Chapter Four

Political-self in Two Lives

I could not ask her about her family, her childhood, her schooldays, her work, her friends, the changing atmosphere in Germany during the thirties, her flight to England, her experiences as an immigrant, the war and, in its aftermath, her search for her family. (TL 185)

As an extension of the social-self discussed in the previous chapter, the present chapter deals with the political-self portrayed through German-Jewish character, Helga Gerda Caro. Vikram Seth’s Two Lives is a work centered on questions of expatriate diasporic political identity, not easy either to define generically or to place spatially and culturally within the globalized literary setting of the early twenty-first century. It is a non-fictional narrative, set mostly in Germany and England. The narration chronicles the lives of two of Seth’s own relatives along with himself across the second two-thirds of the twentieth century. It discusses the complex issues concerning the relationship between the individuals and the socio-political history and also explores the questions of identity and belonging. The self-concept is mostly realized through the prime character, Henny, whose Jewish self is true to the contemporary political Germany. It is obvious that the complications of self-entity are rather politically determined and the self cannot be individualized because in this context Henny is not simply an individual but a type representing collective selves of German-Jews. Hence, Seth’s venture of self-exploration into Henny is both psychological and sociological. This is the character which on the one hand projecting its individual urge to cope with the inner psyche and on the other,
much engaged in the identity politics to rediscover its racial space in the age old
socio-political journey, otherwise called Jews’ diaspora. Her inner self is politics
specific and this chapter specifically traces Henny’s self as shaped by the epoch of the
great war of the world in general, and the war against Jew in Germany in particular.
The other two characters, Shanti and young Seth are viewed as selves within the
political self of Henny.


two lives is really the fusion of at least three separate narratives. This is story
of a love which endured more than five decades. Fitted inside that is a compelling
sketch of life in Nazi Germany and the way the crimes of that regime would
reverberate for years to come. Wrapped around both of these is the writer’s loving –
yet probing – examination of Henny and Shanti as human beings.


two lives presents the intercultural relationships forged in a background of
migration and war. Seth with an acute historical imagination successfully creates a
narrative in which India, Nazi Germany or Third Reich Germany (Nazi Germany and
Thrid Reich Germany are common name for Germany during the period from 1933-
1945), wartime Europe, post-World War II England, and post-colonial India all
enmesh. Vikram Seth, himself a multicultural Indian who has lived in India, Britain,
the United States, and China, narrates the lives of his Indian dentist great-uncle,
Shanti Behari Seth, known as Shanti Uncle and his German Jewish wife, Helga Gerda
Caro, known as Aunty Henny. It crosses over conventionally defined generic
boundaries and deals with the migrant lives and the intercultural relationships forged
between Henny and Shanti, and later Henny and Seth. It clearly depicts the Third
Reich Germany and the Holocaust (the mass murder of Jews under the German Nazi
regime during the period 1941-1945), Jewish migration from Germany to Britain to
escape persecution, and Indian migration in search of further education and professional advancement and the way these elements politically intersect in the lives of Vikram Seth, Shanti, and Henny.

_Two Lives_ is more a book of details than of ideas, though because the sense of the story is so strong it always avoids the trap of familial self-indulgence or nostalgia. Seth did a series of very long interviews with Shanti in the mid-1990s, after Henny died. He also had access to hundreds of letters, including letters exchanged between Shanti and Henny, Shanti and the Seth family back in India, as well as between Henny and her family and friends in Germany. There are, of course, some exceptional synthetic passages, as well as some interesting comments by Seth on his method. The book spans the twentieth century and is a work about levels of diasporic experience and dislocations: the effect of war on Henny and Shanti.

It is biographical in tone, recollected from the narrator’s memory domain but it attempts to draw together many conflicting aspects and apparently disjointed fragments of their life into a resemblance of a story. It is hard to do write like this without an intimate access to the person. Vikram Seth, in _Two Lives_, has such access to not one but two people.

The narrator has been politically driven to view Hennerle Caro (Henny) as a German-Jewish refugee from the Nazis. A refugee is always identified with the concept of political-self. _Two Lives_ recounts the true histories of such politically emerged individuals - at first parallel, later intertwined - of Vikram Seth’s great-uncle Shanti (1908-1998) and his German-Jewish wife Henny (1908-1989).
Two Lives is also a book about borders, boundaries, the closing of borders, and the crossing into new borders to forge lives in new places. The sharpest separating border for the Jewish-German and Indian protagonists, who had both claimed Germany either as home or as place of study and acculturation is that between Nazi Germany and the rest of Europe. Shanti inhabits a border region of the mind, in which India, England, and Germany are contiguous; Henny, equally, inhabits two parallel lives, one in England and another in close contact with her former German friends, many of whom are now members of the German diaspora in North and South America. The patterns of emigration (India-Germany-Britain, Third Reich Germany-Britain), and powerful bonds between human beings across races, generations, and religions are clearly presented by the author. Shanti was the brother of Seth’s maternal grandfather, who belonged to the clan of the Seths of Biswan. Two lives talks about many factual matters of history and biography, without losing personal touch.

It was the inspiration by his mother Seth took into writing Two Lives. At that time Shanti was eighty-five years old and very frail. He also gives the picture about how it evolved:

Mama said, turning to me, ‘You don’t know what exactly to write about next. Why don’t you write about him?’ My reaction was not eager. ‘I don’t know if I want to write about someone so close to me,’ I said. ‘And even if I thought it was a good idea, I don’t think Uncle would agree to it.’ ‘Why not ask him?’ said Mama. ‘You won’t know what he thinks unless you do.’ (TL 50)

Seth decides to take up this work after thinking it over for a few days. He also decides to do it at once and delaying may not make the project a success. He thinks, “Uncle had had an interesting life, and when he died his story would die with him. If I
were to explore it, it would have to be soon, while he still had a little energy and was clear in his mind. I asked Mama to put the question to him. She told me a few days later that she’d spoken to him, and he had been pleased – in fact, enthusiastic” (50-51).

Vikram Seth expresses his happiness for undertaking this valuable project. He carries out eleven long interviews between June and October 1994, for about five months. Shanti Uncle felt very happy in remembering his past when the present seemed so empty. It also made him weep at times when he remembered Aunty Henny, who left him four years ago. This book in one way is a book of recollected memory that evolves the political-self in the individuals.

The textual analysis explains how Henny’s migration begins and how she as a Jewish lady gets into political-self of Jewish diaspora, which provides a model for all such writings on migration in this post-colonial world. Henny Caro is basically a Jew belonging to Germany. Having grown up and lived in Germany as a German citizen, she has been forced to flee the country when things were not in favour of the Jewish community because of the political situations. And she moves to England. Because of being a Jew, her own country is disenfranchising not only her but the whole lot of Jews. The rise of Nazi makes the life of Jews miserable. Henny’s family was Jewish. But as Hitler’s power rose their lives were gradually crushed. The Caros fall prey to this act of the Nazis as they were Jews. They were not spared. They were to survive in conditions of increasing misery and oppression. Their things were robbed. They had to struggle a lot and were finding it hard even for getting their food. They found themselves increasingly isolated from the mainstream of German society. Though she wanted to go to the University, owing to her father’s cardiac illness, she had to do a
secretarial course and find work. Thus, she like her sister, Lola, finds a job at the Mannheimer Life Insurance Company. She becomes the private secretary of Franz Mahnert, who is one of the directors. He grows very fond of her as she is a Jew. He has sympathy towards Jews as his wife is a Jew. His son Hans Mahnert too starts courting her. Hans because of his half breed nature is called a ‘Mischling’. It is with the help of Franz Mahnert she manages to escape. He helps her for her emigration to England where he makes arrangement for her stay and for livelihood with the Arberrys, who were his distant relations. He is the same Arthur J. Arberry whose famous translation of the Quran remains a seminal text in Islamic Studies. Her brother Heinz Caro, some-how makes his emigration to South America. At that time, Jews in large numbers get migrated to America. It is Americans who supported the Jews than any other country. For Jews migration is inevitable. Her mother, Mrs. Gabriele Caro or Ella as she is commonly known as and her sister, Lola Caro were, tragically, to remain in Germany for the remainder of their lives as credible sponsorship has to be provided to the Home Office for getting permission for immigration. Shanti could not help them though he wished to help. Henny survived and escaped the Holocaust. Her mother and sister became victims of this Holocaust, who succumbed at Auschwitz. Unlike her, they were unable to get out of Germany in time.

