

Translated excerpt

**Christiane Hoffmann**  
***Alles, was wir nicht erinnern.***  
***Zu Fuß auf dem Fluchtweg meines Vaters***

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**Christiane Hoffmann**  
***All the things we no longer remember. Retracing the***  
***steps of my fleeing father***

Translated by John Reddick



pray ye that your flight be not in the winter  
*Matthew 24.20*

Deciding to flee is the last and most radical decision  
that anyone can take in their life.  
*Aleida Assmann*

I leave just before eight in the morning. A bare few steps, and the village already lies behind me with its houses - some grey, some coloured, some abandoned; some containing a growing family, others a forlorn old woman - and its resplendent church tower and its barns with their fallen roofs. The village stays put, as it has so often stayed put, silent, humble, and full of pity for all the people forced to leave for God knows where.

A stone angel gives me his blessing, the village sign with its rickety legs and its red edging all askew offers a crooked smile, 'Różyna' - the village's name - struck through from bottom left to top right to inform me I'm crossing the boundary: suddenly I'm out on the road on my own, under instant attack from the wind.

Clouds lower over the sweeping landscape like a vast grey blanket, a strip of blue showing only on the distant horizon where the peaks of the Giant Mountains touch the sky. The ash trees by the side of the road lean southwards; in their bare branches, clumps of mistletoe that look like fire-blackened Christmas-tree baubles.

The weather is mild for the end of January.

When you all set off back then the road to Lossen was deep in snow, the air ice-cold - twenty degrees colder than now, for sure. At around five in the afternoon it must already have turned dark. You could hear the thud of Soviet guns firing across the Oder behind you; ‘the Russians’ as you always used to say.

The rumbling of the guns beyond the Oder had become audible several days earlier. The war was approaching the village in the form of noise, a thunderous, ever louder roar from beyond the river, like a gigantic beast, a mighty dragon raging in fury on the opposite bank and kept at bay only by the narrow ribbon of the Oder. The bridges had been blown up by the Wehrmacht just the day before.

‘When we heard the Russians firing across the Oder’ was one of your mantras. Apart from that you remembered almost nothing.

I began asking questions even as a child, but by then more than three decades had already passed and your memory had congealed like the scab on an old wound; the truth of what had happened lay hidden beneath the impenetrable crust of your never-changing patter. I asked and asked, but the story you told was always the same: how in the rush to leave you forgot the upper half of your sailor-suit, the white tunic-top plus navy-blue collar that was Sunday-best for boys in the peasant villages of Silesia. It was new, you were nine, you’d had it for Christmas but never worn it, and it was still there, you said, lying under the Christmas tree in the parlour.

The sailor suit, the Russians, the Oder: that was all I ever got out of you. But I’ve read up a lot since then and talked to other people, and scrap by scrap I’ve put together a picture of that day, the 22nd of January 1945. It was a Monday.

I now know more than you yourself ever did. I know that two days earlier, on the Saturday evening, a motorised column of Wehrmacht soldiers had arrived in the village and billeted themselves in the farms along the village street. You boys were sledging on the Kirchberg but came dashing back to yank the soldiers’ heavy packs to their billets on your sleds.

On Sunday the rumbling grew louder. After church the adults stood around in huddles in the snow-covered street anxiously discussing whether they were going to

have to flee. Fear invaded the meagre dwellings, where the womenfolk wept at night over their fallen husbands and prayed for their missing sons.

On Monday morning the Wehrmacht column abruptly left the village, as if in flight, unsettling the entire population. The Scholzes had packed up the previous day and wanted to leave at once, but Schütz, the mayor and a loyal member of the Party, stood at the exit from the village with his pistol cocked and refused to let anyone out. It was not until four in the afternoon that the order came to quit the village within the hour, Schütz now dashing from farm to farm to spread the news.

Your mother had scarcely even begun to gather up the bare essentials, there was so much to do, and here she was, stuffing bedding into grain sacks and filling a crate with oats for the horses. People grabbed whatever their eyes happened to light on - a smoked ham left over from the last pig-slaughter, a couple of tools, the few bits of jewellery they possessed. Anyone without a conveyance of their own begged others to let them stack their possessions on their cart.

