

Departure from Berlin Central Station at 12-37. Arrival at Kutno at 17-07. Reservation required. I had reserved a seat by the door, as I am prone to claustrophobia if I don't sit on the aisle in a plane or at the door of a compartment in a train. As a bonus, the seat next to me was empty, so I could look forward to a relaxed trip. Sitting opposite me there was an older lady, dressed entirely in black, and next to her a young couple, unmistakably in love. I liked the look of the young man with his straw-blond hair, full lips and melancholy eyes. And the girl I liked too; she was wearing very low jeans and a blouse that was much too short, and she had a bead in her navel. The two were talking constantly to each other, in Polish though, which I thought was a pity, as I would have liked to eavesdrop a little. And when they weren't talking they were kissing, which bothered neither the older lady or me. Quite the contrary. If I had been the young man I would have kissed the girl too. I found it very pleasurable, especially as she looked straight at me a few times through the curtain of her brown hair and seemed to have no objection to my watching them show their fondness for each other.

All the same I tried hard to concentrate on my own business, and first leafed through the timetable brochure, then got my books out of my bag and spread them out on the seat next to me. According to the timetable the train was going to Kutno via Frankfurt on the Oder, Rzepin, Poznan and Konin. Konin was familiar to me from my parents' papers. This was where they had been forced to abandon their first child Günter as they fled from the Russians in January 1945. They then took refuge in a wood and were finally interned in a Polish work camp. They never found their lost son, despite searching for years, even decades, with the help of the Red Cross tracing service. I had written a book about it over a decade ago. A few years later I wrote a book about a man called Stephan living in Berlin as a university lecturer who wrote a book about his missing brother, and then, sixty years after the end of the war, started to look for his brother once more. Soon afterwards I did the same thing and set off looking for my brother. Since then I have completed the search.

Another thing Stephan had planned to do was to visit a place called Bryschtsche or Bryszcze in Ukraine, where his father was born. He didn't visit the place after all, preferring to travel to Egypt to look at the pyramids, read Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* and have an affair with a German archaeologist on an island in the Nile not far from Luxor. He was right – what

would he have found in Ukraine anyway? A sleepy peasant village at best. Perhaps it had long ceased to exist and had been replaced by anonymous cement-block housing estates. Stephan did not go to Bryschtsche. I wanted to do better than he did. Since then I have completed the journey, too.

I really did get to Bryschtsche, which still surprises me a bit. To me Bryschtsche was not a real place that you could visit by simply getting in a car or bus. Bryschtsche to me was still just this foreign unpronounceable name, and hiding behind it was that person who all my life remained just as foreign to me: my father. Bryschtsche was the East to me. And my father was a person from the East who occasionally reached for the dog leash to raise his sons to be better people.

I did travel to Bryschtsche, but I didn't manage to get better acquainted with my father there. Of course I knew that would be the case, but I wanted to go there all the same. Probably a sign of old age, these trips to the birthplaces of your parents, because in actual fact there is nothing I care less about than genealogical research. After all, if you go back far enough in your family tree then you are related to half of humanity. I don't need genealogical research to find out that I am descended from Adam and Eve, or Sahelanthropus tchadensis or some other African forebear. All the same I find the trip to Bryschtsche had a settling effect. I had had a Bryschtsche gap which grew wider and wider as the years went by, and I have now closed it. There was a time when a trip to Tuscany settled me. I had clearly had a Tuscany gap which needed to be closed by a trip to Tuscany. Later I also had a Provence gap and an Andalusia gap which I also closed at some stage. Now I feel the settling effect of having travelled to a peasant village in the province of Wolynia in the north west of Ukraine. And sitting in the train to Kutno to visit my mother's birthplace was having a settling effect now too.

Bryschtsche was on the road connecting Luzk and Roshischtsche or Rozyszcze. I had planned the trip in such a way that I did not need to spend a night in Luzk or in Roshischtsche. I imagined that would have been pretty bleak. Instead, I travelled to Lemberg, which is called Lviv in Ukrainian and Lvov in Russian. Lemberg was the only town in Ukraine apart from Kiev with its own travel guide, which in itself is an indication that a visit to Lemberg might be worth while. Quite apart from that, articles about Lemberg had been appearing quite often in newspapers for some time now, and the city was clearly developing into a new tourist destination. The people who used to go to Cracow were now going to Lemberg.

