

Trek

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The Second World War turned out to be a disaster for Germany, materially of course but above all morally, leaving the populace devastated with guilt and shame. Thus there seems to be a collective amnesia of the period of the thousand year Reich that lasted for a mere twelve-years (but surely far too long nevertheless). It was a dramatic, surreal period involving exaltation as well as despair. The late German expatriate writer W.G. Sebald deplored¹ the scarcity of contemporary documentation of civilian life under the bombings, and above all the total lack of literary depiction of those times. The point being that those were not to primarily show that the ordinary Germans suffered too nor to alleviate guilt but to give voice to unique experiences. Similar sentiments have been brought forward by Gntner Grass². In the late 90's it came as something of a sensation when the diaries of the Jewish linguist Klemperer were published, revealing a far more nuanced public attitude than vulgar demonization of the Germans, as exemplified by Goldhagen's book 'Hitlers willing executioners'³, would indicate. To take a German point of view can easily be seen as an attempt at exoneration and is thus often resisted. Such an attitude is, however, a bit shortsighted and eventually self-defeating. There is nothing extenuating say about pointing out that what is evil can also be beautiful, because if not one may easily conclude that what is beautiful cannot be evil, an illusion potentially with fatal consequences. It is of course satisfying to condemn in retrospect, thus invariably basking in a sense of moral superiority, because few things are sweeter than rightful indignation; but the important thing is to take a humbler attitude and inquire as how to learn from the lessons of the past. To find the deplorable actions of the past understandable does not mean that one necessarily condones them, only that one becomes aware that one may commit them oneself in the future. Not that the circumstances will be the same in the future, they never are, but they may be similar and the essential point is to be able to recognize this⁴. It is a major historical problem of trying to understand the phenomenon of the curious but potent mixture of rationality and insanity that characterizes the spectre of the rise of Nazism in Germany. But it may be a problem that is insoluble. A pre-requisite for understanding is

¹ 'Luftkrieg und Literatur' reviewed in February 9, 2006

² Whose moral authority took a nose-dive when he late in his life confessed that he had joined the SS as a teenager, something which by itself would not necessitate censure, but whose covering up invited accusations of hypocrisy. Of course had he been more open with it initially, his career as a man of letters based on his moral high ground would never have taken off.

³ Apparently Goldhagen had a great success lecturing to German audiences, their sense of mortifying guilt easily veering into self-pity and a desire for flagellation.

⁴ There are various neo-nazi movements which have engendered a lot of medial attention. The fact that those so clearly identify with the symbols of the past, prevents them to be anything but curiosities, less of a political problem than a social syndrome.

sympathy, in the sense of being able to identify with a point of view, which in the case of Nazism is a bit too much of a challenge to stomach for a decent historian. It is symptomatic that Evans in his trilogy on the rise and fall of the Third Reich states his intention to take an objective point of view and stay away from moral censure, but he is unable to stick to his resolutions for any period. Human history is not Natural Science, even if it would be intellectually desirable to treat the Nazi phenomenon in the same way one treats a hurricane, it is humanly impossible. One cannot take a dispassionate view, human history is about passions and one has to take sides. Maybe a more dispassionate view can be taken in the future, but then the urgency and immediacy is gone, and there are no longer any eye-witnesses who can tell 'how it really was' acting as necessary correctives to the cardinal sin of a historian - anachronism, at least according to the historian Hobsbawm. The great advantage of a historical investigation is hindsight, which at the same time obscures. For us the past is safe, it does not touch us, its horrors do not threaten us, because we know what happened later; while for those living in the past as a present, the future is still a void, and fears are real. Hindsight makes it possible for posterity to know much more of an event than what its contemporaries were able to, and at the same time it prevents us to feel what 'it was really like'. In a sense the more we have of the former, the less of the later, as in a Heisenbergian uncertainty principle.

The present book is a memoir of a sojourn in Nazi-Germany. The experiences it presents are not unique, except of course in the trivial sense that all experiences are unique (but admittedly the fact that they were experienced by an expatriate American woman gives them a certain piquancy), but what is noteworthy is that they are not only penned down on paper but with an undeniable literary verve which makes them exciting to read. There is obviously no way those reminiscences will in any significant way resolve any of the issues I have alluded to above, nor shed much light. But some light it will shed, a little glimmer, and what more can we expect?