Your mother fetched the horses from the stable. The chestnut one had been conscripted into the Volkssturm along with your father just a few weeks before. Two horses were left at the farm, you said, one lame, the other one still young and never previously between the shafts. Hitching them up was beyond your mother. The sailor suit, the Russians, the Oder, the horses.

The thunder of the guns was becoming louder and louder. The dragon reared up over the village, spewing fire and scattering people in all directions; the air filled with noise, the earth shook, shells landed all around the houses and dug craters in the ice-hard fields. The panic as everyone rushed to leave seized the animals too, cows bellowed, dogs barked and tore at their chains, maids ran through the stables tipping feed in the troughs and scattering three days' grain for the chickens: you wouldn't be gone any longer than that, so they'd told you - you just needed to get out of the firing zone for a while.

It was getting dark. The horses were hitched up with the help of a neighbour, and your mother stuck her mother-in-law on the cart along with your uncle, who was as

lame as the horse. Lame horse, lame uncle: they used the same word for both. You yourself would be going on foot.

And so it came to pass in all this frantic haste, in the desperate rush to gather things together amidst the scorching hot air and the roar of the guns, that only half your sailor suit made it out of the village. The top half stayed behind and fell into the hands of the Russians, or else perhaps it was worn later on by a Polish child; for you, however, it was gone for ever.

The sailor suit; the Russians; the Oder; the horses. It was never you but other people that I heard in your incessantly repeated phrases; they were lifeless, alien clichés, a barrier that my questions never overcame. But even so I wanted to hear you tell your story again and again - the story about that moment of departure, that moment that changed everything, determined everything, and was the crucible that re-fashioned our family history. The sailor suit; the Russians; the Oder; the horses. Now it is me that will do the remembering on your behalf. I know more now than you ever did - but I still feel the urge to ask you, even now when it's no longer possible.

I had to wear protective clothing whenever I visited you. Pale yellow, the colour of watery snot, it lay ready on a shelf in the anteroom to the ward amidst plastic piping and single-use syringes. A nurse helped me to fasten the coverall at the back of my neck and waist, like an operating gown. It was disposable, and on leaving you had to dump it in a large bin in the corner. One day I forgot to, and out in the corridor a nurse immediately told me to be more careful in future.

The face mask, held in place by a piece of elastic that went around my head, reached right over my nose and had a thin metal strip at the top enabling it to be bent to the contours of my nose and thus shield my mouth more effectively. It was a good one-and-a-half years before the pandemic, so this was new to me. The rubber gloves were the worst thing. It was good to talk to you - but I had come to hold your hand.

The first day there I obeyed the rules, just as you'd both always taught me. I regret it now: I missed so many hours when I could have touched you. I had fallen short - again.

When my grandmother was still alive you adults sometimes sat around of an evening at her kitchen table - you and Mother, your brother Manfred and his wife, Grandma and her brothers and their sons, who were frequent visitors. Cigarette smoke and the smell of cheese from the open sandwiches filled the air; a lamp, the wire shade of which Mother had adorned with a fabric showing flowers against a murky brown background, gave out a pale, wan light.

Underneath the table it was almost completely dark. That's where we children played. Half fascinated, half repelled, we compared the hair peeking out between sock and trouser turnup on the men's legs: scattered strands on yours, a dense mat on your brother Manfred's. Grandmother's bare feet were in slippers, her shins all gnarled and covered with scars and bruises that never seemed to go away. We would roll your socks up and down and twist their elasticated tops into squidgy sausages. We'd never have dared to do that with Manfred.

They were cosy, these evenings in the gloom: everything in Grandmother's flat from her curtains to her slippers was more or less dark in colour, including the simple bits of furniture that she and grandfather had been able to afford towards the end of the 50s when at last they had been allocated a place of their own by the *Neue Heimat* housing organisation.

