

THE SEA REMEMBERS

Reading a landscape, according to Roland Barthes, means first of all perceiving it with the body and the memory – with the memory of the body. So childhood is the best way to get to know a country. In the end there is really only one country: the country of childhood.

LANDSCAPE AND HISTORY

My journey to the northeast followed a wide arc into the unknown, to Bad Polzin, the place of my birth according to my passport, now in Poland with a name unfamiliar to my ear: Połczyn Zdrój. No memories of it clinging to my mind's eye.

The child was just six months old when she lay in her baby carriage sharing space with a briefcase containing certificates, a few photos, bread, dried ham and tea for setting off with. Anything else? Nothing else. They were hard times. We kept looking ahead, mother said.

But where we come from must mean something, mustn't it? Something that happened not quite by chance at least. Thinking of it bears the heavy burden of what is inaccessible and strange. Where were you born? The other children asked me at school. In the land where the Pollacks come from? You know, like Grabowski the coal dealer, who's always talking about his neighbor, saying "Czerwinski say to I..." Dunno, said the child, stubbornly denying. Border guards. Travel ban. The Gap of not knowing.

It is said that there is a cell-memory, that cell water is laden with powers heavy with meaning, that there are traces of memory stored in it, measured and mapped, that go far back and are seeking the way back to physical experience. Even if something is detected through the veil of what has been lost or never possessed, perhaps that is more like an invention? How can we ever trust our memory? On the other hand, the sea remembers, but does not invent anything. Instead it ceaselessly shifts the tongue of land that forms its rim. That is why I was going to the sea, to the Baltic, practically an inland sea between Scandinavia, Russia, the Baltic countries, Poland, Germany and Denmark, with no tide to speak of, reaching from Swinemünde (Świnoujście) along the Stettiner Haff (Zalew Szczeciński) to Stettin (Szczecin) and beyond via Schivelbein (Świdwin) and Bad Polzin to Kolberg (Kołobrzeg).

Mother said you should not speak as you feel but as you remember. But she did not abide by it herself. Everything will be as it should be anyway, she always said. The sun would bring it all to light. What was the child to make of that, intimidated by the mythical supreme power of the heavenly bodies?

Later I read Albert von Chamisso's poem about the treacherous murder of a Jew

The ravens gather cawing more and more
Towards the gallows to cram their maws
Who are they breaking on the wheel at this hour?
What has he done? How was it known?
It was the sun that brought it to light.

At school I had read poems by Mörike, Goethe, Eichendorff, Fontane and Storm. But singing folksongs was rare. I learned some of them on car trips with my father. A few years later the radio was playing Country, Folk, and Rock'n Roll. Elvis and Bill Haley – "the one with the swing of the hips,

the other with his kiss-curl.” My parents thought they were only a passing fad. But what we did have in common was a strong bond with nature. Mother’s eyes shone sometimes as she told me about how she had swum free of her mother’s strict prohibitions, about secret trips to the lakes, to the Buchholzsee (Bukowiec), and about going to the sea to swim.

Father laughed a lot, she told me, before the war. He was an adventurer who loved to travel, delighted in baroque and romantic landscapes, and carried Hofmannsthal’s writings within him from his Austrian home: *Everything we experience takes on a strangeness in memory that approaches the condition of dreaming; calling it to mind again both attracts and repels us – life and death are mixed in it like saltwater and freshwater...*

He was born in Karlsbad (Karlovy Vary), just above where the River Tepl (Teplá) joins the Eger, near Theresienstadt (Terezín) in the heart of the Bohemian Forest, not far from the Krkonoše Mountains. Was I as a child supposed to feel protected by “Rübezahl”, the spirit of the Sudeten mountains, or be afraid of him? Of his big nose and strong arms? There is a black-and-white photo of father standing with his lute next to another musician. During his student days, he roamed through the forests, my mother told me. Attracted by the social-romantic ideas of the “Wandervogel” movement, with the songs of “Zupfgeigenhansl” in his pocket. The youth movement: breaking free of the old bourgeois relics. I liked this story. Years later my father played music with me, accompanying me on the guitar. His fingers were awkward on the instrument’s strings, his left wrist, left rigid by a bullet, paddling bizarrely and oddly. His voice was husky, somehow reserved.

