

The Gates of Schlaraffia

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2. *The worldly-wise man,
the first refugees from the Republic
and the inhabitants of Little Berlin*

The kitchen boy's announcement that my *Pommes* are ready resoundes over the terrace of *Der Grenzgänger*. In spite of the fact that I am the only client, he nevertheless maintains his tradition of announcing the orders out loud. I am given a paper plate with fries, an inadequately rinsed salad and a greasy glass. Next to the bench for tired hikers, there are metal swings and a seesaw. The garden of the establishment, where children are agitating the chickens, used to be full of Russian landmines.

There is no mention of this village on my map, although it is *mitten in Deutschland* as the inhabitants are keen to declare. An enamel plate on the wall of a farmhouse is unequivocal: the heart of Germany lies precisely three-hundred kilometres south of Berlin and three-hundred kilometres north of Munich! Might this also be the legendary centre point of Europe? Apart from that, the village has fifty inhabitants, generations of farmers who have populated the area since time immemorial. The majority have never seen what the world outside looks like, although many people have been coming to see what their world looks like day after day for the last few years. The inhabitants are unfamiliar with the distant capital and three-hundred kilometres south of Berlin, there is nothing to remind one of Berlin, but during the Cold War, this village had one thing in common with the capital of the DDR: the Wall ran through it. That is why the Americans nicknamed the place Little Berlin.

Little Berlin is actually called Mödlareuth, and it is situated northeast of Bavaria and south of Thüringen, on the banks of the Tannbach. The Czech border begins on the other side of the hill.

Fortified by my potato dinner I make my way into the village. The languid air smells of vulture. A yellowed oak forest covers the incline. An undulating band of smoky blue forestry stretches across the horizon.

Mödlareuth consists of little more than a collection of farm dwellings and barns: houses in soft indigo with dark shutters, a little further a sand-coloured building, a peasant cottage in the same gentle pink as the poppies along the roadside, and all the roofs slated. The single street is graced with a maypole adorned with ribbons and garlands. If it were not for the tractors and visitors buses, Mödlareuth could easily be taken for the setting of a seventeenth century *Romanze*, but the wind turbines beyond the furthest farmhouses are sufficient to rob one of any illusions.

The remains of the Iron Curtain dominate the view of the village: a pillar painted in the German tricolour, black – red – gold, foreseen with the unambiguous words ‘Deutsche Demokratische Republik’, a sign with ‘Landesgrenze’, another sign with ‘Grenzgebiet’, and then watchtowers, a white wall made of reinforced concrete with cylinder blocks on top, a searchlight the diameter of a bathtub, rusty barbed wire, iron fencing, knife-rests, a ditch sided with concrete, cantilever barricades, horrifying signs warning against high explosives: ‘Vorsicht Minen’. Running along the side of a ploughed field *Der Kollonenweg*, two parallel lines of concrete slabs intended for border patrol vehicles.

My journey begins on the *Kollonenweg*.

A worldly-wise man – born in the year Adolf Hitler wrote *Mein Kampf* in Landsberg prison – is sitting on a bench next to a farmhouse with his thumbs in his pockets and he nods in my direction. The wind blows an empty tin can along Mödlareuth’s main street. Behind the farmhouse, there is a waist-deep pond with a plastic duck bobbing on its surface. The air is warm and smells of manure.

I can call him Master Ewald. He is from one of the neighbouring villages but has been visiting his relatives here in Mödlareuth for as long as he can remember. He has worked his entire life as a teacher and because he is blessed with an excellent memory, untarnished by frustration and spite, I place myself in his capable hands. He wears two gold rings on his finger, his own wedding ring and that of his wife, who lies to rest 'six feet under' in Hof, the closest city.

I examine his face: furrowed, thin, with a slightly anxious chin, gentle and yielding, and with an ever-ready smile, intended to underline the gravity of what he is saying. He is a man who grew up in a world with a hierarchical order and even today, in spite of his advanced years, he exhibits an air of dignity and authority.

We look out over the hill for a while from the bench by the river and then head down the street to the Tannbach and the *Kollonenweg* where Master Ewald stops every once and a while to straighten his tightly knotted tie or to add a full stop to the end of a sentence with the point of his umbrella cane. I am reminded of one of the main characters in the Günter Grass novel *Ein weites Feld*: pompous, pedantic, know-it-all from a century that has gone forever, but nonetheless an adorable grandpa.

