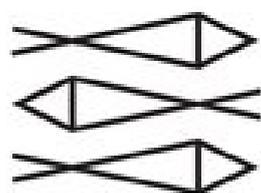


FORGOTTEN LAND

JOURNEYS AMONG THE GHOSTS OF EAST PRUSSIA

MAX EGREMONT



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**JOURNEYS AMONG THE
GHOSTS OF EAST PRUSSIA**

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**FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX
NEW YORK**

For Melissa Wyndham

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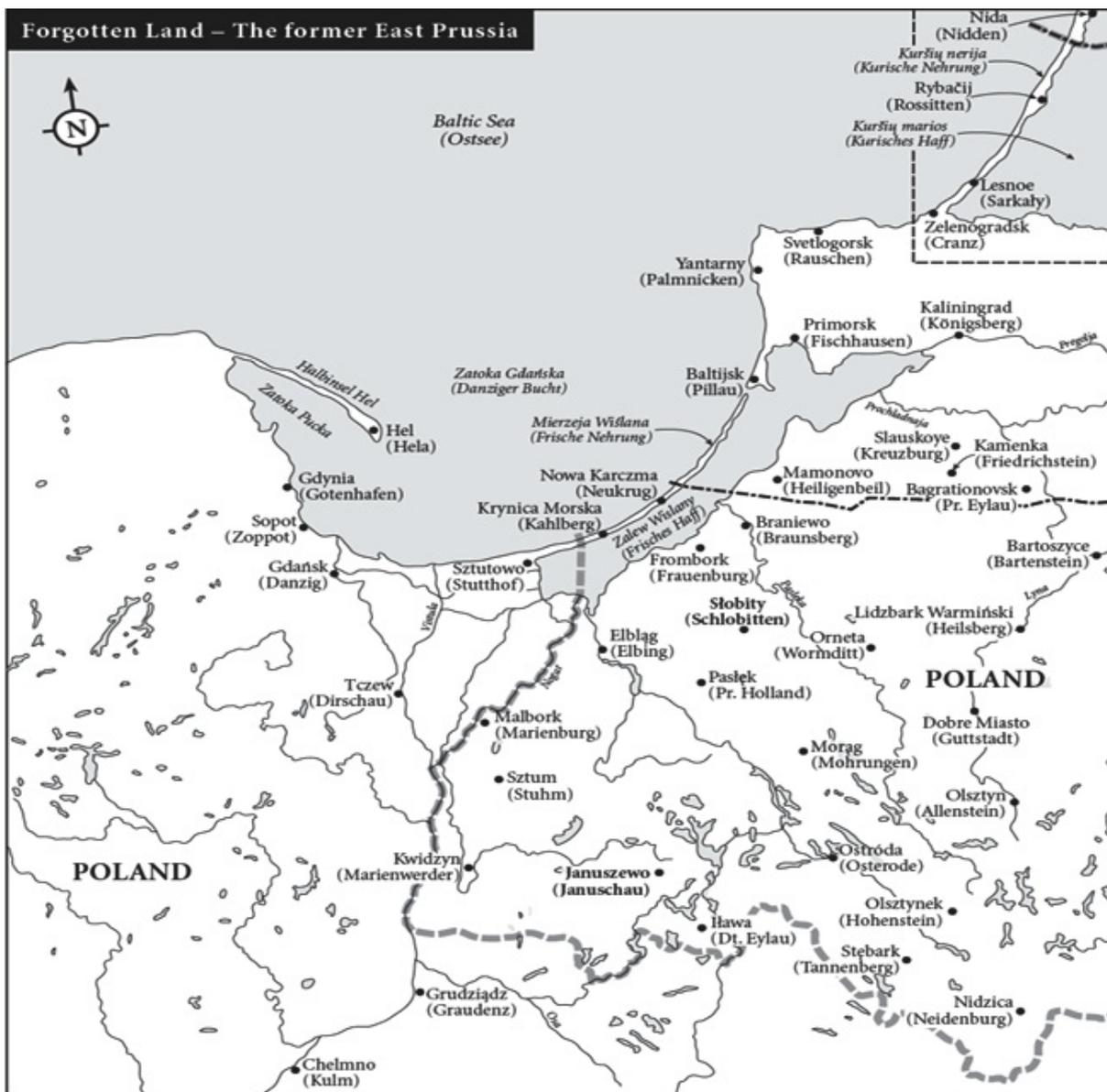
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Forgotten Land – The former East Prussia





Introduction

Marjellchen is a restaurant in a street of monolithic apartment blocks off Berlin's Kurfürstendamm. It's a dark place inside, heavily cosy, almost a caricature of a certain antique Germanness. The clutter includes beer tankards and ancient marzipan boxes, armorial shields (one from the old Königsberg, now the Russian Kaliningrad), pictures of deer in the wild, of castles, harbours and twisting medieval streets, of wide lakes and forests. Glinting bottles of central European spirits line the bar, also evoking the old times: the Aquavit Samländer, East Prussian Kartoffel (potato) Schnapps, Pillkaller, Trakehner Blut. 'Marjellchen' means girl in a now rarely spoken dialect from hundreds of miles away, in a land now divided between Russia and Poland – the old East Prussia.

