

Translated excerpt

Per Leo
Flut und Boden
Roman einer Familie

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Per Leo
Flood and soil

Translated by Robert Brambeer



The celebrations, which have all condensed into one long day in my memory, never felt festive. The overwhelming feeling was that of caution. My father's eldest sister, the omnipresent W36, was especially intimidating. (I had to be an adult to appreciate her). Whatever you happened to be doing, she could give you the feeling that there was still plenty more to do to make the important day a success. Driven by ambition, resigned to a role of court mistress of ceremonies, she demonstrated how irreplaceable she was again and again. She constantly gave instructions as if merely making suggestions, although they were indeed orders, offered suitable topics and tidbits into conversations she didn't participate in as she walked by, manoeuvred cake and bowl-carrying bodies through the house, heard a final concert recital, clapped her hands and called everyone to dinner. And then she arranged herself. Looked one last time in the mirror, smoothed her brow with her finger, straightened her collar, tried on two or three faces and then breezed through the door into the living room where the company was already sitting. During the meal, she seemed to vanish, but this was only because she knew how to divert glances with the force of her silence. Then suddenly she was back, and everyone else fell silent. With a slowness that dragged on for what seemed like ages, as if awakening from a deep beauty sleep, she graciously smiled, reminded those assembled at the table why they were assembled there, raised her wine glass and expressed her gratitude to her parents from the "bottom of her heart". She never said what she was thanking them for. The honoured elders received the toast with a rather stony expression. Then grandmother lowered her eyelids, nodded sadly and acknowledged the almost superhuman tension of her eldest child with a look that said, yes, dear W36, if only they were all like you, I could also take joy in you.

The grandparents sat in their customary place on the sofa with the green-felt upholstery, directly beneath the oval photo framed with pink flowers of W38 as her parents were determined to remember her. Not as the child who had likely gone the furthest astray, but certainly the most beautiful of their six children. They say that several months before she killed herself, she was seen in front of her parents' house with a gun – one of those dreamlike rumours which are ridiculous in that they're accepted as absolutely true in a setting of half-spun incidents. How could she do this to us, grandfather supposedly said at the funeral.

Even down in the fruit garden along the river promenade, which you could reach via serpentine steps made of boards jammed into the sand, you were never free of the observing eyes of the house. Yet it was a splendid place. With old trees on the embankment behind you, sticking your hand through the wrought-iron gate that led to the Weser, which was locked by a heavy chain, you could almost feel your fingers getting wet. On the riverbank hilltop there was a bunker from the world war that smelled like damp earth and had since been so shuttered up, you couldn't see the walls anymore, but just feel the bricks. The real reason we kids ventured to the farthest reaches of the property was not because we were exploring or taking walks. We were sent away on errands the grown-ups had painstakingly devised to keep us busy: getting some fresh air until lunch, checking how ripe the plums were getting, collecting a basket full of tangerine-sized walnuts from the trees on the embankment, keeping our cousins company, with whom we had nothing in common than being sent out to play in the garden.

Between the street and the house was a hall called the "Storerroom". The high ceilings, which hadn't been suspended like the rooms inside the house, and the dark panelled walls, spoke of a time when the inhabitants of the house knew how to put its size to use. My grandparents used the

Storeroom literally as a storage room, and only every few years was it allowed to fulfil its original purpose as the scene of a large party seated around a long table of coffee and cake.

My great-great grandmother's porcelain service supposedly contained 48 place settings. Whenever the entire set was used, the door of the house stood open all day long. If someone had wanted to wipe out all of the dignitaries in Bremen's port district of Vegesack in one fell swoop, detonating a bomb in the dining room at Weserstrasse 84 on such an occasion would have done the trick. One hundred years later, a party-time explosion in the same room would have only wiped out an entire gene pool. My grandparents didn't actually invite anyone to the party; they simply announced the date to the family. Declining was not an option. My mother discovered this first-hand when she tried explaining why the trip would represent unreasonable hardship for us after having moved 800 kilometres away.

