

Neue Materialien

JULIAN PREECE

Ungedruckte Erinnerungen an Elias und Veza Canetti



Abb.1: Elias und Veza Canetti mit Natalie Davenport und Jean François Couëlle in der Provence, 1957.

Natalie Davenport schrieb mir am 5. August 2020 die folgende kurze Nachricht, die mitten im Satz anfängt:

I very much enjoyed reading your writings on Veza.

In case you're interested I attach a short piece of my relationship over 16 years with these two wonderful people.

It has particular interest perhaps because of her death.

Am also attaching the only photo I have of them together whilst we were all in France on holiday.

Please don't hesitate if you have any questions, observations etc.

Sincerely

Natalie Davenport

Im Anhang (mit dem Titel *Veza and Canetti*) waren die ersten zweieinhalb Seiten der hier abgedruckten Erinnerung und ein Foto, das schon in einem Bildband abgedruckt worden war, aber dort mit der Unterschrift: „Veza und Elias Canetti mit? in der Provence, 1957“.¹ Es zeigt vier Personen, die bei hellem Sonnenschein draußen um einen Tisch sitzen. Elias Canetti (1905–1994) und Veza Canetti (1897–1963) sind klar erkennbar. Er sitzt vorne und lächelt der ihm gegenüberstehenden jungen Frau vergnügt zu, mit der Hand auf ihrem Arm. Jemand muss gerade etwas Lustiges erzählt haben, denn die junge Frau strahlt zurück und blickt ihm direkt in die Augen. Auch die hinter Elias platzierte Veza Canetti nimmt an der Heiterkeit teil. Nur die Figur neben Veza ist offensichtlich vom *bon mot* unberührt (vgl. Abb. 1). Diese Person kann jetzt als Jean François Couëlle identifiziert werden, der Sohn eines Steinmetzes aus dem Dorf Rognes im Süden der Provence. Die junge Frau im Vordergrund ist Natalie Davenport selbst (* 1937).

Davenports Aufzeichnung, die sie 57 Jahre nach dem Tod von Veza und 40 Jahre nach dem letzten Treffen mit Elias zu Papier brachte, war in der Tat wegen ihres Berichts über Vezas Tod von biografischem Interesse. Angelika Schedels Selbstmordthese kann sie zwar weder bestätigen noch widerlegen,² aber es geht aus ihrer Darstellung von Vezas letzten Wochen klar hervor, dass sie schwerkrank war und mit dem Tod rechnete. Ein Brief von Elias Canetti hat diese Frage inzwischen aufgeklärt.³ In Sven Hanscheks Biografie von Elias Canetti ist zu lesen, dass Elias und Clement Glock (1913–1955), Davenports Mutter, eine Liebesaffäre verband.⁴ Glock (geb. Hale, früher Davenport) soll zusätzlich mit beiden Maxwell Brüdern, Aymer und Gavin, intim gewesen sein, deren Namen in der Erinnerung ihrer Tochter auch vorkommen, weil beide nach dem Tod der Mutter auch ihr einen Heiratsantrag machten. Elias Canetti begleitete Aymer Maxwell, „de[n] engste[n] Freund[.] [...] den Canetti in England hatte“,⁵ im März 1954 nach Marokko, woraus sein Reisebuch *Stimmen aus Marrakesch* (1967) entstanden ist. Clement Glock und Veza Canetti sollen laut Vreni Amsler ein Illustrationsprojekt besprochen haben. Amsler erwähnt ferner 17 Briefe Vezas an Natalie aus den Jahren 1953–1962, ohne sie jedoch zu kommentieren. Sie befinden sich im Privatbesitz

der Erbin Elias Canettis und wurden für diesen Artikel auch nicht ausgewertet.⁶

Was mich in der Erinnerung schockierte, war die Aussage über acht Schwangerschaftsabbrüche, denen Veza Canetti sich vor der Emigration bis Ende 1938 in Wien unterziehen musste und die in den Biografien beider Canettis nicht erwähnt werden.⁷ Es leuchtet ein, warum sie den sexuellen Teil ihrer Beziehung zu Elias daraufhin beendet hat und ihm die Freiheit gewährte, Geliebte zu haben, was er im Londoner Exil voll in Anspruch nahm. Auch die Romanschriftstellerin und Philosophin Iris Murdoch (1919–1999), die in Davenports Erinnerung kurz erwähnt wird, gehörte dazu. Private Enthüllungen dieser Art haben hier durchaus einen literaturwissenschaftlichen Wert, da die literarische Partnerschaft der Canettis zum Mittelpunkt einer Kontroverse wurde, als Vezas literarische Schriften Jahre nach ihrem Tod von Elias zur Veröffentlichung freigegeben wurden.