Speaking German, I ask the waiter for a menu. He smiles a little condescendingly, walks across to a desk and brings over one that has been translated into English. The fare is sturdy stuff, appropriate for long, snowy winters. It's hard to choose between Creamed Herrings East Prussian, Smoked Ham of Deer, Fried Cockerel Legs, Grapevine Snails, Fillet of Pork Squire's Style, Masurian Jugged Game, Grandmother's Semolina Blancmange.

Is Marjellchen a gathering place for those with roots in the province that ceased to be German when the Red Army stormed through it in 1945? Later, as I leave, two middle-aged couples are standing outside and I ask why they chose Marjellchen. Were their families originally from what the restaurant owner's East Prussian grandmother called her 'cold' Baltic homeland? The four of them laugh. One of the men says, no, they know nothing about East Prussia, gesturing with his hand as if to push the place away: nothing at all. It's Marjellchen's food that they like – good sustenance to protect you from the winter wind.

East Prussia was on the edge. Perhaps this historic pressure on its people – their anxiety and sense of threat, how they faced these – was partly what drew me there from Britain's island safety. East Prussians used to talk of going into the Reich, particularly during its last years, as if travelling to the mother country from a distant outpost. After the First World War, the province was cut off from the rest of Germany by the Polish Corridor, the thin strip stretching south from the Baltic that had been given to the new Poland in the Treaty of Versailles. Many East Prussians felt the need to stress, before and after their homeland's extinction in 1945, that the place had been German for five centuries. Stalin had brought about the huge population change, seizing their identity. The Germans were expelled and Poles and Russians moved in.

What were these supposedly long-lasting frontiers? Over time, they had changed as the borders of Prussian districts, the frontiers of Poland and (since 1871) those of Germany shifted. After the Treaty of Versailles, East Prussia's western frontier was along the River Vistula, east of Danzig (now Polish Gdańsk). It stretched eastwards

along the Baltic shore and south to what was then the new Poland's northern frontier, then north-east, including Königsberg, up through Tilsit (now the Russian Sovetsk), over the River Niemen to the most eastern town of pre-1945 Germany: Memel (today the Lithuanian port of Klaipėda).

Five centuries of continuous German life, it's said – since the Teutonic Knights, a crusading order of chivalry, had set out in the thirteenth century to conquer this remote land for Christendom, converting or killing (like the crusaders in the Middle East) its pagan people. So East Prussia evolved into the German Empire's most eastern redoubt, tramped over by invaders. Immigrants sought refuge there from persecution in the rest of Europe, from anti-Semitic Russian tsars, from French Catholic kings or Austrian archbishops.

This makes nonsense of any claims of racial purity. In January 1945, the eleven-year-old Arno Surminski fled his village in the East Prussian district of Masuria, with most of the inhabitants and his parents. The Red Army caught up with them, they were marched back and the older people deported to the Soviet Union, leaving behind Arno, who never saw his parents again. Later, as a writer in the west, Surminski thought of his lost homeland as an extraordinary mix – a small part of Asia, invaded by Tatars, also the country of the old pagan Prussians, the Lithuanians, the Russians, the Poles, the Ukrainians, the Teutonic Knights, the Germans, the Huguenots from Catholic Europe, the Turks and the Mongol invaders, the Swedes during the Thirty Years War, the French under Napoleon.

In the sixteenth century, with the ending of the Teutonic Knights' control of the region, Duke Albrecht, the Hohenzollern ruler of East Prussia, swore allegiance to the King of Poland, bringing the land into the Polish-Lithuanian Empire. In the seventeenth century it passed by treaty into the lands of the Hohenzollern Elector of Brandenburg, whose descendant was crowned King in Prussia in Königsberg in 1701.

Duke Albrecht called on his fellow European rulers – Henry VIII of England, the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, King Ferdinand of Hungary and Bohemia – to support him against the Turks (the Asiatic hordes) who threatened civilization: a rallying cry of Christendom used five hundred years later by Goebbels against the invading Red Army. In twentieth-century Germany, East Prussia could seem an anachronism, still a bastion of the Junkers, the militarized aristocracy from east of the River Elbe that provided much of the officer corps of the German army. Yet Königsberg was the city of the philosopher Immanuel Kant and, in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a place of astonishing intellectual discovery. In East Prussia there was tolerance and bigotry; after 1871, in the newly united Germany, it became increasingly fearful and reactionary – against threats real and imagined, in the form of the Poles, the Bolsheviks or economic decay on the edge of the new Reich.

In 1945, the bastion crumbled. The northern part – Königsberg and its ice-free port, an enclave about the size of Northern Ireland – was taken by Stalin for the Soviet Union; the rest joined the new communist Poland. More than most of Europe, East Prussia is strewn with symbols of a turbulent past – in its buildings, its ruins and its graves. Poland has absorbed the southern parts, with a few remaining tensions. In the north, the Russians of the Kaliningrad region find themselves cut off from the rest of Russia since the early 1990s by a Poland and a Lithuania now outside what was the Soviet bloc, places they go to increasingly often. Many Kaliningraders compare their

lives not so much to those of other Russians as to those of Poles and Lithuanians in the European Union, and, although dissatisfied, have hopes of change.

