

Tagebuchtexte
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Lidija Burčak Nöd us Zucker edition spoken script

Nöd us Zucker (*Tough Cookie*) presents excerpts from the diaries Lidija Burčak wrote between the ages of 15 and 32. Readers are sucked directly into the hopes, fears, and frustrations of a young second-generation immigrant growing up in Switzerland. Outside pressure and inner confusion; anger at the state of the world and the narrowness of Swiss life: the diary bounces back and forth between unflinching self-criticism and nagging existential questions, from boundless optimism to Burčak's yearning to be an artist—ideally, in Paris, London or New York! We follow her as she chases one internship after another, one job after another, in her boring hometown of Winterthur and later in Zurich.

Burčak's voice is raw, funny, and deeply honest, capturing the turmoil of adolescence and early adulthood with immediacy and charm. *Tough Cookie* is a celebration of life, identity, and creativity – an intimate depiction of how it feels to grow up between cultures, yet full of curiosity, resilience, and the irrepressible desire to be heard. Burčak's words are at once personal and universal, inviting readers to reflect, laugh, and recognise themselves in her story.

We are convinced that this text will also appeal to a wide English-speaking audience.

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Author bio

Lidija Burčak was born in the industrial town of Winterthur near Zurich. She earned a BA in Cultural Studies in Zurich and a Master's degree in Visual Anthropology in London. *Nöd us Zucker* (*Tough Cookie*), published in 2022, is her debut novel and was awarded a Canton of Zurich Achievement Award. She works as a freelance filmmaker and author, makes documentaries and is currently writing her first play about roots and belonging, inspired by her Balkan heritage.

Burčak has kept a diary since 1990. The entries were never intended for publication, but one day she plucked up the courage to share them with a circle of close friends. However, as interest grew, she soon began reading to a larger audience, and increasing numbers of people were turned on to her writing. Burčak always read in public from her original handwritten diaries, but as her audience grew, people asked where they might find her texts in print. She was pointed towards a publishing house that seemed a good fit: Der gesunde Menschenversand, a Swiss independent press known for publishing literary texts in Swiss German with the stated aim of promoting the vernacular as a separate and serious form of literary expression.

Some of her early diaries (she has kept a journal since she was seven) were written in German, but over time she realised that the Swiss German entries felt more immediate. Her main concern was to record her experiences, and this urgency is a hallmark of her texts. Shot through with German and English expressions, capitalized and punctuated to replicate the emphases of spoken language, the sentences flowed naturally onto the page, and not a word has been corrected or altered since they were first written.

Burčak grew up as a second-generation immigrant, known in German-speaking Switzerland as 'secondos/secondas'. Her first language, her mother tongue, is Serbo-Croat. Her relationship with Swiss German, her second language, was long an ambivalent one. Though it is now the language she speaks best, she rejected it for many years because its use was bound up with difficult questions of belonging and exclusion such as: Where did she belong, and how could she express this? Her texts grapple with 'being a Yugo', 'the Yugo thing' and her own position. Ever since the 1990s 'Yugos' has served as a collective term for people from the former Yugoslavia, often with socially pejorative undertones. But the younger generation is now reclaiming the word and changing its connotations.

Tough Cookie

Extracts translated by Simon Pare

Wednesday 19 July 2006 / 7 pm

(...) I wanna dance, I wanna be a choreographer. For Gods sake, its not like Im up against the champion of New York, is it –good old Switzerland is the perfect place to be average – unless you have two left feet, youre nailed on to win a Swiss danceoff show.

Sunday 7 February 1999 / 6.05 pm

Sittin on my bed with Oasis on, feelin a bit sad. My 'rents are arses. Last Friday I cried again and they had a talk with me. Not a proper one, natch. They bollocked me sayin, like, *I had to* talk to them about my problems. Bleedin muppets. Im tearin up just thinkin about it. They cant insist Ive got to talk to them, then go around blabbin so everyone knows. Last thing I need. Worse still, the 'rents say Ive no reason to cry or be unhappy. Where they get that from? They feel like their troubles are a thousand times worse. Who knows, might be true, but it dont mean they can treat me like some little, inexperienced, stupid, naive 15-year-old with not a clue about the world or real problems.