On a visit from India, in helping to clean out the attic after Aunt Henny’s death, Vikram Seth’s father found a trunk ‘untouched for decades’, in the attic belonging to Aunt Henny. Seth says, “It contained a trove” (186). Seth expresses his views for calling it so. But for this treasure Two Lives would not have been a complete one. He calls it a fortune: “As a result, this book would have been mainly about Shanti Uncle. I could not justify have called it Two Lives unless her voice
played a role as strong as Uncle’s. And, had it not been for a fortuitous discovery long after her death in the attic of their house, hers would have been a supporting role” (186). He says he knows nothing about the life of Aunt Henny and there is no way to find out as she was already dead. Uncle Shanti had already destroyed all such items that reminded him of her. “I could not ask her about her family, her childhood, her schooldays, her work, her friends, the changing atmosphere in Germany during the thirties, her flight to England, her experiences as an immigrant, the war and, in its aftermath, her search for her family” (185). Seth finds the trunk full to the brim with correspondences, documents, and a few books:

The few books in German that Henny must have brought with her on an exile to England are a small atlas, a couple of textbooks for learning English, a small volume of folksongs set to music for the lute, and three large, slim paperbacks illustrated with full-page black-and-white photographs: on modern German sculpture, on German baroque architecture and on the German countryside in the spring. Five other books were in the trunk, but they have different provenances. One of them (in English) was published by Chatto & Windus in 1941: *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* translated by Edward FitzGerald. Two of them appear to be gifts given after the war: the poems of Michelangelo translated into German by Rilke, and a book on Durer. The final two, and for me the puzzling ones, are two hardbound books in black: a Jewish bible in German and a Jewish prayer-book, in German and Hebrew. (189)

*The Bible* has the notation ‘Adolf Berliner 1912’ handwritten on it. Adolf Berliner is the one under whom she worked in Berlin before her immigration to London. He is
now known as A.G. Belvin. Henny treats him as her best friend and confidant and discusses with him before taking any decisions on her own.

Shanti knew nothing about the trunk and its contents. Most of the correspondences belonged to the years covering almost exactly the decade of the forties. Most of the correspondences were among her friends in Berlin after the World War II. Through them Hennerle Caro was trying to find out about the fate of her mother and sister who had stayed behind in Berlin. Most of them were from Christian friends in Berlin consoling her on her loss and providing the information that they had gathered about the last days of Hennerle’s mother and sister. She learned that though they lived together, were separated at death. Her elderly mother was deported to Theresienstadt, her sister to Birkenau for extermination.

Letters or correspondences play an important role to substantiate Seth’s memory. They provided him the ample image about Henny and her life. He says, “Neither he nor I could have anticipated just how rich the material was, so rich in fact that it provided me with an image of Aunty Henny at least as acute as that of Shanti Uncle’” (187). These letters help to explore the lives of ordinary people caught up in the events during the period of great historical consequence in Germany. These papers – printed, typed, handwritten, photographic helped Seth in creating an image of the character of Aunty Henny. These papers also act as a medium to explore how her individual-self emerges as a political-self. Henny frequently made carbon copies of her responses, so her voice can be heard, as she conveys her anger and bitterness at the fate of her family. The agony and anxiety of Henny in finding out about her family can be seen through these papers. Most of her letters are her inquiries to friends whom she trusts about and friends who were trying to re-establish contact with
her. She wanted to know exactly how they had behaved during the war, how they escaped from that situation, what groups they had joined, who they had associated themselves with. She is bitter about those who wrote to console her after she finds out from others that some of them stayed away from visiting her mother and sister even though many of them had known both her mother and sister well. Others had put themselves at risk by visiting them and helping them out with food and other basic needs, before they were deported.

Henny was an heir to her mother’s, her sister’s and her two maiden aunts’ estates. Henny’s closest Christian friend who still lived in Berlin offered to help her with claims against the German government to facilitate compensation for both ‘damage to career’ and all confiscated property of her aunts and her mother. The letters back and forth between Henny, her friend, the German government and the American government (because she suspected her wealthy aunts had sent money to American banks) reveal the callousness on the part of the bureaucracy in both governments that still outrages so many years later. The reply received for ‘damage to career’ by the German Government is quoted here: “We regret to inform you that we no longer possess the documents that would cover the question of the grounds on which the dismissal of Frau Seth ensued” (406).

As Seth excavates the aloof and the enigmatic life of Henny, the horror and trauma of history is unfolded. Henny’s letters reveal a world of pain, as she has written to her friends in Germany trying to reconstruct events. She has an inevitable hatred towards Nazis as her letter to Mr. Mahnert, dated 18th July 1946, exposes:
You can well imagine my feelings when I saw the 2 post cards written by mother and sister which they had sent from the Concentration Camps. I could only recognise their signatures and from the way they wrote these few lines I could see misery, pain and suffering they must have undergone. It is true that all of us have to die one day, whether we are rich or poor and irrespect of religion or thought... but to die of an unnatural and beauty death as it has been the case with them I can find no solace and peace. You can understand that I hate each and every German who has been connected with the Nazi Ideology. This naturally does not hold good for the people like you who, I know, have always been against the beastly Nazi Regime from the very first day. I know, that some of my old friends changed with the time as the tide changes with the moon and you cannot blame me if I despise such people. I know ‘to err is human, to forgive divine’, but the way the Nazis have erred is inhuman and can never be forgiven and, I hope, never be forgotten. It is only at the time of adversity that one recognises one’s friend, but unfortunately only very few people come through this acid test. (315)

Let alone Henny, no human on earth will ever forgive the acts of the Nazis. These letters provide a political stand of Henny as a Jew rather than as a German. She helps the Jews in all possible ways to get them rehabilitated after the war. The letters also reveal the pathetic condition of Jews, in the post war Germany. A letter by Mahnert expressing his gratitude and pitiable state to Henny, written in August 1947 is heartening:

Your little parcel was handed to me on the 29th ult. and was a relief: I would have had to use twine for my boots, had you not been so kind to send me
laces. Many thanks also for the other things . . . . When you have some time to spare please let us know a little about yourself. Are you accustomed to the climate there and to the people? We are glad to know you have a good and reliable friend there in the person of Dr. Seth [Shanti]. He IS a good fellow! — It is not nice, to think that we shall very probably never meet again. Well, we have after all nice souvenirs, — we have lived during a time which the present youth will never see, I suppose, here in Germany. You can hardly form an idea as to how things are here, all people thin and haggard and in fear of the coming winter, without coal (or with a ridiculous small quantity thereof) and, for the greatest part, without window glass! — But never trouble the trouble until the trouble troubles you. . . . You were kind enough to ask me in your letter what we needed here. If I am not abusing you kindness, I would say that Mrs. V. Gliszczynski would thank you very much if you could send her a pair of stockings, used of course, and some underwear (undies) also worn, if you have some. She possesses one single pair of stockings, in an awful state and no means to get any here. — We unhappily lost all and everything by the bombs! (322-323)

This letter of Manhert gives an exact picture of the shattered and ravaged lives of Germans after the war. The pathetic situation is that once a director of a big company even had to starve and struggle hard for fulfilling even the basic needs.