The significance of the party was not only apparent by the number of guests, but also the degrees of kinship present. At Easter and Christmas, the parties were usually celebrated with only the children and grandchildren, but on round birthdays and anniversaries, everyone showed up – siblings, nephews, nieces, cousins of the grandparents, many of whom I'd never seen before. When shadows of twilight fell on such a company, everyone inevitably began to sing.

There was no other moment I feared more at these family celebrations, but there was no other moment more enticing. While all the other expectations the house invoked felt like a fog you could stumble through for days on end, the sing-along was a real obligation. If there was any tradition religiously upheld in this family, then it was the singing. I knew this because I refused to keep it. An invincible sense of shame hindered me from joining the familial sing-along. No cajoling, no scolding, no disappointed looks, no fatherly

displeasure could change my mind. I knew the price of freedom only came with the shame of failing. And with the guilt of betrayal. The collective disappointment weighed heavily on me, and it was impossible to walk away from the battle with any expectations of winning. But that didn't mean there was nothing to gain. I knew what I didn't want – namely, to bond with these strangers in song, but I also knew what I did want. I wanted to listen to my father's family sing.

The first song was pure torture. W36 looked at the guests, exchanged glances with the leaders of the second and third part, so that she could take them all on the only journey they could take together, a journey that would lead them away from reality – the longer, the further. The further, the closer. While the voices rose to the cathedral ceiling, I caught the severe look in my father's eyes, then I felt his hand squeezing my arm. I could hear my own silence. Between the first and second song, my father's displeasure was still menacing, but I knew his resistance would soften if I could only hold out until the third song. And then I was free. And I heard something that didn't fit with anything I knew about these people. How much forgetting was contained in this incredible harmony! How much understanding, how much accommodation, how much intimacy in this confident polyphony! What knowledge of things lost whose finality could only be endured in moments like these when forgetting came with remembering – how melancholic the refrain. I don't mean to say that I was consciously aware of this as I slipped out of sight beneath the low-hanging table cloth of the long coffee table. But I did feel the poison of romanticism. I sensed the heath. The landscape where grandfather found his wife. The world where my father came from.

*No country more beautiful in this time,
as ours here, both far and near,
where we happily meet,*

*beneath the linden trees,
at eventide*

Naturally, it's a coincidence that the only place I was able to passionately sing in public without feeling ashamed was just a few kilometres upstream in a different building on the same bank of the same river. It was when my friend Sven Waas took me to the east stands of the Weser Stadium – April 12th, 1985, the day after my grandfather's 77th birthday. With no place to sit in the upper stands, it seemed like a step down because whenever we went with a father or uncle to a Werder game, we always got a seat. Twenty years would pass before I'd be sitting here again, myself now one of the men who buy children tickets to instil that sense of community in them. Because this is what happened. Long before the game began, and without a moment's hesitation, I joined the thousand-person chorus singing freely and at the top of its voice just to be heard. It hit me with the force of a sudden revelation. I always knew how hard it was to resist singing in a collective at Weserstrasse. What was new to me at the Weser Stadium was that the feeling of obligation was also accompanied by a sense of responsibility. It would have been utterly negligent if I hadn't participated in belting out those chants. Comparing football chants with church hymns is anything but blasphemous. Both are much more than just an expression – of a mood, a belief, a truth. They are actions, deeds that are meant to achieve good. Both are addressed to a higher power which has the ability to influence your personal well-being. And so on this glorious evening in April, our chants filled us (Werder fans and athletes alike) with confidence and strength. They honoured and prayed for a contract extension (Rudi Völler's after his 1:0). They instilled us with hope that strength wouldn't wane (Uwe Reinders' after biffing his penalty kick). They delivered scorn (to our opponents in particular, to the Bavarians

and HSV in general). They showered kudos (to the whole team after 2:0). They offered thanks (to the coach Otto Rehagel for the miracle he had performed there). And they pledged constancy and loyalty (to all that remains when we are no longer):

Werder Brem', Werder Brem', Werder Brem'
(melody: *Here we go, here we go ...*)
Werder Brem', Werder Brem', Werder Bre-men
Werder Brem', Werder Brem', Werder Brem'
O Werder Bremen, o Wer-der Brem'!