In Lemberg I first stayed at the Grand Hotel, which was not my usual style. I did not want to take any risks – whatever those risks might be in Ukraine. Actually you can't get a good night's sleep at the Lemberg Grand Hotel. The beds are so hard that you think you slept on the pavement of the Svobody Prospekt where the Grand Hotel is situated.

After only one night at the Grand Hotel I moved to the Hotel Leopold, which is just as expensive as the Grand Hotel but has better beds. What's more, it is in a palace-like building that has just been renovated, and only a few metres from the market square called Rynok, probably one of the most beautiful squares in Europe.

I had been given the telephone number of a lady professor by a Berlin travel agency specialising in Ukraine; she was to organise a car with a driver and an interpreter for the trip to Bryshtsche. According to the owner of the travel agency the professor would line up a student of German to travel with me and act as my interpreter. I rang the professor, and she said I should come by; it would be best if I came immediately, as she had time right then. On foot it would take only about twenty or thirty minutes from the Hotel Leopold to her university below the castle hill. She told me the address and I set off.

In Lemberg it is practically impossible to get lost if you keep your eyes on the castle hill, which can be seen from almost anywhere in the city. I had no trouble finding the road where the university was situated. But I couldn't find the university. There was no university, there was only a fairly run-down building with a sign next to the entrance indicating a language institute. On entering I was greeted by the doorman who was lying on a couch behind his booth and reminded me a little of Kafka's Gregor Samsa – after his metamorphosis into a dung-beetle. Just as the whole building made me think of Kafkaesque worlds. The man had not shaved or combed his hair, but was wearing a bow-tie and an apparently hand-knitted woollen waistcoat which he had tucked into his trousers. He spoke no German, which I could not expect of course. The man didn't understand what I wanted and stood threateningly in front of me so that I would not have been able to take one more step into the building.

Fortunately, a moment later a blond lady appeared and spoke a few words to the doorman who finally let me pass, so I was able to follow the lady to the first floor. The lady was a member of the staff, and the professor who was waiting for me. That is to say, there were

three middle-aged ladies waiting for me, and the fourth sat down next to them. We were all sitting round the professor's desk in an office that needed sprucing up. The window was covered with a blind; the view was apparently too depressing, for I saw only covered windows the second time I visited the institute too. The lady behind the desk greeted me with a grand imperious gesture and immediately introduced herself as the director of this establishment which, as she explained, was a private university. I was satisfied with this, and anyway it was none of my concern – I just wanted a driver and an interpreter, the student of German as mentioned before. I wouldn't have minded if it was a girl student, but I didn't say so. The professor then suggested that one of the ladies present, who was called Jelena and worked as a German lecturer there, would take me to Bryschtsche. When I replied that I would very much like to travel with a student, she said that there were no students in the city as it was vacation, which I didn't quite believe. Clearly she wanted to get her colleague a job.

If I wanted, her colleague would show me the city as well. A tour of the city with Jelena did not appeal to me, as my Lemberg guide had already served me very well. On the other hand the tour would be a good test of whether I could stand a whole day with the woman. Lemberg was practically teeming with captivating young women, but these four post-socialist matrons did nothing for me at all. All the same I agreed to a two-hour guided city tour but insisted that it would have to be now, immediately after our conversation, to which the professor replied: "Not a problem." Then she said something that sounded like "avanz" or "avance" and clearly meant a down-payment. I gave her a fifty-euro note which she pocketed without saying a word. Now there was the matter of the driver and the interpreter to deal with. Not a problem either, she said; she knew someone who didn't speak German but did speak English. And of course Russian and Ukrainian. However, he didn't have a car.

That would be up to me. I didn't have a car, however. I didn't even have a driver's licence. So I said I would do without the driver and decided to hire a driver and a car through the hotel. I didn't want to do the trip with an acquaintance of the professor, especially when I found out during the city tour that followed that Jelena didn't have an inkling about the sights of Lemberg or the city's history, let alone the fact that a third of the population was once Jewish.

