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## A Place Like Eichkamp

Berlin is an endless sea of houses constantly swallowing a torrent of airplanes. It is a vast desert of gray stone, and each time I fly in its direction, I am excited all over again. Magdeburg, Dessau, Brandenburg, Potsdam, the zoo district.

In Berlin they keep busy building subway express lines and inner-city thoroughfares; they devise clever new entry ramps to the superhighway and erect bold television towers. All these go to make up the new, modern Berlin, the technological treadmill of the enclaved city, its circular motion powered internally by the rough, laconic wit of its people and impelled externally by capital.

It is handsome and radiant, this new Berlin, but I do not actually feel at home until I have taken my seat in the interurban train, which these days displays a fair amount of East German shabbiness as it rumbles through the West.

This is my Berlin—the roaring, humming trauma of my childhood, my indestructible iron toy, with its bright, quick clacking that still seems to proclaim, “You’re here, you’re really here, it’s always been this way, this is the way it will remain.” Berlin is a hard and shiny bench of polished yellow wood, a dirty, rain-smudged window, a compartment reeking unspeakably of the federal railway system. The odor is a mixture of stale smoke, iron, and the bodies of many workers from Spandau, stuffed with bread and margarine, dragged off to be confirmed at the age of fourteen, daily readers of the tabloids ever since.

Berlin is all this and more. It is a vending machine on the drafty platform, a dispenser of peppermints—white and green tablets wrapped in stiff foil. It is the slamming of the electric doors and the shout at

Westkreuz station: “Stay back, please.” The shout frightens no one; no one has to stay back these days. But the shout remains, as do the sudden start and the man wielding the signal disc. Berlin is a shabby yellow ticket costing fifty pfennigs. Even today fifty pfennigs lets you ride from Spandau to the capital of the Democratic Republic of Germany.

I am riding the interurban train to get to Eichkamp. I know that Eichkamp is not what we would consider a hot topic these days. Articles on Berlin are in great demand. Give us a piece about the Wall or about the new Philharmonic Concert Hall, the Congress Center, the Christmas preparations over there. There’s always a call for that sort of thing. But Eichkamp? What’s that? What is it supposed to mean?

Eichkamp is not listed in any catalogue of Berlin’s tourist attractions; no black tribal chief and no American who has crossed the ocean to be enchanted by the glittering shops of the Kurfürstendamm and scandalized by the Wall is taken to Eichkamp. When you come right down to it, Eichkamp is nothing—nothing but a small, insignificant settlement between Neuwestend and Grunewald, no different from the countless other settlements at the edge of the big city, where houses gradually merge with greenery and countryside.

Strictly speaking, Eichkamp is only a memory to me. It is the place of my childhood. It is where I grew up; on its streets I played marbles and king-of-the-hill and hopscotch. It is where I went to school and, later, where I returned from the university to eat and sleep. Eichkamp is, quite simply, my home, and I—a stranger—want to see it again after more than twenty years.

I return as a citizen of the Federal Republic of Germany, leaving behind my profession and my car, my own world. I return alone, but not because I find it stirring and fine that I, a grown man, should try to track down my childhood. Repellent longings of aging men, to wrap themselves around their early years: the obscenity of the old who sit in playgrounds with beating hearts as if there they could discover secret Edens. For me, Eichkamp was not the Garden of Eden, and my childhood was no secret dream. Eichkamp was my youth under Hitler, and I wanted to see it again and to understand once and for all how it was in those days.

More than a generation has passed. Everything that was the Third Reich—the torchlight parades through Berlin’s most splendid avenues

and the jubilation heard over the radio and the intoxication of renewal—all is gone, past, forgotten. So are the bread coupons and the bombs over Eichkamp and the Gestapo men who sometimes came from the city in black automobiles—all forgotten long ago. By now, I thought, it should be possible to understand. By now almost a lifetime lies between, elation and depression have died away, everything has become new and different. I am a citizen of the Federal Republic, I come from the West, I come to Eichkamp because I am tormented by the question of how it really was, that incomprehensible time. Now, I think, it becomes necessary to understand.

Sometimes at night my dreams lead me back to Eichkamp. They are brooding, anxiety-ridden dreams that awaken me early and leave me feeling broken and battered. Thirty years is a long time. The time of one generation. Time to forget. Why can't I forget?