Natalie Davenport stammt aus einer Familie von Künstlern und Schriftstellern. Ihre Großmutter mütterlicherseits war Beatrice Forbes-Robertson Hale (1883–1967), eine amerikanische Frauenrechtlerin und Autorin mehrerer Bücher, ihr Vater John Davenport (1908–1966) ein bekannter Literaturkritiker, der mit Dylan Thomas zusammen ein Buch schrieb. Obwohl seine Tochter sich an keine Begegnung zwischen John Davenport und Elias Canetti erinnern kann (ihre Eltern hatten sich kurz nach ihrer Geburt scheiden lassen, und es waren ihre Mutter und ihr Stiefvater, der Musikwissenschaftler William Glock [1908–2000], die die Canettis kannten), hat er kurz vor seinem Tod eine Empfehlung für die Taschenbuchausgabe der *Blendung* in englischer Übersetzung geschrieben (*Auto-da-Fé*, engl. von Veronica Wedgwood, Harmondsworth 1965).

Mitte September 2020 bin ich ins ländliche Stroud, Gloucestershire gefahren, wo Natalie Davenport seit vielen Jahren wohnt, um sie weiter zu befragen und ihren Text zu ergänzen. Das entstandene Porträt ist so gut wie einmalig, denn Berichte von Zeitzeugen über Veza Canetti gibt es sonst kaum. Davenports Darstellung von Elias zeigt seinen facettenreichen Charakter, einerseits zuvorkommend und um die Tochter einer verstorbenen Freundin besorgt, andererseits in der Hitze des Augenblicks fähig, ihr grausame und vollkommen absurde Vorwürfe zu machen, die er erst Jahre

später zurücknimmt. Davenport hatte die meisten von seinen Büchern in der englischen Übersetzung in ihren Regalen und hat seine Karriere und die späte Wiederentdeckung von Vezas Erzählungen aus der Ferne mitverfolgt. Peter Conradis einseitiges Porträt von ihm in seiner Biografie über Iris Murdoch kannte sie aber nicht.⁸ Im Alter von 83 Jahren und an einer Blutkrankheit leidend, wollte sie jemandem ihre Erinnerungen anvertrauen. An einer Veröffentlichung war sie nicht in erster Linie interessiert, stimmte dem Vorschlag aber bereitwillig zu. Ein paar Wochen nach unserem Gespräch schickte sie mir den hier abgedruckten undatierten Brief von Elias Canetti an sie, der die offensichtlich zerbröckelnde Ehe eines Freundes thematisiert. Laut einer Auskunft der Canetti

Stiftung Zürich gilt Philip Inman als einer der letzten Freunde Veza Canettis, der kurz vor ihrem Tod mit ihr essen ging.

Im Frühjahr 2021 kamen dann weitere Informationen von Natalie Davenport in Form von neu entdeckten Tagebuchauszügen aus der ersten Hälfte des Jahres 1960. Während dieser Zeit machte die 23-jährige Davenport Nachtschichten bei der BBC und war am Tag anderweitig beruflich beschäftigt, weil sie genug Geld (£ 50) sparen wollte, um nach Frankreich zu entkommen und dort ein neues Leben anzufangen. Das Tagebuch dokumentiert verschiedene Begegnungen mit den Canettis und deckt sich mit der Erinnerung, die jedoch ohne Bezug darauf verfasst wurde.