Anyway, last Friday I made a list of things I want from them. To go out every other Friday or Saturday til 11 pm. Be allowed to sleep at Manus or Monis. Snowboard with my mates for a day, go to the cinema from 8 to 10, you know, just going out, like. They laughed at me when I showed them the list coz its a kinda contract. But except for a few points, they agreed. Not even this kind of contract can cool things between my 'rents and me though. Ive realised now it isnt the stuff about goin out that makes me so sad. Course it gets me riled when Im not allowed out. But I mean, theres other stuff makes me so sad too. Not that I know what that stuff is, mind, not yet.

My 'rents and I were in the Mövenpick at the motorway services today. Theyve got a Fiat Lancia now. We had a drink there. Well, I asked if I could go along when my mates go off snowboardin. They said 'No' and I asked 'Why'. And that set off a discussion about how amazin and well behaved their generation was. *Dont make me laugh!* On top of that, they said I read rags like Bravo, Girl and Mädchen. Dont know if they meant books by Katherine Applegate? I dont read smart books, apparently, but thats totally wrong. For example, I read P.M. A scientific magazine, a very

interesting one. Im interested in all kinds of stuff and even at 15 I'm really well-read compared to my mates at school.

My 'rents have no idea about me. They think Im one of those dumb chicks, only interested in money, clothes and boys, who dont see any point in education. They think I drink alcohol whenever its going and take drugs and jump in bed with every boy around.

My 'rents also say I should get some hobbies. But whenever I suggest somethin, its either no good or too expensive. For example, they say I oughta play basketball. I dont want to, though. Im into drama, film, dance, plays, photography and singin. You know, all those things artists do! But I guess that dont suit them coz then Id have no education. But I know for sure that one day Im gonna stand on stage or in front of the camera, maybe even sing! Yeah, thats my dream! But if I told them that, they wouldnt support me one bit, coz none of those is a stable job. What keeps me alive is the hope of being free later on and believin I can make it. Im really lookin forward to my life after this prison. While Im still in prison Ill do everythin to prepare for my later life.

Just noticed that people who write long diaries have no real, close friends or theyd tell them. Oh well, Im just a very lonely person. But Im used to it. I can take a lot.

Wednesday 24 January 2001 / 10.08 pm

Uh oh, ok, so, slept with a guy today for the first time ever . . . who woz he? You guessed – Rio. Ok, well, here goes. No school this mornin, staff development day. Sposed to have gym at 1 and a maths test at 3. Mum woz sposed to be workin til 4. Told Rio the evenin before to come over to mine in the mornin. Had a premonition that night that it woz gonna happen. Got up at 7.30, peed, shaved my legs and had a good wash. At 8.45 he turns up, we snog a bit, get down to our undies and then I ask: 'Would you have anything on you?' He dont, so I go to look in sis's room, couldnt find any there either. So Rio goes off to buy some at Coop. Meantime I must've been to the bog about 3 times. Felt a bit scared, of gettin preggers mostly. Waited. Then he gets back and we start up again. Suddenly I said I didnt want to now, coz it woz givin me a weird feelin. He went all quiet after that and it got me right stressed. He put his top on, and me my jarmas. Hardly sayin nothin. Then I start kissin him again and all til he gets the jonny out. Oh yeah: so, when he gets back from Coop, first I read the packet and told him the stuff written on it.

Anyway, he took it and I went to put it on – but then I thought it woz the wrong way round and got out a new one, but Rio dealt with it. Then he lay down on top of me, and we had bare trouble *aimin straight*. Sounds stupid, but its true. After a bit we managed and it hurt real bad . . . he

never went in far . . . just a little and then out again. Yeah, it hurt bad. Then he *comes*, like really fast. And it woz all over, nothin special, short n painful. A bit rubbish really.

We yakked about it afterwards and he said he woz well narked that I hadnt come. Told him it hurt. Went to have a shower at half eleven. Got dressed, and we still had fun afterwards. Sis came home at 12.20, I did some maths revision, Rio watched telly. Let down the blinds in my room and started snoggin again. Woz so nice. Then he got the jonny out, I put it on. We had trouble aimin straight again, but when he *penetrated*, it hurt a little, but then he started movin and it woz nice feelin him so close. Sooo nice. Didnt give me quite the satisfaction he does with his hand or his mouth, but still nice. Used 2 jonnies one after another coz he *came* a little bit in the first. He stopped now and again in the middle so he wouldnt come too soon and make it too short. Suddenly it woz half 2 and Id missed maths. Wanted to keep goin, but he couldnt get a hardon any more, not a proper one, so we stopped.

