

**Excerpt from *Everything we don't recall (Alles, was wir nicht erinnern)*  
by Christiane Hoffmann (© Verlag C.H.Beck oHG, München 2022)  
Translation by Jo Heinrich**

I set off at eight in the morning. After just a few steps, the village is behind me, the grey houses and the colourful ones, the abandoned houses and the ones where only an old woman still lives, the houses with young families, the barns with their sagging roofs, and the pale church tower. The village is left behind, as it's so often been left behind, silent, loyal and full of compassion for all those who have no choice but to leave and go here or there.

The stone angel gives me its blessing and the two-legged village sign nods to me, grinning with its crooked red mouth, the name Różyna crossed through from bottom left to top right. Then I'm alone on the country road, and the wind rolls over me.

The clouds lie over the wide landscape like a grey quilt, and only on the horizon, where the crests of the Riesengebirge mountains reach the sky, is there a shimmering stripe of blue. The ash trees along the road lean south; mistletoe hangs in their bare branches, black like charred Christmas baubles.

It's mild for the end of January.

When you set out all those years ago, the road to Lossen was deep in snow, the air was icy, a good twenty degrees colder. It must have already been dark at five in the afternoon. You could hear the Soviet artillery shooting over the river Oder behind you: the Russians, as you always called them.

The rumbling beyond the Oder had begun days earlier. The war was approaching the village as a noise, as an ever-louder thunder beyond the river, like a large beast or a dragon, only held back by the thin line of the Oder, rampaging and raging on the opposite bank. The Wehrmacht had blown up the bridges the day before.

'When we heard the Russians shooting over the Oder': those were the words you used. Other than that, you could barely remember a thing.

I began asking when I was young and still a child, but even then, over thirty years had passed since that day, and your memory had congealed, like blood over an old wound. A hard crust that always covered what had happened with the same sentences. I asked and asked, but you only ever told the same story: how in the rush to leave you'd forgotten the top half of your sailor suit, the white shirt with the navy collar: Sunday best in a Silesian farming village. It was new, you were nine, you'd been given it for Christmas and you'd never worn it. It was, you said, in the front room under the Christmas tree.

The sailor suit, the Russians, the Oder: you never told me any more than that, but since then I've read and spoken to others, I've gathered together snippets and formed a picture of that day, 22 January 1945. It was a Monday.

I now know more than you; I know that just two days before, on the Saturday evening, Wehrmacht soldiers had entered the village in a motorised column, and they were billeted in the farmhouses along the main street. You boys had been tobogganing on the Kirchberg and then you came running along to pull the soldiers' heavy packs to their quarters with your sledges.

On the Sunday the rumbling grew louder; after church the adults stood around in small groups on the snowy village street, talking anxiously: would they have to flee? Fear

crept into the farmhouses, where at night the women wept over their fallen husbands and pray for their missing sons.

On the Monday morning, the Wehrmacht column hastily left the village and everyone became restless. The Scholz family had already packed the day before and wanted to set off at once, but Schütz, the mayor and a party member, stood at the end of the village, pistol at the ready, and refused to let anyone leave. Only at four in the afternoon did the order come to vacate the village within the hour. Schütz was now running from farmhouse to farmhouse spreading the message.

Your mother had scarcely begun to pack the bare essentials; there was too much to do. She stuffed laundry and bedding into corn sacks and filled a crate with oats for the horses. People grabbed whatever was in sight: the smoked ham from the last pig slaughtered, some tools, what little jewellery they owned. People with no transport begged the farmers to let them add their belongings to one of the carts.

Your mother took the horses out of the stable. Your father had been conscripted into the Volkssturm a few weeks earlier, along with the brown horse. Two horses were still left on the farm, you used to tell me: one lame, and one so young it had never pulled a cart. Harnessing the horses proved too difficult for your mother. The sailor suit, the Russians, the Oder, the horses.

The artillery's thunder grew louder. The dragon reared up over the village, spitting fire and sending people scrambling around feverishly; the air was ringing, the earth was quaking, shells were landing left and right of the houses and tearing craters in the frozen-hard fields. Even the animals were seized by the panic of having to leave: the cows were bellowing, and the dogs were barking and pulling on their chains. The servant girls went round the barns one last time and filled the troughs with feed, scattered three days' worth of grain for the chickens: you wouldn't be gone for longer than that, you'd been told, you'd only need to be out of the firing line for a while.

Dusk fell. Your neighbour helped your family harness the horses. Your mother got her mother-in-law onto the cart, as well as your uncle, who was as lame as the horse. Lame uncle, lame horse: you used the same word for both. You yourself would be walking.