'No,' he says, 'the boundary that split Mödlareuth in two is nothing new. We've known about it round here for generations.' He turns at the river and faces the *Kollonenweg* that climbs obliquely upwards. 'You should know that the border was not drawn after the Second World War by Stalin or the American army, but four-hundred years earlier to be precise. Pay good attention!' The Tannbach surges along close by. 'In 1524,' Master Ewald contests, 'it was decided that this river should form the border between the principality of Brandenburg and that of Reuss. The day-to-day life of the inhabitants continued unperturbed. They could cross the border with ease to go to church, for example, in Töpen.' He points to a knee-high pillar with his walking stick. 'Do you see that? In 1810, the Brandenburg side came under Bavarian

authority and a year later, the tiny principality of Reuss was absorbed into the newly established *Freistaat* Thüringen. The Tannbach served as the boundary the entire time.’ He stoops at the pillar and rests his hand on top of it. ‘That same year,’ he continues, ‘these boundary markers were set in place. On the one side the Kingdom of Bavaria and on the other side the Principality of Reuss.’

When I examine the pillars at close quarters, I can make out the inscribed initials ‘KB’ and ‘FR’.

‘So the division has always been there,’ I say.

‘Correct,’ Master Ewald answers in his impeccable German. ‘Between the First World War and the great conflagration, half of Mödlareuth continued to belong to Bavaria and the other half to Thüringen. The school and the tavern were on Thüringian soil and people went to church in Bavarian Töpen where – as they jokingly say – the “grumblers” live.’

If the half-demolished Wall and the meandering Tannbach had not been here, any division between the two halves of the village would no longer be visible. But is there still a difference nowadays?

‘Absolutely,’ Master Ewald laughs. ‘The two halves still belong to different *Länder*. They have different postcodes, dialling codes and license plates.’

‘And different local authorities?’

‘You won’t notice a thing if you walk through the village,’ says Master Ewald, ‘and it might seem absurd for a community of fifty people at the most, but there are two mayors and you can recognise them by the way they greet their people. The one says “Grüss Gott” in Bavarian style and the other “Güten Tag” in good Thüringian.’

Master Ewald tugs me along the sloping street towards an otherwise unobtrusive farmhouse. The sideboard is adorned with decorative plates depicting pastoral scenes, a vase with orchids and

an earthenware beer barrel bedecked with jugs. It is clear from the material spread out on the table that Master Ewald has meticulously prepared my visit. He serves me sweet black tea and opens a manila folder with the letters IH.

‘In her twenty-seventh year,’ he says, ‘in the last year of the war, Ida Hoffmann, resident of Mödlareuth, kept a diary, providing us with an eye witness account of the situation after the German capitulation and the liberation.’ He follows the handwriting on the page with his finger. ‘Please listen. “1945, April has arrived. Warm, cloudless days. The sky is becoming more beautiful with each passing day. You can hear the artillery fire of the advancing American forces in the distance. What’s going to happen? What does the future hold? Everyone is talking about it. We don’t receive letters anymore. The telephone isn’t working. Only the rumours, the grapevine reports. April thirteenth has dawned, April fourteenth. People are saying ‘The Americans are everywhere. In Töpen, in Gefell, a few kilometres from here.’”’ Master Ewald licks his lips, enjoying himself as if he were reading a school essay. ‘And this is the moment. “The fifteenth has dawned, like every other day, with radiant sunshine. There’s an oppressive sense of dread hanging over the village. Hours pass. Suddenly, around nine, they arrive. Americans in the centre of the village. Everyone goes about his business as if nothing is happening. There are no house to house searches, no one is harassed.”’ Master Ewald closes the document with a slap and adjusts his tie. ‘And that’s precisely what happened,’ he says with a deep sigh, ‘because I witnessed it myself.’

American soldiers described their remarkable impressions of Europe after liberation: a part of the world in which people speak incomprehensible languages and fight family feuds, a continent full of alleyways too narrow for an overseas panzer division.

‘The inhabitants of Mödlareuth had expected the allies who had defeated Germany to settle scores accordingly with the enemy survivors,’ Master Ewald continues. ‘The final punishment! They

would massacre the villages just as they had devastated Dresden and Berlin, but their fears were unfounded. Mrs Hoffmann's words speak for themselves. The arrival of the Americans brought tranquillity to the village, at least in the first instance.'

'So it didn't last,' I interject.

'You will be aware, of course, that another liberator was on his way. If that had not been the case, we would not be sitting here together in the shadow of a watchtower. The second liberator was the very opposite of the Americans in every sense of the word, with the exception perhaps of his anti-fascist fervour and his hunger for power.' He browses through the pages of a photo album without casting a glance in my direction. 'As agreed by international treaty, the Americans withdrew behind the demarcation line, which coincided with the traditional boundaries. The demarcation line was the Tannbach, remember?' His finger glides over a photograph of an armoured vehicle full of laughing soldiers. 'The Soviets arrived on July 7th. They crossed the demarcation line and occupied the entire village, in spite of the fact that the Bavarian side still fell under the American flag... The Russian *Ortskommandatur*, as we called it, was set up in one of the farmhouses. It was to take until July 26th 1946 before the Russians withdrew behind the demarcation line. From that moment onwards, one side of the Tannbach belonged to the Russian zone and the other to the American zone. The river served as the dividing line as it had before, but for the first time ever the division also had a military significance.'