Jelena had not been living in Lemberg long; she came from a town called Ivano-Frankivsk which, as I knew, was named after the Ukrainian national poet Ivan Franko. Before it was renamed, Ivano-Frankivsk had been called Stanislaviv, which I didn't know. I did know that

Ivan Franko had written a book with the title *When the Animals Could Still Speak*, which has been translated into German. I didn't know it two days before meeting Jelena, as I had seen the book and its German translation in a showcase in Lemberg's Ivan Franko House, which I had visited a day before. It stood right next to the house of Mychajlo Hruschewskyi, who was an important Ukrainian historian and politician. To this day I have heard nothing about him.

Thanks to my Lemberg book I was a long way ahead of Jelena on the subject of Lemberg churches and the houses on the Rynok as well: after all my guide described each of the twenty-four middle-class and patrician homes around the square individually, and I could have given the woman a perfect tour of the Lemberg market square. If for instance she had asked me about the house bearing the number 2 at the north-east corner of the square, then I would have answered without hesitation that this was the Bandinelli House which had been built in the Italian style for the merchant and first Lemberg apothecary Hieronim Wendel. And that the house came into the possession of the Italian Roberto Bandinelli in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. He was a grandson of the sculptor Bartolommeo Brandini who was also called Baccio Bandinelli and was the son of the goldsmith Michelangelo de Viviano de Brandini of Gaiuole near Florence. At some point Roberto was granted the postal monopoly and the title "royal messenger", which gave him the right to open the first Lemberg post office in his house on the market square. Unfortunately Jelena didn't ask me about the house with the number 2, so I refrained from lecturing her about it. Even if I learnt nothing new about the city from her, she was at least useful to me in making a purchase. I had a suppurating infection, quietly throbbing under my right thumbnail, and I needed some antibiotic cream which a pharmacy sold her without any fuss. After the pharmacy I paid her for the so-called two-hour city tour, which actually consisted of nothing more than going to the pharmacy, and informed Jelena that I would not be taking an interpreter on the trip to Bryschtsche. After all, there would not be much to discuss with the inhabitants, in the event that there was anyone at all still living in Bryschtsche. However, I wanted the fifty-euro avance or avanz back, and so I would look in on the professor again tomorrow.

The next day at the hotel reception I reserved a car with a driver for the following day, which was a completely straightforward matter. The driver was to be a man with a knowledge of English by the name of Jurij, and the car was a Ford Mondeo. The price for the eight-hour trip was 199 dollars. That was not peanuts. It made me want the fifty euros back all the more. Then I called at the private university again. Once more Gregor Samsa blocked my way. Once

more I found the lack of comprehension I'd gotten used to. I pointed upstairs to the first floor and said "lady professor". The doorman shook his head. And once again an older woman appeared, but she didn't take me to the first floor; instead we went to an office on the ground floor. It was the most dismal office I have ever seen in my life, the effect being created by the fluorescent lamp on the ceiling emitting pale light, and the furnishings which consisted of a big wardrobe with four doors from circa 1879 and two tiny metal desks from the Soviet era. One of these was where the lady worked – she was going through some lists or other by hand – and the other desk seemed unoccupied. The door with leather button upholstery made you realise the office had once seen better times.

I explained to the woman that I had come to get back the fifty euros which I had given the professor as a part-payment. The woman did not react. I changed to pidgin German, said "lady professor", pointed to the ceiling and said "avanz" and "avance". Then I rubbed my thumb and index finger together and said "euro, euro" and, to make absolutely sure, "hrywnja", the name of the Ukrainian currency that had been introduced recently, which the woman seemed to understand no better than anything else I said.

In reply she said something or other in Ukrainian, then tried Russian, and finally reached for the telephone handset, spoke for quite a long time, put the handset down again and explained that the professor was not available just now and I should come back in half an hour. Her German was not so bad, though rather outdated, its sound evoking the Cold War and Mutual Assured Destruction.

