

Stettin to Trieste: Down the Iron Curtain

By

Robin Ashenden

For the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust, 2009

(robinashenden@hotmail.com)

CONTENTS PAGE

Introduction	3
Poland.....	4
Germany.....	16
Czech Republic.....	28
Hungary.....	43
Trieste.....	57
Romania.....	65

INTRODUCTION

To start with it just seemed, for once, a good idea: to travel through the countries of the Iron Curtain 20 years after the Fall of the Berlin Wall, and to take the temperature of them, seeing the major cities, attending the celebrations, and meeting as many people as possible along the way. All moments for travel, of course, are arbitrary, but this one seemed less arbitrary than most, as each country asked itself, over many months and in countless historical journals, ceremonies and festivals, what exactly had happened in the last 20 years: where the end of communism and the resulting free market had taken them, and to what degree those hopes, unnaturally high in 1989, had been inevitably disappointed. That this trip should coincide with the worst post-war crisis of capitalism in 50 years seemed opportune too: the Eastern Bloc had seen the failure first of one system, then the faltering of another, and would have interesting comparisons to make.

But of course my reasons were more personal than that. It would, I knew, be as much of a self-exploration as anything else: my interest in the Eastern Bloc had begun nearly twenty years back too, and for the better part of two decades Eastern Europe, in one form or another, had been my life: living in Estonia for two years in the late nineties, lecturing on literature in Russia and the Baltic States, and travelling extensively in Romania and Hungary, writing often on the latter for British magazines. I had been in Russia during Kosovo, had my 2006 visit to Budapest coincide with the riots there (receiving, along with many others, a righteous tear-gassing for my trouble) and seen the mood of Tallinn just after the furore surrounding the removal of the Soviet war memorial in 2005. Though others doubtless knew the minutiae of post-communist European politics better than me, I felt that these two decades of obsessive interest in the region qualified me to say something, and the opportunity, just as I turned 40, to summarise what I had learnt and what this constantly fascinating, always alluring region had meant to me seemed too good a chance to miss. Helped along by generous references and an equally generous grant, I set out in late October last year for Poland, where I would begin my journey.

POLAND

The air-crash deaths in April this year of Lech Kaczynski and other luminaries from the Polish front-rank – including Ana Walentynowicz, a legendary figure from the Gdansk shipyards – seems to have revived Poland's unenviable role, to be Europe's stricken yet devout nation, hit repeatedly by loss, tragedy, and grief. The event seems to remind us of what Poland always was, somewhere adversity and resistance appeared to happen on a larger scale than anywhere else (though Romania and Bosnia might protest) and where one could look for a heroism almost theatrical in its flamboyance. This role seemed to have got lost in the last 20 years, under the blinding effects of free market democracy; indeed, it was difficult to say what Poland was or would be. Kaczynski's much-reported outburst against the Germans in 2006 – snapping that Germany should give Poland extra voting rights to make up for the millions of Poles they had exterminated in World War II – was widely attacked, yet arguably showed up our own slightly smug assumptions of instant forgiveness, and our tendency to treat 50 years as an eternity instead of the historical half-beat it is. In the Entropa exhibition, a Czech artist's huge vision of Europe, a map on which countries are represented by the stereotype the world has formed of them, Poland's square expanse was filled by two giant priests erecting the gay rights flag on a field of potatoes. Was this Poland's image now: ossified faith, conservatism, bigotry, and stodge?

Certainly I went to Poland with few preconceptions, and found a sombre, not celebratory, atmosphere there. Krakow retained its palpable romance, though perhaps not in the Old Town, which is now, like Prague, all too aware and exploitative of its own charms to seem spontaneous or natural. Szczecin – whose name and history seemed to suggest only heaviness – surprised me with its laid back and open atmosphere, while Gdansk, birthplace of Solidarity, was unexpectedly bleak, not the over-buffed medieval theme park I expected at all. Though one caught occasional glimpses of what depths and faith lay underneath, Poland was still enigmatic to me. What remained were random impressions, with one unifying theme: almost nobody spoke with unalloyed enthusiasm of free market Poland, and there was considerable nostalgia – perhaps inevitable – for the old system, however meaningful the struggle had been to rid themselves of it.