He slowly gets to his feet, making a sweeping gesture with his hand. The Soviet Russian *Ortskommandatur*,' he says, 'was this very room! The inhabitants immediately invented an appropriate name for the place: Stalinburg.'

Later that afternoon we take a walk along the Tannbach where children are horsing around in the water. I am reminded of wartime photos of enthusiastic people waving at the camera and I ask

Master Ewald to tell me how things transpired with the double occupation of Mödlareuth after the war.

‘The farmers had no problem with it at first,’ he recounts, ‘although American and Russian expressions obviously caused a stir. The inhabitants on the Thüringian side suddenly found foreign words on their identity cards, words written in a different alphabet, a strange spidery script no one could decipher. I couldn’t even make sense of my own name in Cyrillic.’

When did it become clear to you that there were two Germanies?’ I inquired.

‘In the initial years, intense negotiations took place on both sides of the demarcation line regarding the organisation of the new state. Things only became clear after October 1949. Then we were made aware that there were two political systems and two nations with the Tannbach flowing between them and the need for a special permit if you wanted to cross it.’

‘From 1949? By that you mean from the foundation of the DDR?’

‘Yes. Everything was simple in those days. Hell broke loose three years later, however, when the DDR approved an ordinance ostentatiously entitled *Massnahmen an der Demarkationslinie zwischen der DDR und den westlichen Besatzungszonen Deutschlands* – the DDR were experts in such language. In ordinary terms, this meant that the border to the West was to be completely closed. The process took place in stages. It was no longer permitted to cross the river, and the boundary zone – the no-man’s-land between the two halves of the village – officially referred to as the *Kontrollstreifen*, was extended to a breadth of ten meters. Five hundred meters of *Schutzstreifen* were later added and the procedure was finally rounded off with a five-kilometre *Sperrzone*. In those days, the border consisted initially of a wooden hoarding but when the latter was destroyed by a hurricane, it was replaced by a metal fence with barbed wire similar to those that marked off the trenches in France during the First World War.

From then on, it was like living in a ghetto between two roadblocks for those of us who resided in the eastern part. There was a night curfew and assembly was comprehensively prohibited. And what do you think they did when the fence fell into disrepair? Precisely! They built a new and even stronger fence with a lightning conductor on top.'

'And more hermetically sealed?'

Master Ewald shakes his head. 'People tried to escape time after time. Cross-border travel was not the only thing that was forbidden, we weren't aloud to look or even wave at each other anymore. They finally built a wall seven hundred metres long and three metres high. Families were separated from one another. The only way to get to the other side was to endure a long and complicated bureaucratic detour. Stalinburg was only the herald of a well-oiled bureaucratic machine with its engine in Moscow.'

On the western bank of the Tannbach a group of boys assemble at a silent witness to the Cold War: a khaki Russian helicopter and a brownish-yellow tank with its barrel aimed at the village. A tractor sputters along a strip of arable land by the river. The farmer at the wheel sees us: myself, the elderly schoolteacher and the boys playing war games.

'Don't be surprised, *grenzgänger*, says Master Ewald as we continue our walk along the concrete slabs, 'by the different shapes and forms your so-called *Kollonenweg* will take in the course of its fourteen-hundred kilometre trajectory.' He stops and pokes his walking stick into the clefts in the concrete. 'But one characteristic feature never changes: it always consists of two rows of concrete tiles intended as a carriageway for the panzer vehicles of the border patrol.'

'Let me tell you a final story,' says Master Ewald.

A short distance beyond the village we pass a meadow with a ruined farmhouse.

'When they reinforced the border, the inhabitants of the boundary zone, all of them farmers, were the worst off. That was

the same everywhere in Germany and not only in Mödlareuth. Their houses were simply in the way! Villages were razed to the ground, garden after garden transformed into a firing range. The DDR authorities were terrified that the population would flee en masse to the West. All sorts of reports were later found to confirm their obsession. One stated, for example, that “a farmer named Grimm from Venzka fled to the West in 1952 with two horses and ten cows.” Laughable, perhaps, but there are also more dramatic examples of entire families committing collective suicide after reading the order to evacuate their property.’

Master Ewald takes a seat on a low rectangular wall reminiscent of the farmhouse that once stood in its place.