My dream: I go to Eichkamp, I stand in front of our house. Long cracks snake across the outside walls, for the house was damaged by compressed-air bombs. It is a small two-story row house on the outskirts of Berlin, built cheaply and quickly during the 1920s. Now the damage has been repaired in a slapdash way. The doors and windows are rickety; inside, the wooden floors are splintered.

In the den my mother read aloud to my father. The den was a small, low-ceilinged room furnished in the indescribably discordant way that in those days was called middle-class: department-store junk gussied up with inherited pieces from the good old days. It contained a round table covered with a lace cloth; a floor lamp with a paper shade; a cheap, square pinewood desk studded with brass nails. A chandelier much too large for the space dipped its long crystal lusters deep into the room an heirloom inherited from Buckow. A huge oak wardrobe occupied almost a third of the room: another heirloom; we referred to it as “our baroque wardrobe.”

My father, impassive, sat at his black-lacquered desk. As always, he was looking at documents; as always, he scratched his head, his “wound”: Verdun, 1916. Behind the table my mother sank down in a cloth-covered spotted armchair; “our club chair,” we called it. The lamplight fell gently across the pages. Mother's hands were narrow, her fingers long and delicate, and they flitted nervously over the lines. She had Catholic eyes: dark, believing, goitrously piercing. Her voice had a proclamatory edge.

She was reading from a book entitled *Mein Kampf*. It was the late summer of 1933.

No, my parents were never Nazis. It is this fact that makes it seem so strange. As they read from this book by the newly appointed Reich Chancellor, their eyes were large and astonished, like those of children. They read anxiously and expectantly: it must contain fabulous German hopes. They owned no other books, except the city directory for Greater Berlin and the Bible; oh yes, and one novel, popular twenty years before. On New Year's Eve they might go out to hear *Fledermaus*. Sometimes they listened to the radio request program. That was their culture.

My parents were “unpolitical” in the same touching way as almost all the residents of Eichkamp in those days. During the twelve years under Hitler I never actually met a real Nazi in Eichkamp. They were all good, hardworking middle-class families, a little dull, a little narrowminded, petit bourgeois, the horrors of war and the fear of inflation behind them. Now they wanted peace and quiet. They had moved to Eichkamp at the beginning of the 1920s because it was a new, green island. In Eichkamp pines and firs still stood in the yards, and it was only a quarter of an hour to Teufelssee, where the children could go swimming. They grew vegetables in their gardens. On weekends they were happy to water their lawns. There was almost a smell of open country.

In the city at that time the Roaring Twenties roared along; people danced the Charleston and were beginning to tap-dance. Brecht and Eisenstein were starting their triumphal march. The newspapers reported on street fights in the Wedding district, armed barricades outside the Labor Hall. All that was far away from us, separated as if by centuries—horrible, mysterious cases, breaches of the peace.

In Eichkamp I learned at an early age that a decent German is always unpolitical.

A strange sensation, now that the train is pulling into Eichkamp station. Remembering, forgetting, remembering again; transmutation of time—what is that? What you are doing now is surely not new—you've done it before; it's always been this way. Get up from the yellow polished bench, take your things from the net, push your way past strangers, grasp

the brass handle on the door with your thumb pressing on the top, then slowly pull to the right and swing the door open. A feeling of courage.

Now that the train is rushing alongside the platform, step all the way to the front, a sudden wind in your face—and then, while the car is still rolling slowly, the wonderful temptation to jump off. I know it is forbidden; it says so on the sign over the door. It was forbidden under Hitler too. But now I feel the same temptation that took possession of me so irresistibly when I was a schoolboy. If you jump off at just the right instant, and if your feet properly absorb the body's centrifugal force, the momentum will take you up the stairs to Eichkamp, let you be the first at the turnstile, the first outside on the green plaza, the first along the narrow path that leads into town.

The others follow at leisurely intervals. A few men carrying briefcases—inspectors, clerks, civil servants; aging ladies who have been shopping in Charlottenburg or the zoo district and now, a little exhausted, take waddling steps toward tiny houses; young girls visiting an aunt. Young lads with soccer shoes cradled under their arms turn off at the first right because that is the way to the playing fields. In the old days they sometimes wore blue shirts. Those were the Jewish boys, going to the Zionists' athletic grounds.