I landed in Krakow, a city not on the Iron Curtain route, but which seemed to demand visiting nonetheless. Krakow was strongly atmospheric in ways I expected: cobbles, drizzle, darkly glittering paving stones, street lamps that shone yellowy through the evening mist. There were the usual queues of men and women in dull, dead-coloured clothing at tram-stops, the usual fug on the glass of damp tramcars, and the mansion block windows with ancient floral lacing, now dirty, fronted by those pot plants which looked more like symbols of death than life. Businessmen with handlebar moustaches embraced floridly at the end of restaurant-meals. Pensioners were like Monty Python cartoons, backs bent, sleeves too long, heads disappearing intermittently as they limped along the streets, old suit trousers flapping inanely against imitation hush-puppies. Cafes, whose décor made you distrust the pelmeni and stuffed cabbage they served, were frequented by workers with pugilistic faces, battered noses, pores enlarged to the point of perforation. Buildings too were flaking and time-blasted,

beautiful in their use and unadorned signs of experience as an old pot, a scored kitchen table is beautiful. Meanwhile the Vistula, mythical river, flowed slowly, steadily, without any hint of frantic undertow, under a sky threatening to discharge a dismal rain. This was unchanging Krakow, it seemed, communist or capitalist, a shrouded, faded, faintly forbidding city, lit up by sudden shafts of faith: roadside altars with nameless moustached statues fondling the crosses in their arms, glass-protected virgins lifting their eyes unto the treetops, urned and helmeted candles (sold on special offer at the supermarket) burning in front of them: city of Pope John Paul II, ex-actor, ex-footballer, local boy about to be canonised, it seemed, and Catholicism was everywhere, a raft the citizens could cling to against a wave of tourist change.

‘Oh, we loved him,’ said Dorota. ‘I can’t explain to you how much. Even my son, who is agnostic, cried when the Pope died.’

‘But it was a merciful release, wasn’t it?’ I said. ‘Towards the end. Those awful shaking hands.’

‘Yes, it was. But we still wanted him never to die. You don’t understand. I knew him,’ she said, ‘when he was Bishop of Krakow. I actually knew him. You can’t imagine how he seemed, not unless you’ve been in the same room as him. His presence, that charisma. And this ability always to say the right thing, without dogma.’

We were sitting in Dorota’s Krakow flat, a wooden-floored sanctuary filled with portraits from the Polish past, a home she shared with her estranged husband who would pace through at times looking like a grumpy Mr. Magoo, ignoring her, nodding curtly at me. Dorota, I felt, would need her religion to deal with such things. But she had always had it, had grown up in the faith when it had meant, to paraphrase one man, both giving one’s worship to the mother of God and, more satisfying in the here-and-now, being able ‘to spite those bastards.’ John Paul had given his famous speeches here, reviving a nation and galvanising Solidarity, a thorn the size of a battering-ram in the side of the ruling elite. Had Dorota, I wondered, been present at his most legendary sermon, the ‘Be Ye Not Afraid’ which every Pole living under communism took as a call to resistance?

‘Oh my God, yes,’ she said, hands shaking, suddenly alive with the memory. ‘Yes! There were 6,000 of us sitting in a field, people sleeping there so that they could get to see him. And then when he talked to us... The atmosphere. Oh my God, I get goosebumps even thinking about it. Can you see?’

She was lost for a moment in euphoric memory. ‘But we suffered so much here when he died. People everywhere were crying. Teachers in schools, people in the shops, in swimming pools, on buses. I’ve never seen that kind of grief before. Maybe I shouldn’t say it, but I felt as bad as when my own father died.’

I was to hear the same from others, from a young Polish girl I met who said she wasn’t a practising Catholic, she didn’t trust the clergy, she had seen the Priest who had lectured her at school about the sanctity of marriage going round with young girls ‘When something like that happens, people know about it here, and he had *children*,’

she said. She preferred to have it all from the Bible, not from someone who was playing a role. 'But John Paul was different. The grief here when he died, much worse here than in other parts of Poland. I too was sad. I too cried.'