There were endless games of cards - invariably *Skat* - and much talk about politics. It usually began with discussions about current political affairs, taxes, Willy Brandt etc., and then they would move on to the Nazi period and the war and how they surely had a right to vent their opinions at long last. After all, not everything had been bad. The autobahns and full employment, for example. Like it or not, so they told each other, Hitler's Germany had saved Europe from communism. And by that stage of the war there'd been absolutely no need for the destruction of Dresden, had there? And once they'd got it all off their chest, seen the world to rights again, and gone through all the injustices they had suffered, they began to calm down, their vehemence gave way to melancholy, and it was time to reflect on the homeland they had lost.

There was much sighing around the table. Down below we tried hard to stay quiet, for it was in such moments of melancholy that your brother Manfred had a habit of exploding with rage. Laugh too loud or pinch one of his slippers, and he would lash out at us painfully and without any warning. You mostly just sat there in silence. The thoughts of the grown-ups sitting around the table were all back with their homeland, and these thoughts reverberated like a sombre and solemn melody, reminiscent of the prisoners' chorus in *Nabucco* - which I knew to have been your father's, my grandfather's, favourite piece of music, while your mother preferred the 'Blue Danube'.

For me the word 'homeland' evoked the tune of the popular song 'We lay off Madagascar / And had the plague on board', especially those points in the song ('Ahoy, comrades!') when the dark reality of pestilence and diseased drinking water is displaced by the sustained near-gaiety of the refrain ('When the sound of the shipboard piano rings out!') And then, when the sailors fall silent, there seemed to me something consoling about their longing for home, lost though they were in the vastness of the oceans, for everyone longs for their homeland, longs to return to it once more. That's what I felt - exactly that.

My sentimental tendencies all came from you.

There was much sighing around the table, while down below we children played at being prisoners or sailors. Such experiences taught us to see 'home' as a place already lost to us, a place known only to our forefathers, one we ourselves had never had and never *would* have. 'Home' was a land we could only long for, a paradise from which we had been for ever expelled. This was echoed even in its name, which was like something from a book of fairy tales. In our imaginations it was fabulously beautiful, an enchanted place by the side of a river, nestling in a dip between rolling hills and an infinitude of fields, and festooned with roses, for its name was Rosenthal - 'valley of roses'.

During the summer after you died I made a trip to Rosenthal, that village near the Oder now known as Różyna.

‘Why on earth go there?’ my Polish teacher asked me. ‘It’s just a tiny little village.’

I look up a few Polish words on Google before setting out: who knows when I’ll next have a wifi connection. Urszula has spooked me with her worries: ‘So where are you going to sleep?’ ‘I’ve not thought about that. In Rosenthal, I reckon.’

‘Take a sleeping bag’, says Urszula. I pop a tent and a sleeping mat in the boot as well, and a roll of toilet paper. Perhaps I’ll be able to camp around the back by the graveyard? ‘Hire’: *na- jąc*; ‘bathroom’: *łazienka*; ‘plug socket’: *gniazdo*, literally ‘nest’ - it’s true: as I later discover, they really do call plug sockets ‘nests’. I check the euro/zloty exchange rate (1 euro = 4 zloty, more or less), and take a look at the weather app: it’s going to be very hot, right throughout the week.

A friend advises me to take some food with me, but that’s unnecessary, I’m sure of it - I know the East well enough for that.

I get going. But *where* am I going? I’m going to Poland. I’m going to Silesia - but what on earth does that mean, ‘Silesia’? A province, a bit of countryside, a lost empire; I am going to the land of my fathers. My father came from a land that no longer exists. I’m a Silesian. Am I a Silesian? My ancestors were Silesians.

I grew up in Wedel, a small town on the edge of Hamburg, and lived there for almost two decades - longer than I’ve lived anywhere else - but Wedel was never home to me. Home was Rosenthal; a home that didn’t exist. Rosenthal was always the vanishing point of my West German existence. And whenever people asked me where I came from and I answered ‘Wedel’, it always seemed to me a half-truth at best.