Like her own fractured life, her social circle which comprised both Jews and Christians, was also fractured under the war time pressures and racial hatred. Some friends displayed remarkable courage, supporting her mother and sister Lola to the bitter end. Others, like Hans, slithered away. These letters are fascinating chronicles
of suffering, victimization and loss. They confirm deaths of Henny’s mother and sister and reveal her brother’s looting of family money which otherwise could have saved the mother and the sister. In her letter to Wolffsky her sorrowful feelings are revealed:

I simply cannot grasp that my dear mother and sister have fallen victims to this ruthless murder, and the thought of it lets me find no peace. It is just unimaginable how my loved ones, who had such fine souls and who were so noble in their characters and way of thinking, must have suffered. The ‘thousand year Reich’ will not last, but even after 1000 years Germany’s shame will not be forgotten . . . . (209-209).

Enclosing a copy of the letter of Wolffsky, Henny writes to her friend A.G. Belvin expressing her sorrow:

A few days ago I had a letter from Herr Wolffsky, who worked together with Lola in the Jewish Germeinde, and he gave me Mutti’s (mother) and Lola’s farewell greetings. I am enclosing a copy of his letter. In his letter he included two cards, one from Mutti from Theresienstadt, the other from Lola from Birkenau, and you can imagine how sad, how unendingly sorrowful I am, and I will never get over it. Sometimes I am so overcome that I don’t think I can go on. (253)

In this fusion of public and personal histories Seth diligently offers a critique of history from a historiographer’s point of view. He explores the consequences of the War and Nazi Germany on nuclear research:
it is almost certain that the relevant discoveries would have come about anyway, but not quite so soon. Under the impetus of war and assisted by the exile of German-Jewish scientists, this research was most effectively harnessed by Germany’s most powerful enemy, and the bombs thus produced used against Germany’s not yet defeated erstwhile ally. Thus began the atomic age and, in due course, the nuclear arms race. (342)

Seth analyses the rise and fall of Germany, its effects on the world politics and humanity at large. It teaches a lesson of history about the atrocities of war, the terrible tragedies both caused by and infliction on Germany in the previous century to some extent to avoid them in the present one.

Seth is sincere and overtly respectful of letters from which he quotes too fully. Seth’s foray into the content of these letters leads him to analyse the history of the Second World War. Further there is a marked digression as the writer starts giving critical commentary on the consequences of the War and the current global problems. Along with it he provides imaginative reconstructions of that part of story where he falls short of exact details. He recreates Henny’s sister Lola’s final journey from the collection camp for Auschwitz. Even in this fictionalization of history, as in reproduction of facts and in translation of several letters from German into English, the author is true to history.

Henny’s life is the arduous task of rebuilding a shattered life, with the friendship and, finally, the married companionship of Shanti, who himself heroically overcomes his disability and practises for years as a much-respected dentist. Neither thinks of returning ‘home’, despite Indian independence and West Germany’s rise from the ashes. They resolutely decide and make their life in England.
One of the most interesting aspects of piecing together Henny’s story is in looking at the more subtle ways in which bonds are fractured. Many of Henny’s non-Jewish friends stayed loyal and continued to look after Lola and Ella after she had left Germany and her love and gratitude for that comes through in her letters and the parcels she sent them in the aftermath of the war. However, at least one important friendship, that with Lili Wurth, who had been close to both of the Caro sisters before Hitler’s Chancellorship, was destroyed forever. As far as we can tell, Lili was an apologist for the Nazis, both during the war and afterwards, when her excuses for them were overlaid by a deeply unpleasant sense of victimhood. However, the fact that the rift between them comes to us through a couple of letters means that the details are less than clear. We do not know what pressures Lili was under that might have induced her to behave as she did. But that was not the only ugly truth she discovered. Her German fiancé had left her for a Christian. Her feckless brother had spent money that might have saved her mother and sister. Some German friends had been true but others turned their backs on Lola and her mother. Henny’s refusal to talk about the past to anyone, even Shanti, means that yet again, the writer and the reader are thrown back on educated deduction.

The third part of the memoir takes advantage of a treasure trove: a trunk stored in the attic that contained Henny’s correspondence from the war years and the decade after, including carbon copies of her own sent letters. These notes, sent back and forth to friends in Germany, are incredibly revealing and heartbreaking. Seth tells the story of the growing Nazi threat, the deportation and murder of Henny’s mother and sister, and the misery of the years after the war. The politically constructed self of Henny is reviewed:
The more interesting story, in some ways, is how Henny dealt with her old friends from Berlin after the war. Most, she knew, had been powerless to save her mother and sister, and she was grateful for whatever kindness they had shown. But she refused to reply when Hans sent her flowery poems. And a former acquaintance called Lili was firmly rebuffed for having failed to work against the Nazi system or to express a single word of abhorrence for its crimes. Henny never revisited Germany. Nor, despite her marriage to an Indian, did she visit India. Aside from annual holidays in Switzerland, Hendon remained her only real haven. As Seth’s brother Shantum observes, there she could live a “quiet middle-class life, without having it ripped apart by madmen”. (Blake Morrison)

He talks about Henny’s determination to cut off relationships with friends who collaborated with the Nazis like Lily, and her steadfast support of friends who resisted — at least those who were left alive. This becomes evident from one of her letters, a letter written to Lily:

You demand an honest answer, and I must tell you that the events of these many years have fundamentally reshaped my view of the world. Those people in Germany with whom I remain in contact belong to the category of those who I am 100% convinced worked against the Nazi system, and not those, like you, who only made ‘EXCEPTIONS’ of those in our circle. I must be convinced that those with whom I remain in a relationship of friendship today share my view of the world. I have gone through too much to be able to think differently. (TL 265)
The fate of her former fiancé Hans who married a Christian girl instead of Henny and got himself to safety; the progress of her relationship with Shanti, too can be seen through the correspondences. The letters are fascinating chronicles of the suffering in Germany during and after the war, and also of the way that events tested – and often destroyed – friendship and character. Henny comes alive in these letters, and so do her friends. She writes to Isle about the mutability of people in general and of Hans in particular:

I am very happy to hear from you that Hans has not changed his world-view; I must have misunderstood both a report from an old friend in Berlin and also your first letter. This is worth more to me than anything else, because nothing disappoints and embitters me so much as when people change as suddenly as the weather. I do not resent Hans at all. Everyone is the master of his own fate, and must know what is best for him, and I only hope that he has found a suitable life-companion. Ilselein, all this is absolutely only for you, and I would be grateful if you would confirm that to me, and then we will never speak of it again. (294)

Two Lives is a double edged narrative of the biography of the two lives of Henny and Shanti on one side, on the other an autobiography of the author. Seth’s Two Lives is autobiographical in the sense he himself records about his previous writings as well as what is presently written by him. When he talks about A Suitable Boy he accounts for Mrs. Rupa Mehra’s character as reflecting his own grandmother, ‘Amma’: “Chanda Seth, my maternal grandmother, whom I used to call Amma, was the only grandparent I have known. Mrs. Rupa Mehra, the presiding character in my
novel *A Suitable Boy*, is based on her. Published a few years after her death, it is dedicated not only to my parents but also to her mother” (68).

