

INDIGO

BY CLEMENS J. SETZ

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1. The Nature of Distance

On June 21, 1919, the scuttling of the German Imperial High Seas Fleet took place at the British naval base Scapa Flow near the Scottish coast. The Treaty of Versailles, signed by Germany shortly beforehand, provided not only for the return of the skull of Chief Mkwawa to the British government, but also for the immediate surrender of all ships. But German Admiral Ludwig von Reuter chose to sink his ships rather than relinquish them to the British, whom he regarded as an uncultivated people. The warships have remained ever since on the sea floor at a depth of about one hundred and fifty feet. And that's fortunate for modern space travel, as high-grade steel salvaged on diving expeditions from the wrecks of these warships – which have meanwhile been underwater for almost a hundred years – is used in the manufacture of satellites, Geiger counters and full-body scanners at airport security checkpoints. The rest of the steel in the world is – after Hiroshima, Chernobyl and the numerous atomic bomb tests carried out in the earth's atmosphere – too radioactive to be used in the production of such highly sensitive instruments. Sufficiently uncontaminated steel is available only in Scapa Flow, at a depth of one hundred and fifty feet.

With this story begins the remarkable book *The Nature of Distance*, published in 2004, by the child psychologist and education theorist Monika Häusler-Zinnbret. On a Saturday in the summer of 2006 I visited her in her apartment in Graz's Geidorf district with its abundant villas. At that time I had already broken off my six-month internship as a mathematics tutor at the Helianau Institute. The head of the institute, Dr. Rudolph, had warned me never again to set foot on the premises.

I sought out Frau Häusler-Zinnbret to ask her under what conditions, in her view, Indigo children live in Austria today, two years after the appearance of her influential book, which strikes hopeful notes in its opening lines. And whether she knew what the so-called "relocations" I had often witnessed uncomprehendingly during my internship were all about.

On the old front door with the three doorbells an ornamental knocker was also mounted, which looked as if it might once have been real – but then, on a hot day, it had simply fused with the darkly painted wood of the door and turned into an ear-shaped adornment above the heavy cast-iron handle. Next to the unusually magnificent house, in the little garden enclosed by a brass fence and a hedge veiled by many spider webs, stood a few quiet birches, aquatic-seeming and practically silver, and in front of a ground-level window I spotted a single sunflower, straining its head attentively upward as if listening to soft music, because it felt the morning sun already coming around the next corner. It was a warm day, shortly before ten. The door was open. In the stairwell it was cool, and there was a faint smell of damp stone and old potatoes in the air.

A month or two earlier, I wouldn't have noticed any of that.

Before I went upstairs to the practice, I checked my pulse. It was normal.

Frau Häusler-Zinnbret kept me waiting for a long time outside her door. I had pushed the doorbell – under which her two last names were inscribed, linked by a wavy ≈ instead of by a hyphen – several times, and, as so often in my life, marveled at the fact that female psychologists and education theorists always have double names. I heard her walking around in her apartment and moving furniture or other larger objects. When I at one point thought I detected her footsteps very close to the door, I rang again, in the hope of finally catching her attention. But the footsteps receded, and I stood in the stairwell and didn't know whether to go home.

I gave it another try and knocked.

A door behind me opened.

– Herr Setz?

I turned around and saw a woman's head looking out through the crack of the door.

– Yes, I said. Frau Häusler?

– Please come in. I'm in a...well, a transitional phase at the moment, as it were, please excuse the disorder...yeah...

Impressed and intimidated by the fact that her apartment apparently extended over the entire floor, I stopped right on the other side of the doorway and was only reminded by a clothes hanger that Frau Häusler-Zinnbret was holding out in front of my chest to take off my coat and shoes.

Frau Häusler-Zinnbret's physical appearance was impressive. She was fifty-six, but her face looked youthful, she was tall and slim and wore her hair in a long braid down

her back. Apart from her black boots, she was rather casually dressed that day, a knitted vest hung over her shoulders. When she spoke, she mostly looked over her glasses, only when she read something did she push them up a bit.

She led me into her office, one of three, she told me. Here she usually received her visitors – from all over the world, she added, and then flipped a switch on the wall that first lowered the blinds a bit and then raised them; a strangely hypnotic process, as if the room were blinking in slow motion. The morning sun entered the room. A sunbeam shining like cellophane crept across the floor, bent at the wall and ran up to a large-scale abstract painting in which round forms vied with angular ones.