For Germans, however, East Prussia is a memory – one that they can shape into myth and regret, fading perhaps but still a reminder of how they once were, in what their forebears thought of as their country's (and civilization's) most eastern redoubt. A place of reconciliation, of fantasy or of hope: perhaps, after its last painful years, this is now East Prussia's destiny.

1: The Whispering Past

I think of a long line of people, walking slowly across an empty winter landscape – victims of what was done to others in their name. Duisburg is on the River Ruhr, in what is still, despite comparative decline, one of the most heavily industrialized parts of Europe. It's a town for manufacturing – cars, machine tools, construction equipment, chemicals – in the post-war Germany of pedestrianized shopping streets, bland medium-rise offices and apartment blocks built mostly after the medieval centre was bombed: not much that is extraordinary here, you might think. But one of the signs outside the railway station points to the Museum of the City of Königsberg, a reminder of a very different place, a lost country thousands of miles to the east.

The route goes through a shopping district, past a piece of public art – a vast brightly painted bird standing on two short fat legs that revolves slowly above a pool of murky water, mostly ignored by passers-by: again nothing strange, just a botched municipal attempt to brighten up the northern winter. To the right of this, down a side-street, is what remains of an older Duisburg: the gothic town hall, a dark Lutheran church, medieval brick walls, the river and the converted warehouse that houses the city museum, opposite one of the largest and oldest enclosed cranes in the world.

It's raining so I walk quickly, glancing at the small boats parked in a marina on the Ruhr. Has a country ever been so patronized, or looked at with such vicarious excitement or ghoulish fascination, as Germany since 1945? The British of my generation (I was born in 1948) are particularly guilty of this. It's as if they want to revive some old theatrical production, sinking into plush velvet seats to sigh, gasp and (sometimes) laugh at warmly familiar lines. In this drama, bad news is satisfying – gains for extremist parties, skinhead demonstrations, crass remarks by a German minister about Poland or the Jews. Yes, the audience thinks, this is how it should be. They can never escape. Our recent past is good, theirs is terrible; we'll always have this over them.

We want to be shocked in Germany, like children on a fairground ghost train. Years ago, when learning German, I'd sat eavesdropping in Munich cafés, picking through fragments of older people's talk – about holidays in Spain, children, grandchildren, deaths, births, an overvalued Deutschmark – for glimpses of the bad old times. My haul was meagre – only a few words that, creatively scanned, could almost hurt: a brief tirade, for instance, against the smell of Turkish kebab houses. There must have been plenty of veterans available then to deliver monstrous opinions while sitting on geranium-filled balconies, against Alpine views – people only superficially rinsed in post-war bleach – but they avoided me.

Surely it's better to try to reach the fear that lay dark in people's minds – and in the Duisburg museum I start the search. When I ask for the Museum of the City of Königsberg that is somewhere in this building, the woman at the desk suggests I might like a ticket that includes everything. I accept – and go quickly past the art, the pottery shards, the glassware, the seals and the ancient implements up some stairs to a long,

wide room where there are no people, not even security guards.

This memorial to Königsberg, once the capital of the German Empire in the east, gets few visitors – but the glass-topped cases and boards of printed text tell much about the drift of modern Europe. For Königsberg, the end started with huge British air raids on two nights in August 1944 before the surrender to the Red Army some eight months later. The display here in Duisburg has a sense that because so much was destroyed, every drop must be squeezed from what survived – early books, drinking tankards, ornate amber boxes or models of ships, advertisements for businesses in the old city, costumes of the student duelling clubs where young Prussians proved their courage.

The last case shows ruin – rubble, bullet-holed street signs, one for the Horst-Wessel Strasse, named after the Nazi hero. The journey towards this brings back a better past, often through those who lived in or left their mark on the city – Martin Luther, Napoleon, Kant and his fellow philosopher J. G. Herder, the artist Käthe Kollwitz, the last German emperor, William II – before Hitler and the end in April 1945. Rebirth comes in photographs of German-Russian reconciliation in Kaliningrad, the Soviet place that Königsberg became. The Germans were ordered out, the Soviet commanders reporting to Stalin that the last one had gone in 1948. What's left of them now is an archipelago of memory: Marjellchen with its Pork Squire's Style, archives of photographs, accounts of the good old days, recordings of elderly voices and infrequently visited museums threatened with cuts.

Some months later, I go to Lüneburg – a serene, small town north-east from the Ruhr region, about twenty miles or so inland from the Baltic coast, its partly medieval centre immaculate, as if washed by loving devotees. The place is quiet outside the main shopping streets: particularly deserted around the East Prussian Landesmuseum, a new (or newish) structure of brick and glass, dazzling on a harsh, bright day. This silence seems far from changing frontiers and disputed identity. At the end of the last war there were over a million refugees from the old eastern territories in Lower Saxony, in and around Lüneburg, and further west in Schleswig-Holstein – and many settled here.