I took each and every one of these chants back with me on the tram to Vegesack, back home to Munich, to my Latin classes, to the tennis court, to the radio conference following the final game of the season when it became evident that Bavaria would be champion – again. They were the exact opposite of the songs in the Storeroom. I'd look forward to the chants in the Weser Stadium weeks in advance, at the latest on the Osterdeich listening to the drumbeat of the moving masses, when the glare of the white floodlights shone over to us, there was no stopping them. They had to get out. Now they would count. The next challenge awaited us, and with joyful pride, we set out to accomplish it. I suppressed the thought of singing at Weserstrasse, however, until the last moment. And when it began, I resigned myself to it, I endured the drone until its sound finally carried me away. Staring at the shoes of my relatives, I was embarrassed, but also amazed to discover beauty here of all places.

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Nonetheless, he asked to come in.

At the border, he answered the guard's questions as tersely as possible. He looked intimidated, his voice quavered and he couldn't respond with even a slightly malicious tone. He was floundering in the situation. I, on the other hand, was pumped full of adrenaline. The camera! I couldn't believe I hadn't thought about it during the entire ride. In the inner compartment of my Ricoh, between the flip mirror and an old, developed film, I had hidden ten folded blue bills. One thousand East German marks, money for all the treasures I wanted to buy and that I'd promised my friends to bring home. That was also one of the reasons I had come along: the chance to splurge on cultural goods that cost next to nothing. I planned to return with sheet music by Bach, Handel, Beethoven, Tchaikovsky and Scriabin, books by any Russian authors I could find, records by Okudshawa and Vysotsky, if possible a large-format camera, and of course, everything for a black-and-white photo lab, ORWO photo paper in green, blue and red, each in glossy, matt and satin-matt, plastic trays, developers and fixers. I think I'd exchanged a few hundred West German deutschmarks, I can't remember exactly how much, but I do remember the stern expression on the face of the bank officer in Munich.

"You're not allowed to take this in with you, you know that, don't you?" he grumbled.

I claimed I needed the banknotes as a prop for a play, but of course, he was only doing his duty. Technically speaking, it did amount to smuggling, I knew that, and the hiding place was pretty good.

But until the border guard started getting down to business, I had never wasted a thought on the psychology of smuggling. I hadn't taken the GDR very seriously. And now this guy was acting as if he were truly looking for something contraband. I seriously asked myself whether he had been tipped off somehow. But if he was only trying to harass us, he was doing good job. He asked my father to step out of the car. He and the guard disappeared from view behind the open lid of the trunk for several minutes, and then even longer in the border patrol booth. The windows were draped closed so I couldn't tell what was going on inside. When my father returned, he was as a white as a sheet. I seem to remember beads of perspiration on his temple, which is not improbable, because he tended to sweat easily. But I do know that he drove into the GDR very, very slowly, like into the car wash he treated his car to every other week. Once we were back on the autobahn, he sped up again, but only gingerly, because he apparently didn't want to get even close to the 100 km/h speed limit. I asked him if he had drunk a cup of coffee with the border guard. He didn't find it amusing. Then hoping to brighten his spirits, I told him about the hidden money. That certainly woke him up. He was shaking with rage. I had hardly ever heard him scream. Now he screamed. I knew that only a part of his fury was directed at me. But still, there was plenty of it for me to realize how very imprudent it was to risk our entire trip just to buy some things. But apparently, that wasn't all. Maybe he needed to blow off some steam too.

"We're visiting our family in the East for the first time, and you're only thinking about going shopping? Do you even realize that they need our gifts much more than you need your damn photo paper? You know, we might have had to turn around, don't you? Do you realize that the Dresdeners might have gotten into big trouble because of it? Boy oh boy, it seems you still don't understand how damn lucky you are! You live in a

democratic country, and you just imagine the world as you like it to be. *That* is something you have to earn. Dammit, you are so much like your mother, as long as you're having fun, who cares about the relatives!"