The girl's belief and outspokenness gave me a sense of linkage with the Polish past, something which seems realer than those 50 years of communism, a tradition unearthed, still solid and shining in its wrapping, when it was safe to do so. Yet Dorota was worried, as many were, about the younger generation. Materialistic, self-motivated, without any sense of Polish history. 'Do you know, my son,' she said, 'He is a good boy – but when I asked him what he would do if there was a war here, he said he would simply run away.' She looked at me to see if I registered the enormity of it. 'He said that he would look after his family but he would simply run from the front. "It's the government's problem", he said. I mean, when I was young that was unthinkable. We Polish fought. We stood up for ourselves.'

Yes, I said, that was the sense the world had of Poland.'

'Well, I think it's going, this solidarity,' Dorota muttered sadly, casting a glance at her ancestors on the wall. 'I don't know what the younger generation lives for, really. I don't know what binds us together now.'

'The weather?' I suggested.

She laughed. 'Yes, possibly that's it. Possibly just the weather.'

Despite Dora's doubts the image she herself presented was of robustness – she spoke of books she had read and was reading, a talk she had wanted to attend by Adam Michnik, key dissident of the Solidarity years, of classical concerts, theatre, Krakow's role as Poland's cultural capital. Her life seemed to brim with a sturdy independence, a rootedness in the things that sustain. Perhaps it was the solidity of these things, and their continuing appeal for her, that gave her a safe territory to fight back from, or that allowed her to be hospitable, giving me no sense I was imposing on her or that we barely knew each other. Again and again she surprised me, refusing to play the sentimental or saintly role. She loved her grandchildren, she said, but was exhausted by them, she was always quite happy to be left alone again when they went. And she was drained by her daughter's demands on her, which were neverending.

'She does not stop asking me for things,' she said, sounding suddenly agitated. 'Pushing, pushing all the time. "I need air-conditioning." "I need a new fridge-freezer." "I need a new car-stereo." And as soon as she has one thing she wants another.'

'I suppose she sees her friends have it.'

'Yes, I suppose so. And everyone they have, you must have too.' She gave a little sigh of resignation. 'But I don't know what they want, really. When I was young, we wanted the end of communism. Everybody wanted it. It was simple. But I mean, we had nothing.' She over-enunciated the word. '*Nothing*'. None of these things. If you wanted something, you waited and waited for it. And when you got it, you appreciated it.'

It was the old story: my parents had told me the same about their childhood. And as with them, I felt the same envy. I was envious of her too for the Krakow she must have known before tourism smartened and standardised it. Had it changed in the same way?

‘It has. I remember when I was younger there were, what, four cafes you could go to. Four. You always knew someone there when you went in. Now, I don’t know how you choose a café to go to, there are so many. How do you choose which one is good, and which isn’t?’

I asked her whether she felt that her own generation, deprived of so many things, were capable of emotions that her daughter’s, given them in abundance, was not.

‘I think so, yes. We supported each other. We had time for each other.’ She inhaled deeply, as though to catch her own breath in the surge. ‘Now everyone is racing, racing all the time.’

What Dorota told me about the younger generation was echoed several times. That evening I spoke to the receptionist at my hostel, a friendly, earnest girl called Magda, who described the same country as Dorota, one from which solidarity – the regular kind – was disappearing. No time for friends or family, and, after that era of achingly empty shelves, the irony of shops teeming with new seductions but no money to buy them.

‘We have everything we need but we don’t see it,’ she said sadly. ‘We’re conscious only of what we don’t have, and when we get something, it’s forgotten in a couple of weeks. And we think too that money can buy us everything we need.’

It’s easy to forget, I reflected, that consumerism – which to us simply means ‘life’ – to them still has the sound of an ideology, a philosophy they are still trying out and which, in stark contrast with what was lived before, does not seem inevitable.

