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Steinkirche

We had still not found the Polish name for my mother's village. Anthea and John were beginning to doubt that it still existed, since nothing appeared on reputable tourist maps of Poland. But another moment of good fortune supported my own confidence. After we had paid the hotel bill that Monday morning, I tried my German one last time on a more senior man behind the counter. I had not seen him before. He said he had never heard of the place, but asked me to show him where I thought it was on the detailed map he had of Lower Silesia.

I showed him somewhere just south of Strzelin. He said immediately: 'That has to be it. Bialy Kosciol. It means White Church!'

Still sceptical, Anthea announced to her young daughter: 'Be happy. We are about to take you on a mystery tour!'

The following day, on a bright autumn morning, John drove us south of Wroclaw on a sealed road that skirted the railway line beside flat farmlands. It was country that still looked part of what used to be known as the great north-eastern German plain. Sweet-corn stubble and potatoes yet to be harvested revealed that there were not many crops growing that autumn.

Wartime bombing had obviously reduced Strehlen to a much smaller city. After Strzelin, the landscape began to undulate. We passed a settlement on the left, then noticed the land turn to hills as we approached where we understood Bialy Kosciol to be. We could make out the steeple of a church on a hill.

We turned left again and followed the road beneath a raised railway track. Then we drove up the gentle slope of a hill, along an avenue of old trees, crossed a bridge over a stream (the Olawa) and entered the village.

A single row of houses flanked the road on either side. Most had red tiled roofs, and appeared to be fairly new. There were about eighteen in all. But the village seemed deserted. I saw no cars and no shops. Nor did the church towards the end of the road where the hill peaked match the latest picture I had printed from the Internet. Had we come to the wrong place?

Then, as we wandered about, Anthea found a poster that showed the church had been rebuilt. Between 1987 and 1994, it had been restored according to its original mediaeval Catholic design.

An elderly Polish woman appeared in the churchyard. But she did not understand our questions. She indicated through gestures that the place had been bombed in the War and the church almost totally destroyed. What remained had been hacked to pieces by 'Russkis', leaving only a shell standing. This had been used in the reconstruction, with what was obviously more recently quarried stone of the region.

John pointed out to me that some of the stones had been numbered for correct repositioning.

While the old woman went to collect her husband, who had learned to speak some German, Anthea discovered a small stack of green paper with a brief illustrated history of the church, in Polish. We took some and both placed donations in the money box.

Inside the church, by the altar, was a painting of a Black Madonna in a golden frame. Like its mediaeval model, the church was once again a Catholic place of worship.

The friendly old woman returned. She had not located her husband. Had he really gone away? Or did he just not want to meet us? She told us, again through gestures, that the wrought iron internal gates of the church were the only fittings that had survived the bombing.

Again, I was moved. Those gates would have been there when our relatives were christened, confirmed and married in this church, and when they were buried from it. Anthea photographed me on the pebbled path down which they had walked to the church for so many years.

But where was the cemetery?

The old woman did not understand through my drawings of graves that I wanted to see the old burial place. But there were a number of large weathered tombstones resting against the wall that enclosed the church. The inscription on one of them was clear. It recorded a death in the 1660s. Were these tablets preserved from the time when the church had first become Protestant? What had happened to the earlier Catholic graves? The place was full of the questions of history.

We stopped in the churchyard to look at a memorial plot adorned with fresh flowers and candles. It was placed under a tree, and seemed to be dedicated to those who had suffered the atrocities of the War. We thanked the kind woman for her concern for us and she and I embraced symbolically across the years, aware of the troubled pasts of both our families.

We felt like foreign intruders in our smart little red German hire car. We had arrived in this very silent and rather poor place to find few people. Only dogs barked their disapproval at our presence. I regret now that I did not enter the shop Anthea pointed out. But she took down the Polish website address of the village, and as we left, we hoped we could use it for future correspondence.

Anthea and I wanted to explore the village a little further, but John informed us that the road ended just beyond where we had driven, behind a house. Our presence would be too intrusive in this deserted place. It was as if everyone had taken flight at our arrival. Were we just another lot of Germans looking for traces of family land that had been confiscated?

The old woman indicated what seemed to be a shrine to the Black Madonna further along the road. After taking photos of the distant forested slopes where my mother's people had collected wild food, and of the river and lakes beyond the village, where she and her siblings had no doubt learned to swim, we drove back to the park-like retreat John had seen.

Sure enough, it was the disused cemetery. It had been badly vandalised. Only four or five tombstones were legible, and even they were badly defaced and corroded. The broken tombstones stood above the encroaching shrubs and tough ivy that covered everything else. I noted the dates 1914 and 1918, but no family names. The period I needed for the deaths of our grandfather and his daughter, 1918, was a time when the cemetery was still in use. Right at the back were some empty graves.

It never occurred to me that there might be unexploded War-time ammunition buried under all that vegetation. What did dawn on me was that the picture my mother always used to draw for her children, whenever she needed to claim our attention, was an abbreviated record of her own village. She drew a church with a steeple on a hill, sheep grazing below, and a cemetery with tombstones down the slope.

John stopped the car at the bottom of the hill so that I could photograph the village from afar. I was surprised how much bigger it looked from this angle. On our route to our next destination in the mountains, planned purely for pleasure, we noted that the railway line—‘Fred’s line’ I called it, after our grandfather’s work—ran from Wroclaw to Klodzko, and towards the base of the mountains. We didn’t know whether trains still ran on that single track.

After a brief tour of the mountain district, we returned for another look at Bialy Kosciol. Each of us wanted to follow the road below the village to the nearby lakes. The two lakes were larger than we had thought, and there was a barrier between them, a kind of causeway. The map shows an arm of the Olawa River flowing into it beneath a bridge that was part of the main village road.

The southern bank of the lake offered a fine view of the village, and showed it to be much larger than we had initially thought. Now there seemed to be some sixty or seventy houses. Another cluster of buildings was strung along the ridge, as a separate section. Perhaps they were holiday houses. On the shores of the lake a number of A-frame holiday huts were available for rent. Since the warmer months were over, however, the place was closed. Later when we studied the village website, it informed us that nowadays a Polish grand tour for cyclists runs through the village.

John drove us up to the village again to show me the quarry I now felt compelled to find. Probably the stones for the village houses and its roads had been extracted from it. Steinkirche was supported by agriculture and stone masonry.

The quarry was on the one road through the settlement, just beyond the church, fenced off and filled with water, just as it must have been when it lured our grandmother to a swift deliverance from her insupportable grief. I’ll tell that story in my next chapter.

My mother Elfriede worked on an estate near the river, from where she could see the steeple of her church on the horizon. It made her homesick.

This was also where she left home for Stamboul (Istanbul). But we were unable to find any signpost with the Polish name (Zelazna, between Olawa and Jelcz) on it. The whole area has been subjected to major roadworks. The highway to Krakow now runs where one assumes the village to have been.

I had often thought Elfriede must have invented her impression of the sight of the church steeple. Surely it was too far away to be seen? But no. Eerily, through the haze, it stayed with us as a ghostly presence along the edge of the ridge beyond the fields. It was visible as far as the place we thought Märzdorf must once have stood.

I regretted that our visit was too short to explore the surrounding countryside on foot. Forests clung to the distant slopes of foothills leading to ranges. Anthea said that it was fortunate I had seen the lost homeland of my forebears at a time before Poland joined the European Union. Rapid change will erase still further the landscape and traditions familiar to them.

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