I set off eastwards. After Cottbus the distance signs on the autobahn show just a single destination. Then there’s nothing for ages until suddenly it’s Wrocław next. There’s very little traffic. Every now and again I overtake a Flix coach - Berlin-Wrocław, €21 - but otherwise I’m more or less alone on a road relentlessly slicing its



way through forests - nothing but forest for kilometre after kilometre: this is where the East begins, a vast no-man's-land, a foretaste of Siberia.

Speed limits in Poland are entirely nominal. Everyone drives as fast as they can. That suits me fine: I can't get to Rosenthal fast enough. I roar across the border in a flash, at the same point where back in the old days we used to wait for hours to get to the checkpoint: 'Stay quiet as a mouse!', 'No laughing!', 'No talking!', 'Don't make yourself conspicuous!'; taciturn guards, peremptory orders, wind the window down, quick quick, apologies when the window jams, beady eyes searching every corner of the car, strange rubber stamps in my child-passport, my mother's anxiety, her excessive eagerness to get everything right, a sense of utter abjection.

This time I don't even have to stop, in fact I accelerate, racing past the former checkpoint buildings with their peeling paintwork, and the only thing that tells me I'm now in Poland is the fact that the smooth and seamless asphalt of Germany has given way to concrete slabs with gaps between them: ker-thump, ker-thump, ker-thump; I soon get a headache.

The interview for my first job as a journalist; a big office complex near Frankfurt's central station; the editor in a dark green woollen pullover. 'Have you ever been to the USA?'

I had never been to the USA. A West German woman nearing the end of my twenties, and I had never been to New York. I had been to Leningrad and Moscow; to Kiev and Lviv; to Riga, Tallin and Tartu; I had been to Bishkek, Crimea and the Republic of Altai. I had even been to Barnaul. Do you know where Barnaul is? It's in western Siberia. There were still a few Volga Germans there back then - nice clean villages; linear settlements like Rosenthal.

I had never been to New York, and had never yet felt the need to go. The United States could wait; they were what they had always been, they held no secrets. Or that's what I thought at the time. But as I sat facing that enormous desk in Frankfurt it suddenly seemed like a major blot on my CV: how could I possibly become a journalist specialising in foreign affairs if I had never been to the USA?

‘Aha,’ said the editor, ‘so you’re an eastern sort of person.’

An eastern sort of person. Not a single ancestor of mine, whether on my mother’s side or my father’s, had been born any significant distance west of the River Oder: both parents, four grandparents, eight great-grandparents: all of them eastern folk. My mother’s stock hailed from Danzig, Elbing, Königsberg, Heubude, Trunz and sundry estates in Pomerania, my father’s from Rosenthal - located, it’s true, one-and-a-half kilometres west of the Oder. Not a single place connected to our family history is still part of Germany. In what direction am I supposed to look if not eastwards?

Poland was the one country I always avoided. I did eventually go to New York. And I kept going ever further east, to the Volga and the Amur, to Minsk, Kaluga, Irkutsk and Khabarovsk, to the White Sea, the Black Sea and Lake Baikal, to the Urals, the Tian Shan mountains and the Caucasus range, to Chechnya (where there are also linear villages). But I never went to Poland.

My three visits to Rosenthal didn’t count: that wasn’t Poland, that was home, the village beyond Snow White’s seven mountains, the place beyond geography.

The trek begins around five - some fifty carts, three pulled by oxen, approximately three hundred villagers, the oldest almost ninety, the youngest a newborn just a few days old. A handful of the elderly stay behind, preferring to die at home than try to flee. Three hundred people - roughly half the population of the village; the other half, men and boys between sixteen and sixty, are away at the war, including your two older brothers, Manfred and Gotthard, and your father.

Manfred, born in 1925, went to secondary school in Brieg, the main town in the area, and took his emergency school-leaving exam in 1943. As local leader of the Hitler Youth he was briefly responsible for its members in the villages of Lossen, Jeschen,

Jägerndorf, Koppen, Schwanowitz, Schönau, Pramsen, Frohnau and Rosenthal, before volunteering for the navy. He had last been in Rosenthal back in April, his first and only leave. Long planks were set up on barrels in Fuhrmann's inn for a showing of *Riding for Germany* starring Willy Birgel. That was nine months ago.