‘I am afraid of the younger generation,’ Magda continued softly. ‘People of my age [she was 29] dreamed of having a family. But the younger people I know seem to dream only of things they can buy. Maybe in time they will change, and find it isn’t making them happy, and they will go back to something else. But right now their parents aren’t home enough to teach them what is important, and they are really material, and it is all ‘

I found myself sceptical of this. Was there a priggish streak to Magda, which might make these ex-cathedra generalisations consoling to her sense of superiority? Telling me about the social work she was studying for, she told me that one of her intentions was to tell people – alcoholics, drifters, ‘asocials’ – that ‘What you are doing is *wrong*,’ making me flinch a little at such self-righteousness. But she was only echoing Dorota: atomisation, breakdown, greed. It is an irony of history that the Solidarity movement, one might suggest, has been indirectly responsible for the fragmentation and self-centredness that many, all over Eastern Europe, lament. Magda herself spoke of a ‘nostalgia, nostalgia for more time, more time for important people. Now we are really stressed and working too much. Working at university, and then working at

work. I don't have time for nothing. Two hours for my boyfriend, two hours for my best friend. But no time for reflection. None at all.'

In the same hostel I was to meet a man with too much time on his hands, truly one of the losers of Poland's independence. Rafa had sidled in my hostel room like a ghost, and within minutes started to rebel, leaving a fug of smoke in the non-smoking bathroom, disconcerting me with his silent, blank nod hello and his look of morbid blankness. He lay on his bed for half an hour, picking his fingernails, tweaking the bedsprings over him, until I felt I had to speak just to break the silence. So we made awkward conversation in a broken Russian, and he told me some of the details of his life.

Rafa was 38 but looked much older; he could easily have been in his fifties. Part of it was doubtless a hard life, part of it was boxing: he had the boxer's broken nose, the floating irises, the barely withheld, smouldering aggression. He worked as an electrician in Gdansk, he said, and this was his weekend treat, loading up a bag with lager cans, and escaping to sit in front of a hostel television alone. 'Krakow is number one,' he said belligerently. 'Do you understand? Number one!' He owned it defiantly, seemed to cling to its beauty as though it might somehow touch his own life, his own battered image. About Poland itself he was bleak: no future, he said, Kaczynski was a wanker (he made the universal sign), they should have Walesa back again. Walesa was 'number one' too, a Gdansk boy made good and a down-to-earth man (and another electrician, I remembered later) who spoke Rafa's language. Rafa himself was nationalistic, paranoiacally proud of his roots as the failed can be, suddenly raising his voice when I called Lvov by its Ukrainian name 'Lviv'.

'It's Lwow!' he shouted. 'Not Lviv! Lwow! This was a Polish city. And it will be Polish again within ten years. Ten!' He brandished his fingers and thumbs aggressively. 'You wait and see!'

Rafa was wrong of course, Lviv, Lwow, call it what you will, would remain Ukrainian. What he was really voicing, I thought, was his own sense of despair, of having in some way been failed by the people he looked to. There was a pathetic pride about him, a visibly swelling of the chest, when I said I wanted to interview him. Why not? he said. He knew all about Poland, he could tell me some good Gdansk stories, he remembered Solidarity well, had lived through the period, seen the demonstrations with his own eyes. Oh yes, and his father had been killed in a Solidarity riot when he was a child.

The last fact I doubted, not because it was impossible but because it was too neat, too much of a coincidence, and I was sure Rafa was warming to his theme. But of his feelings of deprivation – he lived with his mother, he said, in a tiny flat, and had nothing – there could be no doubt. When later, having drunk with Rafa, I became maudlin and said: 'I don't know why they say life is short. To me it seems long,' he nodded vigorously, and his eyes filled with tears.

It was a mistake to start drinking with Rafa. Each time I left him, I would return to find another beer can crunched up on the table. He accepted my Zubrowka hesitantly, as though knowing what demons it would wake up, and later shattered the bottle on

the floor. As the evening went on he became unruly, aggressive. A smug young Polish couple, holding hands on the sofa, stared at him with undisguised disgust. He smoked, shouted, cracked open more beers, feasting on a big tub of yogurt he had bought at a local shop, spooning it hungrily into his mouth, cutlery marooned in his vast fists. The receptionist's pleas that he be quieter provoked only more bellows: 'Why should Rafa be quiet? Why?!! I've paid my money to be here! I've paid!'