There were two forms of luck for my father. Both seemed to play no role in his life, yet all the more in mine. Luck was something that either I possessed, but didn't appreciate, which gave him the right to admonish me. Or it was something I didn't possess, which gave him the right to make it happen for me. The fact that he brought up the subject of luck – and at such an impressive volume – revealed that this wasn't going to be any ordinary visit with relatives. It took me a while to recollect the purpose of our trip again. I could still hear the echo of our explosive arrival in the so-called Eastern Bloc. Staring out the window, I concentrated hard on bringing my knowledge of communism into line with what I was seeing. The gigantic fields. Might they have something to do with Marx? I asked my father. But he wasn't speaking to me.

It was already dark when we arrived in Dresden. Surprisingly, the lighting hardly changed when we entered the city. The street lamps emitted a dreary, weak and vain light, as if they wouldn't tolerate any other light. It immersed the entire city in an ember-like glow which revealed just enough of the houses, cars and streets to prevent collisions. The scenery resembled a dream to such an extent that I wasn't at all surprised when a monstrous silhouette of an oriental palace rose in the distance. And then the Elbe appeared at our left, wide and black. We were supposed to follow it, C. had written. The street seemed to take us through the center of town. Walls and buildings, which you could sense were old, rose up on either side of us. Didn't anyone go out at night? There were hardly any pedestrians in sight, and we were practically the only ones who were waiting at the traffic lights. The few cars we saw all looked the

same – small, sandy-colored and ridiculously useful. Our red Mercedes couldn't have been more conspicuous had we constantly blared our horn and held Helmut Kohl posters out the windows. I felt that our mere presence was incredibly tactless. I half expected a police officer to stop us at any moment and ask to see our permit to breathe. But we weren't doing anything but driving to our relative's house in a car that we happened to own. And that was turning out to be easier said than done. We had been driving straight for a long while when we suddenly came to a fork in the road. C. hadn't mentioned this in his letter. My father instinctively continued along the Elbe, but Schillerplatz simply didn't want to appear. It seemed strange to me, so I suggested finding a pedestrian to ask directions. My father differed.

"Don't worry, we'll find it."

Yeah, right, I thought, tomorrow morning at the latest, C. is going to call the police and report his Western relatives missing. Little M42 and little Per in a fire-red Mercedes with a Munich license plate. But somehow we made it.

We hadn't opened the windows even a crack since we had crossed the border. Now as we got out, I felt like Neil Armstrong. But only for a brief moment, because then I was overpowered by a pungent smell that I couldn't make out.

"What is that?" I asked my father, fanning the air with my fingers.

"Lignite. Never smelled it before, huh?"

A smile flitted across his face.

The house was located on a quiet intersection. For socialist standards, it seemed incredibly large, but didn't feel intimidating. A quaint set of stairs led up to the front door under a roofed porch. My father rang the bell. We stood there for a long time in the burnt-orange night and waited. Then the door opened. We were met by a young man who was maybe 17 years old.

While I struggled to remember his name, he spread out his arms like a pastor blessing his

congregation and cried "Welcome!" in a rather loud and overly articulate way. It startled me. This greeting sounded like...like what? Like from a different era? A different language? In any case, it was shockingly out of place. I hadn't anticipated such strange customs. So what now? I tried arrogance. Take a look at that, I thought, while S. was vigorously shaking my hand. So that's what they look like, these well-mannered boys you hear about, they really do exist, interesting. Luckily I didn't get any farther than that. Before the coolness took complete possession of me, the parents suddenly appeared behind my supposed rival. The man was not especially tall, a bit on the stout side with thinning hair carefully combed back, and after warmly embracing us, kept smiling and nodding his head thoughtfully, murmuring "mmh, hmm", which seemed to indicate general pleasure. The short woman donning a Mireille Mathieu hairdo, pulled us into the house, and with astonishing efficiency, slipped off our jackets as if we were two rascals who had stayed out for too long and now urgently needed a bath. My father hadn't seen his cousin for almost thirty years, I didn't know any of these people, but gathering from how they behaved, it was obvious that we were indeed welcome. They seemed truly delighted at our visit. I don't know what else I should have expected, but definitely not that. All of sudden, Munich was millions of miles away. It struck me that these were also Leos. I tried to connect them with Uncle Martin, the old, hunched man with the smooth face and sun spots. I couldn't do it.

