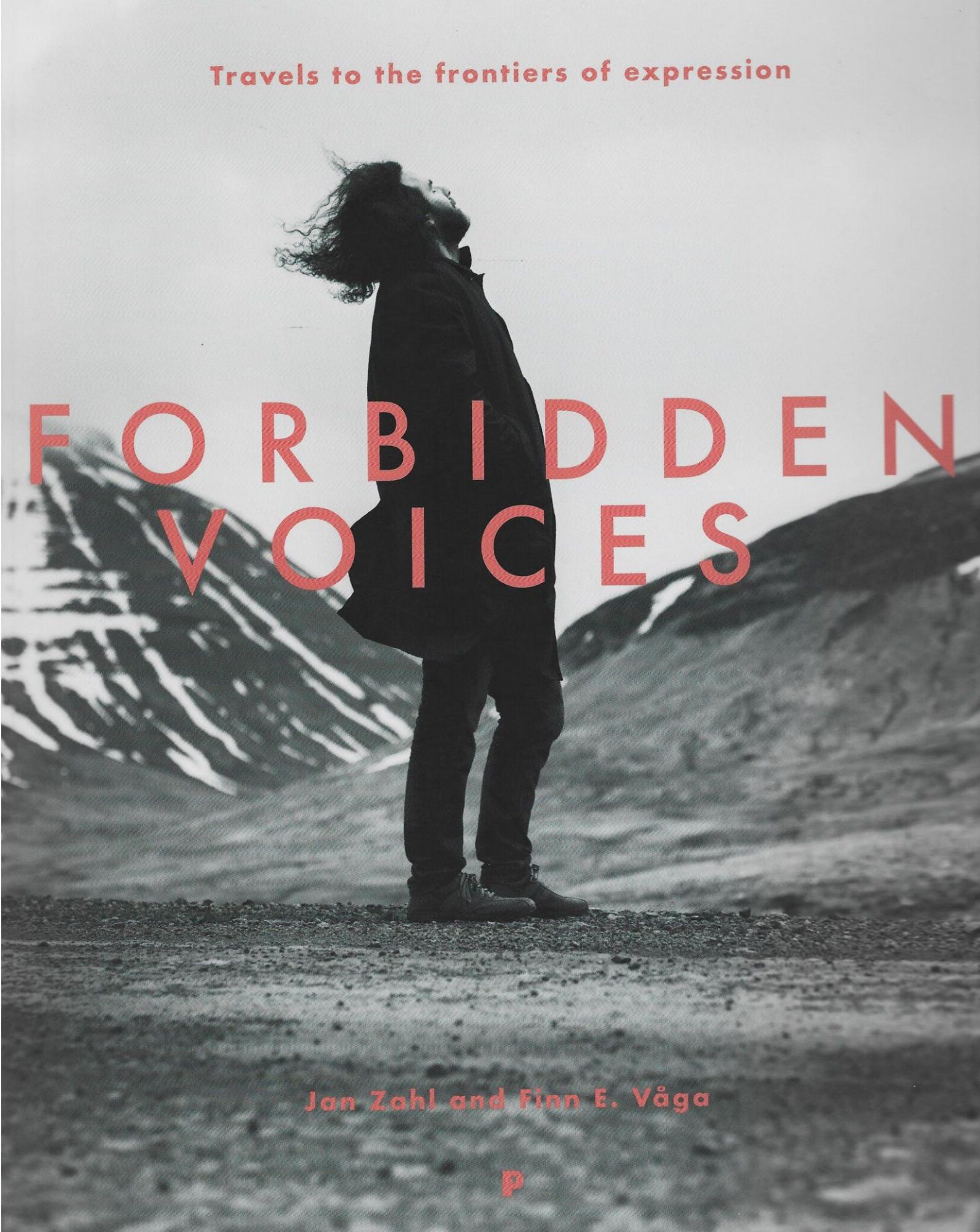


Travels to the frontiers of expression



FORBIDDEN VOICES

Jan Zahl and Finn E. Våga

NG ARIAS WITH A KNIFE TO MY THROAT

Aslı Erdogan is an internationally renowned author living in exile after fleeing her homeland of Turkey, a country on an increasingly authoritarian trajectory. She is also lonely, unhappy, angry and unwell.

Jan Zahl journalist | Finn E. Våga photographer

Is it a happy, well-adjusted woman you see before you? 'I'm not sure, perhaps?' Aslı Erdogan smiles, but hers is not a happy expression. The muscles in her face drag the corners of her mouth downwards. Her lips part, revealing a row of white teeth. She is expressing in such a way that it could be a smile, but there is no trace of happiness to be found in her grey-blue eyes. Her head is slightly tilted, her slim body resigned. It is as if she is deliberating whether to continue the conversation or not. She has the strength for further battles.

In May 2019 and we are sitting on the top floor of Haus des Kulturs, Frankfurt. Outside the window, the blue sky of a dry winter day provides a backdrop for the many skyscrapers of Germany's financial capital.

When Aslı Erdogan moves to many different cities, and it is here that she finds herself, exiled from her homeland of Turkey, she has spent 136 days in prison after the attempted coup in the summer of 2016. There are numerous people who want to help her in Frankfurt, both well-meaning Germans and members of an international support network. Nevertheless, this doesn't make her particularly happy. Not even if she is free.

She is living in Frankfurt? It's a life in exile. Fresh problems manifest themselves on a daily basis. Fresh knockbacks are endless.'

Even though she is in a state of misery, she remains a woman whose books have been translated to a host of languages after setting both her academic career and her career as a quantum physicist to one side. She is a woman with a number of international accolades,

and she has been awarded for both her literature and her activism, and was most recently presented with the French Simone De Beauvoir prize for women's freedom. How did she end up here? Drama might be an author's most critical fuel, but Aslı's own life story features more than enough of this in its own right.

DIFFICULT CHILDHOOD

'I came from an awful family. My childhood was difficult and violent. My father tried to kill my mother in front of me when I was only five years old. He was a hard man.' Aslı's father came from an impoverished background in the north-eastern Turkish countryside. 'The fate of people from these areas was similar to that of the Armenians. Many were killed. Being trapped between the Turks and the Russians was only ever going to lead to trouble.' But her father was extremely intelligent. Aslı hopes that this might be the only trait that she and her father share. He started working at the age of five, eventually teaching himself engineering skills. From a poverty-stricken life in the countryside, her father was to experience a class journey that would propel him into middle-class society in Istanbul.

Her mother's family were from Thessaloniki in Greece. Her mother tells her that they are Macedonian.

'My mother denies it, but we're also Jewish. I remember Jewish rituals from my childhood,' Aslı says. Not that it bothers her one way or the other; Aslı is indifferent when it comes to such ethnic