‘On June 5th 1952 – listen carefully, because I witnessed this with my own two eyes – the evacuation commission appeared at the Wurziger family mill. The communists had invented an appealing term for their action: *Zwangsaussiedlung*. Farmer Arno Wurziger enjoyed respect throughout the village. He had restored the house just before the war and his farm had started to function again just a few short months before the eviction order. He told me this in person.’

Master Ewald stands and pretends to open a no-longer-existent front door.

‘Arno Wurziger was a smart lad. He told the commission members that he would pack his bags. It was early in the morning and two trucks had arrived. The inhabitants had been told they could take their furniture with them. Wurziger’s wife was already packing but Arno had “different plans” as he himself would later put it. The entire family disappeared while feeding the animals in spite of the three double observation posts and the six *Volkspolozisten*. The women had climbed down through a window in the stables where the Bavarian inhabitants were waiting to lend a hand. Arno Wurziger and his son had made their way up to the hayloft and father Wurziger jumped to the ground where the drop was not too high followed by his son where it was a little higher. In

an instant they were outside! The *Landrat* – the district supervisor – later ordered the clearance of the entire farm. In the days that followed, Wurziger watched from the other side of the border as they completely ransacked the place.’

‘Didn’t they devise a name for Wurziger’s crime?’ I note. ‘*Republikflucht*.’

‘It was tantamount to treachery,’ Master Ewald nodded.

He suddenly remembers something. He takes me to the bushes behind the farmhouse where the meadow changes into marshland.

‘Speaking of *Republikflucht*,’ he relates, ‘farmer Wurziger and his family were not the only ones to make their escape. After the sawmill, the mill itself and the stables were demolished, the farmhouse was used for a while by the border infantry. On May 25th 1973, thirty-two years ago to be exact, something spectacular took place there!’

He narrows his eyes in order to describe the images in his mind as best he can. ‘It was midnight. A driver passed the Haidefeld checkpoint and the border post at Mödlareuth’s *Schutzstreifen* in his Barkas B 1000. He was in possession of a valid permit so the soldiers let him pass. He drove ten, twenty metres further. Nothing out of the ordinary. At a point invisible to the border post, however, he suddenly turned off the road, switched off his headlamps and drove the across the six metre wide control strip up to the wall of the mill.’ He points with his umbrella cane. ‘Exactly where you’re standing right now! When the border guards in their wooden observation towers realised something unusual was going on by the wall of the mill they aimed the searchlights at the truck.’ Master Ewald can’t resist a snigger. ‘But the driver had already placed his metal ladder against the facade and succeeded in no more than a few seconds to jump over the wall.’ He opens his eyes, winks and grins. ‘A fusspot of an officer, who couldn’t believe the simplicity of the escape, had the whole thing reconstructed at a later date.’

‘But were no shots fired?’

‘Thanks to the fustpot officer, we know that the border guards had twenty to thirty seconds to use their weapons. Nevertheless, the driver arrived unharmed in the *Bundesrepublik*. It’s hard to believe, but not a single shot was fired.’

‘What were the consequences for the village?’ I ask.

‘After this particular *Republikflucht*, the DDR pioneers set up a metal fence along the street in 1973 and three years later flattened the building with a bulldozer. From that point onwards, the border was fixed and it remained closed for sixteen years.’

Our walk along the *Kollonenweg* gradually reaches its end. I accompany Master Ewald back to the farmhouse where we met earlier in the afternoon and we say our cordial goodbyes.

I walk along the *Kollonenweg* through Mödlareuth one more time, alone. It was quite calm when I first arrived but in the meantime packs of border tourists have arrived, the elderly in buses, and young people on bicycles. Children clamber up the watchtowers, adults peer around in astonishment and dismay.

I try to imagine the trajectory of my walk on a map of Europe, straight through the heart of the continent. If I listen carefully, I can hear an echo of Wagner from Beyreuth to the south on the other side of the Fichtel Mountains and of Mozart from Prague to the east. Bach lived in Jena, Weimar and Eisenach to the north. And the ghost of Luther is lurking around every corner.

I would have liked to have spent the night in Mödlareuth but *Der Grenzgänger* doesn’t rent rooms and it closes its doors pitilessly at the stroke of eight. The board depicting a hiker recommending the *Pommes* looks a little lost.

As a drive out of Mödlareuth I decide to zigzag across the border for the rest of my journey, as if weaving both sides together, and to stay as close to the *Kollonenweg* as possible.