What is time anyhow? What is there to remember? How is it possible that you are doing all these things again as if you were fourteen? Four years of elementary school in Eichkamp, nine years of attending the Grunewald secondary school. Every day for nine years jumping off the interurban railway, and during that time the swastika over Eichkamp; first skepticism and then elation because things were looking up for everyone after all.

The Katzensteins and the Schicks and the Wittkowskis had moved away. We really hadn't noticed. They were our good Jews; the bad ones lived around the Alexanderplatz in central Berlin. Every resident of Eichkamp had at least one good Jew. My mother favored Jewish doctors. "They are so sensitive," she said.

In those days Arnold Zweig lived in Eichkamp. His fashionably flat roof was un-German; after his escape it had to be gabled in the German manner immediately. Ludwig Marcuse lived three doors from us; he too fled in 1933. None of that was noticed. Right next door to us lived Elisabeth Langgässer. Sometimes she came to our house to listen to the

Swiss radio. She always said that in three or four months Hitler would be “done for.” She believed it for twelve years. And stayed to the bitter end.

And then the day of the first food coupons. September 1, 1939. I was standing outside the co-op store, and I could no longer buy what my mother wanted. Butter was rationed, bread put on coupons. The good citizens of Eichkamp looked sullen. Wasn't this a repetition of how it had been before, in 1917?

Then the first airplanes. As I stood in the garden, I heard the British engines humming high up in the air. Langgässer stepped to the fence. She was short and stocky, she was rouged to a farethee-well, and she wore heavy, horn-rimmed glasses. When she walked down our street, the children behind her shouted, “The paintbox is coming, the paintbox is coming!” And Langgässer said to me, “These are our liberators, Horst, believe me.” As she spoke, she stared critically at the sky, blinking, as all shortsighted people do.

And then, later, all the heavy bombs over our area, and the Russians, who also bombed us and also destroyed households and also said, “Woman, come.” Did Eichkamp deserve all that? Then the British came, and the years of hunger, the patched-up houses, the time when the black market flourished so luxuriantly. Then currency reform and the airlift. And at last the slow rebirth of the city.

Strange—now Eichkamp is once again what it used to be. It is almost as if nothing had happened, as if all of it had been only an ugly hallucination, a nightmare, an error of history. The error has long since been repaired.

The old row houses remain, a couple of new bungalows are nestled shyly among them. The old houses are narrow and tall, the walls roughcast in yellowish plaster, wild grapes climbing upward along them. The gardens, the gardens of Eichkamp—can this still be Berlin? Thick clusters of lilacs are in bloom again, bluish purple and white; the scent of jasmine wafts from the front yards. Gladiolas, upright as candles, are ranked in beds, and next to them grow strawberries and onions, dill for the kitchen, leaf lettuce, kohlrabi, red cabbage, chervil, and the pines at the rear, the fir trees with their tall, slender, resilient trunks. The radio tower is there as well, and somewhere linden trees are blooming, the linden that figure so prominently in German Romantic poetry; when did I read about them for the first time?

So I am heading for sentimentality. Of course —I am heading home. And as always happens when you go home after years and years, everything gradually grows smaller—the houses, the gardens, the street. How did we manage to live behind such tiny windows? Schmiedt the butcher is still here, selling his sausages and his ground meat; he's got to be as old as Methuselah. And Labude the baker, he's still here too, or at least his shop is. They have endured. I used to go to Labude's to buy Danishes for five pfennigs, and on the weekend I was allowed to buy honeybuns: four at ten pfennigs each. That was our Sunday-morning breakfast cake.

I take the same route I used to take in those days: Fliederweg, Lärchenweg, Buchenweg, Kiefernweg, Vogelherd, Im Eichkamp—all of them narrow, neat streets, still without sidewalks, still lit by gas lanterns, lined by tiny houses with narrow front lawns, green shutters at the old-fashioned windows, and behind them nothing but good, solid citizens who work hard at their crafts, their businesses, their offices. Eichkamp was the world of the good Germans. Their horizons extended just about to the zoo district and to Grunewald, Spandau, and Teufelssee—but no farther. Eichkamp was a small, green microcosm. What did Hitler want here anyway? Here all the votes went to Hindenburg and Hugenberg.