The tale was obviously not written down in real time, nor are there I believe, any contemporary notes from which she was able to draw. According to the foreword it was written down from memory in 1959 a decade and a half after the events. Human memory is notoriously unreliable, and the British historian R.G.Collingwood emphasizes that it cannot serve as a document for the writing of history, but on the other hand, it is often all that we have, and besides once written down it becomes a document of sorts⁵. Clearly the recollections were meant as a private memento not to go beyond a closer circle of relatives and friends, to go public is another matter. One senses in the editorial introduction by the grand-son - Steve(n) Mumford, a certain discomfort. Had the story had been yet another tale of narrow escape from the Holocaust, there would have been no need for a defensive and puzzled position. But now. For one thing, how could the couple have settled in Berlin during the war? As conceded by the editor, it is easy to be wise after the facts, but at the time it must not have been such a preposterous move after all, and certainly

⁵ From a strictly documentary point of view, notes written at the time would have been more reliable, on the other hand as already hinted at, hindsight allows a less myopic perspective in which facts are enabled to fit into a general context. Furthermore I suspect that Collingwoods censure of human recollection was based on the fact that a memory is always changed every time it is retrieved and thus not stable enough to submit to a cross-examination.

not a taking of sides. The case of the grandfather, the German Jentsch, nevertheless makes for a certain embarrassment, and to the editors credit he does not shy away from it. After all in 1940 enough of the regime was known to anyone but a simpleton to draw the pertinent conclusions. For one thing the Nuremberg laws had been enacted. On the other hand those did not prevent the majority of the Jews to stay, partly because they had nowhere to go, and partly because they may have wishfully thought of the measures as temporary. At the end of the 30's the official strictures became so severe that they complained of being treated almost as bad as Negroes (little did they know what was in store for them), which incidentally points out a certain hypocrisy on the American part⁶. What was remarkable was the demotion of a highly respectable and more or less fully assimilated Jewry to such a lowly status. It was much easier to swallow in the case of gypsies always on the lowest end of the social ladder⁷. The argument that Dr Jentsch was not anti-semitic because of his Jewish partner does not make much sense under closer scrutiny. For one thing, what is meant by anti-semitic? It is not like being pregnant, either your or you are not, but such sentiments come in a great variety and are seldom personal⁸. France and Russia are traditionally thought of as more pronounced anti-semitic societies than Germany, after all the Prussia of 18th century enacted for the time unusually liberal laws as to Jewish rights. Furthermore Jews played a central part of traditional German high culture. One may dismiss this of course as a phenomenon of the elite and that there was a deep resentment against Jews among the German masses, whatever those were. As usual there is never any dearth of finding evidence for any claim (this is known as the phenomenon of persecution-mania) and this is particular the case in history where it is hard to falsify anything. Nevertheless, barring evidence to the contrary, it is in my opinion reasonable to assume that he was not, or at least that the Jewish question was not that important to him. That he served in a function that was for all intents and purposes in the interest of the government and that he at the end of the war volunteered for military service, may be harder to swallow. But obviously like many people he was a patriot and with a strong identification as a German. In retrospect this can easily be held against him, but at the time it was not in any way remarkable. And volunteering for the army, nearly cost him his life. One should also not forget that the aristocratic opposition against Hitler, as a vulgar upstart, were motivated by strong patriotic feelings, and they had no intention to surrender unconditionally, but to negotiate a peace with honor. As opposed

⁶ The commendable official action against institutionalized racism (incidentally the only meaningful sense of the notion of racism) would not take place until the 50's and 60's abetted by the Civil Rights Movement which later would give rise to the anti-war movement of the 60's but then come to an end by the Reagan era.

⁷ There existed of course unassimilated Jews, the so called Ost-Juden, who were looked down upon by the West-Juden.

⁸ Gring suggested that every German should have a 'Schutzjude' a close friend whom he was to protect. Hitler is rumored to have been fond of the family doctor who was Jewish and whom he warned and who set off for the States. With a certain element of audacity, one may even argue that the anti-semitism of the top-brass was not personal but instrumental, as if it would make a difference, or even be thought of extenuating. In my opinion it makes it even worse.

to the shameful extermination which was carefully kept from the view of the public⁹, the military exploits were extolled and no doubt enjoyed wide support and popularity even among those who did not hold the regime in any regard¹⁰.