It becomes as much a commentary on the ethical issues surrounding biography as it is an exemplary act of biographical writing. As every biographer would do Seth too wants his Aunt Henny and Uncle Shanti too to be remembered by everyone. Autobiography or biography is, like history, a documentation of human experiences and so has political motives:

Vikram Seth’s captivating book is the story of a century and of a love affair across a racial divide: *Two Lives* is both a history of a violent country seen through the eyes of two survivors as well as an intimate portrait of their friendship, marriage and abiding yet complex love. Part biography, part memoir, part meditation on our times, this is the true tale of two remarkable lives -- a masterful telling from one of our greatest living writers (Book Browse).

Seth wishes to visit the then Uncle Shanti’s house, before closing this book. He says that the purpose is to close the book from where it has begun. “Before I close this book, I should return to 18 Queens Road. For more than five years, I have had no wish to go back. Now, so that things might come full circle, I will” (*TL* 496).

Thus he visits the house in March 2004. Things have changed a lot. Looking at the house he recollects the glorious memories:

An old man, weeping in a crematorium, consigns his wife to the flames. And I hear her voice saying, in German, ‘Don’t take the black man,’ and, after a while, in English, ‘Cathy, take care of my husband.’ Behind every door on
every ordinary street, in every hut in every ordinary village on this middling
planet of a trivial star, such riches are to be found. The strange journeys we
undertake on our earthly pilgrimage, the joy and suffering we taste or confer,
the chance events that cleave us together or apart, what a complex trace they
leave: so personal as to be almost incommunicable, so fugitive as to be almost
irrevocable. Yet seeing through a glass, however darkly, is to be less blind.
That is what has motivated this effort; that is all I have hoped would result.
These two people whom I loved and who loved me may not, in differing
degrees, have wanted every stroke – sometimes distorted, sometimes over
explicit – of this portrait. But they are dead and past caring; and I want
complexly remembered – in sickness as in health, in weakness as in strength,
in secrecy as in openness. Their lives were cardinal points for me, and guide
me still; I want to mark them true. (498)

When Henny, a fugitive from Hitler’s Germany, reaches London, Shanti, the
only person she knows in England, is there to receive her at Victoria Station. Shanti,
who has returned to England disillusioned, gets enlisted in 1940, and the war duty in
the Army Dental Corps takes him to faraway zones while Henny survives the blitz in
bomb shelters. Until he returns from the war they keep a warm correspondence. After
his return, the one arm dentist struggles to reestablish his dental practice and gradually
a friendship is evolved between these two fractured lives. This unusual pair of exiles
seeks sanctuary in each other and eventually marries after eighteen years of friendship
just to live a childless life at 18 Queens Road, Hendon. It was in this era that Henny
decided to marry Shanti, although Seth never totally unravels the mystery of his
aunt’s feelings for his uncle. Henny after her engagement, writes to Georgia, A. G. Belvin, her confidant in Atlanta, about her confusion in marrying Shanti:

Regarding Shanti, you are right. I am in a dilemma and don’t know what I should do. I like Shanti, I value him, and he is particularly close to me because he is the only one here who knew my loved ones and, I could say, also loved them. That is a great deal, that is indeed a very, very great deal, for no other man can understand me, because he can sympathise so very much less than Shanti with I have inwardly gone through and what will never again be erased. But I must come to a decision soon . . . . Shanti has a good and upright character, and I believe I may say that I also mean something to him. I want to make him happy – he deserves it – even at the risk that I am not 100% happy. But who knows all that in advance? Perhaps I will find happiness in this uncertainty?!” (375)

Being friends for 18 years, and finally they wed, and spent 38 more years together. According to Seth’s parents, ‘they looked so incongruous: he short and compact, she tall and thin in her high heels, towering over him’ and their marriage was ‘more a mutual support system than any great love’ (385). Shanti’s feelings were never in doubt. “We were so integrated,” (47) he mourned when she died in 1989. He lived 10 years without her, in loneliness that was “patent and deep and seemingly incurable,” writes Seth.

Living the greater part of their lives as a couple in Hendon, Henny gives up her job when faced with the prospect of buying and running her own firm. Here, her life follows predictable gendered contours. Yet in other respects Henny remains
intransigently her own person, not trying to engage very much with India or Indian languages. It is, of course, arguable that Shanti too makes no attempt to go back to India, though he engages warmly with members of his family. The couple’s closest friends remain German, and they often speak to each other in German: in this sense, perhaps, it is Shanti who assimilates far more to Henny’s roots and origins, through their shared formative past in Germany. She never wants to go back to Germany. Seth says, “Of those Jews who emigrated to England, some, like Henny, remained there for the rest of their lives – though I was to discover, from correspondence between her and the German authorities in the fifties, that she had at first intended to go on from England to the United States” (353).

However when Seth gets a “trove”, a trunk full of Henny’s letter, her story eclipses the entire book. This discovery dramatically changes the shape of Two Lives because he has primarily aimed to pen the story of Shanti. Seattle Times book critic Michael Upchurch says:

Relying on Henny’s correspondence with her German connections and on Seth family members’ memories, Seth shows us Shanti and Henny from all angles. In the case of Henny’s wartime experience, questions of personal loyalty, fear and forgiveness are raised. We’re left in no doubt of how hard-earned her “optimismus” was, and how her defenses affected even her later marriage to Shanti, to whom she scarcely confided about her losses. (This may, Seth speculates, have been her only way “to create in her marriage a zone where she could be at peace”.)
In *Two Lives*, Henny and Shanti attempt to acculturate in England, the country to which they emigrate. She later married her Indian boarder. Yet both Henny and Shanti continue to speak in German to each other, during their long years of marriage in England. Though migrated to England Henny remains there as German-Jew:

Shaken about the globe, we live our fractured lives. Enticed or fleeing, we reform ourselves, taking on partially the coloration of our new backgrounds. Even our tongues are alienated and rejoined – a multiplicity that creates richness and confusion. Both Shanti and Henny were in the broader sense exiled; each found in their fellow exile a home.

In Shanti’s case, the exile was of his making; not so with Henny, though it could in some strict sense be said that she chose not to return when, once again, it became safe to do so. Increasingly from adolescence onwards she would have sensed that she was set apart from her Christian friends – that her position was precarious, even in the city in which she had been born, in the only streets she had known. (*TL* 403)

Parallel to Henny’s migrated story the life of Shanti begins from India. Failing to get admission in Roorkee Engineering College, Shanti is sent by his family to study dentistry in Berlin, leaves India in the early 1930s. During pre-independent period there was a wide scope for every Indian to go abroad for higher studies. Rich are always affordable and in that period an individual self socially motivated not so politically influenced, migrated from the mother land to the other land. But for Shanti it was his social status that made his migration possible. When he came to Berlin, he
was aware of the political situation in which he himself realized politically constructed racial discrimination.