And it was in this haste, in the scramble to gather everything amid artillery thunder and fire breath, that only half of your sailor suit came with you in flight. The top was left behind and fell into the hands of the Russians, or maybe it was worn by a Polish boy later. As far as you were concerned, it was lost forever.

The sailor suit, the Russians, the Oder, the horses. It wasn't you I heard but others in your never-changing words; they were strange, dead words that my questions could never penetrate. All the same, I wanted to hear the story from you again and again, the story of that moment of departure, the moment that changed everything and defined everything: our family history's primal scene. The sailor suit, the Russians, the Oder, the horses. Now I will remember in your place. I now know more than you, but I still want to ask you, even now that it's no longer possible.

I had to put on protective clothing when I was visiting you. It was on a shelf at the entrance to the ward, between tubes and syringes, pale yellow, the colour of liquid snot. The nurse helped me tie the gown at the neck and back, like something you'd wear for an operation. It was disposable clothing. When we left your room, we had to throw it away in the big bin in the corner. Once I forgot to throw away the gown; straight away a nurse in the corridor asked me to take more care.

The facemasks had elastic that went around my head, and they covered my nose; wire attached at the top edge could be bent to the shape of my nose to ensure a good fit. At that time, a year and a half before the pandemic, I hadn't seen them before. The rubber gloves were the worst. It was good to talk to you, but I'd come to hold your hand.

That first day, I respected the rules. It was what you'd taught me. I now regret so many hours when I could have been touching you. Another oversight.

When my grandmother was still alive, the adults would sometimes sit around her kitchen table in the evenings: you and Mother, your brother Manfred and his wife, Grandmother, her brothers and their sons who often visited. Cigarette smoke mingled with the cheesy smell of the open sandwiches; the lamp, a wire frame that Mother had covered in floral fabric with a brown background, gave out a dim light.

It was almost completely dark under the table. We children would play under there. Half fascinated, half appalled, we'd compare the hairiness of the adults' legs peeking out between the top of their socks and their trouser hems: your occasional strands of hair and your brother Manfred's thick fur. Grandmother's feet were bare in her slippers, her shins gnarled and covered with scars and bruises that never seemed to go away. We'd pull your socks up and down, rolling their cuffs into soft little sausages. We'd never have dared do that to Manfred's.

They were cosy, dark evenings. Everything in Grandmother's apartment, from the curtains down to her slippers, was in nondescript, sombre colours, even the simple furniture she and Grandfather could afford at the end of the 1950s when they finally got their own flat from the housing corporation *Neue Heimat*.

Skat and political debate were the order of the day. Conversations usually began with the politics of the moment, taxes and Willy Brandt, then they'd move on to the Nazi times, the War and all the things they could only say amongst themselves. That not everything had been bad after all. Motorways and jobs for everyone. That Hitler's Germany, whether they liked it or not, had ultimately saved Europe from communism. And that destroying Dresden had really been quite unnecessary. And once they'd put the world to rights, when they'd gone through all the wrongs they'd suffered, the conversation's fervour would subside, passion would slowly give way to melancholy, and thoughts would turn to home.

Above the table, there were sighs. Under the table, we'd try to keep quiet: it was precisely in mournful moments like these that your brother Manfred could fly into a temper. A loud laugh or a stolen slipper could make him lash out unexpectedly and painfully. You'd usually sit there in silence. Above the table, they'd remember the homeland and the reminiscing sounded like a deep, sustained melody, like the prisoners' chorus from *Nabucco*, which I knew had been my grandfather's, your father's, favourite music, while your mother preferred *The Blue Danube*.

For me, home was the sound of *Wir lagen vor Madagaskar*, the old seafaring song: 'Ahoy, Comrades,' the section when the gloomy reality, the plague and the putrid water gives way to the refrain and its sustained, almost cheerful melody: 'Yes, when we hear the accordion on board.' And when the sailors go quiet, there's something comforting about their homesickness, in spite of all the desolation on the world's oceans, because everyone's longing for the homeland they'd like to see again one day. That's exactly how it was.

I inherited my sentimental side from you.

Above the table, there were sighs. Underneath, we'd play prisoners or sailors. And that's how we picked up the idea of home being something that had always been lost, something that only our ancestors knew, but that we ourselves had never had and never would have. Home was a land of longing, a paradise that we'd been driven out of forever. Its name suited it. Home had a name that could have come from a fairy tale. We imagined it as a beautiful, enchanted place by a river, in a hollow between rolling hills and broad fields, with roses all around. Home's name was Rosenthal: literally, 'Rose Valley'.

I'm travelling to Rosenthal in the summer after your death, to the village on the Oder that's now called Różyna.

'What are you going to do there?' my Polish teacher asks, 'It's a very small village.'

