

Anya von Gosseln

I remember...



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There was a briskness in the air that day (early in February 1945) which was the kind I love but what happened shortly around noon was not what a child would expect nor could ever love.

I do remember that a few days before that there was unusual quiet and also peculiar and hushed business around the house. Our housekeeper Wanda, from Kraków, was busy sorting things and packing some mysterious suitcases and a box or two. Mysterious to me because they were so big and did not give anything away. Not the kind you would take for an overnight trip? Most astonishing were two larger flat items carefully wrapped up, which later turned out to be two much-valued historical maps of Silesia. I have those always with me now. Rolls revealing themselves later as oriental carpets, small enough to fit into a Horch car. Horch? Yes, that was a wonderful gentlemanly car big enough to house my stepfather, my mother, me and my mother's highly pregnant best friend Frau Heering.

My mother wore all her favourite hats at once, one on top of the other. She could not decide, she told me years later. My stepfather, well I will just call him father now, it's easier, had stashed away a leather bag of Hungarian-Austrian gold coins and his, by now famous, Rotbart razor blades to act as currency at wherever we would be trying to go. Wise of him to know that the Reichsmark would be worth nothing soon.



On that late morning two German officers appeared suddenly in the front garden in a type of jeep-plus-driver, got out and banged on the front door. My mother, ever the smart one, knew already why they were there. Of course she did. She risked her life to listen to BBC in German for weeks before this dismal day and knew all civilians had been lied to. The enemy was just outside the city limits although the local radio had claimed they were hundreds of miles away. One of many deceptions. Our freezing little group was asked to leave immediately or be in major trouble. As if we were not already.

Our lovely house-keeper we thought was not, she thought and told my parents she was safe and looked forward to the Soviet invasion of Breslau. She was Polish after all. But little did we know. Wanda was raped and killed a few days after we left and after Breslau fell to the Soviet Army. This we heard about much later. The same fate befell my stepfather's parents when he turned back to rescue them. He found them beaten to death in their front garden in the countryside. As we set off, all goods carefully distributed in the car, there was one last look back at the house and a tearful goodbye.

I often wondered whether those German officers were not wondering why we had such well packed and prepared cases and boxes waiting in the hall?



In any case from that moment on we were scared-to-death refugees who had to leave everything they loved behind except the cases and... hats. The coins and razorblades. The little radio. Frau Heering, seven months pregnant meanwhile, was supporting the Volksempfänger (the make of the radio) in a Bakelite case on her by now voluptuous lap as best she could.

We left the outer Southern suburbs of Breslau (now Wrocław) very fast and soon joined a huge queue of others in the same boat but most not in a comfortable Horch. Pushcarts, horse-drawn carriages, people on foot, other cars, bicycles, motorbikes, everyone dressed in layers of shawls to attempt to keep warm, all in constant move towards what we heard was a still safe zone. Görlitz was our goal.

A smaller place near it was to be our first stop and our first experience of begging for a place to stay overnight or for a few days, a demeaning situation to be in? A wealthy business man and his family, deprived of everything in less than a day. That is hard to take with grace. Of course, the same applies to everyone in this situation? Rich or poor, one loves one's home and everything in it?

I still, so many years later, admire the composure of my mother when confronted with this new reality.



Before we were even near Görlitz, nature called my father and he went behind the bushes as did everyone in this convoy. One after the other. When he came back he was shaken to the core. He had passed the first stiffly frozen corpses of the convoy before ours. It was very, very cold and a wind was breezing and there he saw old people, eyes wide open, babies, children, women, younger men, their dogs, some of their horses frozen to death in the ditches. He saw hell. But what he also saw, and that is when he called my mother and me out of the car, was a long, long line seemingly shuffling along the horizon, people dressed in standard concentration camp suits, striped with matching caps, but no coats. They were chained together and we could hear the clinking of those chains across the fields in the crystal-clear cold. Horses and soldiers to the front and rear. We much later found out that they were being transferred from one camp to another to be gassed.

We drove on, my father shaking at the wheel, the rest of us crying with sorrow and fear until we reached a place which seemed the right one to stop. That pitiful human line is always in my mind. Now that we have so many more refugees in the world I feel deeply what they must feel.

I remember.

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***Anya von Gosseln** was raised in Breslau (now Wrocław), Bremen and Wuppertal, Germany. After graduating in Textile Engineering, she worked in the fashion industry in New York until moving to Canada and eventually back to Europe. A renowned and influential gallerist, curator, art dealer and artists' representative, she has made her mark in the international art world. Anya is the founder of the Eileen Gray Society and lives in County Wexford, where she is a dynamic member of the arts community.*

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