We lay there chattin about college camp, about the Albania street festival when SUDDENLY THE DOORBELL WENT! We got up so quick (already had my undies and bra on), pulled on my jeans and Nike jumper, did up my hair, Rio made the bed and got dressed. Mum woz back at 3 instead of 4! Laughing my arse off. She came into my room and said 'Hello' to Rio and when she went out again, I saw a used jonny on the bedside table! Fuck! Lucky she missed it.

At 4 we went into town and smoked a joint, hung out in the Manor caff and I ate 3 croissants. Tell Rio Im really made up about experiencin summat like that with someone I like, someone I REALLY REALLY LIKE. He says, 'Cheers, thats such a nice thing to say.' I told Moni, but it woz weird tellin her. Reckon I wont tell noone else. By the way, we were all sweaty down there second time around. It woz REALLY MEGA nice!! First time to Jamiroquai, second to Lucy Pearl (only half the cassette though). Even tried changin positions, didnt really work though. What scares me is he kept slippin out, is that allowed with a jonny? Wont the goo run out? Definitely goin to the doctor tomorrow, just as a precaution . . . thinkin about the pill too.

Wow, wow, that woz good . . . mmm . . . N-night.

Saturday 5 November 2005 / 2 pm

On the train to Winti. Had my talk with the German teacher, Mr Baumann, and it woz amazin. And now I can think of a thousand things Id ask him and like answers to. He really took me apart on my essay. Had to listen to what writin an essay at school is really about. And we had a really cool chat together . . . He snapped at me a bit. Me: 'So whats with all these writers tryin to make their point in mega complicated sentences?' Him: 'You arent an artist, youre a student and my jobs to prepare pupils for uni, thats all. Its a really narrow path. Whats inside your head, I dont doubt the thinking for a

second.' Summat like that: he meant he woznt criticisin my thoughts, just what woz down on paper. 'You have the feeling the reader can see inside your head. Every head has its own system, its own organisation, and we have to agree on writing as a norm so I know what youre thinking. An essay is that norm, with everyone having the same one to understand each other.' He put it more or less like that, and then I said that stuff about writers and artists, and he went, 'They shatter the norm.' Me: 'But then writin an essay for schools much harder coz I gotta stick to the norm?' Him: 'Art isnt easy just because its free. It starts to get interesting when they know *which* norm and *how* to shatter the norm.' It really woz a cool conversation and for once I walked out not feelin stupid.

Saturday 25 November 2006 / 1.30 am

Saturday night and I'm at home because that's the way I like it right now. Everything chill. Moved my telly out of my room on Wednesday and so far its all chill. If I really need to watch summat, I go over to my dads. Builds communication between us. Just watched *American History X*. I love that film! No, what I really love is Edward Norton in that role. The way he changes, breaks down, gets back up again . . . So awesome the way he acts, the way he talks. Its sick what a moving film it is. I reckon they oughta show the film at primary school when they talk about racism. Do they even do that? Probably not, bloody system. Whats most important at that young an age is to deal with stuff like that when you can still *educate* the kids. I mean, Im not on the whole 1984 trip, but some stuffs just pure shit – like racism! I think its summat you need to *educate out* of them, beat out of them even. Like paedophilia. I mean, thinkin about gross subjects that cannot be hushed up makes me wanna burst into tears. Our world is sick. We humans just puke all over it. Its so gross. Thats right, I sometimes think about what Id do if I woz boss of this planet:

My first task would be killin all the people who do nothin but cause shit and spread negativity. Hmm . . . I mean, after all why not? I wouldnt go killin Kofi Annan, mind, only some other wankers. Dont even think Id take out Bush coz hes such a muppet they ought to hold him up as a reminder to all the stupid pillocks. Id take out his pushers. Obviously Id need to look into it closer. I reckon Id kill summat like 1/3 of all stars – first, those hiphop dickheads biggin up crappy standards like dollaarrzz, pussy, rides. Shite, fuckin bollox, screwin us youngsters up, Im sorry, its the truth. Yep, Id kill Paris Hilton and all. Massive influence these star eejits have. I remember when I thought the Spice Girls were so sick. Who knows how good a streetfighter Id be if theyd talked about fightin Aids, the issue of racism, unfair trade, acid rain and things instead of girl power like 'Yeah, arent *we* sexy'. All those other arseholes making perfumes too, I mean PERFUME?!? Whats going on? Oh God, winds me up summat nasty. Need to stop this crap now. Ive got some happier news though.