The epic struggle of the Second World War was the clash between Germany and the Soviet Union, anything else were mere sideshows. It is clear that Hitler considered the Soviet Union as the only real enemy, and would have preferred France and especially England as allies. The western war, although brilliantly successful, was the result of a miscalculation and as such an unfortunate diversion. The war in the east was to become completely ruthless disregarding all conventions, and did consequently invite a response in kind. The contrast to the German war with czarist Russia a quarter of a century earlier is striking¹¹. However, it is not true that there were no precedents, as has been remarked, what was shocking about Hitler was that he applied against Europeans measures that had up to then been reserved for colonial natives. The Slavs were to be treated as subhumans. One should keep in mind that there had never been any traditional enmity between Germany (Prussia) and Russia, on the contrary. As a result of the Napoleonic War a natural bond was formed between the countries, one which Bismarck (who was something of a Russophile) nurtured (and of course not only for sentimental reasons). However, at the end of the century French feelers for an alliance, led to a fateful configuration of such, which more than anything else was responsible for the start of the First World War¹². During the 1920's there were a renewed rapprochement between the Germans and the now Soviets, probably because of a shared position as pariah nations at the time. Hitler was a brilliant rhetorician, unfortunately he also meant what he said (sincerity not always being a virtue), what the Jews and also the Slavs would learn to their peril. As to the former the full extent of the War against the Jews were not disclosed until after the war, and thus never played any significant role in the war against Hitler¹³. As a school-

⁹ It is a comforting thought that the Holocaust was indeed kept a secret, except for those that needed to know, and is indeed one which I personally would very much want to believe. In recent times there are indications that this might not have been true, although few of the proponents of that view take the extreme position of the already alluded Goldhagen.

¹⁰ This is similar to the opposition to the Communist regime in Soviet Union, no matter how much there were grumblings and resentment, there was a widespread sense of pride of the country being a super-power.

¹¹ Wilhelmine Germany took a lot of Russian prisoners, almost everybody survived. Nazi-Germany tended to exterminate theirs, as did the Soviets, however saving the higher officers.

¹² A riveting account of the process is given by George Kennan in his book 'The Fateful Alliance'.

¹³ If one is cynical one may wonder how much it would have mattered had it been known. It is ironic that anti-German feeling was much more virulent at the onset of the First World War than at the Second. According to Orwell, the British learned to admire the Germans and despise the French. Somewhat inured against propaganda the public was skeptical as to the rumors of atrocities that nevertheless leaked out. It is also to be remarked that the focus on the Holocaust was not in place until the 60's, before that the Germans were mostly feared and admired as a formidable fighting machine, and it is symptomatic that

boy I was enthralled by the Swedish exploits in the 17th and early 18th century, and being brought up to fear the Russians as barbaric invaders (further abetted by the Cold War), I certainly can understand the elation caused by the initial German onslaught. (What engaged the Swedish public more than anything else during the Second World War was the Soviet attack on Finland, and the heroic resistance of the Finns, so what would be more understandable than the latter later joining in the ranks to regain what they lost, and why not much more?) One may argue with conviction that the German public was more motivated by their enmity against the Soviets than against the Jews.¹⁴ Anyway such sentiments (of military valor and exploits) are basically infantile and go not much deeper really than the routing for your favorite sports-team¹⁵

The narrator of the story had little choice. Either she would divorce her husband and return to the States, or stick loyally with him for better or for worse. As it turned out it was for the worse, getting in fact the worst of both worlds.

Americans are notorious for their inability to really understand that anyone could chose to live anywhere else but the States if they have the right and opportunity to do so. Just as non-American currency is thought of as monopoly money¹⁶ their attitude to other countries, although often inspired by genuine curiosity, are not entirely free from condescension. The narrator, although unusual because of her extended expatriation and willingness to move to Germany under such inauspicious circumstances, is not entirely free from it, as subsequent events would show. There is very little of her days in Berlin, what strikes her imagination (and hence becomes the basis for her narrative) is her life on the land, an experience that is both strange and familiar¹⁷.+ The Germany beyond the Oder is a truly vanished land, one of the major casualties of the Second World War

Other casualties are the medieval centers of German towns, as documented by

in the early fifties American movies extolling Rommel as a general could be made, and long thereafter a distinction could also be made between the 'Wehrmacht' and the Extermination, but as more and more is brought up to light, the distinction becomes more and more blurred.