And then, abruptly, I have arrived. But there is nothing to be seen. There is only a hole: rubble, moldering wood, broken stones, a lot of sand, all blanketed in green. A battered suitcase lies below, in the basement. A cellar, decayed, overgrown with weeds, forgotten—a leftover from the war, a dilapidated souvenir of the battle for Berlin, a house in ruins standing cheek by jowl with the gleaming, practical new buildings. Everywhere such empty spaces remain—white dots on the map of our new German affluence. Their owners are dead or missing or living abroad, have forgotten the world of those days and certainly do not wish to be reminded of it.

And I stand and think: But this is your past, this is your heritage, this is the legacy they left you. This is where you grew up. This was your world. The ground plan barely covers thirty square meters. This is where our house stood, two stories high, and on top of that a drafty room for the maids. And it was to these thirty square meters that I was brought in 1923, a three-year-old. The last time I entered this house, in 1944, I was twenty-four, and a German private first class. I was on leave from the

Italian front. I brought home a twenty-liter gasoline container. I brought twenty liters of olive oil from Italy, and when we had eaten the hashed-brown potatoes this precious oil made possible once again, all of us were sick. We vomited. The fat was too much. We had to throw up. We—in those days that meant my father, my mother, and myself. My sister had committed suicide long before—in 1938.

So I am back home. I am in Eichkamp. I stand outside our property, the linden trees are in bloom again, and I feel that if I could now understand everything that occurred in this house, I would know how it was in those days—everything about Hitler and the Germans. Somewhere here in the Charlottenburg area there must be a land registry; my name will be inscribed on the title list. It is incontestable. I am still the owner of a ruin, of this ravaged cellar, and if I could only remember, the house would rise again—the colorless, sober, terrible lower-middle-class building of which I am the offspring.

I'm a little ashamed of having come from this narrow, vapid petite bourgeoisie; I would have liked to be the son of an academician or a day laborer. I would have liked to be the son of Thälmann or of Thomas Mann—I'd be somebody, then. But I come merely from Eichkamp. I am the typical child of those innocuous Germans who were never Nazis, and without whom the Nazis would never have been able to do their work. That's how it is.

Remembering, remembering—how can you remember it all? My earliest memory of Hitler is jubilation. I'm sorry about that, because today's historians know better—but I, at first, heard only jubilation. It did not come from Eichkamp. It came from the radio. It came from the distant, foreign city of Berlin, from Unter den Linden and the Brandenburg Gate, which was twenty minutes by interurban train from Eichkamp. That's how far away it was.

It was a cold night in January, and there was a torchlight parade. The radio announcer, whose resonant tones were closer to singing and sobbing than to reporting, was experiencing ineffable events; there seemed to be an indescribable exultation in the Reich capital's street of splendor, where all well-meaning Germans, all genuine and young Germans, had flocked together to pay homage to the aged field marshal and his young chancellor, or so I was told. Both of them were standing at the window. It must have been something like a Hallelujah Chorus of the

redeemed: Berlin, a festival; Berlin, a national myth of rebirth. Singing and marching and shouting and surging, and then again the sobbing voice over the radio, chanting something about Germany's awakening, and always adding as a refrain that now everything, everything, would be different and better.

The people of Eichkamp were skeptical. My mother and father listened with astonished and somewhat intimidated ears. It seemed, after all, that such quantities of joy and greatness could not fit into our narrow rooms, rooms already crowded with so much junk and so many old baubles. Soon after eleven my father turned off the radio and, a little perplexed, went to bed. What was happening? What kinds of worlds existed out there?

But the aged marshal and his young chancellor (the latter now frequently in tails), along with those who thenceforth called themselves the Government of National Concentration, finally gathered over Eichkamp, too, like a hope. The skeptics relaxed, those who had been indifferent began to think, the small businessmen grew hopeful. Suddenly over this tiny green oasis of the nonpolitical, the storm of the wide world had broken, not a storm of politics, but a springtime storm, a storm of German rejuvenation. Who wouldn't want to trim his sails for it?

The black, white, and red flags of imperial Germany, which the citizens of Eichkamp had always displayed in preference to the black-redgold ones of the republic, were now joined by Nazi flags, many small and some large, often home-made, with a black swastika on a white ground; in their hurry, some people had sewn the swastika on backwards, but their good intentions were evident just the same.