3. *The forgotten city beyond the enchanted forest
and a way of life like whisked milk*

I zigzag my way from Gefell in the east to Töpen in the west, meaningless places unknown to my map. In this part of East Germany the villages have been plunged into poverty. The courtyards and market squares smell of stray cats. A couple of farmers have parked themselves on an upturned barrel by a stable door waiting for the cool of the evening. A hoarding attached to a half-collapsed wall announces the ‘Festival of Central Europe’. The barn behind it stands in the shadow of a centuries-old elm. A cart with two broken wheels lies abandoned in the yard. A donkey ambles alongside the fence.

A drunk is trying to strike a match in the middle of the street. I offer my lighter and inquire about the infamous *Kollonenweg*. Stinking of beer and manure he gives me a detailed but incomprehensible answer and then gesticulates agitatedly with his hand towards the west where the sun is setting. The only word I can pick out is ‘Schlaraffia’, Cockaigne – the Land of Plenty.

In the West, the less significant places on the map are represented by staked out building plots, allotments and holiday villages with the same warning – ‘Bissiger Hund’ – on every other gate. Lace curtains twitch here and there behind half-open windows: a breeze or an alarmed resident? There are rooms for rent in the local sports club building, but – as I am thoughtfully informed – they are reserved for young athletes and they don’t have a bar to allow me to console myself with drink in response to this information.

I take a random deserted road through a forest of deciduous trees back to the East. A road sign leads me to Hirschberg. The *Erlkönig* haunts my thoughts: ‘Wer reitet so spat durch Nacht und Wind?’ – a poem by Goethe set to music by Franz Schubert. The story tells of a father and his son making their way home in the

middle of the night. The boy is convinced that the Erlkönig is following them but his father puts his mind at rest: the boy has only seen a wisp of cloud, a *Nebelstrief*, nothing to worry about. When they arrive home after their frantic journey, the child is found dead in his father's arms. I was introduced to the song in the Berliner Ensemble, Bertolt Brecht's theatre in East Berlin, in 1996. I was attending the final production of the controversial artist Heiner Müller who, while himself terminally ill, had staged a version of Brecht's *Arturo Ui* with generous portions of Shakespeare woven into the dialogue and a magisterial opening scene set to the music of the Erlkönig. Müller had died a few days earlier. After the performance, Germany's entire art world came to mourn him in the stairwell of the theatre.

I shake off the shivers, drive out of the forest and suddenly find myself at the highest point of Hirschberg. Behind a gaudy war monument, an ochre-yellow house exhibits the same traces of mutilation as all the palaces that were revamped under communism as collective farms. The building is now encased in wooden scaffolding and is being restored to its original state. Dozens of windows peer out over a valley where early morning lights are burning in a cheerless town spread out over the hill.

The further I drive into the valley, the more I have the impression that Hirschberg seems to be clinging to the side of the hill in the hope that it won't fall off. Almost all of the streets are named *Gasse*, and I am reminded once again of the American liberators with their panzer vehicles penetrating deep into the European labyrinth.

The town centre is little more than a miserable square with a church and a grocery store cowering under a couple of streetlamps. The decrepit houses lean shoulder to shoulder. Half of them are 'For Sale'. In the DDR days, Hirschberg was a typical old 'proletarian' hideaway, in stark contrast to the new Stalinist housing estates. Nowadays it's not only old and proletarian, it's also impoverished: the workers are unemployed, alcoholic and

devoid of euros, and if they're young they tend to go west. Multi-storey edifices are dotted across the valley, high-rises in which no one wants to live yet here and there, I still detect signs of life behind the broken glass.

Every street slopes downwards towards the Saale. Only the walls remain of the factories that once stood around the potholed square on the banks of the river. New Germany's enterprises rise up in the distance. I search the town centre for a display-board, an advert, a signpost or a pub, but it appears as if a neutron bomb has destroyed every form of life in the place and left the houses dilapidated but still standing. I am reminded of small towns in eastern Poland, Ukraine or Russia that have survived wars of every sort and seem to be doomed to bear witness to the fact *in aeternum*.

On the opposite hill beyond the Saale where a new enchanted forest appears to begin, I discover a street lined with stately houses, likewise exhibiting years of neglect and eroded by time but not quite in such a deplorable state that they might collapse at any minute. I stop at the final building, a *Gaststätte* with a neon advertisement for Warsteiner in the bay window. A flabby individual, stripped to the waist, gawps at me from the upper balcony. I toss a 'Guten Abend' in his direction and descend three steps into the pub.

Welcome to Hirschberg's nightlife. In a basement of tattered velour, a small group of elders are sitting around a poorly lit table chewing on their cigarette butts and playing poker. The torrent of depressing thoughts in my head is unstoppable. They're not surprised at my arrival. One of them, a man whose head is too small for his body and reminds of a tortoise, makes his way to the beer tap and pours me a glass. Once my eyes have adjusted to the light, I examine the black and white pictures of Hirschberg on the wall: choirboys, soldiers, women with hats, proud residences, ruins, allotment gardens... One of the photos depicts a laughing woman pointing at a DDR pillar next to a roadblock.