¹⁴ Which gives rise to some sombre speculations that the Jewish Holocaust was just a warm-up for a far more extensive extermination of vanquished Slavs in order to make Lebensraum. However, I find those speculations somewhat fanciful, but should be kept in mind when one makes head-counts of the victims of Stalin and Hitler in which the latter comes out short, but perhaps not because of not trying hard enough.

¹⁵ The Swedish director Ingmar Bergman claims in his memoirs to have been a German fan during the war routing for them, celebrating their victories, suffering with their defeats, only to be overcome with shame at the subsequent post-war revelations. This never seems to have caused him any grief, maybe because people never got very far into his book? Or that some people enjoy such a status as to never to be questioned. I bring it up to support my point of infantility, and its wider applications.

¹⁶ While most countries change the appearances of their bills and coins regularly, making them obsolete, the Americans stick with theirs. Money is serious business not to be tampered with lightly. A kind of conservatism I incidentally sympathize with.

¹⁷ Not much is revealed in the account of her Kentucky background, but reading between the lines, one suspects a rural and feudal one, which made it easier to connect. As William James remarks, what excites our curiosity is the familiar in an unfamiliar setting.

Friedrich in his book 'Brandt' (reviewed in June 30, 2009). The bombings of Berlin started early as a British retaliation of the bombings of London, which initially may have been done by mistake. They were never really successful (as they neither were in London). What is needed is combustible material, which the old half-timbered buildings provided, to set off firestorms. In most cases those bombings had little if any military justification, had limited impact on public morale, and if anything were in the interest of the Fhrer's architectural visions, but were conducted in a purely retaliatory spirit (they were not entirely unprovoked after all) and to reassure the public at home (as well as foreign backers?) that the British was actively pursuing the war. The targets were chosen on the basis of their vulnerability and multiplied at the end of the war as they became more and more accessible and less and less relevant for the outcome. As Sebald notes in his book, half a million missions were flown, killing half a million Germans. The reader is free to make his own divisions ¹⁸. As usual in war, the damages perpetrated to the enemy will in the end turn out be incurred by all ¹⁹.

Germany as a nation is an ambiguous concept, and does not really make sense until Bismarck's unification of 1871, before that it only referred to a loose geographical collection under the formal suzerainty of an elected Kaiser. Thus it does not make sense to say that Germany is a traditional enemy of Poland. Sweden and Russia are. Prussia is a modern state that sprung out of Brandenburg and expanded greatly during the 18th century, part of the expansion involved other German lands part non-German ethnic territory. At the end of the 18th century there were three partitions of Poland, the last one wiping it out from the map in its entirety. It was accomplished by its friendly neighbors Prussia, Austria and Russia, with Russia taking the lions share. In fact the Polish uprising in the next century was directed against Russia, which was commonly thought of as the country that had swallowed Poland. Thus to claim that Poland was carved out of the midst of Germany after the Versailles Treaty is misleading. One needs only to compare the maps of Germany prior to the First and Second World War respectively to see that the territorial losses suffered by Wilhelmine Germany were rather marginal. The re-emergence of Poland was a result of the military defeat of Czarist Russia by the Germans (which also led to the establishment of the first ever Finnish nation, as well as the emergence of the Baltic States) at the Brest-Litovks treaty in 1918, which was, however, declared void by the Versailles treaty, which indeed made the adjustments at the expense of Germany, much to its resentment²⁰. However it is clear from the fact that Germany possessed the entire southern part of the Baltic coast that there must have been some recent expansion at

¹⁸ Incidentally the conflagration of Dresden actually pops up in the account with Dr Jentsch as a survivor.

¹⁹ True, traces of the destruction are being removed so no one will know what is being missed. When I visited Dresden the first time in December 1979, the city was filled with ruins, not one of which I discovered on my return by bike in 2012. A ruin can become a second order ruin when restored!