Two bullets had lodged in his back, too close to his spine to be taken out. Until 1943 he was exempt from military service, responsible instead for building and repairing the airfields from Kołobrzeg to Warsaw. His short stint at thirty-one as a soldier on the Eastern front ended when he was shot in the stomach. For a long time he wore a metal plate over his abdomen, and for the rest of his life a disabled veteran’s identification card in his wallet.

He died at the age of eighty-six from the side effects of an operation to fix a hernia caused by his war wounds. On his sickbed, he had fevered hallucinations that Russian soldiers were landing in a helicopter on the hospital grounds. In his eyes shone the anguish of unlimited freedom. And sometimes he smiled quietly to himself. The next moment he would be bursting with energy, with a hunger for life. He seemed to have faith that everything would be all right. And yet his mind was full of worries until the very end. I had to let him go.

How delighted he was to catch sight of me in the hospital hallway, coming closer and closer. And when I laid chestnuts in his hands. To see such a feeling of happiness in him – that reminded me of my own childhood.

ON WHITE UNLINED PAGES THE WORD *KATASTROPHE*

Mother told me how she wandered aimlessly around the forest with her child in one arm and a suitcase in the other hand, experiencing an abstruse feeling of freedom. How, later, she was at first reluctant to gradually reacquire drinking glasses and all the trappings of bourgeois existence. She found going shopping simply grotesque, while my father would dream of roasts, of biting into the meat so that the fat would run down from the corners of his mouth.

After my mother died I found a small notebook among her papers. Her fluid handwriting with round characters on white, unlined pages. And on the cover over on the left edge beneath the name of the manufacturer “Glockenpost” transcribed in a kind of letter-forming exercise, the word *Katastrophe* as if to ascertain her story in its Greek meaning of disaster and turnaround.

Written forty-five years after the events of March forty-five. She wrote it all down when she was seventy-two, five years before her death, about a time when she was twenty-seven.

At Christmastime in 1944 we were still all at home at my parents' house. Richard had come from Kolberg. My brother Gerhard had a few days' leave from the front. There was an air of gloom despite the Christmas festivities, which Mother had always celebrated so beautifully with a Christmas tree, lots of Christmas cookies and delicious meals. Refugees from East Prussia with horse-carts were streaming through the town, and we were thinking about where on earth we would be able to go when the Russians got closer to Pomerania ... On the 5th of March, 1945, we set off. Taking just the bare necessities, we climbed into the carts early in the morning. We had hardly had a wink of sleep the night before. We could hear the explosions nearby, and everyone in the village was getting their wagons ready to leave ... There was chaos on the roads. When we finally got going, the fully-laden wagons got stuck in the mud. So we lost even more time until each wagon had been laboriously dragged from the softened earth and put back on the road. When we started off again, a postman came by on his bicycle from the next village, just a few kilometers away. He was shocked that we hadn't left yet and told us that the Russians were already in the next town. In the dawn light we could see in the distance the bright glare of burning houses in the nearby villages, a ghastly feeling – would we make it, or would we be overtaken by the Russians? That's what we were afraid of. Earlier, we had gone through my sister Johanna's house again. We had to leave everything behind: the fine furniture, the linen, the neat house, everything. It was the same with our whole family ... my entire family lost everything...

We traveled day and night. We could not make any stops because the Russians were so close behind us. The horses were frequently completely exhausted and we had nothing to eat, only the meager supplies we had taken with us in the wagon ...

After pushing on for three days and nights, we reached the market square in Anklam in the evening. People came out of their houses, wanting to help us and put us up. I was taken in by a young couple and was given a bed in the attic, but it was warm and I got something to eat as well...

Next morning the trek continued on its journey. There was no way I could get back onto the cold open wagon with a sick child ...