– Oh dear, said the child psychologist. Did you hurt yourself?

– Yes, I said. A little accident. But nothing serious.

– Nothing serious, Frau Häusler-Zinnbret repeated with a nod, as if she had heard that excuse many times before. Tea? Or maybe coffee?

– Just tap water, please.

– Tap water? she asked, smiling to herself. Hm...

She brought me a glass that tasted strongly of dishwashing detergent, but I was nonetheless glad to have something to drink, for the walk from my apartment near Lendplatz to Frau Häusler-Zinnbret's had made me tired and thirsty. The night before someone had dismantled my bicycle into its component parts. They had been left neatly in the garden that morning, the wheels, the frame, the handlebars, in an arrangement roughly corresponding to a quincunx pattern.

– So you're doing research for a book, is that right? she asked, when we had sat down at a small glass table.

Frau Häusler-Zinnbret took a fan out of a box that looked like an enlarged cigarette pack and unfolded it. She offered one to me too, but I declined.

– I don't know yet what it's going to be, I said. More of an article.

– The dark life of the I-kids, said Frau Häusler-Zinnbret, tapping with her forefinger a little *uh-huh* on the table. I nodded.

– And why that?

– Well, I said, the subject is, I mean, it's sort of in the air, so to speak...

The psychologist made a strange gesture as if she were waving a fly away from her face.

– Until recently you were still at the institute? she asked.

– Yes.

– You know, I'm acquainted with Dr. Rudolph, she said, fanning herself.

– I understand.

I was about to get up.

– No, said Frau Häusler-Zinnbret. Don't worry. I'm not one of his...Please, stay seated. Dr. Rudolph...I'd like to know what sort of impression he made on you, Herr Seitz.

Sounds of people on the stairs, an itch on the fraying seams of my scalp, a loose shoelace...

– A difficult person, I finally said.

– A fanatic.

– Yes, maybe.

– Did you live there, I mean, on the premises? Near the...

– No, I commuted.

– Commuted.

– Yes.

– Mhm, said Frau Häusler-Zinnbret. That's better, isn't it? Because of...

There was a pause. Then she said:

– You know, the proximity to the I-children, or what does Dr. Rudolph call it now? Does he even have a name for it?

– No, he prefers –

– Oh, that damn idiot, Frau Häusler-Zinnbret said with a laugh, and then she added: Sorry. What was I saying? Oh yes, the proximity to the Dingos can change people. I mean, not only physically...but also their world-view. Does he still do those...those baths?

I was so astonished to hear someone use the word *Dingo* that it took a while before I replied:

– Who?

– Dr. Rudolph.

– Baths? I don't know.

Frau Häusler-Zinnbret briefly pursed her lips, then smiled. The fan took over for her the task of shaking her head in disbelief.

– What baths do you mean? I asked.

– The bath in the crowd, she said.

– I never heard anything about that.

– Dr. Rudolph's personal Kneipp cure. He has the little Dingos surround him and

bears the symptoms. For hours. He swears by it. But you must have seen that...

I shook my head.

– You noticed, though, that he’s a fanatic?

– Yes, I said. I mean, he’s structured his institute according to the mirror principle, that is, the teachers interact with each other no more than the students do. So that they know how the students feel.

– I can imagine one would get pretty lonely, said Frau Häusler-Zinnbret. But one would probably notice a few things too.

Was that a prompt?

– Yes, I said, trying not to let my confusion show. You do witness certain things, like, for ex–

– I used to really admire him, Frau Häusler-Zinnbret interrupted me. His work methods. And that absolute mastery of all techniques. He was lightning-quick, you know. Really lightning-quick. A virtuoso. But then I was with him once in one of his Viennese support groups, mainly kids with Down’s syndrome and a few other impairments too were there...Anyway, he played that game with them, musical chairs, but with the same number of chairs as participants. So completely pointless. And he recited some counting rhyme, and the, um...the kids ran in a circle and then, boom! They sat down. And then they looked at each other, as if to say: And what’s the point of this? But Dr. Rudolph’s theory was that no one should be excluded, especially not the slowest kid. No winners, no losers. Well, as I said, a fanatic. He always said there’s no such thing as happy endings, only now and then fair endings.

– Fair endings, I said. Yes, that’s right. He said that a lot.

– A lunatic, said Frau Häusler-Zinnbret.