²⁰ But there was so much for the Germans to resent, so it is not clear that this was the major source of frustration.

the expense of the disintegrating Polish nation which until the 17th century was a major actor²¹. Poland, along with Lithuania were great powers during the previous centuries, with their heartland in present day Ukraine. In fact a thousand years ago the Slavs extended much further West, in fact beyond the Elbe²². One may argue that the German hold on eastern Prussia was more tenuous than further west, on the other hand through the Teutonic Knights the German presence in the Baltic states were quite established since the time of the Crusades. The capital city of East-Prussia - Knigsberg, plays a pivotal part in German culture and its present incarnation as Kaliningrad is a sad testimony to the radical extinguishing of history. Anyway Pomerania, the initial setting for the book, had been German for time immemorial indistinguishable on both sides of the Oder. The German word 'Heimat' is untranslatable. It is part of the romantic notion of a Nation based on the concept of ethnicity encompassing a racial, linguistic and cultural uniformity with an unalienable geographic attachment, and which came to play an inordinate (as well inconsistent) role in the aftermath of the First World War²³. Romantic or not, the notion is very potent indeed, and to the American woman a new and exotic world would have opened up. It is always interesting to see the familiar through strange (and innocent) eyes, referred to as alienation in jargon of literary studies. The 'Mangel' was obviously a novelty to the narrator, who may not have known that the word is the same in English, (and of course the words 'mangle' and 'mangled' are frequently used, if not in their literal meanings). The depiction of washing using cauldrons, which I am familiar with from my childhood visits up north, she also finds quite intriguing. Life in the countryside is indeed very pleasant, not to say idyllic, even if there are inevitable tensions living close with strangers. In fact the most charming part of the memoirs is devoted to a description of life in a parson's family by name of Schwarz. By order of Goebbels, women with children are to be evacuated out of Berlin, and the narrator arrives in the small village of Barnimskunow out in the wide plains with a huge sky, empty and bleak at first but eventually the narrator will connect it with the American West. The pastor is away in Greece, but Frau Schwarz is a formidable presence, who at first physically repelled the narrator by her broad-shouldered and muscular appearance, but then she was won over by her charm and wit and obvious intelligence. Her energy was restlessly abundant and found no corresponding outlet but led her into constant feuding and other mischief, which eventually would make relations impossible, but that was to be in the future. Her passions involved black coffee, cigarettes, motorbike and thrillers in addition to her husband and children. As most of those were not available, all of it was vested in her progeny. And children there were many, and more were coming, all of them strong individuals. Dinners were communal of course in the large household, and Frau Schwarz was a stickler for order and behavior, any misdeed resulting

²¹ The repeated wars against the invading Swedes with whom the Polish briefly had been in a personal union undoubtedly contributed to this decline. Few contemporary Swedes and Poles are aware of this, which shows the benefits of a lack of a historical education.

²² I was first made aware of this during an exhibit of the splendors of Dresden sponsored by the DDR and taking a very politically correct attitude.

²³ One may argue that the reinstatement of Poland was an unfortunate and shortsighted step, just as the disintegration of the Austrian-Hungarian empire, and in modern times the re-introduction of the State of Israel on similar grounds.

in banishment and no food. And everything edible was of course to be eaten, including fishbone, which should not be wasted. Life in wartime Germany was minutely regulated, it was forbidden to make butter, milk had to be delivered and farmers had to buy back butter through ration cards. Depending on the size of the family you were entitled to certain domestic beast, but a pig had to be slaughtered at a certain age and weight. Needless to say Frau Schwarz ignored many of those regulations, keeping more pugs and goats she was entitled to, although punishment was severe, and got away with it. The rationing system incidentally was very intricate and detailed, but also quite efficient and reliable but above all scrupulously fair (although prisoners of wars did get lower rations) and there was almost no black market (partly because of the harsh punishment). Vegetables were not available at the local store, but necessitated excursions to the market at Staargard, and those were of course welcome diversions, sometimes after the chores had been disposed of, turning into veritable snatches of holidays, including going to the movies and the shopping of modest luxuries. As the war wore on not only those but basic necessities such as shoes, became scarcer and scarcer. Gradually the narrator is able to get away from the claims of the Schwarz household and take in the larger picture. She finds a feudal society, where social hierarchy is based on rank rather than profession and education, and most of the land is in the hands of big aristocratic estates. The village itself is teeming with interesting people and she makes friends with the owners of a store. There are charming descriptions of apple-picking, with all the apples individually handled and stored, lasting as a valuable dietary supplement throughout the winter. Daily living usurped most of the energies. Washing the children became a time-consuming chore, as was the washing of dishes after the meals, as well as the preparations of the same, especially those of the vegetables. Clothes had to be darned, and gardens tended. Beats had to be peeled with heavy knives before being cut into pieces and boiled in huge cauldrons finally to be pressed by hand producing syrup, a task that involved the entire family for days. However, as previously hinted at, relations with the parson family became too strained, and after some ugly episodes, the narrator felt compelled to move out. Life continued, maybe not so intensely as by the Schwarz'es, but picturesquely enough. Among the happiest moments during their rural life, were the walks in the summer among the fields and woods, a landscape, which at first had seen alien became to be appreciated. There were cows and sheep and the village itself was swarming with geese, several hundreds of them. They were told that in peacetime the feet were dipped in tar from walking on all those cobbled stones, and being driven into town at Christmas to be slaughtered. The children attend school and their life becomes more and more integrated as the narrator improves upon her German. Idyllic indeed.