Then the man had an idea. He worked at Anklam airfield and had heard that a truck with a trailer was supposed to be leaving there in the morning to take children evacuated from Hamburg back home via Malchin. He would arrange for me to go with them. I was overjoyed ... So next morning my host took me and my child to the airfield in his official car. The truck was already there. A few women with children were there too, as well as a young officer, who was wounded and wanted to go on the truck as well. My host negotiated with the people and I was loaded onto the truck with the baby carriage. I thanked him and we set off, but we didn't get very far. The truck was soon stopped and everyone had to get out. Only the officer was allowed to stay on the truck. Evidently, it had been confiscated for the use of evacuated children only. I refused to step down. I had a sick child, and where was I supposed to go, out here in the middle of nowhere? Then the trailer with my one suitcase containing the little I possessed was unhitched

Her notes broke off there. The narrative continued to write itself.

As soon as we become aware of ourselves as people, our unsuspecting eye yearns to grasp the land unknown, prepares to take over the land. Along shoreline estuaries and island mountain ranges. What should be included, and what should be chosen? How are we to fit in? Where is our place between the past and the future? On the spool of growth rings. In unending conversation between repressed memories and condensed experiences: where are we, where do we come from? Layered histories. Told stories. Variations on sequences that are evermore similar. In meanings and interpretations that will never be exhausted. From the circularity of experience to insight into what cannot be explained.

Then there were all those Sundays spent in Pomeranian meetings of the expellees' associations. The child was bored. Research into the fates of missing family members, friends and acquaintances subsided in the end. But it was now possible to describe with some certainty the circumstances under which my grandfather and uncle had been shot. What could not be ascertained was put to rest. Many official papers had been lost. Witnesses had come together to file official applications for "Lastenausgleich", a process of trying to equally distribute what had been lost.

How I would have loved to have taken Mother with me on my first belated journey to the land of my birth. How I would have loved to hear her talk about the beach, the dunes, the pines, the sand and the birches. I would have loved to know which paths she liked best to walk along, what she would have wanted to tell me about the clouds and what she wished for.

I never asked her, because I never knew what to ask. I had no image in my mind of the market square, the manor house, the castle, St. Mary's church, and of their own home on Bismarckstrasse. She had buried those images. Part of her remained unknown to me.

THE OVERLAY OF IMAGES

Amazing the ceaseless energy to rebuild again and again the world set in ruins. Heavy manual labor. Difficult mental work. We collect, sort, re-collate and reconstitute in documentaries, photographs and other images from archives. The layering-over of pictures. The geological shifting of layers of the earth. The forced migrations of peoples. The resettling and relocation, expulsion, and waves of ethnic cleansing. The stateless and the fatherless. The excluded, the lawless. The dispossessed outlaws. In Europe the streams of migrants from the east and the south. Asylum seekers, emigrants and refugees. The culture of miscegenation, ambiguities and multilingualism in Eastern and Central Europe. And today the hour of the modern nomads in the global world: often obeying necessity, more or less adaptable and in the best sense curiously emancipatory, mobile and eager for inspiration.

In the ever-changing natural world, it is not the future but the past that seems infinite. A past that is like the universe unlimited and yet has a beginning?

We have learned to live this paradox, insofar as the time - as we feel and experience it - seems to frame space and charges it with power by this setting of limits.

This is why we circle around the place where we began, hoping to recognize something strangely familiar there, and the forces working in us. How unlike this are the shifting sand dunes, slowly advancing in a certain prevailing wind direction. This can be measured. In Poland they are advancing between ten and twenty meters a year.

On yellowed black and white the photographs. As if on the dark steps with the memory also the color returns. A group of young girls, happily walking along the beach in bathing suits, the sea in the background. And above them the later voices of the schoolchildren mocking the refugee child.

May beetle fly
Your father's gone to war,
Your mother is in Pommerland,
Pommerland is all burnt down
May beetle fly!

The child ignores the song as if it had nothing to do with her. Later she found out that these lines come from a nursery rhyme dating from the Thirty Years' War, from that catastrophic event of the 17th century when the land was devastated by hordes of mercenaries and imperial troops and occupied by the Swedes. It was not the first time Pommerland had been all burnt down.

The sea does not invent anything. The shifting sand dunes remain untouched by the inner voice saying: you are not really yourself until you bring your memories to life. You must consciously remember. And remembering means first connecting your early days with this one particular place.

Recording the geography of cell-memory in this way: reconstructing what has been passed down in what is still here, interpreting it and assimilating it to yourself and time. Because otherwise it would mean that: if you do not know where you come from, you follow the wisdom of the wind.

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