The East Prussian Landesmuseum's hall is light and empty, perhaps because the exhibitions are seldom crowd-pulling with their displays of restored textiles, traditional rugs, information about coastal erosion or different types of Baltic fish. Other sections deal with aspects of the old country; soon the charts, the boards of information, the blown-up photographs and the stuffed animals and birds begin to crowd in. Over it all is the landscape: the Kurische Nehrung (the Curonian or Curland Spit, or Peninsula, that juts into the Baltic); Masuria with its thousand lakes; the nineteenth-century overland canal; Rominten heath and forest, south-east of the horse stud at Trakehnen – the hunting land; the elk woods east of old Königsberg; the bird life at Rositten, on the Curonian Lagoon. This could be a hard country – where fishermen were reduced to catching crows in nets for food in winter, biting into the birds' necks to kill them without damaging the meat.

As in Duisburg, Kant and his time feature strongly – Königsberg's (and East Prussia's) intellectual high point. As in Duisburg, cases show amber boxes, jewellery, tankards, crucifixes, ancient knives and examples of the goldsmith's art before the section on East Prussian culture and artists like Käthe Kollwitz or the writers Agnes

Miegel and Johannes Bobrowski, who tried to reconcile nostalgia with truth. Out from Königsberg are the country districts; most of East Prussia was rural, sending corn and horses and timber to the rest of the Reich from drained and difficult eastern lands. The section on the years after 1918 – the creation of the Polish Corridor that cut East Prussia off from the rest of Germany – has photographs of people voting in the plebiscites when they were asked if they wanted to be in the new Poland or the new Germany (there were massive majorities in favour of staying German): a reminder also not only of the nationalistic Tannenberg Memorial but that from 1920 until 1932 Prussia was led by the Königsberg Social Democrat Otto Braun. Then comes the end: the British air raids and the Red Army's victory.

The display boards have grim statistics: of the hundred thousand people in Königsberg in April 1945, when the German commander General Otto Lasch surrendered, only twenty-five thousand survived to join the German exodus in 1947 – 8. Two hundred and forty thousand refugees from East Prussia had arrived in Denmark as the war was ending. From January to April 1945, some four hundred and fifty-one thousand people were taken by ship from Pillau, Königsberg's port; between a hundred and eighty thousand and two hundred thousand crossed the frozen sea to the Frische Nehrung, or the Vistula Spit, the thin peninsula that reached westwards, the counterpart to the eastward-pointing Kurische Nehrung. Another five hundred thousand reached the peninsula over the ice from points west of Pillau. The refugees suffered strafing and bombing. They were often caught by the Red Army and captured, raped or killed.

One model shows part of the great trek or flight to the west, its mock-up figures wrapped against the cold, walking with horses and a tractor and carts piled with agonizingly chosen possessions: the pain dulled by the belief that, after the peace treaty, they would come back. Those left behind could expect little mercy. In February 1945, the Russians began the forced deportations from the districts outside Königsberg although the city had not yet surrendered. The journeys in goods wagons could last from three to six weeks to often deadly Soviet work camps in the Urals or on the Don.

While I am looking at the section on the Rominten game reserve, an old man pops out from among the stuffed creatures of the wilderness – the lynxes, wolves and fish eagles, the snow owls, buzzards, bison and elk, and the hunting trophies, the formidable stags' heads, some shot before 1914 by the Emperor, one killed in 1943 by Rominten's last master, Hermann Göring. The old man is small, brown-faced with short grey hair and alert eyes. He says that he grew up in a village near the forest, now in Poland, just across the border from the Kaliningrad district of Russia. He doesn't care who knows it but the Poles have turned his old home into shit (*Scheisse*) – he went back ten years ago and was nearly sick.

Can this be a part of the display, I wonder – laid on by the museum? I ask where he lives now. Outside Lüneburg, he says, and he comes here often since he retired. What's gone can never come back. Yes, the place is – and he repeated the word – *Scheisse*; he wanted me to know. Then he clasps my arm, smiles and walks off. If it is a tableau, he won't be overworked. There's no one else nearby.

East Prussian survivors often look back to an enfolding sweetness. In the country

districts particularly, the routine had a security of its own. Winter came in November with the fitting of secondary windows inside the permanent frames, the hanging up of woollen clothes to rid them of the smell of moth-repellents – before white sharp days and clear star-filled nights or freezing fog that burned off quickly in the morning sun. You travelled by sleigh to a soft flow of bells, wrapping yourself up in sheepskin rugs, or tobogganed or skated on icy fields where drains had burst or skied to neighbours or watched the ice-sailing regattas on the Masurian lakes, cradling hot drinks and eating bratwurst. Christmas meant marzipan, carp and goose and a tree with white candles followed by a ritual on Boxing Day evening when a man on a hobby horse and others dressed as goats (carrying goats' heads) or storks entered the house to bring fun. In summer you might go to the Baltic, to a seaside resort. On the Curonian Peninsula – the Kurische Nehrung – the fishermen spoke a strange dialect and women in black tended long lines of smoked fish over juniper-wood fires. The wearing of black had begun, it was said, because death had been so frequent under the shifting dunes. In those days (the old days) the peninsula's lagoon and the sea were clean and pure. You had a choice for swimming – the smooth inner water or the strong Baltic waves.

