

#3. Plays about Rachel Marker

"Rachel Marker, Franz Kafka and Alice Sommer," produced in Manoa, Hawaii, 2005

"Through the Eyes of Rachel Marker: a piece for two voices," produced in Berkeley, CA, 2005, and Potsdam, Germany, 2006

"Through the Eyes of Rachel Marker: a three-part presentation," San Francisco, 2008

In January 2004, I wrote the first of my three plays devoted to Rachel Marker.

"Rachel Marker, Franz Kafka and Alice Sommer"¹ is drawn from my 2002-2003 Prague texts, together with the narrative in the *Art Journal* story, plus the introduction of a new figure, Alice Sommer.

Note: Alice Sommer is a real Czech Jew with a remarkable life. She knew Kafka when she was a child in Prague, was a professional pianist in the Theresienstadt concentration camp during World War II, then moved to Israel, and now at age 106 lives in London. Note: In March of 2004, I arranged to have Alice Sommer videotaped by Charlotte Prodger, and this video includes a scene where she moves to a window in her London apartment and toasts to Kafka.

On September 17, 2005, directed by Peter Ruocco, there was a staged reading, with props and a video clip (of Alice Sommer toasting Kafka) of **"Rachel Marker, Franz Kafka and Alice Sommer"** in the Auditorium, the University of Hawaii, Manoa.

Characters: Rachel Marker, The Reader, The Golem, The Angel of Death and the Singer.

Another play, **"Through the Eyes of Rachel Marker: a piece for two voices,"** was adapted from various Rachel Marker texts by Anna Muza and myself. (Anna Muza is a Russian-trained theater historian/critic, who now teaches at UC Berkeley.) We performed this for the first time at the Judah L. Magnes Museum, Berkeley, CA on October 30, 2005 (in conjunction with a panel on the Peter Forgacs' exhibition, "The Danube Exodus") and, slightly adapted, performed it again at Teachers Training Conference, Potsdam, Germany, May 25, 2006.

In May of 2008, **"Through the Eyes of Rachel Marker: a three-part presentation,"** was staged in the Right Window Gallery, 992 Valencia Street, San Francisco—presented in the context of "Looking but Not Touching," a live

¹ An adaptation of this was published in *n. paradoxa*, Volume 17, "Journeys," 2006, an issue that was included in the 2007 Documenta in a commissioned art journal/magazine section.

performance series curated by Cassie Rigor. (I played a silent role as Rachel Marker in Pt. 1 and, again silent, as Moira Marker in Parts 2 and 3).

Part 1: "Rachel Marker, Franz Kafka and the Golem, Prague 1924-1939," May 11, 2008

Characters: Rachel Marker, The Reader and The Golem

Part 2: "Rachel Marker & Walter Benjamin/The Café & the Labyrinth, Paris, 1936 and Berlin 1990," May 18, 2008

Characters: Walter Benjamin, Rachel Marker, Moira Marker and The Messenger

Part 3: "Searching for Rachel Marker in Paris, Prague & Berlin, 1968-," May 25, 2008

Characters: The Reader and Moira Marker

#4. Fact and Fiction. Rose Hacker and Alice Sommer

Woven into these texts are references to two actual women: Rose Hacker, an English Jew and my adopted mother, and her friend, Alice Sommer, a Czech Jew, now living in London. (I had already included these two remarkable women in a Fall 2002 project called *The Cyber Theater*.²)

I first met Rose Hacker (who was born in 1906, and died in February of 2008 at age 101) when I was a child during World War II and much later she became my unofficially adopted mother. She and her two children moved from London, and came to live with my mother and me in my mother's house in Letchworth.

Rose not only had a long public history in politics, writing, mental health and marriage guidance, but also made sculpture, and then, at age 100, began to write a bi-monthly series of articles on such subjects as peace and women's rights for a local London newspaper. Toward the end of her life she was virtually blind, and so would dictate these texts to a friend.

Alice Sommer (Herz), born in 1903, knew Kafka as a child; she began her long career in the 1920s as a professional pianist, and still plays the piano regularly. During World War II she and her son, Raphael (later to become a gifted cellist), were in the Theresienstadt concentration camp, where she played the piano and her son sang (including in Hans Krasa's children's opera *Brundibár*). Afterwards they emigrated to Israel. Alice has lived in London since her sixties, and recently a book appeared on her life.

² I constructed this *Cyber Theater* project with a very short instructional script—that involves a text, mirror, two people and a photograph, and this script was acted out by friends in Venice, Zurich, New York, Southern California, Buenos Aires and London. See my text, "The *Cyber Theater* of Mneme and Melete: Of Writing, Performance and Photography," *Camerawork: A Journal of Photographic Arts*, Vol. 33, No. 1, Spring/Summer 2006.

#5. Related Publications

Selections of the Library of Maps texts

Performance Research, Summer 2001, Vol. 6, No. 2, "On Maps and Mapping" issue:

#2, "The Map of the Cosmic World"

#4, "The Children's Map of Time"

#9, "The Unruly Map of Threads"

#11, "The Two Street Map"

"Rachel Marker and the City of Maps, Berlin, Summer 2001," *X-tra*, Vol. 4, No. 3, 2001

"No. 10: The Two Street Maps," with commentary, published as a broadsheet (accompanied by a map by Peter Sis), History of Cartography, University of Wisconsin, 2001

"The Pierian Spring," Trafficking Boundaries issue #24 of *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory*, Fall 2002

[Part 8, #1 of Traveling Companions/Fractured Worlds series]

"The Map and the Magnifying Glass: An Email Exchange and a Fable" (Die Handkarte und das Vergrößerungsglas: Eine Email Korrespondenz und ein Märchen), Gisela Weimann, *Reflexionen/Reflections*, Weimar, Germany: Edition Eselsweg, 2002, English version of text: pp. 460-472, see especially "Of the Village of Handmaps," pp. 470-472

"Rachel Marker and Her Book of Shadows," *Art Journal*, Fall 2003, pp. 66-73

[Part 10 of Traveling Companions/Fractured Worlds series]

"Rachel Marker, Franz Kafka and Alice Sommer, adapted from a theater piece in three acts," *n.paradoxa*, Volume 17, 2006, pp. 19-29

"Through the Eyes of Rachel Marker," *Camerawork: A Journal of Photographic Arts*, Vol. 33, No. 1, Spring/Summer 2006, pp. 30-37