

## 2

# The Lost Homeland

Since the death of my mother, Elfriede, ten years ago, I have been haunted by the desire to visit the homeland, the *Heimat*, that she never saw again after her fifty years in Australia. In more ways than one, Germany had become her lost homeland, the spiritual place of her ancestors from which she was exiled. I sensed the pain she felt over the tangible loss of connection to her own past. For me to be able to go so far away and pay tribute to her German home in what is now Poland, to savour the environment of her childhood, at first seemed impossible. I nevertheless hoped for the opportunity to do so, although I expected to find all the names of the places changed, and that people spoke a language I did not understand. It would be confronting to go there, I thought.

When in 1997 I visited Vienna, my father's Austrian birth city, and after that my German cousins in Germany, I was not regarded as a stranger. Despite being an almost lifelong Australian, I spoke their language and somehow belonged. I was accepted by people as someone who had come home to reclaim my heritage. I could merge with crowds unobtrusively, like a 'local'. The only subtle tremors of feeling generated by what people are used to were shown up in my too-German ways for the Austrians, and my too-Austrian ways for the Germans. The Austrians reacted more firmly. This suggests that my mother's influence on me was strongest.

I was born in Turkey, north of Ankara, in 1935, and when I also went there on my trip home, I was treated to a special welcome by each Turk who found this out, from my passport or my conversation. My birth in Turkey entitled me to Turkish citizenship. Naturally I was delighted,

though somewhat embarrassed as well, by such trust. I knew only too well that the families of guest workers of Turkish origin, even those residing in Germany for several generations, did not qualify for German citizenship.

Now, in 2005, this rule has been changed. At the time of my visit, in so many places in the world, bloodlines counted most. In Turkey, geography seemed more important.

In 1992, as an Australian citizen, I visited parts of the United States with my eldest son, Justin. Australians seemed hardly known there. 'Where is that place Australia?' they would ask. 'You mean Austria?' Since the war in Iraq, with Australia's involvement, some of this has changed. Now many more Americans know about us.

When my eldest daughter Anthea and her partner John invited me to stay with them in London, and offered to accompany me on my quest for mother's lost homeland, I used the city as a springboard from which to visit the place where Elfriede, her brother Otto and much younger sister Else had been born and raised. After World War II, no member of the family of their mother, Emma Bittnar, went back to Steinkirche, once a German village in rural Silesia.

The reason for this is part of the complex modern history of that troubled part of the world. At the end of the War, in 1945, letters from my mother's family from Breslau, where some had settled after 1930, told how my mother's mother and her sister lived through incendiary bombing raids and the artillery battle over Breslau between Nazi German forces and the advancing Soviet Army. Thousands of Breslau's refugees fled to Dresden before the Red Army's advance. Most of them were then incinerated in the firestorm from the bombing of the city.

The consequences of the invasion of Breslau by Soviet troops were personal secrets too dreadful to speak of in our family. Elfriede's younger sister, Else, stayed behind in Breslau to protect her ailing mother. After the shooting had ceased, she and other women were forced to clear rubble from the streets.

They were then dragooned into gangs to break rocks. Her subsequent terrified flight westwards towards Zwickau with her sick mother became one of Else's most traumatic nightmares. The starving refugees were shot at in farmers' fields as they scavenged for food. Her end-of-War experiences led to Else's hospitalisation for almost a whole year.

During and after the War's end, those people in German Silesia who had not already fled the Russian advance in early 1945 were subsequently evicted from their farms, homes and city residences to make room for people displaced in eastern Poland by Soviet conquest. It was not what Churchill wanted; this was his ally Stalin's demand.

For many exiled Silesians and their descendants, the pain of loss has lingered. Their attachment to their heritage was steeped in custom, literature and legends. Although one can argue that the resettlement of displaced Poles on once-German territory was justified compensation for the horrific crimes committed against Poland by the criminal Nazis, the issue was not settled by this simple, brutal, diplomatic solution. As a great English writer of Polish history, Norman Davies, has recorded, Silesians were singled out to pay the end-of-War costs for atrocities perpetrated by the whole German nation.

My father's relatives in Vienna suffered less acutely than my mother's during the War. Members of the family of my father's eldest sister, however, were to experience the consequences of her mental instability after she was twice sexually assaulted by Allied soldiers while a patient in hospital. Both my parents, especially Elfriede, were spared this terror. Their misfortunes were to begin in an entirely different place, far away from 'home'.

Knowing how my mother's family had suffered, I intended to visit both metropolitan Wrocław (Breslau) in Poland and the rural birthplace of my mother's family. But I could not find the obscure village that was once Steinkirche in relation to what was once Breslau. What was its Polish name? How large or small a place was it? Did it still exist in any form? Was any part of Wrocław still identifiable as the old Breslau I had seen in books?