The war is of course ever present, perhaps not so much by the bombings of nearby cities (Stettin being the closest) nor by the presence of prisoner of wars, as by the make-shift living arrangements and the rationing of food²⁴. Reading one is struck with the efficiency of the war-time administration of the authorities. This is of course Nazi-Germany, but the signs of it are few and formal, and seem not in any way to affect daily life significantly. The author points out that to her Prussia has very different connotations than to the average American. Prussia is in the vulgar imagination seen as the ultimate embodiment

²⁴ In wars economies tend to be planned and work very well, the reasons for that are beautifully explained by the economist Hayek in 'The road to serfdom' reviewed in May 25, 2012

of militarism. *Blut und Eisen*²⁵. The most Prussian King of them all - Frederick the Great, thought German was the language of illiterate peasants and spoke French instead. An accomplished amateur musician and (a still closeted) gay²⁶ he surrounded himself with the intellectual elite of the day, playing the role of the enlightened despot with gusto. The liberal reforms of the Prussian state we have already referred to, but maybe the most notable was the educational system, beginning from the bottom, which was set in place in the early 19th century served as an inspiration to many countries. The brother Humboldts as well as the mathematician Riemann are worthy products of the Prussian mentality²⁷. Those are not the kind of examples which the author proposes, instead she is emphasizing more down-to-earth solid qualities such as honesty, integrity, dignity and not without, she adds, a sense of humor, comparing them to the British and New Englanders²⁸.

By 1944 ominous signs appear. Treks of refugees from Eastern Prussia appear. As time goes by they are replaced by refugees from further west, mirroring the Russian advance. The author does momentarily consider the option of being 'liberated' by the Russians. Such thoughts are quickly brushed aside as unrealistic. Those Mongolian hordes are illiterate and her being an American would cut no mustard with them. Sentiments representing the conception of the approaching Russians. The exodus is orderly and organized by the authorities. Each village leaves at the same time, making up a train of wagons, after which the military takes care of the livestock and left over stores. When the time has come for the narrator and her two children, the Russians have advanced so far through a breakthrough in the south that they threaten to cut them off from the Oder, the crossing of which is seen as deliverance, because for some reason it is understood that the Russians will stop at that river. They stick with the village trek for some time, then the author and her newfound buddy - Dora, decide to make it on their own, getting lifts with trucks, crisscrossing haphazardly through the countryside dodging Russian tanks. They manage to make it eventually to the Stettin Hauptbahnhof where they spend a night on

²⁵ The German Wehrmacht was considered by its enemies to be qualitatively superior to the counterpart of the Allies. But what matters in the long run are resources, of which the Germans were short. It is tempting to see this as at least a cultural characteristic of the Prussian mentality. But Germans have no particular tradition of being soldiers (pace Freeman Dyson's remarks in an essay in the NYR a few years ago). The military traditions of the French are far more striking. In fact the only militaristic German tradition is in fact Prussian. It was held by many that the Rhinelanders had none such, and at the Versailles treaty some Frenchmen were suggesting to incorporate that part of Germany into France, they being more Latin in mentality than German. This is of course fanciful. One explanation proposed for the success of the German forces is that they were less hierarchical than that of the Allies, and even low level commanders were given more latitude for individual initiatives. In short they were more 'democratic'. A kind of paradox, which like most paradoxes, is intellectually attractive.