For those expelled from East Prussia after 1945, a new land took shape, in parallel to their new life – that of the past, a huge monument beside which everything else seemed small. The past may be distorted any way you want; to think or to write about it can be to hide the present or the future behind beautiful brocade. So exile can mean conservatism or self-pity or comfort in the company of the dead who are buried in that lost land.

The land: *das Land*, *Bernsteinland* (the land of amber), *Land der dunklen Wäldern und kristallinen Seen* (the land of dark woods and crystal lakes), *Menschen, Pferde, weites Land* (people, horses, distant land). This word, on its own or added to another – as in *Landschaft* (landscape) – can resonate with anger, joy or regret. One of the most famous lines in German poetry is from Goethe's novel *Wilhelm Meister*, when the strange creature Mignon longs for the south, for the land of lemons and oranges, of myrtle and the bay tree, a lost place of happiness and of love:

‘Kennst du das Land wo die Zitronen blühn?’ (‘Do you know the land where the lemon-trees flower?’)

It's partly consoling; the land, at least, remains where it was: your other country – although lived upon by others. The poet Agnes Miegel, forced out of East Prussia in 1945, liked to think that Russians and Poles would soon work the same fields so that someone could enjoy them. Meanwhile, in exile, she could do what she wanted with the memory.

Nostalgia permeates a catalogue of books about East Prussia sent out some sixty-five years after the province's end: *Our Beautiful Samland*; *East Prussia – My Fate*; *Anecdotes from East Prussia*; *The Last Summer of Mauritten*; *Childhood on the Pregel*; *School Memories from East Prussia*; the 1941 postal directory of Königsberg;

Last Days in East Prussia; recipes from an East Prussian kitchen (a short book); photographs of old castles and manor houses; memories of flight in 1944 and 1945; DVDs of films – from ‘before the bombs fell’ – of the towns like Elbing, Memel, Thorn and Marienburg, of Königsberg’s *Schloss*. In the films you see a calm country – either in summer sunlight or covered in bright snow; trains leaving Königsberg’s Nordbahnhof for the Samland coastal resorts, for Labiau and for the Curonian Spit, the Kurische Nehrung; then shots of what happened later under the post-war Polish communist or Soviet rule. A lighter note comes with a CD called *The Happy East Prussian*: ‘cheerful stories and songs in the East Prussian dialect’; and another of East Prussia swinging between the wars – ‘The Cheerful Tilsiters’, ‘The Masowian Trio’, ‘The Königsberg Musicians’, ‘The Elbing Sparrows’.

East Prussia was Germany’s (some claimed western Europe’s) eastern redoubt. People remarked on its neat towns and villages, its cultivated fields – the order imposed upon broad lakes, poor soil and apparently illimitable forests. There was a sense still of colonization, though much of it had been controlled by Germans since the fourteenth century. Asia began at these frontiers, it was said. System against chaos, a threatened civilization, a hard place to be – these formed the land’s myth.

If you go east, from Lüneburg and Duisburg, away from the past, back to Kaliningrad (the old Königsberg) there’s competition, more than six decades after the expulsions, to be the last German – someone now to be cherished rather than expelled or killed. I see this when I meet the farmer Johann van der Decken on a bright late-autumn day. We are near the Russian town of Gusev, until 1945 the German Gumbinnen, twenty or so miles from Kaliningrad. Aged about fifty-five, bearded, his face tanned below the line of his cap, Johann has been here for twelve years. He really is, he says, the last German working this land; true, there’d been a group near Chernyakhovsk (the old German Insterburg) but most of them were leaving. As for Stahl, an old man who’d been born in East Prussia and then came back – he just keeps a few cows and pigs: not proper farming.

Johann’s farm – some two thousand acres of wheat, barley, oil-seed rape and dairy cows, employing thirty-four people – is big, different to those of Stahl and the Chernyakhovsk Germans in another way; Johann has no links at all with the province. He grew up near Hamburg and before coming here he worked in agriculture in Africa, where he met his Russian wife. Is he like the Germans who had come east to develop the land centuries earlier, following the Teutonic Knights? First Africa, then Kaliningrad – Johann is a pioneer. He’s building (or rebuilding) the place. Kaliningrad agriculture had collapsed in the 1990s, after the closure of the huge Soviet collective farms.

Johann van der Decken had come from outside to what had been East Prussia, not like Klaus Lunau, who lives in the neatest Zelenogradsk (once the German Cranz). As I walk with Klaus Lunau through Zelenogradsk, past the hideous glass and brick house built for Boris Yeltsin (who never spent a night in it), he says that he really is the last German from the old Königsberg in the Kaliningrad Oblast (or district), having retired here from intelligence work for the German army and police. But what about Gerda Preuss, I ask – the old lady who had lived since the 1945 Soviet take-over in

Königsberg with her Russian partner, Maria? What about Rudolf Jacquemien, the communist poet? Klaus says that Gerda Preuss and Rudolf Jacquemien are dead. Only he remains.