Got a big compliment from Mr Baumann after reworkin my German essay: 'Clear thinking, precise reasoning and wonderful phrasing – reading this text is quite a pleasure and gives a sense that you had fun formulating your thoughts in this way.' How wicked is that? Gave me a massive thrill! Now hes given me 4 and a half out of 6 instead of 4, nothin amazin, but that comment will do for me.

Gotta revise some maths tomorrow. Test on Monday, really hard, cant get my head around it, differential calculus. Ive got so much energy and college is slowly gettin on my nerves. Need to move a bit – just dont like bein in Winti, in one place like this, for so long. Im 23 and sooner or later I need to get out, out, out of here.

Sunday 25 May 2008 / 11.05 pm

Saturdays gone, didnt pass the entrance exam and this shitty life goes on. Man, had another real downer of a day. Man, this is shit. And Im thinkin: nothin I want out thats a bit of the ordinary ever works out. Actin, hospital clown, TV internship . . . Travels, blokes I fancy, nothin works out. Hmm. Why not? What about my 'the universe will help' theory? Why isnt it helpin? Now Im back where I woz. Work for 1 more month, then thats over. Gotta organise my hols, preferably alone, preferably with a guy. Im no different after all, I need someone. Or friends anyway. Hell, do I want to turn off that part of my brain. Maybe a bit more Bob Marley attitude . . . *easy-going*. Day by day. *Don't think, just feel*. Or summat. Need is the mother of invention. But Im never in need. Id be better off goin on the dole again, hangin around to see what appeals. But no, now it hasnt worked out with arts school, Lidijas goin to do a radio internship, despite hating Winti. I want out of here. Then again, its a pretty good idea: 3 or 4 months as an intern at the radio where I can learn a lot, then take it from there – either become a journalist or a columnist or an idealist or start cryin coz I just wanna find some kind of place for myself in this shitty world. Coz I just cant find my own path here. I wish some bleedin prince on horseback would come and find me and say, 'Oh god Lidija! What are you doing in this town? I'll take you with me and show you the world and we'll get by on love and light and enjoy life!' Oh yeah.

And this mornin I wake up and think, Why get up? No ones comin lookin for me and Im interested in nothin right now and then I panic coz every time they come and visit, my grandparents say how bloody lonely they are and how bad it is. And then Lidija thinks, 'Help help, I dont want to be so lonely' and I panic. Even though loneliness doesnt bother me coz you gotta be able to put up with bein alone, gotta be able to come up with things on your own. And I think what Im writin is great but I can hardly get goin in the mornin and I think, 'Whos missin me?' That stupid clown, always with some banter at the ready, but nothin to back it up? Loads of dreams, nothing comes of any of em, nothin works out. Or have I just set my goals too high? And obviously Id like a man around, with me, someone I like as much as he likes me and we really like each other and its just him and me. But my stance is really that

you gotta like yourself and be content . . . as Rio put it – yeah, et voilà la misère: prospects are shitty, Lidija, coz if youre lookin this hard, youre going to be waitin a long long time.

Or should I think of other people apart from myself? Could be a different approach . . . But I need to get to know myself anyway. Find stability somewhere inside. At least summat in me thats always there. JUST ONE THING! Then I could cling onto that instead of clinging onto someone else, I dont want that. But a need, an issue, a thing if need be, summat inside that I can work on, summat that makes me forget to eat, get it? I need summat like that.

And I dont want to talk about it anymore. *Keep a secret.* And the nighttime. I love nights. Everything is different. Thats when I get the feelin Im takin my own path. But no, I gotta sleep so Im in shape for the day I don't actually want to spend doin what I gotta do. Be patient, Lidija, only 1 month more then 2 months off. The radio can shove it if they reckon Im comin in August – no chance, I need those 2 months.

Know what else I need?