But I was to witness Rafa's crowning moment later when at 2 a.m. he suddenly broke his snores to sit bolt upright, nip quickly to the corner of the dormitory and, without ceremony, send a noisily spattering jet of piss all over the walls, all over the linoleum, all over the smug young couple's trainers and charging mobilephones. '*Curva!*' shouted the young man, jumping out of bed, and he and Rafa squared up to each other, Rafa snapping at once, frighteningly, into the boxer's pose, a terrible violent power in him. But he relented, ordered out by the receptionist with her bucket and mop, stuffing his clothes violently into his bag. If I were a Polish Repin, I thought, this is how I would paint Rafa. Clumsily cramming his knapsack, having to leave at once, rejected: 'The Misfit'.

The next morning I saw Rafa moving like a ghost through the square. He looked like a deathhead, like the closest thing a human could be to skeleton while retaining skin. He barely returned my greeting as he approached, was agitated and full of hurt dignity. 'They locked me in last night,' he said. 'Into a downstairs room. You believe that? And this morning... they lied to me, told me I had pissed in the dormitory upstairs. I told the receptionist, it's not possible! It's lies. Just bloody lies.'

I didn't say anything. Rafa registered it. 'I'm going to look for another hostel,' he muttered, with a threadbare bravado. 'Somewhere with more normal people, with professionals working there. Somewhere they treat their customers with a little more respect.'

I watched him walk away, to another day of himself. And after that another. And after that another. And after that... It did not bear thinking about.

I only hoped, for his sake, he was as crazy as he seemed.

In Szczecin, Pomerania, I met Wojciech, who liked his drink as much as Rafa, but could hold it better.

Szczecin was very different from what I'd expected. Partly it was to do with its German name Stettin which, with its overtones of 'stepped on' and 'tin', sounded like a great metallic Soviet boot coming down on the landscape. Szczecin, once Germany's third-biggest seaport, had as Stettin been the base for the German Infantry invasion of Poland, and its 135 camps had filled with up Polish slave-workers. Allied bombing had destroyed more than half of the city, especially the historic centre, making, in a local joke, the reconstructed Old Town the 'New Town', the new town the old. When the Soviets took the city in April 1945, it was a battered ghost-town, almost abandoned.

Szczecin was not the brutalist hellhole I expected: perhaps nowhere by the sea can really feel that brutalised, and away from the cranes and drifting smoke of the docks, there were ivy covered and ornate official buildings, art-deco housing blocks spilling geraniums from their balconies, naval cadets chatting breezily into mobile phones on the steps of the academy. In the seafront theatre I was impressed by the range of productions: experimental mime, expressionist works in which women in slips, suspender-belts and hard-hats gave victory signs, a stage adaptation of an Almodovar film. Billstickers of a local magazine showed Putin with a forelock of hair scrawled onto his forehead and a Hitler moustache, reminding you of the ancient antipathy between these neighbours. In the new town – the Old Town – I was reminded more than once of Pest: fin-de-siecle, almost Parisian streets, roaring trams, pleasantly discoloured buildings, and those afternoon bars empty and tended by darkly attractive women in their thirties, experienced and isolated, living their lives, ruminatively, rootedly, unambitiously, in an atmosphere of slowness.

The reconstructed Old Town, meanwhile, was cobbled, almost Swiss in its feeling of cleanness and order, and with Bach arpeggios wandering from the windows of music schools. Wojciech's pizzeria was in the main square, and Wojciech the only person kind enough to open up for me at 12 p.m. He came to the door bleary-eyed, coughing, porcine, a chubby young man like chubby young men the world over. I had the impression he had just woken up in a back room. While I looked at the menu he pulled himself a beer, downing half of it at once as though it were milk, and seemed to recover from whatever morning sickness he was suffering from.

We got talking across one of the pizzeria's coffee tables, his beer and my coffee sitting in front of us. The pizzeria was his, he said: his construction business had dried up ('No work at all') and now the bar, bought as a hobby, was his main line of work. 'It's useful to own your own café,' he added drily. 'Nobody can bar you from it.'