In Berlin Shanti sublets a room in a flat belonging to the Caros. And he begins his friendship with Henny. Thus he makes the acquaintance of his future spouse. At first Henny strongly objects and tells her mother not to permit Shanti, an Indian:

Shanti discovered more than a year later that when Mrs Caro phoned her younger daughter Henny with the news that they had a lodger, her first reaction had been: ‘Nimm den Schwarzen nicht’ [Don’t take the black man]. This was the beginning of relationship that was to last five and half decades. (81)

The political-self plays a strong role in Henny which creates a strong wall in her, not accepting anyone from other ‘race’. She has a strong feeling and liking for her society in which aliens are not allowed to enter. She is a Jew by birth. “Caros themselves were Jewish. Since the girls had gone to the Furstin Bismarck Gymnasium, there were more Christians than Jews among their friends and acquaintances. Needless to say, the Caros, in that sad phrase, never thought of themselves anything other than Germans” (84).

Thus in the beginning, Shanti faces all the prejudices of Nazi Germany. He is totally new to this place and does not speak or understand a word of German. But Shanti’s charm and intellect carried the day, earning him success at his studies and numerous German friends, including Henny and family. He was not interested in marriage and appealed to his brother to leave him alone. But he had an inclination towards Henny:
It was Henny whom Shanti liked more than anyone else, though Lola seemed to be the more devoted to him. She corrected the draft of his papers, she typed any letters necessary. With her gentleness and quickness, her logicality and linguistic sensitivity, she helped him through difficult times in a subject, language and country, all of which were still foreign to him. (95)

Henny and Shanti first met in 1930s Berlin where Shanti, as a young dental student, found board and lodging at the Caros’ rented flat. Ironically, it was Henny who initially warned her mother, Ella, not to take ‘the black man’. However, Shanti, with his mischievous sense of humour and engaging personality, soon made a place for himself at 16 Mommsenstrasse. Ella and her children, Lola, Henny and Heinz, and their extended circle of friends started liking him. In later years he fondly remembers the picnics and boating trips, intimate Christmas dinners and the general atmosphere of warmth and generosity that characterized his stay in Germany. Shanti cherishes his student days in Berlin and according to him it was the most memorable of his life.

But Henny is courted by Hans Mahnert, son of Herr Mahnert one of the directors of the Mannheimer Life Insurance Company for whom she was the private secretary. Hans used to visit Caros’ regularly. Shanti Uncle presents the joyful days he spent with him:

He was an attractive young man, a student of economics, who spoke excellent French and English. He enjoyed the finer things in life, from pearl tie-pins to ornamental fish, and owned a rowing-boat which he would, on Sunday afternoons in summer, take out on to one of the lakes near Berlin, usually the Sakrower See. In summer, Hans, Henny, Shanti and a few friends would camp
beside the lake; in winter they would go skiing in the Riesengebirge near the Czech border. (82)

His father had pampered him as a result he has become “rather soft, weak-willed and dandified” (83).

Shanti falls in love with Henny but is immediately smitten because she is involved with Hans. Henny’s mother Ella is also not very happy with Hans. Rather she likes Shanti. Ella never allows any outsider into her kitchen. But she treats Shanti not as an outsider but as her family member:

Shanti was permitted to enter the sanctum, but not Hans, whom she told: ‘You have got no business here.’ Ella thought Hans had rather a flaccid character, and was not sure he was good for her daughter. It was accepted, however, that he was Henny’s unofficial fiance and that in due course they would get married . . . . Henny was the livelier and more energetic of the two sisters. She dressed well, laughed readily and made friends easily. Shanti liked her a great deal, but he was a good friend of Hans, and left it at that. (85)

Henny’s mother does not have any hope in Hans. “Henny, besides, had Hans. But her mother Ella, who was ambivalent about Hans and, it appears, sensed Shanti’s unspoken feelings, once said to Henny, in what context it is now too late to learn: ‘Even if you marry Hans, as long as Shanti is around, you won’t starve’” (95) Thus Shanti’s love for Henny remains deep in his heart not to be erased by the changes and difficulties he encounters later in his life. Seth offers us meticulous details of Shanti’s social life, his medical education, his expanding circle of friends. Shanti travels into continental Europe, and chooses to study medicine, dentistry in Germany partly
because it is less expensive than England. He lives as a student and trainee in Germany. But the Third Reich has arrived framing all legislations against the ‘Jew and ‘Non-Aryans’ and foreigners. Thus, by the time he finishes, having gained both a degree in dentistry and a doctorate, he cannot by law be employed any more in Germany. A professor wishing to take Shanti on as a research assistant gets a written reprimand from the government for wishing to employ a foreigner.

By this time Hitler becomes the Chancellor. Within three months a sheaf of laws were passed aiming mainly at Jews and some of them against ‘non-Aryans’ in general and to some extent against foreigners. One of them was the law against the Overcrowding of German Schools and Universities. The Jews were assaulted by the Nazi activists. “Throughout this period, there was an increase in the vehemence of the assaults against Jews which were such a hallmark of the Nazi activists, and in the persecution and indeed murder of Jews in different parts of the country” (90). New set of laws, decrees and orders were passed all against Jews, expelling them from Civil Service, forbidding the lawyers from practicing at the bar, excluding doctors from many hospitals and clinics and restricting both the enrolment and the overall membership of Jews in educational institutions. They compared Jews to “germs or vermin, dangerous to health of a resurgent nation – or indeed any nation” (90):

Hitler and other Nazi leaders viewed the Jews not as a religious group, but as a poisonous “race,” which “lived off” the other races and weakened them. After Hitler took power, Nazi teachers in school classrooms began to apply the “principles” of racial science. They measured skull size and nose length, and recorded the color of their pupils’ hair and eyes to determine whether students
belonged to the true “Aryan race.” Jewish and Romani (Gypsy) students were often humiliated in the process. (Encyclopedia)

The aim of the Nazi party was to create a psychological war among Jews:

The Nazi party and those who helped them sought to separate Jews from their fellow Germans in every possible sphere – work, friendship, marriage, cultural life, leisure – in order both to immiserize them financially and to emigrate or to kill themselves: at any rate, to reduce their presence in Germany. The pressure was to be increased until eventually Germany was Jew-free and blood-pure. (TL 90)

Uncle Shanti gets much affected by this law. He is prohibited from practicing dentistry on racial grounds in the territory of the German Reich. As Hitler comes to power both Henny and Shanti are displaced and end up in London. He was prevented from practicing in Germany, despite his dental qualifications obtained there, for being a foreigner, a non-Aryan – ironically, but his British passport issued in 1938 described him as an “Aryan Hindu”:

For years before Adolf Hitler became chancellor of Germany, he was obsessed with ideas about race. In his speeches and writings, Hitler spread his beliefs in racial “purity” and in the superiority of the “Germanic race”—what he called an Aryan “master race.” He pronounced that his race must remain pure in order to one day take over the world. For Hitler, the ideal “Aryan” was blond, blue-eyed, and tall. (Encyclopedia)
The perspective of his life gets darkened with the rise of Nazism. Thus Shanti’s self is also conditioned by racial politics of Nazi regime.

Shanti finds that the borders of this country effectively become closed to him, as the new regulations of Nazi Germany proscribing employment of foreigners comes into force. Now he chooses to move at first to Scotland, then to England. Shanti is very sad and reluctant to leave Germany. At that time he never realized that he has been very fortunate in leaving that country. Seth writes:

Shanti had known that he could not practice as a dentist in Germany. But now even academia and research were closed to him. He did not realize at the time how fortunate he was to have to leave the country. He took it hard, regretting that his days in Berlin were over and that he would have to part from his friends and colleagues and make a life for himself somewhere else – perhaps in London, where he spent just a couple of weeks some five years earlier. (TL 99)

He moves to London with a heavy heart. According to him, the year 1937 is the most cold and miserable year of his life. In London, he comes to know that his German degrees have no recognition in Britain and he has to re-qualify in all the subjects, if he wants to work there or anywhere in the Empire. So he moves to Edinburgh as that would be cheaper than London, both for studying and for living because he had almost no money – “enough for bread but not for butter” (99). Here he meets his best friend Heinrich Etzold who is later known as Henry Edwards. It is Henry who helps him in overcoming his disaster and encourages him to practice dentistry on his own. On getting enlisted in the British army, he serves in various
places like Egypt, Africa and Italy. There he serves in World War II in British Army Dental unit until a shell blows off his right arm at the battle of Monte Cassino in Italy.