Manfred is currently in Gotenhafen. When they asked for volunteers for the navy's Special Operations unit he immediately stepped forward: he'd had a bellyful of parade-ground drills, and also couldn't bear the thought of his younger brother already being at the front. Manfred is now being trained on one-man submarines to fix explosive devices to enemy ships - an unsurvivable enterprise, a suicide mission beneath the waves.

Your father, born in 1898, had been conscripted into the Volkssturm, the recently formed People's Militia, in mid-January. He had already fought on the western front in the First World War, but that had been different: he'd been young back then, just turned seventeen - and the war had never reached Silesia.

On that particular Monday, 22 January 1945, with the Red Army already having reached the Oder near Rosenthal and your mother vainly trying to hitch up the horses ready to flee, your father is sitting in a guardroom in Breslau writing you both a letter. From: Herbert Hoffmann, Volkssturm Battery 3049, Leuthen Barracks, Breslau. To: Frau Olga Hoffmann, Rosenthal, Brieg.

*Dear Mutter, dear Adolf*

Adolf: that's you.

It's a long letter, especially coming from a peasant farmer; the kind of letter a sailor might write, full of yearning for home, for the life that has just been taken away from him.

*As for me, I can't say all's going well - there's just no place like home. Military life's no fun for someone of my age.*

At not quite fifty your father already considers himself old. For more than thirty years he has toiled from dawn until late at night, he has paid off all the farm's debts and leased extra land. He's looking forward to handing the farm on to Gotthard, his

middle son, who turned seventeen in August and is the only one of the three brothers keen on becoming a farmer. But Gotthard had been drafted into the Volkssturm back in the autumn and is now under orders to hold the line along the Oder.

It's a letter full of worries about his sons at the front.

*My thoughts are with you and the boys all the time.*

A letter full of worries about his farm and about his wife; a letter full of dark foreboding.

*I can't think you'll be forced to abandon the house. But if it does come to that things will surely turn out alright in the end.*

Only the day before, Gauleiter Hanke had declared Breslau to be an out-and-out military fortress, and in consequence hundreds of thousands of women and children have to leave and are forced out into the teeth of a snowstorm. The war hasn't quite reached Breslau yet, but as Herbert sits there in the guardroom at three in the morning writing his letter, the claw of the dragon is poised to strike. The dragon will seize hold of Herbert, destroy his life, and spew him out only many years later, half dead and in a distant corner of Germany.

Your father will lose all control over his life, he will be subject to the whims of others, both German and Russian; for many years his fate will be determined by war and imprisonment. He will never return to Rosenthal, never set foot on his farm again. His mother, his brother and one of his sons will not survive the war, and he won't see his wife for many years, by which time he will have lost everything, and nothing will be as it used to be.

Your father knows none of this yet, but he senses the impending disaster, senses that *things that meant everything to me just a week ago have now paled into insignificance.*

*But we mustn't despair - we must trust in God, then even the hardest things are bearable.*

The tenderest lines are dedicated to you, 'our dear Adolf'.

*I can see him all the time, right there in front of me, doing his homework, racing around outside so madly that he rips his trousers, then in the evening burying himself away in his dad's bed. Has he finished reading that sailor book?*

It's an unassuming letter that seeks solace in the familiar and finds comfort in small things - his hopes of receiving a letter, for instance, perhaps even a visit (she'd need to catch the no. 2 or the no. 12 as far as the terminus, he tells his wife); he sends best wishes to all his friends and relatives in the village, and expresses his hope that things won't get as bad as he fears they will.

*Normality will return at some point and we'll be able to get on with our lives in peace once again.*

And he closes the letter with the affirmation that *All's well that ends well*.

But this sounds more like an entreaty than a confident assertion, given that nothing at all is going well; or perhaps it's a secret message to his wife - perhaps that's the last thing they used to whisper to each other as they collapsed into bed at home in Rosenthal after sixteen, even eighteen hours' work on the farm or out in the fields: 'All's well that ends well'.