Dokumente

I. NATALIE DAVENPORT: *Memories of Elias and Veza Canetti*

I first met Veza and Elias Canetti when I was about 6 years old in 1943.⁹ My mother Clement Glock had become very friendly with them and talked about them to me, especially about Canetti. She was the scene painter at Covent Garden Opera House and an occasional set designer. At that time Veza and Canetti, as they called each other, lived in a tiny flat near Paddington [14 Crawford Street]. They were very poor and entirely dependent on kindness and generosity. I had never met people like them before and found them thoroughly interesting. Canetti understood English and later came to speak it extremely well. Veza was very quiet, though she understood everything. She had lost her entire family, her friends and her public. She seemed to me to be in a continual state of shock, but her smile transfigured the sad face and her beauty was intense. They both seemed delighted with our visit – mainly as I was a child and that warmed them.

We knew lots of refugees from Nazi Germany because my stepfather William Glock, a musician and music critic, had studied in Berlin and had lots of contacts and friends who needed to get out of the country. He used to say that in Berlin he had met everyone worth meeting. It seemed totally natural that they came to our house, either to introduce themselves to him again, hoping for assistance in getting work or some renown, or because they genuinely had nothing and for that reason were directed to people who could help them out. Almost certainly some of them (particularly the painters) would be sent to us by Canetti. I don't remember Veza ever visiting us, but Canetti would drop by to meet up with my mother and her friends and those of my stepfather. The place would be busy with people – artists, musicians, writers, poets, travellers. Conversation was all important, with a cheap stew or bread and cheese sustenance, and an occasional 14-people game of racing demon. Nearly everyone was poor but that meant they were generous with what they had and shared money. Aymer and Gavin Maxwell were often there, not that they were short of cash. After my mother's death in 1955 both proposed to me, Gavin having a compulsion to emulate his brother in everything that he did. My mother and I travelled with Aymer and Canetti to Scotland. I was also fond of the sinologist Arthur Waley and was surprised to read in Canetti's *Party in the Blitz* that he did not like him because if Canetti was a father to me, Waley was a grandfather.

Everyone seemed to know that Veza had been a successful writer, and Canetti made sure that they did know. However it didn't appear to be a subject that could be talked about! She talked very little about Vienna and never (to me) boasted of her success there. I remember just once when she said something like: 'I am very changed now to when I lived in Vienna. There I went out a lot and wore good clothes and knew everyone. None of that exists for me here.' I began to see them more often when they found a small flat in Belsize Park [8 Thurlow Road] near to where we lived in Well Walk. Veza would stay at home while Canetti took every possibility of meeting everyone he could, holding court at the Coffee Cup near the bottom of the Hampstead High Street. He sat in the same seat and everyone knew he would be there and they would come to talk with him. There were lots of people who wanted to be great writers and they seemed to think that if they spent time with him their dream would come true.

Soon after my mother died when I was 17 Canetti dropped by because she had loaned them money for a sewing machine which he hadn't fully repaid. I urged him not to worry about it but he was determined and faithfully gave me £ 1 a week until the debt was paid off. I think he also felt a human responsibility for me because I felt stranded and bereft. He knew how fond I was of Veza and suggested I visit every week to keep her company. He played the role of father to me at this time, nudging my thinking in what he held to be the right direction, forming my mind, but wanting me to find my own way. He was sensitive when it came to spirituality which was growing in importance for me while he was an atheist. He guarded me sometimes from male attention. The actor David de Keyser, ten years older than me, declared he was in love, but Canetti told him he could not have anything to do with me. But when another admirer accepted a posting to Iran and I refused to go with him, Canetti told me I should write to him.

There started several years of my visiting the flat in Thurlow Road. Veza would generously give me a part of the supper she cooked. She always insisted that I should not offer to help in the kitchen though I could do things like lay the table. It was years before I realised that she was missing the lower part of her left arm. She could use the arm to balance things like plates and would disguise it with a draped over material which somehow looked businesslike. When finally I plucked up the courage to ask her if there was anything the matter with her arm she told me that as a young girl she had been thrown from a horse and the lower arm had had to be removed. She never complained. She loved to read newspapers and bought herself two or three every day. They were her sole luxury. She read everything in them and she would say that this is where the world is taking place. Put all the stories together and you understand what is going on. She deteriorated in her later years. I knew nothing about her burning her manuscripts but I can well imagine her doing so and saying 'what is the point?' I can imagine too what she was like in her prime, back in the city of her birth, dominating a room with her presence. She had the most amazing eyes. I sometimes sensed this pre-war Veza when someone she had known from before came to visit. Georges Canetti [der jüngere Bruder von Elias, J. P.] positively illumined her. I was by no means her only visitor. Christine Porter, the mistress of Canetti's friend Rudi Nassauer, was there every other day. I remember being in the house on one occasion at the same time as Iris Murdoch who was in another room with Canetti and Veza said, 'there they are, at it again'. Carol Stewart who translated his play *The Numbered* followed by his big book, *Crowds and Power*, spent hours with him and got to know his mind better than anyone else. They talked language and the meanings of words.