²⁶ As a young man he was forced to attend the execution of his boy-friend ordered so by his father

²⁷ Riemann benefitted from the excellent Prussian elementary education, where his unique talents were discovered and nurtured. Wilhelm Humboldt's vision of a university held sway for at least two centuries, but is now being phased out.

²⁸ Marcel Reich-Ranicki in his memoirs 'Mein Leben' stresses that his Gymnasium teachers, although self-avowed Nazis, never discriminated against him, their deep-set Prussian principles going deeper than their (ephemeral?) political allegiances.

the platform unsuccessfully trying to board overfull trains fighting with the other women with children. Eventually they are able to catch the last train going west. They are subsequently given papers endowing them with refugee status, which allows them free access to public transportation (and in principle also private) and shelter, but they are not allowed to stay at the same place for more than three days in a row, unless infirm. The country is swelling over with refugees, and it is very hard to find any place to settle down. They manage, by some subterfuge to take themselves to Marne in western Schleswig, getting there is fraught with incidents. At one time the train is attacked by dive-bombers. They have to scramble out seeking shelter, while the locomotive is destroyed. A replacement is quickly found and they can continue, only to be attacked again, and yet another attack puts the new locomotive out of business. Nevertheless a third locomotive is located and the trip can be concluded. One can only marvel at such service in wartime. Nowadays most countries would be unable to match it in peacetime. Marne turns out to be a disappointment, but eventually they manage to find a sanctuary in Giekau, a small village east of Kiel already overflowing with refugees.

In former times conquest did seldom involve ethnic cleansing. Whatever Polish lands Prussia had annexed kept their populations, just as the Austrian empire was a quilt of different nationalities. Conquest meant foreign administration, not replacement. The Second World War and especially its aftermath witnessed a lot of ethnic cleansing. Maybe the largest and the most costly in lives being the Indian one as a result of the partition involving many a massacre. The German ones were almost of the same magnitude, involving more than ten million people being moved from the East, with an attrition of maybe two million people. Much of the exodus was voluntary, but no doubt there were forceful expulsions as well, as in the case of the other German cleansing, namely that of the Sudeten Germans who were forcefully driven out of their homelands, not because of any invading army but because of the hostility of the local population with many an atrocity as a consequence. Examples of documented atrocities are the sinking by the Allies of ships containing tens of thousands of refugees in the South Baltic. Statistically the risk of dying from those expulsions were no doubt higher than those suffered by the Jews during their transportations. However, statistics is misleading. It is a huge difference between being in charge of your own escape or being forcefully moved under inhuman conditions. Also, those who successfully made the transition to the West were to enjoy relative prosperity (and as been sardonically noted, saved the constraints of a subsequent Communist rule) while those who were transported to the East faced inevitable extinction²⁹. Thus harrowing as the escape was to the narrator and her two children, it can only confirm 'that all is well, that ends well' ('Ende gut, alles gut'.) Also the presence of the two children probably made the ordeal more bearable for the mother. Having two children to protect puts the focus outside yourself and allows strong primordial instincts to take over. In extreme situations, you live entirely in the present, and are allowed to draw on resources you never suspected that you had. Had you known what

²⁹ That life may not have been so rosy for many of the eastern refugees is another matter.

would be in store for you, you probably would not have thought that you would be able to deal with it, just as you in retrospect may hardly believe that you did. The point being that circumstances do not allow much latitude to indulge the idle imagination, what imagination you have has to deal with pressing needs of the moment³⁰ .

What follows is a rather idyllic time, a kind of carnival in which the ordinary laws of life are suspended. It is a time to survive, above all to stave off starvation (incidentally the normal state of affairs for any organism living in harmony with nature). It gives to existence a certain rawness during which desperate measures are taken and taboos broken down. How readily do not the narrator and her friend resort to theft, and how eagerly do not many fall in love, in the general enchantment. The transition of authority from the Germans to the invading forces is quick. Considering the efficiency of the Germans, the rational step would have been co-option. This was however stalled by what was considered the necessary de-nazification process³¹. Once the occupying forces were in charge, the status of the author and her family changed from being privileged refugees to basically prisoner of wars, exacerbated by they haplessly finding themselves in a so called Black Zone, which involved a lot of red tape and restriction of movement. The last chapter of the book is devoted to the tragic-comical efforts of making her status as an American recognized and acted upon. After all, there is no place like home, especially if you are an American trapped in miserable circumstances. Those efforts were eventually successful, but all in all it would still take a year in the chaos that reigned the first years after 'Stunde Null'. It is clear that in spite of spending many years in Germany, she had never fully assimilated. She does complain about her poor German. It is not clear what this means. It could be something as trivial as an unavoidable accent, which is the lot of all adult foreign speakers, regardless of their command; but something more serious is hinted at, namely an inability of mastering its grammar and subtleties of expression, that she for all intents and purposes is reduced to a kind of higher-level pidgin, sufficient to get around and chat with friends, but not enough to assume the role of an educated citizen³², any position short of which would have not been compatible with her expectations and temperament.