Seth’s life can also be considered to be a part of diaspora politics that Henny and Shanti suffers from. The book opens with the description of 18 Queens Road, Hendon, the abode of Seth’s great Uncle Shanti and great Aunt Henny. He goes there at the age of seventeen to stay with them for few years and continue his schooling at Tonbridge. At that time they were sixty. Seth begins his story with his British boarding-school days, when he often stays with the oddly-paired twosome. Seth discusses the way in which he started it:

I chose to start the book with a moment involving all three of us: when, as a boy of seventeen, I went to live with them. It was not dramatic in the grand scheme of things, even if fraught with tension for my more nervous younger self. Now I am three times that age, and they are dead, and the book is almost written. It has been a voyage not only round their histories but also a sort of pilgrimage of their geographies. (492)

He recalls his first meeting with them when he was very small. Aunt Henny and Uncle Shanti were keen on children. They did not have one. At the age of two and half when he was brought to London to his mother who was already there in London as his father got transferred to the Head office of the Bata Shoe Company, London. They took him to see Uncle Shanti and Aunt Henny. He remembers how Uncle Shanti managed the situation when he did not like that place:

I don’t know whether it was Shanti Uncle’s effusiveness or Aunty Henny’s European colour and features, but I quickly became uncomfortable. ‘I don’t
like it here, I want to go home,’ I stated firmly in Hindi. Shanti Uncle looked startled. When Aunt Henny asked him what I’d said, he told her that I was enjoying myself and would come again, but that I was tired and needed to go home and rest. (5)

Uncle Shanti does not want to hurt the feelings of Aunt Henny by saying the truth and at the time he does not want to give her a situation for thinking ill of his family to which she was never attached. Seth recollects his younger days:

The foreign Aunt Henny, whatever she represented to me, did pose a puzzle to the whole of Shanti Uncle’s extended family in India. Uncle had married late, in his forties, and had not brought her to India to be shown around in the proper way. They had no children. She was known to be a German, tall, quite brusque, and with no time for clan commitments in the Indian style. As Aunt Henny said, years later: ‘It’s very difficult to be enthusiastic about all these adults, these total strangers, who turn up every so often and call themselves your nieces and nephews.’ Even my mother, whom Aunt Henny liked, never graduated to being her niece. Whenever my parents called, she would open the door, survey the visitors standing on the top step and shout out, in a view-halloo sort of voice, ‘Shanti, your relations are here.’ (6)

To Seth’s family she remains strange and a mystery. But in due course Seth becomes very close to her and she to him. She takes care of him and encourages him more than Uncle Shanti. Aunt Henny has not visited India. Seth regrets for this. With his brother Shantum he discusses this topic and it is the insight of Shantum, Seth thus quotes:
She had a big fear of India – the noise, the crowds, the germs. It’s a bit of a pity that they didn’t come here. He had very strong memories, but he had a fear too, and he certainly didn’t want to expose her to India. You would have thought that if someone married an Indian, they would want to come and live in India or at least to visit, but not in this case. Shanti Uncle first became rather German, and then rather British, and Aunty Henny didn’t appreciate the Indian side of him, though she did appreciate the qualities that might have come about as a result. And to go to a place where there was this huge extended family when she had no family of her own. She lived, I imagine, with a lot of memories of the past. (403-404)

Vikram Seth informs that before he investigated these letters in the trunk he only had a superficial knowledge about the Holocaust. He knew no Jews growing up in India. For that matter India never politically supported Jews. Perhaps that may be one of the reasons that Aunt Henny never wanted to visit India and get to know about her relatives by way of marriage. Seth is shocked by the fact that he knew nothing about Aunt Henny’s past; about what had happened to her family and friends. When he asks Uncle Shanti who had known his mother-in-law and sister-in-law when he lived in Berlin, Uncle Shanti said his wife never wanted to talk about it.

For the author, writing this book included, doing research about Jewish Berlin, the Nazi edicts visited on its Jewish residents, deportations, and conditions and procedures in the Theresienstadt and Birkenau concentration camps. At one point the author visited Israel to give a talk and found spontaneously going to Yad Vashem where he found entries for Gabriele and Lola Caro in German documents. Reading German, a language he loved that was part of his connection to his great aunt when
she had tutored him, so sickened him, that for a period he stopped reading German and listening to German Leider.

Seth presents his own journey to London at the age of seventeen to study at Tonbridge School and shares his experience, where he is served shrimp in scooped apples and eats the apples, to the shocked consternation of English schoolboys. Slowly he tries to pick up the style of Western culture by surreptitious glances at others. It is in Tonbridge he is introduced to the music of Simon and Garfunkel, mainly. In Oxford his interest in the cello and Bach initiates his closer relationship with Western classical music.

Seth had to take the special entrance exams for Oxford. He discovered that he had to get qualified in a European language to O level standard to get into the university. He wrote to the authorities asking for waiver since he had studied Hindi and he did not have any opportunity in Indian school to learn any European language even if one wished to. But he was not granted. He was in a panic. Learning a language to the required standard in the ordinary way takes four or five years. He was left with only six months. It is Aunty Henny who encourages him and pacifies him when he explained his problems to them:

When I explained my problem to Shanti Uncle and Aunty Henny, they were worried for me, especially since they could see how dispirited I was. But shortly afterwards Aunty Henny sat me down in the drawing room with a cup of tea and said firmly that there was nothing for it but to accept things as they were, unfair as they might seem. This is what life was sometimes about. I would have to fulfill the requirement. In addition, it was clear that German
was the right language for me, because in the holidays she and Uncle would be able to help me where the school had left off. (10)

She takes much interest in teaching him German which starts from her kitchen and expands to all household articles and so on. This inspires love in their young nephew, particularly when Henny crammed him with enough German to pass a crucial exam, unwittingly also offering him the key to their lives – lives which he discovers to be full of courage, character, and event. It is through his study of German that he could deepen his relationship with them. And it is this knowledge of German that helps him develop this book with the story of Aunt Henny too when his father unveils the trunk belonging to Aunt Henny which contains all the letters she had corresponded with her relatives and friends in German.

This becomes evident that people get moved if addressed to in their tongue. Thus Aunt Henny is moved and becomes attached with Seth. Here the language barrier is thus broken and cordial relationship is developed. Language ties a strong bondage:

After a while, I stopped being a guest for Aunty Henny, or a project, but became a sort of companion. I was still ‘my husband’s nephew’ when introduced to strangers. One evening, however, she introduced me as ‘my nephew’ paused, but did not correct herself. After that, she used the terms interchangeably. For Shanti Uncle, I became little son. (12)

The author concludes with making some salient points about having written this book. He is troubled with the fact that he was publishing letters that were not meant for the public eye, but decides that since Uncle Shanti and Aunt Henny are long
gone, their lives are now part of history. He makes the point that their lives spanned most of the twentieth century and through his research and analysis the author reveals how the major events of the twentieth century shaped their lives and those around them. Twentieth century is known for socio-political-economic developments. It centres on materialistic life where people aspire for affluent life. Shanti’s character reveals this. Because of this aspiration, he easily transcends the linguistic, racial, and political factors. All policies were created in the twentieth century which emerged because of the political movement. Polity of the Government affects Shanti’s social-self, but it is not reported that he is affected by politics. *Two Lives* is a political history of twentieth century. *Two Lives* is the narrative of not the lives of two nations but of the ‘self’ haunted by the two lives of the nations.