All of them, Johann van der Decken, Gerda Preuss and Klaus Lunau, feel or felt secure in Kaliningrad because they married or lived with Russians; Rudolf Jacquemien came there in the 1950s, an idealistic Marxist, so was different: not a survivor but an immigrant. The larger part of the old East Prussia, its southern bit, from the Russian frontier to the Vistula or Weichsel River, went to Poland after the last war. Here there are more Germans, several thousand, many from the large Polish minority that had lived for centuries under German rule. If you want greater evidence of the old German east, it's in the churches and castles and civic buildings or on the faded headstones of the graves scattered across this forgotten land.

In a Hamburg bookshop, I find a large section on the former German eastern territories – Silesia, Pomerania and East Prussia. Among the books are a history of the great neo-classical Dönhoff house at Friedrichstein, with photographs taken before its destruction in 1945; an illustrated account of the journalist Marion Dönhoff's flight west ahead of the Red Army; and her own memoirs of childhood and escape, written after she'd become one of the most admired women in post-war Germany. The shelf also has a novel, later filmed, by one of Marion's young relations about the trek west, a neat European romance between a young German aristocrat and French prisoner of war. There are also collections of sun-filled photographs. One is called *Beautiful East Prussia, Pearl of the East*.

Several post-1945 survivors of the East Prussian landowning families – or Junkers (from Jung Herr or Young Lord) – wrote their memoirs; from these we know about the Dönhoffs of Friedrichstein, the Lehndorffs of Steinort and the Dohnas of Schlobitten. The books tell of a still partly feudal society, a world (apparently) of obligation and trust. Marion Dönhoff depicts a frugal innocence in the huge pre-war Friedrichstein that is almost bleakly dutiful. One of the estate workers at Schlobitten, the Dohna property, told Alexander Dohna's startled young wife that everyone in the place looked upon her as their mother. Hans von Lehndorff, the last heir to Steinort, evokes the place's beauty and worthwhile life. All these seem to say: is it so wrong to regret the passing of this world?

It's near the end of winter, so Hamburg is cold, its wealth dulled by a leaden twilight. I think of my meeting with Marion Dönhoff some eighteen years ago, how in one of her books she describes hearing at night in her house in the Hamburg suburbs the distant shutting of a car door, a break in a silence that had brought back her earlier life in a much more remote place. Before the war, Hamburg and Königsberg had both been rich trading cities; in 1944 and 1945 both suffered terrible destruction. Then came the two kinds of rebirth – the Soviet and that of capitalist western Europe. When I mentioned to Marion Dönhoff the immense difference between rich Hamburg and poor Kaliningrad, she hadn't responded; perhaps it was too obvious.

This day in Hamburg I have lunch with two German friends and we talk about the millions of refugees who had come after the war to the new Germany from the old eastern territories. In the communist zone, they were controlled by the Soviet

occupiers, but in the democratic west these people formed a large and active group. Konrad Adenauer, the Chancellor of the new Federal Republic, feared an island of anger and reaction. They were given money and, in places like the Duisburg and Lüneburg museums, memorialization of their former lives.

This didn't put an end to resentment and demands for a return of what had gone; although my friends don't say so, I think that the absorption of so many is an extraordinary achievement. We talked about the leader of the Bund der Vertriebenen (the largest organization of the expelled), Erika Steinbach – how she infuriates the Poles, particularly those who now live in what was, until 1945, the southern part of East Prussia. Should this be worrying? No, because her latest campaign is for a memorial in Berlin to the expelled people – not about property or frontiers. Frau Steinbach had wanted the memorial for the Germans whereas others, particularly in Poland, say victims throughout Europe should be commemorated. Much more important points had been settled at the time of reunification, when the German Chancellor Helmut Kohl accepted the post-1945 frontiers. The legal challenges brought by a few Germans who had left Poland in the communist time and now wished to reclaim land weren't important. I remembered what a Polish politician said to me – how you could play on German guilt. Perhaps this could last for ever – an infinity of darkness.

When I first went there in 1992, Kaliningrad had also seemed darkly shocking. I got off the train into a parody of Soviet planning with cracked concrete, cratered streets, people bent against the cold and wet and a sleek German tour coach gliding past belching Ladas and dirty, dented trams. Rumours went round – that Helmut Kohl wanted to buy the place back for the newly reunited Germany: that the Germans, Poles, Lithuanians and Russians might run the enclave (now cut off from the rest of Russia) together. In a broken-down hotel that was patrolled by prostitutes and drug dealers, I asked two Russian students what they thought should happen. One said that the name must be changed; Mikhail Kalinin, Stalin's henchman, represented the bad years (it jolted me to think that there had been a worse time). Now the place should be called Kantgrad, to show that Russia's most western land was now part of a new Europe.