The War was a disaster to Germany, but as noted initially, more moral than material.

³⁰ When you are seriously sick, you do not envision the worst scenarios, you are thankful for anything that brings some comfort, tending to concentrate on what gives hope, not what suggests despair.

³¹ This was one of the big mistake made by the invading forces in Iraq. Anyone connected with the Baath-party was excluded, leaving a void.

³² I was a bit taken aback that she needed to look at a map to locate Constance after several years in Germany, but maybe it is not normal to pour over maps. Some of the names of towns are slightly wrong such as Itzenhe (Itzenhoe) and Segesburg (Bad Segesberg) which testifies that the memoirs are written from memory indeed and not checked, which gives it authenticity and impresses with the accuracy most towns are noted. Incidentally she speculates that the strange name 'Itzenhoe', might be Danish, after all The Danish King was until 1864 the suzerain over the German dukedoms Schleswig and Holstein, a bone of diplomatic contention throughout the early half of the 19th century. But the name is at least as strange to the Danish tongue as to the German. I did visit the city on bike a few years ago, and saw some plaque by the church to the effect that the Swedes had been there and ransacked during some obscure war.

Huge damage had been done to old cities by the indiscriminate bombing campaigns, but the damage was human and cultural, not really material. Industrial military production actually increased towards the end of the war, and most of the industrial infra-structure remained intact after the war. The (West)German miracle is well-publicized³³ and ten years later there was little to show in the West at least that the country had suffered through a devastating war. My first visit to Germany was in the summer of 1963, when I was about to turn a teenager. I remember that during my first day I was very uncomfortable with the thought that every male I saw must have been a German soldier. This discomfort quickly subsided, never to return³⁴. I never saw a single ruin, the preponderance of which must have characterized the first post-war years, until I went to DDR sixteen years later. At the time of 1963, there was still some subdued talk of a German reunification, and besides no formal peace-treaty after the war had been signed, which meant that theoretically at least, there was a possibility of regaining the lost lands to the east³⁵. With the Ost-Politik of Willy Brandt in the 70's, all such thoughts and hopes became unrealistic. Maybe there even was a formal peace-treaty signed at the time, I do not know, or just individual assurances of the status-quo. The eventual unification of Germany in 1990 (in effect already in the fall of the fall of the wall) was an almost surreal event to my generation³⁶. But long before the unification Germany the defeated party prospered ahead of the ostensible victors England and France³⁷ and becoming the locomotive of the European economy, a role for which it might have been destined at the turn of the 20th century, the two world wars only being a diversion. One is reminded of Braudels notion of 'histoire de longue durée'.

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³³ The architect of which commonly being attributed to Ludwig Erhard who took over after Adenauer.

³⁴ Cynically a little bit like poverty which strikes the visitors to the Third World upon arrival, but to which they quickly get used.

³⁵ I remember how shocked I was in 1964, after having saved money to buy a Swedish atlas, to find the old national boundaries still drawn. Formally of course this was correct.

³⁶ One of its surreal aspects I experienced with my family in 1991, driving through the former DDR countryside, whose post-war bleakness was being spottily improved by commercial advertisements, seeing all those Russian military equipment driving idly along the roads in what had become a Nato-country!

³⁷ Only politeness allow them such designations. France was utterly humbled by its quick defeat (as Celine sardonically remarked, no matter how fast the civilians fled, they could not catch up with the retiring French army) and proved to be a most assiduous collaborator, notwithstanding all talk about the Resistance, making it possible for the Germans to occupy the country with a minimal force. And the English, although unvanquished, had no choice but to wait for American assistance and hope that the other monster - Stalin, would crush their enemy. Their own military actions being reduced to that of peripheral theaters.