That Monday, 22 January 1945, changes everything. It will determine our destiny for a long time - for decades, for generations; it will change your own life, your wife's, mine, my children's. From that day onwards and for a very long time our family will have no solid ground beneath its feet.

My own childhood, too, will be played out on murky and treacherous terrain, like a swamp that can easily swallow you up and where you must be ever careful to stick to the signposted paths, to be home before dark, to avoid looking too deeply into a blackness that can easily drag you down. Central to all this was my certain knowledge that in the blink of an eye, from one day to the next, between 4 and 7 of an afternoon, we can lose everything - house and property; sons, brothers, parents; our ancestral home; even our memories.

You join the straggling procession as it passes your farm, the last before the fields begin. The story is that you're supposed to be getting out of the firing line just for a day or two until everything calms down again. Not everyone believes this. But almost no one realises that in fact this is goodbye for ever. Perhaps you haven't actually forgotten the sailor suit - perhaps you've just left it behind in the belief that you'll soon be back. Or do you in fact already suspect the worst? Since when? Since the previous day, when the Wehrmacht soldiers arrived? Since the previous week? Since the previous month? Are you afraid? And when did you start being afraid? Is it possible to be afraid of the unimaginable?

And what about us: are we afraid?

Whenever the air beneath Grandmother's kitchen table became too oppressive we would come out from underneath it and sit down amongst the grown-ups. And as we sat there picking away at the blueish-white formica that was beginning to peel from its plywood underlay we would try to find at least something of interest, something comprehensible to us, in their musings about life 'back home' - such as how many pigs and cows there were on the farm, or whether you could skate on the village pond in wintertime. But their reminiscences, invariably accompanied by much sighing, were not about things of interest to us. Grandmother said nothing in any case. Only your brother Manfred would occasionally tell us stuff. The village pond really had frozen over every winter, he said, but none of them had skates. He talked about the house - the main part, and the annexe your father built where lame old Uncle Walter lived; about the parlour, used only on high days and holidays; about how hard your parents had worked. But if we asked what the horses and the farm dog were called, the grown-ups would start talking once again about the other inhabitants of Rosenthal, people we had never known: who had fled where with whom; where they'd left such and such behind and then lost sight of them; who had died on the journey; who had stayed behind in Rosenthal.

Once over the frontier I scan the car radio for a Polish station: I want to see how far I've progressed over the last few months I've spent with Urszula, my Polish teacher. Not very far, I'm disappointed to discover. I scroll through the various stations in search of one where there's talking. I keep scrolling whenever there's music: I don't want to listen to trashy Polish pop songs or 'The Final Countdown'. I never understand exactly what they're talking about, but I can tell the difference between a weather forecast and the traffic news, or a sermon on Radio Mary. I *think* they've just said there's a traffic jam on the A4 to Wrocław - but isn't that exactly where I am myself? Commercials are recognisable from the speaker's tone of voice - but commercials about what? My headache's getting worse, even though the concrete slabs have finished. There *is* now a traffic jam on the opposite carriageway. It's hot and close, with big signs every few kilometres giving the air temperature - 32° - and the temperature of the road surface - 52°. Who on earth wants to know how hot the road surface is?

Just short of Wrocław, a mighty triumph: I hit the traffic jam! So I *do* understand Polish! I'm elated beyond measure. And when we finally start moving again I'm so excited that I take the wrong turn at the next junction and end up in the jam on the opposite carriageway.

Viewed from afar Rosenthal *looks* like home. A village straight out of a children's story book, it nestles in the landscape beneath the arching sky, its white church tower resplendent against the greenery and standing guard, four-square and solid, over the surrounding houses and barns with their red- and brown-tiled roofs, its metal flèche glinting in the sun like a halberd poised to repel whatever threat might supervene. Everything is exactly as it should be. The roots of the oak trees run deep, the land is friendly, expansive, undulating; land as we might wish our parents to be: caring and kind-hearted.