Before I set off, I google some Polish vocabulary; who knows when I'll next have WiFi? Urszula's concern has become infectious: 'Where are you going to sleep?' I hadn't even given it a thought. In Rosenthal.

'Take a sleeping bag,' Urszula says. I put a tent and a roll mat in the boot as well; maybe I can camp out back in the cemetery. And some loo roll. Hire: nająć, bathroom: łazienka and power socket: gniazdo (it's actually a nest, I'll find out later, they say 'gniazdko', little nest). Then there's the zloty exchange rate, around one to four, and the weather app. It's going to be very hot. All week.

'Take some food with you,' a girlfriend suggests. But I'm certain that won't be necessary. I'm familiar enough with the east to know that.

I set off. Where am I going? I'm going to Poland, I'm going to Silesia, but what even is Silesia? A province, a landscape, a fallen empire; I'm going to my father's country. My father came from a country that no longer exists. I'm a Silesian; am I a Silesian? My ancestors were Silesians.

I grew up in Wedel, a town on the outskirts of Hamburg; I lived there for nearly two decades, the longest I've ever lived anywhere, but Wedel was never home. Rosenthal was home; home didn't exist. Rosenthal remained my West German life's distant vanishing point. And whenever people asked me where I came from and I answered 'Wedel', it only ever felt like half the truth.

I'm driving east. After Cottbus, the distance signs on the motorway only mention one place. There's nothing for a long time, and then at some point Wrocław. There's very little traffic; every so often I overtake a green Flixbus, Berlin-Wrocław 21 euros, but otherwise I'm more or less alone on the route through the forest. Mile after mile, nothing but forest; the East begins here, a gigantic no man's land, a precursor of Siberia.

Speed limits don't mean anything in Poland. Everyone drives as fast as they can. That comes in handy; I race towards Rosenthal. Race over the border where we used to wait for hours on end to be allowed through: quiet as mice, mustn't laugh, keep our mouths shut, don't attract attention, taciturn people in uniforms, terse commands, wind the window down, hurry up, apologise if the window's stuck, stern looks into the car, strange stamps in my children's passport, my mother nervous, anxious to get everything right, a feeling of subordinacy.

Now I drive on without stopping; on the contrary, I step on the accelerator and race past the border guards' buildings with their peeling paint; I only notice I'm in Poland when the smooth German asphalt gives way to concrete slabs with wide cracks in between: da-dack, da-dack, da-dack. Headache.

The interview for my first editor's job, a large office not far from Frankfurt's main railway station, the publisher in a dark green woollen jumper. 'Have you been to the USA?'

I'd never been to the USA. A West German, nearing my late 20s, never been to New York. I'd been to Leningrad and Moscow, Kiev and Lviv, Riga, Tallinn and Tartu. I'd been to Altai and to Bishkek and to Crimea. I'd been to Barnaul. Ever heard of Barnaul? It's in western Siberia; back then there were a few Volga Germans in the area, tidy villages, one-street villages like Rosenthal.

I'd never been to New York, and I didn't feel I'd missed out. The United States could wait; they carried on as they were, they had no secrets. That's what I thought back then. But then, in front of the big desk in Frankfurt, it suddenly seemed a mistake. How could I become a foreign affairs editor if I'd never been to the USA?

'So you,' the publisher said, 'are an easterner.'

An easterner. None of my ancestors, on either my mother's or my father's side, were born significantly west of the Oder; both parents, four grandparents, eight great-grandparents, all of them easterners. Danzig (Gdansk), Elbing (Elbląg), Königsberg (Kaliningrad), Heubude (Stogi), Trunz (Milejewo) and somewhere in Pomerania: that was my mother's line, and my father's: Rosenthal, just one and a half kilometres west of the Oder. Not one place in my family history still belongs to Germany. Where should my gaze fall, if not to the east?

There was only Poland that I left out for a long time. I did go to New York at some point. And I kept moving east, to the Volga and the Amur, to Minsk and Kaluga, Irkutsk and Khabarovsk, to the White Sea, the Black Sea and Lake Baikal, to the Urals, to the Tian Shan mountains and to the Caucasus, to Chechnya, to one-street villages there as well. There was only Poland that I missed out.

The three visits to Rosenthal didn't count: that wasn't Poland, that was home: the village beyond the seven mountains, a place with no geography.

The convoy sets off at five o'clock, around fifty drawn carts, three pulled by oxen; maybe 300 inhabitants, the eldest almost ninety, the youngest a newborn, just a few days old. A handful of old people stay behind: people who would rather die at home than flee. 300 inhabitants, around half the Rosenthalers; the other half – men and boys between sixteen and sixty – are at war, including Manfred and Gotthard, your two elder brothers, and your father.