Sex. I dream about it so much. With a woman last night. The way she looked at me . . . pure trust, pure love. Not just sex. Love, then . . . Not that I have a definition, but a feelin by which I just sense its there. And then sex, and what sex. Anyway, movin on. Better to go to work tomorrow, go worship Baumann a bit and crack some jokes, as if I hadnt written any of this.

Friday 14 August 2015 / 7.03 pm / Lucerne

Whichll be my last diary? *Please please*, not this one . . . Please, whoever's listenin to my thoughts and goin to decide on my death, *dont let this be the last one*. Even if I often feel grotty and sometimes – really very rarely – think of topping myself, I love bein alive. OK.

Went to the trauma seminar today. Dreamt I got there late. Sometimes I get the feelin my role is to be out and about, meetin strangers, listenin to their stories and then tellin them to other people. Had an encounter today that moved me to tears and I hugged two total strangers. Hugged them.

After the course today I went down to the lake, to do some writin, then walked around and sat down on a bench next to this old couple . . . Is this seat free, I ask. 'Yes, and if your sweetheart comes along, theres room for him too.' And then the old, nice-looking man starts tellin me about all the mountains around us, and his wife, such a pretty old woman, keeps lookin at me and givin these sweet laughs. And then I tried to repeat the names of the mountains, pointed to the Säntis and got so worked up I couldnt remember it woz the Pilatus for hells sake and felt ashamed of myself: 'Ah, now Im annoyed, you only told me a couple of minutes ago.' And he puts his hand on mine and says in this really calm voice, 'It doesn't matter.' I immediately shut my gob.

'You know, Im actually English,' he said with a British accent. 'I came to Switzerland in '56, to Lucerne, and then I met her and weve been married for nearly 60 years and still in love', and she pats him on the back and says, 'What you talking about?' And then we start chattin about all kinds of things and how the first Migros opened in Lucerne back then and she woz workin in the bistro and he came in and said hed like a PINEAPPAPPLE juice and she laughed and he went, 'Know what, my heart just went like this', pointin to his heart, how its poundin, 'and I couldnt speak a word of German. And if I may say so, shes the first and only woman Ive known, never had a girlfriend or nothing before . . . my only one. A lucky devil is what I am.' And she puts her arms around him as she stands there – shed got up from the bench (think she woznt comfortable sittin down for so long). Even then I tried to pull myself together coz I felt I woz going to start bawlin again and looked away a bit, lucky I had my sunnies on, the promenade full of people and a nice evenin vibe. 'We sometimes sit here for a while, just watching, I could sit here for a month watchin people I dont know.' They said they were glad to still be livin in their flat and not in a home. Coz they didnt want to go into a home and the only thing naggin him is 'We dont see our grandchildren so much – theyre young, with their own lives, we understand that, but Id like more and we found out yesterday a babys on its way, in March – a great-grandson! I hope we live to see it.' And then he moves a little closer. 'Can I ask you a question? What do you think is the most important thing in life?' Thought about this: 'Relationships . . . love . . . being healthy . . .' – 'No . . . the most important thing is being content, or all the rest isnt worth a thing.' And then it tore me apart . . . couldnt hold back my tears no more coz thats my problem, not bein able or wantin to be content with EVERYTHING I have (not even material things but immaterial things). I burst into tears and he said, 'Havin a little blub, love? – and his wife steps forward: 'Yes, look, shes havin a little blub.' – 'Oh, you mustnt cry. And through my tears: 'Sure, but youre so touchin,' I says apologetically, and he puts his arm round me and gives me a tissue of course and the two of them look at me so lovinly and kindly and I couldnt stand it. And he comforts me: 'There are good people . . . there are . . . You know, we get on with other people, I dont care where they come from, there are good people . . .'

Him 85, her 87, his names Tony with a Y and hers is Ruth, used to be called Ruthy but those days are long gone, she said, and we talked a lot more. And when we got up to say goodbye, he gave me such a lovin hug, such an old man, and she did too . . . I walk away and then I hear him callin, 'Lidija!' And I turn round, walk back to them, he goes, 'Not goin to give me your number then?' And then we really did swap numbers . . . Oh Tony! He says, 'Youre a good lass. On my wavelength, you are.' Im so tired from talkin, touchin. Need some sleep.