The men wipe the foam from their mouths with their sleeves and order another round, including one for me.

In the conviction that I will soon be enjoying the summer evening from the balcony of my room I inquire about availability.

‘*Es tut mir leid,*’ says the tortoise from behind the bar, ‘but we’re fully booked? Why don’t you try here...’ He draws a map on a beer mat – the snake being the Saale – and scribbles a name underneath.

‘*Viel Spaß,*’ the poker faces exclaim in unison.

The address provided by the tortoise turns out to be a plain whitewashed building on the banks of the Saale, without doubt the best-lit place in Hirschberg. There are three entrances, guarded by longhaired cats. I choose the wrong entrance twice and end up in a labyrinthine room full of cash machines, which appears to me like the engine room from some future century in a small town such as this.

The unlit entrance at the back of the building is what I’m looking for. Instead of a balcony looking out from some stately home, I end up in a dusty B&B with a not very communicative hostess who must be eighty if she’s a day. I spend the night between a chamber pot and a scone candlestick.

The only evidence to confirm that time has not stood still in Hirschberg is the vending machine on the corridor offering American pop, Dutch beer and Belgian peanuts at scandalous prices.

My bedtime reading is the history of *ein Land genannt die DDR*, which is a chapter in the history of Germany, which in its turn constitutes a considerable portion of the twentieth century European narrative into which the Iron Curtain has been woven as a sort of leitmotif.

Cities like Hirschberg leave the visitor with the impression that they have just managed to leave the war behind them. Time appears to have come to a halt in May 1945, the month in which the German *Wehrmachtsführung* capitulated. The statistics are

difficult to justify because they round off the number of people involved in percentages. Nevertheless, they still offer an idea of the scale of events. I pore over a number of figures referred to in relation to the genesis of the DDR. Fifty to sixty million people lost their lives between September 1939, when the Second World War broke out with Hitler's invasion of Danzig (now Gdansk) in northern Poland, and May 1945. In the Soviet Union alone, there were twenty-five million victims and in Germany's eastern neighbour Poland around six million. The German *Reich* had been on a war footing with no less than 67 countries. The end of the war was accompanied by horrifying allied bomb campaigns, some of which were completely meaningless from a military standpoint, given that Germany had already lost the war.

I am reminded of the pictures in the cellar with the poker players, portraits from a ruined era. Another image drifts across them: a photo of three gentleman at Potsdam, the 'Big Three', the British prime minister Winston Churchill, the American president Harry S. Truman and the party secretary of the Soviet Union Joseph Stalin. When it became obvious that Germany was losing the war, the Big Three were known to have consulted one another repeatedly. In February 1945 they had already discussed post-war Europe at a meeting on the Black Sea Crimean peninsula. It was then decided that Germany should be 'punished' by dividing the country into four zones: the northwest under British authority, the northeast under Soviet authority, the southeast under US authority and – upon the insistence of Charles de Gaulle – the southwest under French authority. The border demarcating Soviet territory ran along the old boundaries and minor rivers usually constituted demarcation lines.

In July 1945, the world leaders gathered in Schloss Cecilienhof in Potsdam. Under pressure from Stalin, the decision was made to hand over the territory to the east of the Oder-Neiße line – roughly twenty-four percent of 1938 Germany with a population of ten million – to Poland. It was also agreed that the

Germans living in the Soviet zone of Eastern Europe should be evacuated. The latter boiled down in reality to little more than ethnic cleansing. The subdivision of Germany was not yet on the cards in those days. On the contrary, a common policy for Germany was the ultimate goal and costly oaths were being sworn with words like ‘demilitarisation’, ‘de-nazification’ and ‘democratisation’. Stalin vehemently insisted on having a say in decisions relating to the mineral resources and the industrial potential of the Ruhr territory. The Potsdam Conference was simultaneously the final summit of the anti-Hitler coalition and the first in a series of East-West conferences intended to hold the Cold War in check.

A few months earlier, during the days of the liberation, three groups of functionaries from the German Communist Party returned from the Soviet Union intent on bringing Germany’s eastern zone under the authority of Moscow. The groups in question were headed by Walter Ulbricht, Anton Ackermann and Gustav Sobottka who had flown on a secret mission to the Kremlin on June 4th for a meeting with Joseph Stalin. It turned out that the leader of the Soviet Union made a statement during this meeting that was to become reality a short time later: ‘In spite of allied unity there will nevertheless be two Germanies.’