Manfred, born in 1925, went to school in the nearest town of Brieg, took his school-leaving exam early in the summer of 1943, was briefly given the role of Hitler Youth leader for the villages of Lossen, Jeschen, Jägerndorf, Koppen, Schwanowitz, Schönau, Pramsen, Frohnau and Rosenthal and then voluntarily signed up for the Navy. He last visited Rosenthal in April, his first and only leave. At Fuhrmann's guesthouse, they put long planks on top of barrels and showed the film *Riding for Germany* with Willy Birgel. That was nine months before.

Manfred's now in Gotenhafen (Gdynia). And as they're looking for volunteers for the small arms combat unit, he takes a step forward on the parade ground, because he's had enough of parading and he can't bear the thought of his younger brother already being at the front. Manfred is then trained to plant explosive devices on enemy ships in a one-man submarine: an assignment impossible to survive, a suicide mission deep down in the sea.

Your father, born in 1898, was conscripted into the Volkssturm in mid-January; he fought on the Western Front in the First World War, but that was different: he was very young back then, just seventeen, and the war never reached Silesia.

That Monday, 22 January 1945, as the Red Army's advancing to the Oder at Rosenthal and your mother's trying in vain to harness the horses to leave, your father's sitting in a guard room in Breslau (Wrocław), writing you a letter. Sender: Volkssturm Private Herbert Hoffmann, Fortress Battery 3049, Leuthen Barracks, Breslau. To: Frau Olga Hoffmann, Rosenthal, Brieg District.

'Dear Mother, dear Adolf,'

Adolf: that's you.

It's a long letter, especially for a farmer: like a sailor's letter, it's full of longing for home and for the life that's slipping away from him.

'I must say it's impossible for me to talk of things going well: there's no place like home. The military is just no fun for an old man.'

At almost fifty, your father actually feels like an old man; he's worked from dawn to past nightfall for over thirty years, he's paid off the farm's debts and rented extra land. He's looking forward to handing over the farm to Gotthard, his middle son, turned seventeen in August and the farmer of the three brothers. But Gotthard's now been in the Volkssturm since the autumn, defending the Oder line.

It's a letter full of concern for his sons at the front.

'My thoughts are constantly with you and the boys.'

Full of concern for the farmhouse and his wife, a letter full of dark forebodings.

'I keep thinking you won't have to leave home. But if needs must, it will just have to be.'

The regional leader, Gauleiter Karl Hanke, declared Breslau a stronghold the day before: hundreds of thousands of women and children have to leave the city and are forced out into the snowstorm. The war hasn't reached Breslau yet, but as Herbert's sitting in the guard room at three o'clock in the morning writing his letter, the dragon's already raised its claws. The dragon will take hold of Herbert; it will wreck his life and only let him out of its grasp years later, half dead and at the other end of Germany.

Your father will lose control of his life; he'll obey orders, both German and Soviet; for many years, war and captivity will determine his fate. He'll never go back to Rosenthal and he'll never set foot on his farm again. His mother, brother and one of his sons won't survive the war, and he'll only see his wife again years later, after he's lost everything and nothing's ever as it was before.

Your father knows none of that, but he can sense an impending disaster, he can sense that 'what meant a lot eight days ago is now fading into the background.

'We must not despair but trust in God, then even the greatest of hardships can be endured.'

The most tender lines are for you, dear Adolf.

'I always have an image of him, doing his schoolwork, playing around outside until he's ripped his trousers, and hiding in Papa's bed in the evenings. Has he finished reading the sailor book yet?'

It's a quiet letter, reaching out for the familiar and clinging to the minutiae: hoping for post, maybe even a visit (she should take a 2 or a 12 to the final stop, he tells his wife), sending regards to friends and relatives in the village, hoping things won't turn out as badly as he suspects.

‘One day everything will turn around and we can go about our work peacefully.’  
And to finish, these words: ‘All done, all good.’

It sounds like an incantation, as clearly it’s not all good, or it could be a secret message to his wife: maybe they whispered it to each other as they sank into bed back in Rosenthal after sixteen, eighteen hours of work on the farm: all done, all good.

That Monday, 22 January 1945, changes everything. For a long time it will define our fate, for decades and generations; it will change your life, your family’s lives, mine, and my children’s. After that, for a very long time, there’s no firm footing for our family anymore.

Under my childhood, too, there will be dark, boggy ground, like a moor into which I could easily sink. I have to take good care to stay on the marked paths, always be home before nightfall and not look too deeply into the dark; it can drag me down. It’s the knowledge that you can lose everything from one day to the next, from one hour to the next, from four to five o’clock, house and farm, sons, brothers and parents, home, and even memory.