'Rosenthal', 'rose valley': the name is a puzzle. There's no valley here - the fields stretch down dead flat all the way to the Oder. In fact if anything Rosenthal sits on a slight hummock. This puzzle has rather intrigued the village's inhabitants across the

centuries, and in consequence given rise to a number of different theories. For some, the name derives from 'Rodeland', a German word for 'cleared land', since the area was still heavily forested when Johannites from Lossen founded the village in 1238 in the course of colonising the area. Others maintain that mail coaches used to change horses in the village and that as a result the place acquired the name 'Ruhstall' ('resting stable'), in Silesian 'Rustl'. What is certain is that it was popularly known as 'Kucherustl', since major events such as weddings were traditionally celebrated by an ample distribution of cakes ('Kuchen') throughout the village. It is said that the best poppy-seed crumble-cakes in all Lower Silesia were baked here, but Rosenthal is probably not the only village to make this claim.

Since the end of communism the locals have done a lot to ensure that the village merits its name by planting roses, masses of which loom up in people's gardens on every side in a multiplicity of shades - white, red, yellow, apricot. Garden fences are adorned with wrought-iron rose-buds, and the stone angel at the entrance to the village cradles a bunch of plastic roses in her arms.

I arrive in the village around 5pm, park the car by the clay pit, and walk over to the farm. Jana is sitting with her sons under a wooden roof where the walled dung-heap used to be.

After building the annexe my grandfather had intended to move the dung heap from the middle of the farmyard to behind the barn, but he was forestalled by the turn of events. As a result, the dung stayed where it was for several decades before disappearing at some point following the collapse of communism, and when we visited after the turn of the millennium a white canvas canopy stood in its place - a feature so ubiquitous back then that the whole of central Europe looked like one vast camping ground - and there beneath it sat Jan and Jadwiga, drinking coffee as they awaited our arrival. Now, however, a wooden-roofed structure supported by substantial posts stands in its place, complete with a brick barbecue and a swing dangling from a cross-beam.



‘What do you want here?’, asks Jana from the other side of the fence.

The dog barks and starts jumping up, the little boy in her arms buries his face in her neck. She looks me straight in the eye with a searching expression conveying curiosity rather than distrust.

‘My father was born here’, I reply.

She calls out to the dog to quieten him, but without taking her eyes off me.

‘You’ve been here before.’

She’s right. More than once, in fact. I came to Rosenthal first in 1978. I knew the village under communism, when Fuhrmann’s inn had become a House of Culture and there was nothing in the shop except onions and potatoes, and then under capitalism during the white-canopy phase, when the kindergarten had closed, the men worked in Irish abattoirs, and the women cared for the old in Germany. I’ve returned to Rosenthal again and again; I was last here three years ago together with the children, and now I’m here on my own for the first time.

‘So what do you want here?’, Jana asks again.

‘I’m staying for a while. A couple of days. Any chance of a bed hereabouts?’

‘Are you on your own?’

‘Yes.’

‘There’s a hotel in Brzeg.’

‘What about here in the village?’

‘I’ll give it some thought.’

She’s right: what *do* I want here?

I walk down the village street towards the church. Next to its wall there are still a few crosses with German inscriptions, all at a crooked angle. I carry on past the village shop, in front of which the local drinkers tend to congregate. It smells of summer

heat, dust, dry grass, and the straw that's just being brought in from the fields by tractors speeding along the street pulling enormous flatbed trailers loaded with circular bales of the stuff. There's the smell of dung, too, even though there are only a few farmers left in the village, and no cattle at all - just a paltry few chickens and horses.

Red and white Polish flags flutter in the gardens and at the gable-ends of the houses, and the flower pot next to the bus stop boasts white and red geraniums. Christ on his cross leans protectively over the monument to the dead of the 14-18 war. The church has been recently renovated - whitewashed, re-painted and re-roofed, like all the churches in all the villages in these parts. No matter how run-down the villages may be, their churches are always in tiptop condition, and a good half of them have a monument in honour of the Polish Pope.