The fan in her hand moved in agreement.

– He made it unambiguously clear to me, I said, that I'm no longer welcome at the institute.

– Aha, she said, and paused.

I felt the heat rising to my face. I took a sip of water and tried to undo the top button of my shirt. But it was already open.

– To come back to your actual question, said Frau Häusler-Zinnbret. It's been a while since I've dealt directly with a Di...with one of those poor creatures. They are, thank God, rare...still relatively rare, yes...But that's not to say I don't remember well. You do have to ask me concrete questions, however, Herr Seitz, or else I can't tell you anything.

–Of course.

I took my notepad out of my pocket.

I had jotted down three questions. More hadn't occurred to me. I would like to claim that I knew from experience that you always learn more in an informal conversation than in a classic interview with prepared questions – but I had no experience at all.

– Yes, well, my first question would be...When did you first begin working with Indigo children?

It was apparent that Frau Häusler-Zinnbret was prepared for that question. She had undoubtedly been asked it hundreds of times, and in her look was a reproach: *You could have looked that up in other interviews with me, young man.* I took a sip of

dishwashing detergent water and put my pen to the notepad, ready to take down all that might come.

– Well, she said, starting when the problem first became acute, of course. That was around '95 or early '96, when the first reports came out. You had already been born then, right? And as is always the case with things like that, there was all manner of uninformed chatter and journalistic chaos that relatively quickly became intolerable, at least to me and some others...and that's when I decided to do something. To shed some light on the matter.

I had taken notes. On the pad was written: PROB. ACUTE 95/96, THEN ☒ CHATTER.
→ DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT.

– Can you really read that later? Sorry I'm peeking...

From this or that word choice or foreign-sounding syllable, Frau Häusler-Zinnbret's German background could be heard. She was from Goslar, but had already lived in Austria for more than thirty years.

– It's my cipher, I said. I always write in block letters.

– Is that so? And why? Isn't cursive simpler for quick note taking?

– No, not for me. I've never been able to get used to it.

– Interesting.

Her nod was unmistakably that of a child psychologist, as if she had given up her original nod like a hard-to-understand dialect only late in life, perhaps during her studies, and had been working ever since on this new nod. And her forefinger again tapped *uh-huh*. No doubt she already had a name handy for this disorder, a particular form of dysgraphia, an antipathy to the continuous line, the child who would rather play with

alphabet soup than with spaghetti...

– And you can reconstruct the conversation on the basis of those notes?

– Yes, it's like instant coffee, you take the powder, and then all you have to do is add some hot water and...

I broke off, because the comparison had failed.

– Um, Frau Häusler, I said. You mentioned that the *problem* first arose at that time. So was it perceived that way? As a problem?

– Well...Certainly, what do you think? People were getting sick by the dozen, and didn't know why. Mothers vomiting over their baby's cradle. A big mess. Dizziness, diarrhea, rashes, down to permanent damage of all internal organs, those are serious symptoms, after all, which can't always be explained psychosomatically. Understandable that panic sets in, isn't it?

I nodded. DIZZIN., DIARR., RASHES, DAMAGE √ ORGANS.

– And then the first voices piped up: Yes, the symptoms always occur only when I'm at home, only near my children and so on.

When Frau Häusler-Zinnbret imitated those voices, she used a heavily exaggerated Austrian intonation. I had to laugh.

– But that's exactly how it was, she said. You definitely wouldn't have laughed if you'd been there. It was eerie.

– Yeah, I can imagine.

– And the people's hysteria. The way they walked around in the children's rooms with their Geiger counters and tore up the floorboards and inspected everything, really everything, but there was nothing. Nothing.

∇ INSPECTED APARTMENTS: RES. = ∅

– Except...

– Well, that last step was one nobody wanted to take, of course. People always forget: When they had to give the disease a name, they at first named it after the first child that had been demonstrably afflicted with it. Beringer disease...But the name disappeared again very quickly from the medical literature, it never even reached collective consciousness. Then they called it Rochester syndrome or Rochester disease, those unimaginative cowards...but that didn't catch on either, thank God. The objection was that such a name was discriminatory, like the first name for AIDS. Do you know what AIDS was called in the early eighties?

– No.

– GRID. Gay-Related Immune Deficiency. Of course, no one remembers that now. They're forgotten very quickly, such names. Indigo, the name ultimately took root, strangely enough, even though it's definitely the most ridiculous one of all. Totally absurd. Borrowed from some esoteric self-help books. The kids aren't blue, after all, and neither are the people who fall ill.