The door was closed.

The boat we had boarded had started its motor.

We were chugging ahead into the heart of the GDR.

There were two rooms in the house, through which our hosts led us, which made a particularly strong impression on me. The first was the realm where S. lived. If my mockery hadn't been nipped in the bud after his effusive welcome, it certainly

would have died here as S. opened his door. With no obtrusiveness, only quiet, unassuming pride, Martin's grandson showed us his model ship workshop. For that's what the room was. There was no evidence of work or strenuous effort here, but only an aura of loving care which lay over the tools, building materials and unfinished models. There wasn't a thread to be found which hadn't been destined to be wound on a windlass, no cigar box which would serve any other purpose than to be a hull, no piece of sheet metal which could be anything but a paddle wheel.

The hardest thing, S. told us, was finding glossy paints. I was ashamed. We'd only taken coffee, chocolate and kiwis with us in our luggage.

The other room, whose appearance I will always associate with the GDR, was a small guest room in the cellar. Apples, motor oil, cool air and damp cement had created a scent that only old masonry could retain.

My father's bed lay in shadowy darkness; his eyes were already closed. A feeble, yellow light eked from my reading lamp. I heard the clatter of a two-stroke engine approach on the street outside, the headlights flashed through the cabin-like window, and then it was quiet again. I couldn't help thinking about my mother and my sister and wondered whether they were as like-minded and yet so utterly different as me and my father. Probably not. If I were lying in my own bed, I certainly wouldn't have felt so content at that moment. I knew that my mind would be wandering around the city, to the catastrophic tennis match last Wednesday, to the party in Bogenhausen to which I wasn't invited, to Markus who was probably writing or composing again, to Sabine whose face kept escaping my memory. . But right now, there was really no space in my head for such thoughts; I was so overwhelmed by this unknown country and the surprising warmth that surrounded me in this strange house.

I thought about the late supper they had served us. The sausage hadn't tasted half bad, and the only difference between Radeberger beer and Augustiner was that I didn't have to drink it secretly.

The conversation was a bit off-kilter at first. My father might have perceived the situation very differently than I, but I'm sure that at some deeper level, we were thinking the same thing. We both were strongly aware of being in the GDR. Is it any wonder? Something that had long existed as an idea, as a difference of categorical import, required a little time to become real. It was no different than when a boy on his first date keeps thinking: a girl, awesome, a girl, only me and a girl! On the surface, our conversation was completely normal, we said this and that, but in our heads we were watching the evening news. My father probably thought, damned police state, and I was thinking fascinating Soviet empire, and both of us were thinking, look at them, our Eastern relatives. Then the moment came when my father suddenly felt inclined to snitch on me. He didn't tell them about the East German marks, but it still felt like a belated revenge when he told these poor souls, who had been oppressed by the proletarian dictatorship, that his son still clung to illusions about socialism. Of course, it was true to some extent. But my views were mostly apolitical. The word "socialism" simply had a nice, full-bodied ring to it. Leftist zeitgeist, dreams of youth, philosophical gravity, profound loathing toward Hoeness, Strauss and Kohl...it expressed all of this. But most of all, it evoked the desire for Russia, and yes, even its present form as the Soviet Union. Yet I felt I had to deny it.

"Not socialism. Marxism!" I said in embarrassment. As if that made any difference.

But none of them discussed it further. The need for their Western cousin to perform a show of political solidarity didn't seem to surprise them. So they let it happen, probably hoping the hysteria

would pass, and confident that they had more to offer than their existence in a rogue state. Indeed, they did. I can't remember how the subject came up, but soon S. asked his father to read the poem "Reschedrubbe" that he'd written as a young man. C. obliged, and when all we could do was laugh at his sharp-witted, yet completely harmless wordplays, we found ourselves sitting across from three normal people. Kind-hearted people, who modestly possessed something we didn't have. I couldn't put my finger on it, but it was undoubtedly there, and I was sure that nothing and nobody could ever take it away from them.