

ANITA DESAI

Note: Award-winning author (Literary Lion award; Hadassah prize), Anita Desai elected to do a reading from her novel *Baumgartner's Bombay*. The novel is about a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany who finds sanctuary in urban India. Following the reading, Professor Desai entertained questions from the audience. Her responses follow.

Marvin Brahams: How did you happen to come to pick this theme for your book?

Jean Cooper-Schmitt: It's quite a while since I've read *Baumgartner's Bombay*, but I seem to recall him as a defeated character. As you say, he is passive. As I recall, throughout the book he never seems to make decisions. Events happen to him. That's why he's in Bombay.

Professor Samuel Bernstein: I had a long-running book club in Massachusetts. We tried to select those books that we feel are most interesting, most influential, richest "literarily." I just want you to know that among the books we chose was *Baumgartner's Bombay*. I thank you very much.

Professor Stephen Nathanson: I'd like to relate your scene in which Baumgartner is in the internment camp, because he's German, to the comment made earlier about the roles of Jews in South Africa. One of the problems or issues that's been involved in a lot of [our discussions here] has been the ways in which people are related to the groups that they belong to, or are thought to belong to, and the crudity of a lot of these judgments. I applaud Professor Edmondson for making the point earlier that it would be wrong to think that because Israel – or Israel's government, or parts of Israel's government – had supported apartheid, Jews supported apartheid. It is certainly not true. Yet, inevitably, it seems that we have to treat each other as parts of groups.

I'm struck by your reading of that scene where the government apparatus treats [Baumgartner] as a German without being able to account for the fact that he himself was a victim – a potential victim – and certainly not a representative of German people or Nazi policy.

Anita Desai Responds

Anita Desai: I have often been asked how I came to write the history of a German Jew, [since] my books are almost invariably set in India. I should tell you that I grew up in India as an Indian child speaking German because, although my father was Indian, my mother was German. [So German] was my first language and the language I grew up with. I experienced World War II and whatever happened there through my mother.

All my adult life I was searching for a way to use the German language which I had known as a child. I had an uncomfortable sense that I was suppressing an essential part of myself in writing in the English language. I was always casting around for a theme that would allow me to use the German language. I couldn't find the way to do it in an Indian setting that [wouldn't seem] too bizarre. I suppose that I could have written about my mother's life, but that was far too personal. I didn't think of it in any stage of my writing life.

But later in life – when I lived in Bombay – I did notice a European man in obviously rather shabby conditions going about the streets and feeding cats with scraps taken out of paper bags the way my character Baumgartner does. I never met this man, but I knew people who did know him. Or rather one person who knew him and who piqued my interest by telling me he was not really as poor as he looked, and that he actually owned race horses. You could meet him at the races on any Sunday. It was a curiosity that just interested me.

Soon thereafter I had heard that this gentleman had died – not the way I describe his death in *Baumgartner* at all, but a natural death. But since he had been completely solitary my friend was asked to clear up his effects. He brought me a packet of letters written in German and said, “Could you look through them and let me know if they’re at all important?” So I did look through them and they didn’t seem important to me at all. They were completely innocuous and, apart from expressions of family affection, said very little: “How are you?” “I’m well.” “Are you well?” Nothing much else. I handed them back to my friend and said, “No they are not important.” I had no idea what he did with them.

Later, I was reading a good deal of Holocaust literature and I learned something that I didn’t know. In the earlier years of Nazism, and the earlier years of those concentration camps in Germany, the inmates were allowed to write perhaps one letter a month. There was such a quota and they were allowed to write out of certain camps. These letters would be naturally stamped with the number of the prisoner. It then struck me that each of these letters that I had seen had had a faint faded number stamped on it. There was no way that I could follow up on this gentleman’s history. I began to read and research as much as I could, but by that time there were very few people who remembered the fact that there had been internment camps in India (which was then British territory.) My research led nowhere at all really. So, I had to imagine a history for this man.

I imagined a character called Baumgartner and I imagined what his history might be – what would have brought him to India – and what would have been this man whom I had seen feeding the cats.

You remarked about his being so passive a character. Yes, I did mean him to be an entirely passive character. For the whole idea was to show how history sweeps people up and, like a juggernaut, often crushes them under its wheels. I wanted to write about such a person.