Soviet housing on the river in Kaliningrad.



Those who write or talk about the city still stress its horror. It has ‘bad karma’, I was told – this hideous, failed Kaliningrad, forever doomed, stifled by a confused and bloody past, riddled with AIDS and drugs and smuggling and crime. Is it worse than many other Russian cities blighted by Soviet planning? I don’t think so. Kaliningrad *does* have its own inhuman centre, as if a great scoop had lifted up a whole quarter, replacing it with wide avenues and chipped concrete walkways, potholed highways and bridges over the slow dark river, often seen through a haze of pollution, across memorials, heroic statues and models of weapons commemorating the Great Patriotic War. On the trams, obviously over-burdened people make you feel ashamed to be rich and happy. But beyond this is a layered history, the sense of stones beneath concrete, of streets and houses of a foreign past not yet dissolved into a new identity. The Russian poet Joseph Brodsky, when he came to Kaliningrad in the 1960s, wrote of the trees whispering in German.

In spite of Soviet destruction, the past can come suddenly back, like the quick lifting of a blanket. You see it in the neat pre-war German railway stations – resembling giant parts of an ancient train set – the paint not thick enough to hide the old names: Rominten, for instance, in black gothic lettering at the stop for the old imperial hunting lodge, once the preserve of the German emperors and that passionate slaughterer of all game, Hermann Göring. The tomb of Immanuel Kant survived the bombs and the changes, to become a sacred place where newly married Russian couples are photographed, the bride’s white dress brilliant against the memorial’s pale-pink stone and the cathedral’s dark-red Prussian brick. The students I first met in 1992 have done well, mostly through links to the west; Eduard and Olga look outwards from Kaliningrad, working for foreign companies or for the European Union. To them, it’s inconceivable that the place can be anything other than Russian. But they know that Königsberg is what makes this Russian place different.

Probably the German city had never been beautiful – idiosyncratic perhaps, with its mysterious corners, self-conscious medievalism, crooked streets, gothic towers and dark blocks of warehouses along a slow, oily river. The former Chancellor Helmut

Schmidt – who passed through Königsberg on his way to the eastern front – remembers a very provincial place. Most of the buildings – even the famous red-brick fortifications around it that guarded western civilization – were nineteenth century, making, at best, a place of character and memory, enfolding its people in a limited, comfortable world. The centre – the castle, cathedral and university district – was what the Soviets and the bombing changed most. After 1945, they blew up some of the churches; now the Juditterkirche, the oldest church in East Prussia, is a place of Russian Orthodox worship, with the old German cemetery next to it. German money has paid for much of what has been done since 1991, often – as with the cathedral and its stiflingly inoffensive civic interior – alongside Russian government funds.

In this post-Soviet age, black limousines and dark-suited bodyguards, former members of the special forces, wait outside the Kaliningrad clubs, restaurants and hotels; the show of money mocks any idea of communism. Most of the city government's plans for tourism seem to leap over the Soviet years and, as you walk round, you sense their brevity. Across from the concrete are the sugary early twentieth-century baroque of the former courthouse (now the headquarters of the Russian Baltic Fleet), the red brick of the nineteenth-century copies of the medieval gates and the Dohna tower (now the Amber Museum). German or Prussian gothic is still a powerful presence, mostly nineteenth century, except in the outside of the restored cathedral, one of the largest brick gothic buildings in Europe. A lake, dark green and pungent in summer, stretches from where the castle once was before the Soviet triumph of the building of the high, still empty and asbestos-ridden old Communist Party headquarters. More recent buildings can seem stagey, crudely imitative, Königsberg in caricature; they are certainly not Soviet.

The tourists are mostly German. When Kaliningrad first opened to the world in 1991, many of those who had lived there before 1945 came back for the first time since the expulsions. It's said that several, standing perhaps where the castle once was, or in Victory Square (formerly Kochplatz, named after himself by the last National Socialist Gauleiter, Erich Koch) or what had been the main business street, the old Steindamm, or the former Lindenstrasse – where the former Jewish orphanage still stands – were overwhelmed, bursting into tears at the memory of terror or of loss.

The street names are now changing back; Gorky Street has become Hoffmann Street again. Tour guides point out other obvious survivors – the neo-classical old stock exchange or the theatre, given a new pillared façade by the Soviets, with the statue of Friedrich Schiller in front of it, surviving 1945 apparently because a soldier chalked on it that this was a great poet. Near the nineteenth-century university buildings, the guides lead their groups down into the bunker where the last German commander, General Lasch, directed the drawn-out defence of Königsberg; then perhaps they go to the Oceanographic Museum (a Soviet addition, with whole ships and submarines docked on the Pregel) or to the zoo, a tired place where slow-breathing animals lie beside murky pools. The zoo is the place for Hans's story: how astonishing care was lavished upon one hippopotamus during the horrific human suffering after the siege's end. More than forty bits of shell and bullets were pulled from Hans's armoured skin and a Red Army vet slept alongside him, tending the wounds or massaging the hippopotamus's heaving stomach as it endured chronic indigestion. What could be done? Eventually, after massive infusions of vodka, Hans walked, or staggered, again.