The following day, Hirschberg has clearly traded yesterday’s lamentable appearance for one of bustling activity. I make my way to the market via the steep streets, one of which – Karl-Liebnechtstrasse – still has to turn in its old DDR name for a new alternative. It’s already swelteringly hot by nine o’clock. Water clatters incessantly from a tap into bluestone troughs. Children’s voices resound from upper-storey balconies, kitchen sounds, piano music. A man emerges from the shadows of a garage, trailing a threadbare string basket in the direction of the grocery store, tapping the uneven pavement slabs with his walking stick. In the Soviet days such a net was called an *avozka*, a ‘just maybe’. You

never knew when it might come in handy in a country that was short of almost everything.

There is a smell of paint in the city, more concentrated in the centre. The only building that has been restored is the town hall. The street sign with 'Marktstraße' on the corner is badly in need of replacement. Two well-tanned thirty-year-olds are assembling scaffolding, cigarettes hanging from the corner of their mouths. They have all the time in the world and make use of every opportunity to lay down their tools: a passing friend, a girl with bare shoulders, a call on their mobile. The rhythm of the utopia, boastful of its full employment record, is still well-ensconced. I am reminded of Thomas Rosenlöcher who described the history of the DDR as a forty-year long work-to-rule. They nod and watch me as I pass. Even I turn out to be an excuse not to do any work.

I have a weakness for churches of all sizes, especially in this part of Europe where religious practice was forbidden by the authorities and going to church was tantamount to resistance. After the *Wende*, the bank gave priority to the restoration of the churches. Sadly, vandalism is also on the increase and the buildings can only be visited during services. As is often the case in Germany, Hirschberg's bronze bell has been accommodated elsewhere, next to the fountain in the courtyard.

What I described as a grocery store turns out to be an all-purpose store. There's little to infer from the window display – a rolling landscape of green felt with tin can villages – but once you open the sticker-covered door you enter into a different world, so small there's barely room for three customers at a time, yet containing everything you might expect to find in such a god-forsaken place as Hirschberg. A mixture of smells wafts towards me: fresh cinnamon, bread, liqueur, plumbs, tobacco, ironed sheets... And a whiff of cheap deodorant as one of the remaining three customers turns around in the narrow space to take one or other product from the shelf. The women behind the pre-war

sewing machine that serves as a counter has skilfully filled every inch of space from the floor to the topmost shelves.

All I want is a bottle of cold mineral water but the atmosphere in the smallest shop in Central Europe lures me into stocking up on everything my hands can carry: a crate of beer, a magazine with revelations relating to the DDR (the amount of material published in this regard is beyond comprehension), glassy grapes, a fountain pen with a rubber suction device instead ink cartridges, and a miniature Russian car, a Wolga.

Chins are wagging in the grocery store as they would in the market or the pub, but the confined space helps to sharpen the conversation's edges a little. Opinions are expressed and called into question, about what's going to happen to the dilapidated building in the Liebkechtstrasse as well as the hidden power of the ex-communists in the federal government.

Just as I walk into the place, they are rounding off a conversation about the news that wolves have been spotted again in Cottbus near the Polish border after two hundred years, a consequence it is claimed of the accelerated depopulation of East Germany.

'They're demolishing more than they're building these days', says the sixty-year-old woman at the front of the shop with a bunch of leeks on her arm. 'The old folk are dying and the young folk don't want to stay. That's when you get wolves!'

'Logical,' says the shopkeeper behind the sewing machine, but she might just as well have said the opposite.

I read the words *Besserwessis* and *Jammerossis* on the cover of the magazine I'm about to buy. One of the first pages contains the headline: Was East Germany a just a fart in history?

'Five euro and thirty cent,' says the shopkeeper to the woman with the leeks.

The second customer, a middle-aged man who is having trouble deciding what brand of coffee to buy, nudges his neighbour,

the third customer: ‘Well, Miss Erika, we haven’t seen much of you these days.’

‘I’m busy,’ grins Miss Erika – who must be around forty – glancing nervously around her, ‘refining my lifestyle. Whisked milk, if you get my drift. And a whisked lifestyle.’ She takes a tin of tomato sauce from the shelf. ‘Only it’s hard to make it happen on the daily wages you get in this shit-hole of a country.’

The man nods but raises his eyebrows at the same time, taken aback by the frankness of her language.

On another page in my magazine, I find pictures of all the politicians who will be setting the intensity of election fever later in the year. A joke at the bottom of the page reads: Question: ‘*Was erhält man, wenn man einen Ossi mit einem Wessi kreuzt?*’ Answer: ‘*Einen arroganten Arbeitlosen.*’

‘They turned their back on us,’ says the woman with the leeks who can easily read along from where she’s standing, ‘after trying to work out what we were all about...’