There was a brief pause, as I couldn't take notes quickly enough.

– And when did you first work with one of those children? How did that come about?

– Hm. At the time, I wasn't really interested in such family-encompassing problems, though that might sound narrow-minded today. But back then, I mean, the late nineties, they were, so to speak, the second seventies for developmental psychology. It was a crazy time.

NO FAM.-ENCOMP. PROBL., NARROW-MINDED, 90s=70s, CRAZY *t*

– But of course, Frau Häusler-Zinnbret went on, of course you often can't just discount all that, I mean, that whole complex, school, home life, temperament, learning environment, natural ability, how does a kid turn out who has certain difficulties in school, perhaps hemmed in by their personal environment and so on. In any case, I realized more and more clearly that I...Well, it would be best to give you an example, okay? I enter a room, and some opera is blaring at full blast from a stereo system, that alone is already really strange, and the family's also completely hysterical, in tears, and I see the baby in its crib and, my God, that was a sight, all right, that completely helpless little face. Honestly and sincerely at a loss, and only two years old. But already at its wit's end, so to speak.

I just nodded.

– And that time wasn't yet as hysterical as today. Back then you were still allowed to ask someone who was clutching his temples whether he had a headache. But nowadays, ugh! Impossible. Because right behind him there might...oh, what a misery...

She laughed. And added:

– You know exactly what I mean, right?

I nodded uncertainly.

– How often have you made such a faux pas?

– A few times.

– Dr. Rudolph, Frau Häusler-Zinnbret said, shaking her head. I bet he even teaches his dog...oh, never mind. It has no effect at all on animals, of course, apart from a few exceptions. Those cases are very rare, thank God. And they might even be

completely normal statistical deviations. A monkey in a research institute, for example, it was, wait, I'll quickly look it up...

She stood up and went to her bookcase.

– I'll show you the picture, she murmured.

When she had found it, she held the open book toward me. The picture showed a monkey in a box. The face contorted with pain. I turned away, held a hand out defensively and said:

– No, thank you, please don't.

She looked at me in surprise. Her right shoe made a little turn. Then I heard the book snap shut.

– What? You'd prefer if I didn't show you the picture, or –

– Yes, I said. I can't stand things like that.

– But you have to know what it looks like, if you're interested in these issues. It's not that bad, wait...

I held on to the seat of my chair. Julia had advised me in moments of sudden fear to focus all my attention on something from the past. As always, the white flight of steps came to my mind. Cloudless sky. Venus visible in broad daylight.

– Open your eyes, Frau Häusler-Zinnbret said gently. Everything is okay.

– I'm sorry, I said. I react really badly to things like that. Animals and such. When they...you know. It's a phobia of mine, so to speak.

A brief pause. Then she said:

– Phobia. I don't know whether that's the right word, Herr Setz. Are you sure you don't want to see the picture of the monkey? Shall I describe it for you, perhaps? The

apparatus? Would that help?

– No, please...

I had to lean forward to breathe better.

– My goodness, said Frau Häusler-Zinnbret. No, then of course I won't bother you with that.

– Thank you, I said.

My face was hot, and I felt as if I were looking through a fish tank.

– Have you ever been in treatment for that? she asked in the kindest tone I had heard her use up to that point. I could recommend someone, if you...

– No, thank you.

– Really? I do think you should face up to it. Writing exercises, for example. Attempts to visualize what frightens you.

– I-in your book, I said, you compare...well...in the very beginning...you write that the children are like that sunken steel in...

A somewhat longer pause. I made an apologetic gesture.

– Yes, well, said Frau Häusler-Zinnbret, you must have read the old edition. I actually thought as much. But that doesn't matter, the mistake can easily be remedied.

She stood up and went to a shelf, took out a book and brought it to me. When I opened it, I saw that the preface had been replaced by a new, much shorter one. In lieu of the removed text there was now a black-and-white picture of a baby in a crib. The baby, about two or three years old, stood upright and held on to the wooden bars with one hand. It was crying, but the face didn't look distraught, more curious and relieved, as if the person the baby had long been yearning for had finally come into the room.

– I took the picture, said Frau Häusler-Zinnbret. With a telephoto lens.

As she brought the picture closer to my face, she laid a hand on my back.