

## An Afternoon with Carmen Francesca Banciu

by  
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Sitting comfortably on caramel colored leather couch in her Berlin Mitte high-rise on a hot and lazy July afternoon, Carmen Francesca Banciu speaks candidly of her fondness for Berlin, the city she has made her home since late 1990. When asked to pinpoint what it is about Berlin that is so special to her, she cites her friends, the vibrant cultural scene but most of all the fact that she is living in a place that she finds geopolitically fascinating. For Banciu, Berlin represents for her a bridge between East and West and more than just that it is a place that is ever-evolving and continuously reinventing itself. Intermittently, she excuses herself to check on the giggles coming from the kitchen where her children Cantimier (20) and Meda (15) are doing their homework and to make sure her frisky cats, Juri and Pablo, are not wreaking too much havoc.

Before sitting down again, she reaches over to give me a bowl filled with sweet, ripe yellow and red peaches and our conversation resumes. We touch on a number of interesting and unrelated topics: Romania, immigration, language, xenophobia, censorship and domestic responsibilities—Banciu is the sole breadwinner and the one primarily in charge of domestic duties in her household. Having made my nervousness about the time obvious—trying to discreet about glancing at my notes and my watch, Banciu gently reassured me that no clock-watching was required—she had nothing planned for the rest of the afternoon. And so we both sat back and allowed the conversation to grow and unravel at a natural pace and picked up a number of interesting and impromptu topics and family anecdotes along the way. For instance, I learned how the boisterous Pablo, her formerly vagrant cat got his name. Pablo was brought home by Meda, the youngest of the Banciu children on the 25<sup>th</sup> of October, Banciu's birthday, and that of Picasso as well. The children found the intersection of dates and fates only fitting—not to mention an apt palliative for Banciu who was initially leery about adopting yet another pet at first, that the proud cat bear the name of the great painter.

If you buy into the notion at all that the outer is a manifestation of the inner, then Banciu's warm and jovial surroundings clearly suggest that she enjoys a sense of rooted contentment in Berlin. But you don't need to dig very deeply to figure that out, Banciu is very open and clear about how she feels about living in Berlin. The radiance and *joie de vivre* that she exudes and the animated way in which she speaks about her life in Berlin clears up any doubt whatsoever on the topic. And if you're still not convinced about that, her latest book says it best.

Berlin is the subject of her latest novel, *Berlin ist mein Paris (Berlin Is My Paris)* published by Ullstein Verlag in early 2002. It is a collection of personal anecdotes, vignettes and short stories that hone in on her impressions and experiences of Berlin. Light-hearted and poetic, the title of this work reflects an important turn in Banciu's biography: Despite her original plan to move to Paris, the natural destination of generations of budding artists, she decided to remain in Berlin, the first city she traveled to after the collapse of the Communist Block. Her choice, Banciu claims, is greatly due to her appreciation of Berlin's strategic geopolitical placement—a crossroads between East and West, a European city par excellence. She relates that her attraction to this knot between East and West also explains her choice of writing places. She writes regularly in Caffè Sale e Tabacchi, a sleek and eclectically decorated Italian Restaurant located near Check Point Charlie—the old border control between East and West Berlin. In such a place, Banciu claims, stories write themselves.

Carmen Francesca Banciu was born on October 25<sup>th</sup>, 1955 in Lipova, Romania. She lived in Gutenbrun Lipova, Timisora and Arad. After completing her secondary school degree in Arad in 1980, she studied church painting and international trade. Banciu began writing at a very young age. As a child and a teenager she wrote mainly for herself and did not even contemplate becoming a writer. In her early twenties, she began taking her writing more and more seriously. In 1982, she won the Literature Prize of the Luceafărul magazine in Bucharest. In 1984, she won the Manual de Intrebări for a work in prose. In 1985, she won the International Short Story Prize of the city of Arnsberg in Germany for her short story on *Das strahlende Ghetto (The Sparkling Ghetto)*. This achievement prompted a publication ban in Romania. In Germany she published *Fenster in Flammen (Windows in Flames)* (1992) a collection of short stories with political content, *Filuteks Handbuch der Fragen (Filutek's Handbook of Questions)* (1995) in 1998

*Carmen Francesca Banciu*

*Vaterflucht (Flight from Father)*, in 2000 *Ein Land voller Helden (A Country Full of Heroes)* and most recently *Berlin ist mein Paris (Berlin is My Paris)*.

Carmen Francesca Banciu continues to live and write in Berlin with her three children Marijuana (21), Cantemir (20) and Meda (15) and her cats Juri and Pablo. In addition to writing, she also works as a free-lance editor and commentator for various news media and teaches a number of seminars on creative writing throughout the year in different European cities.

*Vaterflucht (Flight from Father)* Banciu's autobiographical novel appeared in the spring of 1998. It was the first novelistic debut in the German language. Here the narrator comes to terms with her painful and conflict-ridden childhood. The first person narrator recounts growing up in an oppressive state that constantly played an intrusive role in her life and her personal struggle for individuality and self-expression against the pressures of being a daughter of a Communist party functionary, strict and uncompromising in his adherence to the party line, and an exemplary self-abnegating Communist woman. In a tone that is not the least bit sentimental, Banciu soberly and sometimes bitterly exposes the self-denial and emotional estrangement that the keen desires for self-expression and individuality in this type of society can entail. This is also evident from the Banciu's style. Sentences and verb phrases are clipped ending abruptly and at times seemingly arbitrarily. A cursory look at her writing gives the impression that punctuation is haphazard, but further reading gives way to the fact that combined with the repetition and brief and sober commentary that is slipped in, it has a highly subversive quality.

*Vaterflucht* has received enthusiastic critical acclaim in Germany and excerpts from the novel have appeared in *Les Temps Modernes* in France. A Romanian translation of the work has not yet been carried out, but Banciu has given readings of it in Romania.

My English translation of the first few chapters of *Vaterflucht (Flight from Father)* are presented here as well as an interview I conducted with Carmen Francesca Banciu on writing, Romania and Berlin.