It was a time of renewal. One day my mother came home with a small triangular pennant and said, "That's for your bicycle. All the boys in Eichkamp have pretty pennants like this on their bicycles now." Like everything she did, this gesture was, of course, unpolitical. It was just that life was so edifying and impressive. In Potsdam the aging marshal and his young chancellor had exchanged a historic handshake: the Garrison Chapel in Potsdam, the seat of the Hohenzollern, with the old flags and banners of the Prussian regiments flying—everything was very solemn. The ceremony was followed by a grave and gratifying rendition of the song about the good comrade who marched at my side. So my mother

went to Hermann Tietz—he was still Jewish—and bought the first swastika pennant.

The Nazis had an infallible knack for provincial stage effects. They had all the props to mount a Wagner opera in a suburb, including all the phony magic of the Tree of Life and the Twilight of the Gods, so that the same people who usually listened to light operettas were sent into raptures. Intoxication and rapture are the code words for fascism, for its front, its face, just as terror and death are the code words for its backside; and I believe that the citizens of Eichkamp were eager to give themselves over to intoxication and rapture. They were weaponless. Suddenly one was a somebody, part of a better class of people, on a higher level—a German. Consecration permeated the German nation.

So it came about that in the late summer my mother began to read the book by the new Reich Chancellor. She had always harbored higher aspirations—it was in her blood. She came from an old Silesian family that, somewhat reduced and always in debt, had gradually made its way from Bohemia to Prussia. Like Hitler, my mother was “artistic” and “sort of Catholic.” She paid homage to an immensely personal Catholicism: spiritual, wistful, muddled. She was crazy about Rome and the Rhenish carnival; whenever she misplaced her keys, she prayed confidently to Saint Anthony; and occasionally she gave us children a glimpse of the fact that according to her heritage, she was meant for a higher station: membership in the Ursuline order. It was never possible to explain why this nervous and delicate woman, who sometimes gave serious consideration to anthroposophy and vegetarianism, had married the son of a manual laborer from the Starlau district of Berlin. He was not the kind of Protestant who corresponded to her social station, and besides he shared the rude kind of Berlin Protestantism that expresses its faith only in rabid and sneering anti-Catholicism.

My father did not make much of himself in school. His chance came, as it did for so many German males at the time, with the First World War. No, my father was no militarist, he was peaceable and good-natured; but in wartime everything abruptly became plain and simple. He must have been obedient and brave, for as early as 1916 he was seriously wounded outside Verdun. Afterward his career as a modest civil servant went steadily uphill. First the head wound—that was like a stroke of luck; then the Iron Cross, then noncommissioned officer, then sergeant, and

finally he must have been something like a second lieutenant; in any case, in 1918 he returned from the war with an officer's sword and a piece of paper that entitled him to begin all over again at the bottom of a "state career." For a time he carried documents; later he pulled a cart along the lengthy corridors of the Prussian ministry of culture; later he was made auxiliary assistant, then assistant, office chief, and finally even inspector.

My father's rise did not end there. By the time we moved to Eichkamp, he must already have been a chief inspector, a tenured civil servant who could afford to buy a little house, who got a raise and, under Brüning's chancellorship, made it to administrator. For him that was a culmination, a breathtaking pinnacle that enjoined upon him eternal loyalty and submission to the state.

All his life he left home for the ministry at 8:23 A.M., traveling second class. At home he read the old-line newspaper and the local daily, never joined the party, never knew anything about Auschwitz, never subscribed to the *Völkischer Beobachter*, the Nazi party organ—but for twenty minutes, until the train pulled into Friedrichstrasse Station, he held it up before his face so that others might recognize his loyalty to the new people's state. At Friedrichstrasse he left the paper behind. In the ministry, among his trusted cronies, he might sometimes grumble about crude violations of the law by the new leaders. Political jokes were tolerated as well; he especially enjoyed those that began with "Hermann."

All his life he came home at 4:21 P.M., always on the same train, always in the same second-class compartment, if possible always at the same corner window, always holding a briefcase full of work in his right hand, with his left showing his monthly commutation ticket—he never jumped off the moving train. He had achieved his goal; he was a German civil servant. And no matter whether the government was headed by Noske or Ebert, Scheidemann or Brüning, Papen or Hitler, he was obligated to faith and loyalty. His office was his world, and his heaven was his wife. At that time she was reading *Mein Kampf*, was "sort of Catholic," and was "political" for only a brief period.

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