I said "all right", left the institute and stood on the footpath unable to make up my mind. What should I do? The institute was between the old town and the castle hill. It wasn't worth going in either direction. So I hung around, delighting in the sexy way a young woman walked as she passed by; she was wearing a short skirt and very high heels, a sight you could enjoy frequently in Lemberg. I bought a chocolate ice-cream at a kiosk – it cost the equivalent of twelve euro cents.

After half an hour I went back to the institute, the doorman waved me on to the dismal office of the lady who told me unabashedly that the professor would not be coming to the institute again today and that I should try again tomorrow. I decided not to be put off any longer because I was certain that the professor was sitting right above us in her office with the fifty

euros still in her hand or tucked into her blouse, and of course I could also have asked why they had made me wait for half an hour. Probably just to humiliate me and put me in the position where I had to plead. I calculated how much fifty euros was worth in Ukraine. On the one hand you could buy untold quantities of chocolate ice-cream with it, on the other it was just enough to rent a Ford Mondeo with a driver for two hours. I tried to see the situation from the perspective of the Ford Mondeo hire, waving the fifty euros good-bye. What were two hours' hire of a car with a driver to me anyway? I had after all made a booking for eight hours for the trip to Bryschtsche, though I was not certain if eight hours were enough, and even less certain the next day, when I suggested the driver take a longer route, through the little town of Brody that I wanted to see – it was where Joseph Roth was born. Jurij agreed; after all it was all the same to him what route we took, and I would have to pay him for any extra hours anyway.

In Brody there was not much to see, no traces of Joseph Roth except the high school he had attended. The town centre was an empty square which seemed still to be bearing witness to the battle which had encircled Brody and almost completely destroyed the old town in 1944. At the edge of what had been old town stood the ruined synagogue which had once also been called the 'old Schul'. An enormous building, but the walls had caved in almost completely, and nobody seemed to bother about it, but for some reason it had survived as a ruin, complete with a Hebrew inscription on one of the walls still standing.

Brody was a sad place. We didn't stay in Brody long. In the empty square I sat down on a bench with Jurij and showed him the approximate spot where Bryschtsche must be on the map. The village could not be found on the official road map, but I had a hand-drawn map of Wolhynia which I had ordered from a Wolhynian historical association. Numerous former German settlements were shown on it, including, fortunately, the settlement of Bryschtsche which lay to the west of the road leading from Luzk to Roshischtsche.

As we headed for Luzk I dozed most of the time. The landscape was monotonous: grain fields that had mostly been harvested, with a little wood here and there. After Luzk I woke up and together we looked for a turn-off to Bryschtsche. But there was no turn-off. This made Jurij a bit nervous too, as he had been certain the whole time that he could find the place. At one point he decided to stop and ask directions. His first opportunity was at a fruit stall where there were two women.

“How do I get to Bryschtsche?” Jurij asked, and I was convinced we could just as well have asked the women for the quickest way to Mars. Yet the two were not the slightest perturbed and calmly pointed the way we were going. Even I understood what they said: two or three kilometres more and then left to Bryschtsche. Several times they uttered the word Bryschtsche as if it were the most normal thing in the world. For me it was not normal. For me it was a miracle, and it was proof of the fact that my father was not a ghost from a shadowy realm in the East but a person with an actual place of birth.

The women were right. After only a few minutes a signpost showed the following town: БРИШЦЕ. Jurij saw the sign and said: “Bryschtsche” as if he had never expected anything else. I believed him – I had to believe him. Then I asked him to stop. I wanted to take a photo of the signpost which was blue like our Autobahn signs and had the circle of stars of the European flag.

The circle of stars annoyed me. Did Bryschtsche belong to the European Union? Had the EU built the road? Or just donated the signpost? We hadn’t seen one European flag during the whole trip. I could not understand how the flag got there, but suddenly I felt a certain pride in Bryschtsche. Perhaps Bryschtsche had been the only place in Ukraine to be accepted into the EU. For special merit. Because my father was born there. Because my father tended the cows there. Jurij had no idea either. He seemed not to know very much about flags anyway, but he did have surprising religious knowledge and thought that the twelve stars could represent the Virgin’s crown. I doubted that and maintained that these were the twelve stars of the member states of the EU, to which Jurij replied the EU had more than twelve member states. I gave in; perhaps Jurij was right – I didn’t know much about the EU. Or about the Virgin. Actually, the mere fact that Bryschtsche existed was enough to satisfy me.