No German family photographs had survived the War to guide me. I keenly remembered the Neptune fountain in Breslau in the Neumarkt Platz, visible from the upper-floor apartment where my grandmother lived. But my mother had no recollection of such a fountain. My daughter Anthea also doubted the accuracy of so old a memory. Would I be able to find that fountain in the city? Would I be able to find the name for the village where my relatives had lived? Would anyone still speak German in Lower Silesia?

To prepare myself for the journey from my home in Canberra, Australia, I visited the National Library's vast collection of maps. But I could not find Steinkirche, even in old German records of Silesia. The Polish-German Gazetteer, which has a remarkable list of old German place-names in relation to their Polish replacements, and vice versa, gave the names for many places, including Märzdorf where my mother had worked as a young woman, on an estate near the Oder River. But there was nothing for Steinkirche. The people assembling the directory must have thought it simply the description of a stone church, as the name suggests, rather than the actual name for the place where the church stood.

Obviously it was not an important village. No one in our extended family could give me the Polish names for rural Steinkirche or of Neumarkt Platz in the Silesian metropolis. Had Steinkirche been north, east, west or south of Breslau? In my mind's eye I assumed it to be east—towards Posen—mistakenly, so I was to discover. In answer to one of my many questions, I recalled that my mother had once told me that it had taken her about an hour by train to travel to the school she attended briefly in Breslau. It was an important clue.

I then rang my cousin, Peter Erlanger, but neither he nor his older sister could help me. Peter advised me to try to find Steinkirche using my computer's Internet search engine. It was enlightened advice, and was to provide me with a key clue. The website yielded a huge list of entries, mostly concerning stone churches in present-day Germany. But there was also a reference to a 1928 visit by a church official inspecting a number of communities overseen by the Lutheran Church at Strehlen. I had often heard my mother and her sister refer to acquaintances in Strehlen.

The article about Steinkirche described it as having a 1264 Polish Catholic foundation, on a site where pagan sacrifices had taken place. This seemed to have the ring of truth. The description offered a brief history of the church and gave illustrations of it in various stages of alteration. By the seventeenth century, the place had become Lutheran and in the following 200 years the community's religious confidence expressed itself architecturally, through continual improvements. A church tower with baroque spire was raised and the interior refurbished with an upper-storey balcony with pews on three sides.

This description told me that Steinkirche was somewhere in the vicinity of Strehlen. Then, according to Elfriede's stories about walking her animals, ducks, geese and a goat to the railway station to meet visitors, a station once existed near the village. I wondered whether it had survived the bombing. I have seen films of the utter devastation along the Oder River in early May 1945, just before the War in Europe ended. Did the railway still pass Steinkirche? My mother's father had been a railway line pointsman, a signal attendant. From a station close to home he would have undertaken the long journeys his work demanded.

I went back to the old German maps in the National Library and located Steinkirche on one of several contiguous contour maps perhaps designed for military purposes. They covered Lower Silesia in 1938 in remarkable detail, although such detail also helped obscure the printed names of villages, which were lost in the depictions of miniature hills, rivers, quarries, castles, lakes and even houses.

Eventually I did locate the village through this superb map. Steinkirche was off the main road near the second railway station south of Strehlen, probably on a hill, something my mother had never mentioned. If one passed it, one could also locate it as station number two of the seven between Strehlen and Milnsterberg, on the railway running south of Breslau towards the Carpathian Mountains. Then I noted the Polish names for the two townships south of Wroclaw (Breslau). In the German-to-Polish Gazetteer they are given as Strzelin and Ziebice.

My intention was to take a train or a car to the new Polish ex-Steinkirche, visit it discreetly, and search the old cemetery for family connections. I wanted to photograph my two-year-old granddaughter beside my own grandfather Friedrich's grave. I wanted to look for other evidence of family history, and just savour the atmosphere of the place. I also wanted to see what had happened to Neumarkt Platz.

It was difficult to achieve anything in a hurry. In London, my daughter, granddaughter and I visited the office of the Polish Consulate. Tourist brochures were generously given to us, but none of the authoritative road maps of Poland showed the villages between Strzelin and Ziebice. Did our village still exist? And by what name?

After flying to Berlin, we set out in a hire car for Wroclaw on 13 September 2003. Beside the Hitler-era Autobahn, there are still extensive forests, between flat farmlands. It was raining when we entered Poland.

We received the clear impression from grim customs officials and money-changers at the border that we had entered a part of the world still not entirely recovered from post-War economic depression. Roadside stands sold plaster garden statues, especially gnomes, and other wares were also for sale, judging by the surreptitious lifting of skirts to reveal totally bare flesh, from women sheltering under their umbrellas. I wondered where they would take their truck driver customers in a place where there seemed to be only road and forest.

Anthea's navigation skills took us promptly to the clean and pleasant Tumski Hotel on the Sand Island near the oldest part of Wrocław. I was immensely moved when I found that my room overlooked a canal of the Oder. This was a place of which mother had often spoken. Maria on the Sand (*die Sandkirche*) is still there, one of the large old Gothic red-brick churches that escaped bombing.