I knew very little about the Veza who had once been a centre of literature, art and beauty in Vienna. I knew only a woman who had lost every member of her family, who had eight abortions so as not to burden Canetti with children, and who somehow managed to make me feel loved. She often disagreed with Canetti because she saw things from a female perspective but their arguments belonged to the past. I read *Crowds and Power* when it came out in English in 1962 and I told Veza that I understood it all but something was missing. It was too male an approach. She knew every word of that book. She was fascinated by Canetti's mind, but she was inclusive whereas he was obsessive. I believe that he talked to her about everything, read everything that he wrote to her. At that level he was a more than faithful husband.

When I was 23 in 1960, I left London and went to start a new life in Paris. That is another story, but it did mean that I didn't see Veza and Canetti for three years. When I finally visited London again

in 1963 I rang them up. Canetti seemed delighted to know I was around and invited me to stay with Veza to look after her as he had to go to Austria and Germany. My memory tells me it was Cologne and that he was giving some lectures. His biographer specifies Vienna, which Veza refused to re-visit, and that he left London on 22 February. After Vienna he went to Munich where he met his new publisher to discuss a re-issue of *Die Blendung*, and then Zurich where he visited his new lover Hera Buschor, whom he would marry after Veza's death. When I arrived at the flat he took me to his room to talk to me privately. He told me that Veza was ill – not so much physically as mentally. He explained that she had an obsession with death and would do everything in her power to talk about it. He thought it could drive her to suicide. He asked me if I thought I could manage. Of course I said yes.

And so began 3–4 days which steadily became more and more fraught. Veza was the most intelligent person I knew, with a remarkable way of digging into one's brain, and I stood no chance with her. Time after time she would bring up the wish to donate her body, and particularly her eyes. I would try and change the subject and each day got more anxious as she reworded her wishes. Finally I said that friends of mine had gone to their doctor to ask about how this should be done. She had won! Next morning she looked at me with venom and said that I wanted her to die. Nothing I could say could change her mind. That afternoon she phoned Canetti and begged him to come home to rescue her from me. He took the next plane home and spent some time with Veza before coming into my room and ordering me to go immediately. Which of course I did.

A few weeks later I heard that Veza had died. Canetti met me again and said that I had helped kill her. He was very shaken by her death and although suicide wasn't mentioned, I felt that Veza would have known what to do.

I left Hampstead for good after that. Several years later I decided to see him again and talk through what had happened. I asked Carol Stewart and Gwenda Mossbacher to help me meet up with him and eventually we did meet, as usual in the Coffee Cup.

'Hello Natalie,' he said. 'You look really happy!'

'I am,' I replied, 'I'm lucky as I have met many wonderful people and found good ideas which I have adopted to find some peace for myself. You used to protect me when I was younger from losing my sense of faith, and now I am free of my upbringing and can make my own choices.'

He seemed to relax.

'I want to apologise to you Natalie for the pain I gave you when I accused you of killing Veza. Of course you did no such thing. And of course you didn't have enough experience to know how to cope with someone on the edge as she was. I was simply totally distraught and judged myself harshly in being away at all at that time.'

I thanked him for the peace that response gave me. Then he added:

'I've been married again to a Japanese expert and we have a child. I never allowed Veza any children and only now realise how brutal and wrong I was to deny her that experience.'