He lit up a Marlboro and started his hacking again. Wojciech was in his thirties I guessed (he was 28) and his whole demeanour was lethargic. Telling me about the city's hopeless work-situation, he would occasionally wave a lazy arm, as if to dismiss any dumb optimism. This was the nearest he got to activity, beyond picking up his pint glass. His air of non-combativeness made him likeable, unthreatening, though when I said I liked Szczecin, he smirked in disbelief. 'Oh well,' he said. 'I suppose you're just visiting.'

Nobody in Poland, Wojciech said, seemed happy. 'Why can't we be more like the Czechs? I've been there, they're always smiling. Nobody here ever smiles. Everyone's unhappy.' Perhaps it was the Czechs' widespread atheism, I joked. He gave the ghost of a smile. 'Perhaps...'

He himself was resolutely agnostic, and had nothing but contempt for the conservatism of the now deceased Kaczynski, 'the little fat man' as he called him, who had 'many complexes.' Kaczynski might rant against Germany, but Wojciech and the rest of Szczecin were on the front line here, and had to deal with the consequences. If Germans stopped feeling at home in their Stettin, it would be Wojciech's and other businesses that would pay. 'You shouldn't say these things about your neighbours,' he said. 'It's not how a President should be.'

Again and again in Poland I was to find this need for pride in their representatives, a clear sense of what a figurehead should be like: well-educated, cultured, in control of themselves. It was what had done for Walesa in his time. 'Oh, the electrician?' Wojciech said. 'Hopeless. He couldn't even speak Polish, let alone English. And you know what he did when he met your Queen?'

I was to hear this story repeatedly too, of how Walesa, taken on a guided tour of Windsor Castle, had kept HRH entertained by pointing out improvements that could be made in the wiring there. My protest that she had probably loved him for it met with deaf ears and a shaken head: such things were a matter for Polish shame.

There seemed no optimism in Wojciech: enthusiasm had leaked away. He could understand why so many Poles had left for Britain, why they wanted to get out of Poland, never mind Szczecin. 'How much do you think professionals are paid here?' he demanded.

'Something pathetic.'

'500 Euros a month.' He gave a tiny gesture of helplessness with one of his pudgy hands. 'Doctors, engineers, architects. How can you live on that? How can you buy a house? It's a quarter of a million just to buy one in this city. How can you start a family? It's astupid situation...'

All those rhetorical questions, the ones that free-market capitalism has no answers for. Yet Wojciech didn't sound angry: his inertia seemed too pronounced for such energetic responses. He sat speaking to me with his head inclined cow-like, ghosts of emotions, irritation, irony, scepticism, humour, half-lighting up his tranquillised eyes. Occasionally he would saw the air with his chubby palm, or crack his knuckles.

I asked him whether he himself thought of starting a family. He laughed. 'God, not now. No, not me. I want to be free. I want to travel. I'd go mad, stuck in Szczecin. I had a girlfriend for six years. It could have happened. We spoke about it.' But they had broken up last year.

'Ah, it's okay,' he replied to my condolences. 'When I think I could be married now...In my twenties.' He gave a shudder. 'Every day a new problem. Their family, your family. Different dreams. Arguments. She likes one thing, you like another. You're home too late. You're drinking too much. You're too untidy. You want to travel. She doesn't. Children...'

Wojciech, I sensed, just wanted to be left alone.

'But isn't that how it should be?' I said. 'I like the idea of a new problem every day. It might be fun.'

He gave a dry smile at me, the same one he had given when I said that Szczecin seemed like a nice place. Wojciech seemed, if nothing else, a realist.

For some reason I imagined Wojciech's girlfriend being attractive – he had fatboy charisma, and I got the feeling of someone compellingly indifferent to women, fixated

far more on other pleasures: drink, food, holidays. When a pretty waitress turned up and swiftly, without being asked, set down a fresh beer by Wojciech's elbow (she was to keep an eye on his beerglass, and have a new one waiting each time the old one was finished) there was no flirtation or sexual interplay between them. Wojciech thanked her but barely looked at her. I sensed somebody refreshingly free of lechery, and envied him. Perhaps it was this that allowed him to drink so single-mindedly, without a care for his looks or waistline. We talked about food.