That Saturday afternoon, too late for lunch, we sampled Polish beer and vodka. We explored the famous Rynek, the central seventeenth-century market square with its famed Gothic town hall where American soldiers had stolen the gold from the astrological clock. The bombed-out buildings had been restored, but they were too garishly painted to revive a sense of their history. The adjoining salt square now mostly sells flowers.

We wondered at how few smiling faces there were, and were puzzled by how little German or English anyone spoke. Why was there so little tourism? Only a pair of elegant teenagers had fluent German. We turned down their offers of pornographic pictures and sexual experiences.

We covered enough of the area to get a strong impression of a once-lively city devastated by War and hastily repaired. These were convenient reconstructions, done without an eye to matching styles.

I was especially anxious to find out where Neumarkt Platz had been. That evening at the hotel, I kept going to the window and trying to imagine my mother as a young woman taking an evening stroll with a companion along the banks of the Oder. But this was autumn. Thick mists hung above the water. Few people were out walking.

On Sunday we set out seriously to find the location of the old square. We walked through once-stately streets, past the Metropole Hotel from where Hitler had addressed the crowds, to the Ethnographic Museum. This proved disappointing. The contents of two rooms were a mere

gesture in honour of local culture. Few of the artefacts were authentically part of this area. It told us nothing of any interest or with any authority. We wondered whose culture we were looking at.

At the central railway station, we tried to question officials, in German and English, about the location of Steinkirche. But only Polish was spoken at the information office and other counters. Nor could we locate the correct train line on the information screens.

On our walk back to the centre of town, past the dilapidated theatre where my mother had attended performances, John spotted another bookshop. Surprisingly it was trading busily on a Polish Catholic Sunday. It sold old maps and books. We found old pictures of Breslau labelled in Polish and English. We found descriptions in both Polish and English of Neumarkt Platz (Novi Targ). Various maps showed clear plans of its location. They also showed the Neptune fountain I had been seeking. For centuries it had a conspicuous place in town maps as a well drawing water from the Oder, whose tributaries flowed together and separated the town into different quarters, spanned by a multitude of bridges.

I was thrilled. Before this find, my family had begun to question whether the fountain had actually existed. 'You and your fountain!' they cried. But I always knew it was there, in my memory and beyond.

When we walked to Novi Targ, we found the old houses by the square had been destroyed totally by the War. So, to my disappointment, had the Neptune fountain. In *Microcosm*, his history of Wrocław, Norman Davies tells how, after the War, the rubble of Breslau had been removed in trainloads to rebuild Warsaw in its original style. Some fine Breslau buildings left standing by War were even knocked down for their old bricks.

I viewed this horrible information as being akin to the punishment Dante dished out to sinners in his Purgatory. Atonement was to be made only by suffering punishment that fitted the spirit of a crime.

We then looked for the air-raid shelters in which my grandmother and aunt Else had sheltered from the fire-bombs that rained down on the city in early 1945.

Else had told us how phosphorescence burning on human skin could not be put out, and how a seventeen-year-old soldier, weak from starvation, had been fed at a stranger mother's breast in the bunker before he returned to fight Russian soldiers in the final Breslau street battles. She had told us how a fat man had wedged himself into the shelter's entrance, and had been mown down by the hysterical mob. She had told us how she herself had carried her sick mother across a burning rooftop.

Beneath the reconstructed Novi Targ square, John identified shelters in two places, downstairs bolted against public entry. Plain and ugly high-rise public housing of cheap materials now stood around the bare square, where once interesting seventeenth-century merchant houses had stood amid a lively marketplace. People had lived in apartments even before the Communist-style transformations. Before their destruction, the old buildings of Breslau were of stately proportions, made of good material by experienced artisans who valued their talents and who took pride in a town with depth to its history.

Novi Targ now looks much sadder and more neglected than my glossy photos show. Breslau's lively markets that were once a feature of the city, as shown in my photographs of 1905, were relocated by the council in the second half of the twentieth century to a large new market hall. This was allegedly because of the congestion caused in the city's central squares by traders with their cars, animals and stalls.

I was nevertheless deeply moved. This ugly restoration was on ground where my grandmother and her children had walked so many times. Grandmother Emma and my beloved aunt Else had lived there for fifteen years before 1945. My mother had corresponded with them from far away.

Had we stayed longer, we would have enjoyed other moments of pleasure in a city that remains drab, and in which not even the theatre has been restored. The original buildings, and what they stood for, were German. The culture of Silesia before 1945 has not yet been generally acknowledged. It is also part of Polish history. I am sure this will change.

This text is taken from *At Home in Exile: A Memoir*, by Helga M. Griffin,  
published 2021 by ANU Press, The Australian National University,  
Canberra, Australia.

[doi.org/10.22459/AHE.2021.02](https://doi.org/10.22459/AHE.2021.02)