In conjunction with George Eliot, Seth concludes significantly:

It is not only the lessons of history writ large and the avoidance of gross political errors that can be absorbed . . . . It is also the lessons of history writ little that may be taken to heart – the sense that the act and decisions of ordinary individuals, trivial or momentous, may lead, sometimes by imperceptible gradations, sometimes by sudden jolts, and not even always in the same direction, towards making the world a human and reasonably secure home for all its denizens or a riven and uncertain place of grief and injustice, fear, hunger and pain. (348)

Seth takes the “Lessons of history writ little” and chooses two ordinary lives to write whose lives appear striking because they lived through exceptional times. Through the quiet spaces of history Seth captures the immense damage that the century has
inflicted on people like Shanti and Henny. The book then, deals with “representative” rather “consecrated” biography, or with what Vikram Seth himself calls “history writ little.” Thus:

Shanti and Henny are, in most ways, two fairly ordinary middle-class people whose lives appear striking because they lived through exceptional times (the rise of Hitler, World War II, the Shoah, the reconstruction of Europe; the Quit India movement, Partition and Indian Independence). The lives recounted, be they Shanti’s, Henny’s or Vikram Seth’s own, all have a transnational and transcultural reach. (e - book)

Nonetheless, Vikram Seth is today an expatriate and has been in that condition for large swathes of his life, while Shanti Seth comes over as an actually more deracinated figure than his great-nephew, living in Germany, then England, and after “two brief visits to India during the mid-thirties” (TL 95) not returning again though in close touch with his family.

The life stories of both, Shanti and Vikram Seth, the diasporic Indians become part of a larger world-historical mosaic, in which Indian political as well as transcultural history has its autonomous dynamic yet is inextricably bound up with other countries’ histories and with the whole global system. The intercultural space occupies in the narrative may be called tri-cultural – Anglo-Indian-German. The two Seths belong to Indian culture by birth, to British culture thanks to empire, language and residence, and to German culture for family reasons (marriage or nephew-hood) and having learnt the language, Henny is German-Jewish by birth and, German her native language, British by residence and adoptive language, and Indian linked by marriage. Professionally, Shanti Seth is an Indian who, having failed to get into one of
his country’s elite institutions, the Roorkee College of Engineering, qualifies in
dentistry twice over, in Germany and England, and ends up practising in his second
host country; Vikram Seth is an Indian educated at Doon College, an Indian
replication of the English “public school” (i.e. elite boarding school), and then, while
based with Shanti and Henny, at an actual English public school, Tonbridge, going on
to university at Oxford and then in the US; while Henny, though lacking formal
qualifications, incorporates herself into the German and then the British labour
market.

All, the selves are culturally and politically diasporic, and none belongs
definitely anywhere. It is useful to distinguish between voluntary and involuntary
expatriation and return, but if Vikram Seth himself clearly at all moments in his career
expatriates himself voluntarily and, indeed, returns voluntarily to India, with both
Shanti and Henny matters are more complex. Shanti enters Germany voluntarily but
moves to England by the political force of events, while later ruling out any return to
India by choice; Henny in no sense voluntarily expatriates herself to England, but in
later years both her non-return to Germany and refusal of India (she never sets foot
there) are self-chosen and thus political. All things considered, none of the three has a
single identifiable “home”: while Vikram Seth’s home is, if anywhere, the global
Anglophone literary market, Shanti and Henny – the one having lost an arm, the other
having lost mother and sister – impressively build life and marriage in a country
where neither is a native. As the Outlook reviewer put it, theirs is “the story of
immeasurable love between two human beings of dissimilar backgrounds and
cultures” (Ashokamitran).
At the end of the book Seth takes refuge in a memorial garden in Hendon Park as it was very windy. He finds is a sign requesting people to respect the peace of that place printed in English, Urdu, Chinese, Greek, Gujarati, Hindi and Arabic. He notices a word in silver metal on black at the gate of the memorial garden. The sign in it mentions the Jewish holocaust in the context of more recent events in Cambodia, in Bosnia, in Rwanda. It explains the single word above the arch: “Lezikaron. The meaning refers to the importance of looking forward as well as remembering the past” (TL 499).

Through its last paragraph Seth wants to give a message on the need for communal harmony in human beings which is the only way to bring peace to all. He feels:

As I walk back to the tube, I consider the word in the context of an evil century past and a still more dangerous one to come. May we not be as foolish as we are almost bound to be. If we cannot eschew hatred, at least let us eschew group hatred. May we see that we could have been born as each other. May we, in short, believe in humane logic and perhaps, in due course, in love.

(499)

He terms the century as an “evil Century passed” and offers his vision for the future.

Seth himself describes this book as both memoir and biography as it projects almost the entire life of Shanti and Henny along with history over a century. He calls it an arbitrary unit involving varieties. He writes:

My lens has zoomed in for the most part on my two subjects. But occasionally it has become a wide-angle and touched upon the history of the century they
inhabited. It is true that centuries are arbitrary units – determined, among other things, by the miscalculated date of birth of the founder of a religion and the number of fingers on our hands – but because we invest these units with spurious significance, they take on true significance. Shanti and Henny’s lives were almost coeval with that arbitrary unit, the twentieth century. Both were born in 1908; Henny died in 1989, Shanti in 1998. Many of the great currents and movements of the century are reflected through the events of their lives and those of their friends and family: the Raj, the Indian freedom movement, post-Independence India; the Third Reich; the Second World War; postwar Germany, including the division of Berlin and the blockade and airlift; the emigration of Jews from Germany in the 1930s (with some of Henny’s friends going as far afield as Shanghai, South Africa and California); the Holocaust; Israel and Palestine; British politics, economics and society. Many powerful ‘isms’ – imperialism, Nazism, anti-Semitism, racism, conservatism, liberalism, socialism, communism, totalitarianism – worked through (and sometimes battered) their lives or those of their family and friends. I felt that a picture of these individual lives would be complemented by glimpses of their century, even if these glimpses were mediated by the opinion, perhaps opinionatedness, of the author. Indeed, the lens has also turned around upon its wielder, for this book is memoir as well as biography. (491)

Vikram Seth, does a deep analysis of history and its impact on the two lives and the world at large. Author’s sense of history is so strong that it does not only help him to avoid the trap of familial self-indulgence but also creates an intense urge to unveil the quiet spaces of the history of a century of unprecedented turmoil. The
unbearable atrocities of war have taught that love is the only refuse of humanity. The resilience of the two lives makes it explicit that the resistance and the conflict between cultures must end into reconciliation and resolution. This unusual pair does not make any great impression on the history of the world but the history indeed makes a great and everlasting impression on their lives. The two lives are buffeted and shaped by the upheavals of migration, oppression and war.

