

INTERVIEW WITH ALEX HOFMANN, AUTHOR OF MENSCHEN MIT MEER

DECEMBER 18, 2014 CONNY KAUFMANN 2 COMMENTS

It's nearly 9pm when my door bell rings and **Alex Hofmann** stands grinning in my hallway. The author of *Menschen mit Meer* (lit.: *People with Sea*), a book about people with autism that was published by Kleine Wege in 2013, gives me a hug, gets comfy on the couch – and pulls a thermos out of her handbag.

"I totally forgot I'd made tea and I didn't want to let it go to waste," she explains while I go and get mugs and she pulls something else out of her bag.

"There are a few homemade Christmas cookies in this box. Help yourself!"

We talk about this and that; about space and psychology, autism and *Menschen mit Meer*, and our interview is almost an afterthought.

Alex had the idea for her book by chance, while she was sitting at home frustrated about a cancelled party. "I simply had this inspiration, sat down and wrote a five-page synopsis," she explains. She didn't think much more of it at the time. It was only when she read it through again the next morning that she realised what she was holding in her hands.

"I thought this was a twist of fate. I took the document, edited it and sent it off to a publisher," Alex explains. All of this happened on the off chance it might lead to more. Only three weeks later Alex got a call. "A publisher who'd read the synopsis called and wanted to know more. They really wanted to meet me and I said yes." Alex laughs. "But maybe I should have checked on the map where exactly they're located before I agreed to the meeting."

Nevertheless, she made it to publishing house **Kleine Wege** in Nordhausen. "At that time I didn't even have a proper concept yet, but everyone there was impressed." Alex got a publishing contract without having written a single page of her book.

"At that moment I only had a vague idea and didn't know yet what I wanted to get out of it at the end," she says. Not having to decide right away was important to her.

The publishing house Kleine Wege is known for their support of people with autism and special needs. Alex' book, in which she talks about 13 people on the autistic spectrum, fits right in. "People I know published through Kleine Wege as well. They may be small, but they're well known when it comes to autism. I'm really glad it all worked out so well!"

Within *Menschen mit Meer*, Alex describes meeting 13 autistic people in Germany and Austria. To find these 13 people, she posted descriptions of her project in forums and mailing-lists of autism societies, but she also approached five people directly. "Over 40 people got back to me, that was exciting. They all got a short questionnaire about their profile from me, so I could get a sense of who they are." In her book, she says she was looking for people with autism, but instead found people. Because "life is like the sea, no wave is ever like the next."

Some answered, some didn't, and at the end Alex had 13 willing participants who corresponded with her for over a year.

"It's really important to me, especially when dealing with autistic people, to know who you're dealing with." Alex explains she met all 13 of them; travelled across Germany and Austria to spend time with them. "Because I knew their profiles beforehand, I could concentrate on their person. Their expressions, their gestures. I could observe and I deliberately didn't take notes during the meetings so I wouldn't confuse them."

Take Sepia for example, whom Alex visited in Salzburg. "In the forum, he only answered with Yes or No and I only had a very basic profile for him. I thought he'd lost interest. Then he started to push the issue himself, kept asking 'When are you coming?'," Alex describes. So she travelled to Austria because she didn't have anything to lose. "We didn't talk much, but I could perceive so much about him."



Author Alex Hofmann with her book Menschen mit Meer. Photo: Cornelia Kaufmann

Alex wrote her book in China. In 2011 she studied there and spent two months working for Stars & Rain in Beijing, the only organisation in the entire country to support autistic children.

"The format of the book was clear to me from the start, I wanted to dedicate a chapter to each person," she says. Alex leaves her descriptions completely free of diagnosis and criticism. "That was very important to me. I don't pass judgement, that wouldn't be fair. I keep thinking: 'Who am I to judge others?'"

No matter whether it's Asperger Syndrome, early childhood or atypical autism – whether and where a person is on the autistic spectrum doesn't matter to Alex, as every case is different. "I can only describe how I perceive a person, not what they are like. After all, I'm not a psychiatrist and I don't diagnose anyone. I only see the person, no matter what their file says."

One of the people Alex visited described themselves in their profile as shy, quiet and introvert. "When I got there, they talked non-stop. They were so kind, sincere, open-minded that I had to re-read the profile when I got home to compare. In cases like that you can see the difference between perception of self and others."

Before *Menschen mit Meer* was published, Alex sent each of the 13 people their own chapter to read. "They only asked here and there to leave a name out or change something I had misunderstood. Other than that, I only got positive feedback which I am really proud of." The publishers didn't change much of *Menschen mit Meer* around either. "I'm grateful that I can still identify with my project!"

The tea Alex brought along is all gone by this point. While I put the kettle on for another, Alex tells me about her Writer's Workshop, because writing and the topic of autism are close to Alex' heart.

More than two years ago, she founded Writer's Workshop **Der rote Faden** (The red thread), which meets in Solingen and Düsseldorf. While it is mainly for autistic people, Alex welcomes everyone.

"We don't even talk about a diagnosis. When we write, we notice that social differences disappear. There's only text. Everyone is creative."



Menschen mit Meer

Author: Alex Hofmann

Publisher: **Kleine Wege**

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