'Everything except Italian,' he said. 'Hungarian. Chinese. But Italian is so dull.'

'But isn't this an Italian restaurant?' I said, flicking my eyes at the pizza and pasta dishes on the menu.

'It sells,' he muttered. 'Everyone likes it but me. I can eat at other places. Czech food, now – have you tried that? Pork, dumplings, duck. Good sausages. And the beer. You have to try the beer. Not Pilsner Urquell. Get Radogast. I think that is the best beer in the world.'

I trusted him as a connoisseur. And hearing him speak of Czech food, I could imagine Wojciech transported to a Prague or Brno beerhall, reaching out for his mug of lager, eyes almost Chinese with the fleshiness around them, shovelling duck breast and sauerkraut into his mouth. I said to him: 'Do you know the *Good Soldier Schweik*?'

For the first time, he looked animated. 'Oh, I *love* this book,' he said, sitting up slightly. 'I used to read it at school under the desk. I'd get caught when I started laughing. It's probably my favourite book in the world. You know it?'

I said I hadn't read it, but had brought it with me.

'You're going to love it,' he said. 'Really. Read it in Czech Republic, while you're there. Promise me you'll do that.'

Something had finally stirred Wojciech, and it was infectious. It is always one of the pleasures of Eastern Europe: meeting an apparent slacker and then finding they love some great work of literature. And now, activated, the enthusiasms did not pour but at least trickle out of him: for sailing, for travel, for meeting new people. He wanted to see London, Dublin, Berlin, he said. 'But why have you come to Szczecin? There is nothing to do here, nothing at all. All the young people want to get out, to Krakow, Wroclaw. Places with a bit of culture, a bit of nightlife. We're forgotten by the Polish government here – as far as they're concerned we're practically in Germany.' He stared down at his emptying beerglass, glumly. 'This is a nowhere place,' he said.

From Szczecin I caught a train up the Baltic Coast, to Gdansk. This was another city that had to be seen, the birthplace of Solidarity, the geographical origin, arguably, of the Eastern Bloc's final break-up and communism's end.

Gdansk was so very different from what I'd expected: I'd envisaged a feeling of prosperity, a lacquered and reassuring quality far more German, I realised, than

Polish. This was perhaps fair enough: Gdansk had previously been Danzig, scene of Grass's *Tin Drum*, a Free City, without nationality. Yet since then it had become ruthlessly Polonised, and its atmosphere seemed to bear out Wojciech's pessimism. The entire city, with its gates and towers, seemed like a castle, somehow defensive and impenetrable. Choral music emerged from the vast brick cathedral, but when I tried the door it wouldn't open. The flat fronts of reconstructed houses seemed too perfect, as though cut out of plywood, and their colours – pale green, rosy pink, lemon – were faded, like dying flowers seen in a winter light.

I was to meet no one in Gdansk: my contacts there came to nothing. Practically the only human encounter was with Stefan, the 60 year-old owner of the boat-hostel where I was staying. Cordial when touting for customers, his manner altered abruptly as soon as the zlotys changed hands. From that moment onwards a kind of power-game started, lasting the weekend. I would smile, and Stefan would stare back stony-faced. I would say something, and Stefan would leave a statutory five seconds before looking up or acknowledging it. His entire drive seemed to seduce you into handing over your money, and then making you feel as unwelcome as possible. I stared at the list of regulations in my cabin room – 'The Captain requests....', 'The Captain expects....', 'The Captain expressly prohibits....', 'A fine is payable to the Captain...' It wasn't until later that I realised how literally he took his title. On Saturday evenings (and perhaps the rest of the week too) he would dress in full naval kit and stand on the deck of his creaking little boat, an admiral in his own mind, myself and other guests the whingeing, bothersome crew. As he preened himself on the bridge of his destroyer I looked for some trace of irony in his eyes, some sense of the absurd or humorous. It wasn't there.