While expressing his views on his images of post-war Germany and Britain, Seth says that he has not concentrated much on post-war Britain, though he has said something about the miner’s strike, as he has on post-war Germany. He says:

That’s right. I touch upon miners’ strikes and Uncle becoming increasingly conservative. The events were not so dramatic. I let them inveigle themselves in through a letter or two. Post-war Germany was *in extremis*. A great phenomenon of the last century was that post-War Germany, particularly Berlin, played so important a part in both halves of the last century, epitomising the division between the capitalist and communist worlds. Post-First World War Germany led to the events of the book. (*Frontline* Interview)

He clearly loves his relatives and finds himself so far inside their stories and makes their experience a painful one for him. A visit to Yad Vashem in Jerusalem creates fortunately a temporary breach between him and the German language. But if it has lasted long, the language he loves; of poetry and philosophy, might have become as one of the bureaucratized hate and mass murder.
The Monitor’s book editor, Marjorie Kehe says:

But in truth Seth’s repetition and excursions away from his central point are almost always skilled. They build up layers which help us to know his characters ever more intimately. We share their small moments and their grand ones, and we also come face to face with the fact that there is much of importance that we will never understand about them. But it doesn’t matter. Incomprehension and even disillusionment don’t change the love that some are able to inspire, and Shanti and Henny were such people.

Vikram Seth, for his part, says he suffered from only minor racial abuse as a schoolboy in London, though adding that in the 1980s his brother Shantum, then in England to study, had a rougher time. All in all, the world Shanti and Henny made for themselves in England seems in many ways a model of productive multiculturalism in a political sense.

The multicultural and the multilingual go hand in hand, as Vikram Seth has amply shown in the pages of A Suitable Boy (in that novel, Hindi, Bengali, Urdu and English interact, affirming a multilingual identity for India that parallels and underpins the multicultural, secularist conformation of the Nehruvian polity). The world of Two Lives is resolutely bilingual: Shanti and Henny are both equally at ease in English and German, using the former to operate in public and the latter as their preferred medium of communication with each other. It is true that both lose certain language skills over time: Shanti was at one point trilingual but, “Shanti over the years lost his ability to speak Hindi, the language in which he would have felt most at
ease for the first two decades of his life. Henny still spoke German but read no German books” (*TL* 401).

*Two Lives* is about dispossessions. Shanti and Henny are distanced from their homeland, culture and language. Seth wants the readers to find out what Shanti and Henny found in the midst of such alienations:

I was hoping you’d get to the finding part. Their grit lies more in finding and coming to terms with losses. Henny was not quite as passionate as Shanti, but she loved him in a very abiding way. He once said that he would give his life for her, but she did something more difficult, she tried to live on for him. I think they found something in each other, in their work, and in the country, which seemed to be rather cold but in fact very tolerant. (*Frontline*-Interview)

Language too is a home and confers belonging – not only to the larger cultural group and the community, living and dead, who have spoken or written it, but also to the pods and pairs of our intimate lives. For the first few years that they knew each other, at 60 Mommsenstrasse, Shanti and Henny would have spoken nothing but German. Yet in England during the war, with German the suspect language of the enemy, they were compelled to write to each other in English. In the letters he sent to Henny between 1942 and 1944, Shanti even wooed her through English, which must have been an awkward endeavour. But the language spoken at 18 Queens Road – when no one else was present – reverted to German; and part of the reason that I graduated from ‘my husband’s nephew’ to ‘my nephew’ for Aunty Henny, and from ‘my nephew’ to ‘my little son’ for Uncle, was that I had learned to share their
language, and nothing spoken aloud at home remained veiled for me. Thus, language influences the selves to get along with identity politics.

Vikram Seth is more actively multilingual. He is in fact fluent in four languages - Hindi, English, German and Chinese. In Two Lives, his Hindi enters only marginally into play, but he nonetheless tells us it is his first language: “When I began to speak, Amma [his grandmother] insisted that it be in Hindi and only in Hindi. She herself was perfectly bilingual, but had decided that I would get more than enough English in England” (TL 5).

Curiously, if Vikram has to learn German in England for academic reasons (to get into Oxford), Shanti has a parallel experience in Germany with Latin (as a compulsory subject in his dentistry course). Both Seths learn German thoroughly enough to understand, speak, read and write it, and, notably, Vikram’s reading knowledge of that language is a crucial factor in making this book possible at all. In parallel, Henny’s English becomes good enough to enable her to deploy all four skills (understanding, speaking, reading and writing) with comfort. Bilingualism, which we may view as metonymic of an open-ended multilingualism, thus appears as an integral part of Vikram Seth’s universe.

Preparing to apply to Oxford, Seth realizes in panic that he must clear a European language to qualify for admission: he learns German in months, and this in turn brings him closer to his aunt. Like Seth, Shanti too needs to pass an examination in Latin in order to qualify for dentistry. Seth offers an account of migrants who find that they often need to acquire, at very short notice, certifiable linguistic skills in a variety of languages connected to the host country’s cultural heritage.
Seth questions the nationality of Henny and Shanti:

Where did Shanti and Henny belong, if not in the world of a family or a circle of friends? Which country did they belong to? Not Germany any more, not India. Nor did they have a refuge in the religions of their birth. Both Hinduism and Judaism are somewhat ‘social’ religions, in that dogma and belief are less crucial in practice than rites of passage and social relations. But their religion or the comforting society of their co-religionists did not cocoon either Shanti or Henny. Indeed, how could it have, since either cocoon would have excluded the other partner? Work, the great home, must have given them some sense of belonging. (400)

Seth confirms that they are not bound to a particular nation or culture or religion. They live their own life devoid of all these constraints:

There was no ritual of conformity, no compulsory protestations of patriotism or national affiliation. Thus these two of the many rooted exiles of the twentieth century passed the years and decades of the latter half of their lives feeling neither very much at home nor very obviously foreign in a land that could be seen as either coolly indifferent or blessedly uninterfering, even tolerant. (401)

Two Lives thus records the various aspects of diasporic experience and a sense of strangeness and perhaps rejection due to unfamiliarity with Western ways, as experienced by Seth and others who set off from India to study in the West.

Though, Seth has widely travelled to Western countries his self centres around Indian society. In Two Lives he expresses his concern for an Indian who on an
academic mission completing Ph. D thesis temporarily possesses the foreign land but his thoughts lingers around his main land. Seth seems nostalgia while describing Indian settled in Western world:

After a few years they were so embedded in their temporary lives that they only went home for any length of time upon the death or severe illness of a parent. This thought struck an uncomfortable chord . . . . I like the company of my family and missed them . . . . my father was now sixty-three, my mother fifty-six, Shantum, my brother, was not in India to give them support, and Aradhana, my sister, was growing up without my really getting to know he in the way one does through the humour and abrasion and affection of day-to-day living. (39)

When Seth was asked during the interview to Frontline on Two Lives, whether the book is about Two Lives or about him, Seth says that the book contains part of his story too:

In Hindi it would have been called Dhaayi Jivan (two and a half lives). Every book is eventually about yourself, I’d say this book more than most. Look at the choices people make and the huge moral and psychological pressures they face at different times. You’re bound to wonder how you yourself would have behaved. I see someone in the last decade of his life, estranging himself from the family he loved, and I ask myself how am I going to be in my old age? Will I lose my faculties? The moment you write about people’s lives, especially real people, you speculate about why they did what they did, and will something like that happen to you. (Frontline-Interview)
Thus, Henny’s ‘self’ is an embodiment of the political history of German-Jew and Shanti’s ‘self’ is an upshot of colonial politics whereas Seth’s, an emergence of postcolonial identity politics.
Notes and References

Primary Source


Secondary Sources