Eighteenth-century warehouses in pre-1945 Königsberg, with the castle tower in the distance.



In 2007, fifteen years after my first visit, I call on the German Consul in Kaliningrad in the bright, newly built villa where he has his office. Guido Herz explains how uninterested he was previously in this part of the world, anxious perhaps to block out any imagined plot of a surreptitious German retaking of Königsberg. Short, dark-haired, tanned and dapper, quick in speech and gesture, he is, he says, a Roman Catholic from Heidelberg: not a Prussian or with any emotional attachment to the old East Prussia or the eastern former German lands – none at all. His face shows distaste, as if these places give him pain.

He looks at me sharply. He and Berlin accept completely that this region is Russian – and he sees the city as divided into two parts: the Russian present and the German (or Prussian) past. Did I know that Kaliningrad is booming – booming, booming, booming? he repeats, breaking briefly into English. There is 10 per cent growth per annum and very low unemployment. Which German firms are here? I ask. The Consul is sensitive perhaps to the charge of commercial imperialism. He says only that there are several: one that makes children's goods. The BMW assembly plant is nothing to do with Germany and is a Russian company. It also assembles KIA cars from Korea.

Booming, booming, booming – a volley of triumph. This may be true of the city. But out in the country I remember the pools of green-brown water on fields where the old drainage systems have broken down; the old woman in the stained headscarf who had offered me shrivelled grapes from her garden in a near-derelict house by a red-brick former Lutheran church; then, in Kaliningrad, at the furthest end of the old castle pond (past the two memorials to the Soviet submarine captain who had sunk the German liner the *Wilhelm Gustloff* in 1945, with the loss of thousands of civilian lives) the lighted windows of dilapidated industrial buildings at night, as if people work or live there.

Guido Herz says it's true that the Russians had not wanted a consul – but he's the second and they have welcomed him. When I ask about the groups in Germany that

are pressing for recognition of what they or their expelled ancestors lost or suffered, he explains that East Prussia is not so strongly represented among these as the Sudeten Germans or Silesians. Had I heard of Erika Steinbach, their leader? Guido Herz smiles. She has little influence now, he thinks, in Germany. It suits the Poles to use her – and again he breaks into English – as a bogeywoman. I think also that it suits those who move among the ghosts to remember that Chancellor Helmut Kohl, just before German reunification, had told the *Vertriebene* (expelled people) that they had been treated very unjustly.

One must get things into perspective, Herz says. The former East Prussia makes up only 0.4 per cent of Russian territory. The Russians have no fear of the Germans. Why should they? It's the Czechs and the Poles who are anxious. Kaliningrad is a place of victims, he thinks: victims of the air raids, of Hitler, of the Red Army, of Stalin, of environmental disaster, of poor urban planning, of isolation or of neglect. Even more victims have been sent here, from the Chernobyl explosion, from the Armenian earthquakes; others came from all over the old Soviet Union, from choice or pressure. The problem has been in forming an identity. They need the German past, shown now in Königsberg and Ostmark beer, the number plates with 'Königsberg' written on them: the historic symbols – the restored cathedral, the medieval gates, Kant's tomb. I think that Kaliningrad is old enough now to assert itself. From almost everywhere in the city you can see those two symbols of Russia: the huge new Orthodox cathedral and the empty concrete tower that was built to be the Communist Party headquarters.

Guido Herz has been sent on a mission of reconciliation. Germany is the closest foreign country for those who live here, he thinks – closer than neighbouring Poland, Lithuania or Belarus. Evidence of it is all around – in the streets, the parks, the squares, the graves, the statue of Schiller, the plaque on Agnes Miegel's house, the way the Soviet centre blends at its edges into the pre-war suburbs, the gliding tourist buses. Outside the city, it's harder, he admits. You can rent land, but speculative buyers, taking advantage of tax concessions brought in to lure people to the region, often do nothing with what they have bought. Collective farms, abandoned after the demise of the Soviet Union, had replaced skilled German farmers; and much of the drainage was destroyed in the war. The land needs to be cherished. Once it produced some 20 per cent of the wheat in Germany.

What's happened since 1992 is a letting in of light and money, a break from the military: the arrival of shopping and nightlife, the demolition of some of the bleaker post-war housing, a discovery of the past. In one of the tourist brochures, there's a photograph of an elderly long-haired man unravelling a napkin, facing two tall silver-gilt candelabra and tiered dishes of fruit, seafood and caviar; the caption says, 'It takes time to choose – Mr Benetton, the owner of the clothes brand, in a Kaliningrad restaurant.'

Alexei, a businessman in his early fifties, would have been impossible twenty years ago. In his first career, he was an army officer, reaching the rank of colonel, reputedly in the KGB. Now he lives with his family in Kaliningrad in a smart house from the German time. His father, also a professional soldier, came from Leningrad (the name given to St Petersburg from 1924) to the city in the 1950s, having served in Poland, among other places. Alexei's two daughters were educated here. One now works in Moscow.