'I'm so happy for you,' I said. And I felt great peace for him and Veza who had so much wanted his children. He seems to have found some peace too because as we parted for the last time, he gave me a copy of *The Voices of Marrakesh* and wrote: 'To Natalie, very happy after seeing her again at last and reassured. With much love from Elias Canetti, 27th June 1980.' Looking back now I realise that I was a not yet grown, deeply unhappy young person when I knew Veza, feeling very isolated from family. I felt loved by Veza and hope she knew how much I grew to love her.

II. ELIAS CANETTI: *undatierter Brief an Natalie Davenport*

8 Thurlow Road, NW3

Saturday

Dear Natalie

I am writing to you in a great hurry; it is very urgent; please answer immediately. Denise must not know of this letter, I count on your discretion.

Philip Inman is in a very bad state. He had to go to a clinic and the doctors think he is in a state of acute psychosis. What they say he needs most of all is to get out of this state of torturing doubt about Denise. It would be important to know whether she is in Paris or not. Please do answer me at once and tell me whether she has gone to Rome or whether she is still working at Unesco. If she is in Rome I have to tell Philip. It is better for him to know. His false hopes have driven him literally mad.

The important thing is to know, and particularly to know whether she is in Rome. You know that I never write letters, so you can imagine how urgent this is.

Denise must not know that I inquired about her. She may think that I am being used by Philip to spy on her. All I want is to help him out of his state of murderous uncertainty.

If you are sure that Denise has a friend in Paris (a lover I mean), but only if you are quite sure, it would be right to tell me so that I can free him. Do not allow her to shape you, to continue what she had been doing could kill him.

I cannot tell you how important it is that you answer this letter at once.

Veza will write soon. A happy New Year from Canetti.

When are you coming to England?

III. NATALIE DAVENPORT: *Diary 1960. Extracts relating to the Canettis*

January 3

Canetti rang me about the hanging (of paintings by Marie Louise Motesiczky). Spent evening with Veza and Christine. Veza told us of Mahler's daughter who died at 18 of polio.¹⁰ An extremely beautiful girl, who had been given everything in life, but who then died. Her sister, the sculptress, lived very naturally... To illustrate that for those brought up in hygiene, cleanliness, they are more apt to catch serious illnesses. But as Christine pointed out, the poor have their own variety of illnesses, which are often worse.

January 5

In the evening to Veza's. The only thing vaguely amusing was Bob Hope. Christine came too. And finally Rudi to collect her. She looked much happier – he boorish. Veza was very tired. I feel so ashamed of myself when I have nothing gay or amusing to say to her. She must be sick of us two pestering her the whole time for company. I love her – but what can I offer her?

January 17

Went to Veza in the evening. Christine and Canetti arrived, then Alex and Rudi. Long conversation about death – should one, like Alex, accept it as a matter of course. 'If I die tomorrow I'll yet live today!' Or Canetti who says one should fight death with all one's power and never give in. Far more serious things came into the discussion. Especially the individuality and purpose of each living person.

January 19

After seeing the Japanese film *Throne of Blood* which was absolutely fantastic, I went to have supper with Veza. She had had only two hours sleep the night before and was extremely tired – but she gave me a marvellous meal and was so warm and kind. She would have made a wonderful mother.

February 2

Felt I couldn't stay home. Felt unlike a cinema. Veza allowed me to see her. I felt sad as I had nothing to tell her, and she sees so much of me that I want to give her something and apart from affection there's little else except news, gossip, etc.

February 7

Spent evening with Veza. Canetti, Carol, Rudi and Christine came. We talked about English coldness. Their calm acceptance of death which allows for no emotions. Canetti said that perhaps having to hide ones emotions in the end one no longer feels them.

February 9

To Veza in the evening to see *A Woman of no Importance*. Christine came.

Canetti arrived afterwards. Quite a long talk. Said that Christine is becoming more beautiful, the real reason being that she had suffered a lot and was coming through that suffering successfully. She had therefore more poise and greater character. Told us about Joyce in Zurich – that his eyes were very odd, one being very dark and blind the other large and broken up into small pieces. He felt as if Joyce's eyes were actually on him when they looked at him. The only time in his life when he has had this physical feeling.¹¹

[...]

Gave all my cigarettes to Veza as I intend to stop smoking tomorrow.

February 18

Evening to Veza. Told her odd bits of news. Saw a little television. Ethel now living alone.