We had only a few hundred metres to go. Bryschtsche was a village built along one badly paved road. As you entered, there was the village store which you could only recognise once you went inside the single-storey brick building with bars at the windows; I bought a packet of biscuits there, from a shy shop-girl. As it was already late in the afternoon, the village street had got quite busy, and Jurij was able to chat a little with a few of the villagers who were either busy in their gardens or sitting outside their houses on chairs and stools, enjoying the evening. I got him to ask an older couple if they knew whether Bryschtsche had once been

a German settlement, and they immediately confirmed this. The man told us about a German cemetery outside the village. We only had to go through the village and we'd come to a little wood and that's where we'd find the cemetery, or at least what was left of it.

I had imagined Bryschtsche as a godforsaken place that had died out. But Bryschtsche was not extinct. There were people and animals in the gardens, and on the village street geese and ducks were pecking at the grass at the edge of the road with their offspring, and there were even a few turkey chicks for me to delight in, the first turkey chicks I had ever seen. At some point a herd of cows crossed our path, a peasant and his wife driving them back from their pasture to their byres.

The woman was wearing rubber boots and bright red, fairly tight-fitting jeans. I liked the look of her. I hadn't expected to find a peasant like this in Bryschtsche. I also liked the houses with their partly wooden exteriors painted blue or yellow, and their unkempt gardens in full bloom. I was really touched by the sight of a girl who might have been ten years old, standing under a cherry tree, feeding a cow with freshly picked cherries, as though nothing could disturb her calm. I would have liked to be standing as a child in a garden with a cow; I would have liked remembering it in my adult life. In Bryschtsche, for instance. Or somewhere else. With a memory like this I would have been a rich man. But I was not rich. In terms of memories, I was downright destitute. Without one single possession. Without a home. I could not take comfort in my memories. There was nothing good there. There was not even anything terrible there. There was just a rainy, flat, treeless landscape that refused to end. That is why I envied a girl from Bryschtsche for her future memories of feeding a cow with cherries in the garden of her parents' house on this mild August evening.

However, there was some evidence that I did possess a memory of Bryschtsche now: it was the fact that I was now sitting in the train to Kutno, had left Poznan and Konin behind and was now thinking of Bryschtsche. Part of this was the child with the cow and the cherries. Perhaps my journey to Poland could be turned into a good memory, too. Even if it would not be a childhood memory. It was too late for that. It would, however, be a memory of the place where my mother spent her childhood, which she had hardly ever recalled herself, just as my father had never recalled his childhood village, at least not when I was present.

During the time I was reading the couple disappeared for a while. The old lady was sitting upright and motionless in her seat, looking out the window. She had nothing to read with her. What might an old lady like this be thinking about during a five-hour train journey? Was she thinking at all? Or is old age kind to us during journeys like this, allowing us to have mental lapses and trance-like states of semi-consciousness which we can't imagine while we are young? During trips like this I always have to occupy myself with something. Just thinking won't do. And thinking nothing at all will certainly not do. If I think of nothing I get dizzy. If I try to think about something I don't know what to think about. So I read.

I had several books with me in the train to Kutno. One of them was called *The Centre Lies Further to the East*. Another one was *The Real and Imaginary Ukraine*. I had bought both of the books because of their titles, and I had actually wanted to read the second one during my journey to Ukraine, as it seemed to fit in well with my travel plans and could have also been called *The Real and Imaginary Bryschtsche*. The title of the first book expressed the complete opposite of the way I had felt about geography till then. For me the centre was not in Cologne or even in Stuttgart, but in Berlin. In West Berlin to be precise. In Charlottenburg. Or Friedenau. Or perhaps on the Grunewald lake, but not in Berlin Mitte. Berlin Mitte was the East for me. Not to mention all of the rest of East Berlin. According to this book the centre was supposed to be where I had been: in Lemberg, for instance. And in Galicia. Perhaps not as far east as Wolhynia and Bryschtsche, but certainly in Cracow or Lublin.