‘Now, now,’ the man mumbles.

‘I know what I’m saying,’ nods the woman with the leeks, ‘utopia’s second class citizens.’

‘They said they wanted to know everything about us,’ says Miss Erika, whose face is disfigured by too much schnapps, ‘but in reality they just fobbed us off.’ She turns her attention to the ingredients on the tin of tomato sauce and concludes: ‘Fobbed off, fleeced and fucked.’

‘Our eyes glistened with delight,’ says the indecisive man, ‘when the turnaround came. But we didn’t understand what we saw. Reality only dawned on us little by little.’ He quickly grabs two bottles of liqueur and tries to hide them as if he were ashamed. ‘It was absurd,’ he mumbles, ‘from the word go.’

‘Lunacy... Luxury... Lay-offs,’ chants the woman with the leeks. ‘We were ignorant of the first, we wanted the second come what may and the third is what we ended up with.’ She worms her way towards the door using her bunch of leeks as a machete.

The man with the two bottles of liqueur moves his eyebrows up and down. ‘It’s terrible that the young people are without work,’ he says, ‘but if they were robbed of every opportunity for ideological reasons then it’s a crime. *That* was the DDR. Good for nothing *Eastalgia!*’

Just before the woman with the leeks treads on my toes, she also begins to hold forth about the word *Eastalgia!* She looks at me penetratingly for a moment, as if all the Hirschbergers she knows are passing in review, and then disappears with a snort.

Lifestyle Erika abandons her inspection of the tin of sauce and braces herself in the now available space. ‘If you ask me,’ she says to me in confidence all of a sudden, ‘I think it’s terrible that the Wall is gone, but I think it would be worse if they were to put it back.’ A grin exposes her nicotine-stained teeth.

I shrug my shoulders and stare unconsciously at my miniature Wolga.

‘Who would buy such a Soviet wreck in God’s name,’ she snarls suddenly, turning her back on me for good, while only a moment before I had the impression she was someone I could have a conversation with.

It’s now the turn of the man with the two bottles of liqueur. He turns with spontaneous animation towards my angry neighbour Erika. ‘How is it possible that some people, I say *some people* want to declare East German hallowed ground with retroactive effect?’

‘If you don’t bring back your empties, you pay ten euro twenty,’ says the shopkeeper.

‘Jesus, Mary and Joseph,’ the man groans, inspecting the contents of his wallet. ‘Can I have the second on tick?’

He is granted the favour, not out of congeniality but rather out of convention.

‘It’s possible,’ says Miss Erika as she returns the tin of tomato sauce to the shelf and opts for a different brand. Then she looks at me again. ‘You don’t happen to be a foreigner, do you?’

I nod, trapped.

‘Do you see what I mean?’ she continues uninterrupted. ‘In the past we had one of everything, not even a brand name, just one of everything: a tin of tomatoes was labelled “Tomatoes” and a tin of gherkins labelled “Gherkins”. Everything was clear.’ She opts for the American variety and as the man with the two liqueur bottles – the second of which is on tick – wriggles his way to the door she blurts acidly: ‘It is quite possible that *some* people had it better in the past than others.’

The man avoids her gaze and flees outside. I’m left alone with Miss Erika and feel as if I’m involved in some kind of plot, especially when she hisses in the direction of the door: ‘Stasi pig!’

She finally pays and tosses a ‘*wiedersehen*’ in my direction.

‘If you’re a foreigner then you must be a businessman or a journalist,’ says the shopkeeper. She hesitates for a moment and I sense her eyes glide over my chest. ‘But a businessman would be wearing a tie!’

I smile, relieved.

‘Journalist then?’ she asks almost pleadingly.

‘You might put it that way,’ I say.

‘And what are you going to write about us? Ach, what difference does it make. Write about what it’s like here, because out there they have no idea.’

What shall I write? When I walk through the *Marktstraße* again a little later, the street sign still hasn’t been replaced and the two thirty-year-olds are sitting on their arses drinking beer. I note ‘Men drinking from Dutch beer cans...’

A man in a tailor-made suit exits the glass doorway of the town hall and greets the workers. A little further down the street he gets into a jet-black chauffeur driven limousine. I note ‘Man in tailor-made suit departs...’

A car marked Reed Cross stops in front of a small shop that I hadn’t noticed before. The man who gets out is addressed half in Russian and half in German: ‘*Charasjo? Gut, ja, charasjo!*’ Boxes

are loaded and unloaded, cigarettes are exchanged, amusing anecdotes...

That's life here.

A stunningly beautiful girl passes on her bicycle humming as she goes. Everyone in the street stretches their necks to watch as she disappears unsuspectingly around the bend in the road towards the enchanted forest.

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