Canetti, Christine and Rudi arrived. We all went into the front room. Rudi became a martinet, every direction one pushed him into he would stiffly take up, with a horrible grimace. I find people who are able to look so repulsive very frightening. Canetti is excellent in that. Then they both imitated people. Rudi did Canetti, Christine, David, Gwenda. Canetti did a long imitation of an English bulldog-man and his pipe, with a completely straight face, although we were nearly off our chairs with laughing. Extraordinary stories about Gwenda, dog house instead of brothel, time for the Smiths, etc. Talked of the Japanese drums and films. And of Aymer and my evening.

February 21

Evening to Veza. She became very angry with me because I kept touching the television. Christine came for two minutes, when Rudi came to take her. Canetti worked all the time.

March 3

Went to Veza's in the evening. She has had her hair cut quite short. Apparently Canetti is furious, but actually I like it. Perhaps two inches longer, and then it will regain its straightness.

March 19

Had a terrible dream about the Canettis which ended with me being thrown out of the house, with disappointed anger.

March 28

Went to see Veza and Canetti for three hours. Talked of many things. Told of my dream about them.

Canetti told me that one of the things I must seriously conquer is the way I talk of death. I must control the fascination, because even though for me it might be a normal subject, most people have a genuine fear of death – and to say that they will die etc. makes them naturally believe I wish them to do so.

Talked too of love. Especially the effect that Veza has had on me – teaching me to give as well as to accept. Teaching me too that there is such a thing as real 'blood-mingling' friendship.

Canetti said that if he was asked what he believed in with regard to the whole of mankind he would answer 'miracles'. No one is so bad that they cannot change for the better.

May 12

In a very nervous state. Went to see Veza and Canetti. Nearly bit Veza's head off at one time! Canetti very kind, quietly calming me – declaring finally that it's probably just exhaustion at overdoing my strength. I think he's right at that! After all one can often be unhappy, but one does not have to shake with nerves ...

May 28

Went to see Veza. Christine came. When Canetti came later we had a long talk about Eichmann. Canetti pointed out to me that like most English people I refused to realise the full extent of the problem. One slips around objects rather than confronting them. This was because I told him that my first reaction was 'Oh no, not all that again!' But of course evil does exist. How one deals with it is a different problem.

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Anmerkungen

- 1 Kristian Wachinger (Hrsg.): Elias Canetti – Bilder aus seinem Leben. Wien, München, 2005, S. 114.
- 2 Angelika Schedel: Nachwort. In: Veza Canetti: Der Fund. Wien, München 2003, S. 309–326, hier S. 318 f.
- 3 Vgl. Annika Wilkening: Ein bislang unzugänglicher Brief Elias Canettis an H.G. Adler widerlegt die These von einem Suizid Veza Canettis. In: ZfGerm NF 23 (2013), H. 3, S. 659–663.
- 4 Sven Hanuschek: Elias Canetti. Biografie. Wien, München 2005, S. 409–411.
- 5 Hanuschek, Canetti: Biografie (wie Anm. 4), S. 406.
- 6 Vgl. Vreni Amsler: Veza Canetti zwischen Leben und Werk. Netzwerk Biografie, Innsbruck 2020, S. 438.
- 7 Vgl. z. B. Amsler (wie Anm. 6).
- 8 Peter Conradi: Iris Murdoch. A Life. London 2001.
- 9 Es sind nicht 16 Jahre gewesen, wie sie in ihrer Mail geschrieben hat, sondern 20 Jahre, die sie die Canettis kannte.
- 10 Gemeint ist Manon Gropius (1916–35), Tochter von Gustav Mahlers Witwe Alma und Walter Gropius. Ihre Trauerfeier ist der Gegenstand vom Kapitel *Begräbnis eines Engels* im dritten Band von Elias Canettis Autobiographie *Das Augenspiel*. Die Bildhauerin Anna Mahler (1904–1988), die in Veza Canettis Erzählung *Der Tiger* aus ihrem Roman *Die gelbe Strasse* porträtiert wird, war ihre Halbschwester.
- 11 Elias Canettis Begegnung mit Joyce in Zürich wird im Kapitel *Joyce ohne Spiegel* in *Das Augenspiel* wiedererzählt.