The next morning I packed up my rucksack and headed into town. Gdansk meant one thing to me. While Krakow had been the intellectual wing of Solidarity, Gdansk meant the workers, and the workers meant the shipyard, and the shipyard meant Walesa. Time Magazine's Man of the Year, Nobel Prize winner, fervent Catholic: it is hard to remember quite how iconic his moustached face was in the 80s, how much, with his humour and pluck and steely devoutness, he was Poland's face to the world. For a few years, through his imprisonments, his rallying, his meetings with Thatcher, Reagan, the Pope, he had been a phenomenon, the complications of his image at home ironed out by distance. Though I heard numerous stories of his ineptitude as President, the peasant Premiere embarrassing the Poles in their new found Democracy just as he had galvanised them under communism, I still found him inspirational.

Thus it was I made for the Gdansk Museum of Solidarity, an underground set of rooms in the shadow of the nearby shipyard. Here displays showed a near-empty 1980s shop, with its mannequin of a grim-faced middle-aged woman emerging, a miraculous haul of loo-paper knotted, roll upon roll, like a grimly utilitarian Tahitian garland, around her bent neck. There were lifesize cut-outs of Father Popielski, the rousing populist Polish priest murdered by the secret police, and a mock-of a typical covert Solidarity cell-room, with its overflowing ashtrays and hand-turned copying-machines to grind out the latest underground bulletin. But most nostalgic of all were the old black-and-white film reels – grainy and touchingly amateurish, of Solidarity meetings, speeches, the repressions of martial law. Rattling tanks and pouncing helicopters mix in montage with students and solidarity supporters playing folksongs, commemorating the horrors of Martial Law, the bloody 1970 demonstrations, and the

folk heroes that emerged from them. Romantic and in their way kitsch, these images of power and innocence nonetheless sum up the divisions of the time and how they seemed, even in Britain, even in childhood. There were the scenes one would expect – Walesa sitting buoyant on the shoulders of supporters, man of the political match, Walesa speaking to crowds, negotiating at the round table, signing landmark agreements with that comically oversized pen. Yet only one image seemed to encapsulate his appeal. As, in one jittery handheld clip, he takes his place at the negotiating table, his chair gives out a little, and Walesa, ever alive to humour, mimics it with a comical clunk of the head and a repressed grin. You can see, in that moment of humour, exactly how he won people over.

In the afternoon I visited the shipyard, on a guided tour. Here everything had happened: the bloody disputes of 1970, the August strikes exactly 10 years afterwards, Walesa's sacking and rousing return, climbing over the wall to rally the workers. It is so difficult not to sentimentalise these events, however naïve and open to revisionism the assumptions of shining heroism may be, how much muddier, messier, more complex reality is set beside the myth. Something remarkable, perhaps miraculous, had happened here, within living memory, with characters who still lived and walked about, remaining lifesize and visibly flawed. Yet the Gdansk shipyard itself had been a victim of Walesa's success; production has shrunk massively; unemployment has made people arguably as unhappy, powerless and trapped as communism. The Lenin shipyard has become a ghost-town, one of the most depressing places on earth, with its boarded up workers' hotels, its piles of decayed shavings, its long-defunct machines looking like seized up Pterodactyls and its solitary hulking ship, decades old, unfinished, and rusted almost beyond belief, towering morbidly over the quay. As the wind rips over it from that pitiless Baltic sky, bending the shrubs growing through the broken windows, the shipyard seems grotesque, its abandonment abrupt and unresolved, an eerily industrial Pompeii.

Earlier, in Krakow, I had chatted to that receptionist. Did she or her friends, even fleetingly, blame Walesa and his supporters for where Poland was now, and for the freedom that many – even the apparently successful – seem too weak to moderate or manage in?

'No,' she said firmly. 'We are responsible, we can choose, I can choose life in dormitory if I want, I can choose to live like that and save my money. But I want to have what other people have. I want a normal apartment, normal living. So I must do two jobs, I must save.' Yes, she said, Walesa had taken them to independence. But they themselves were responsible for what had happened since.

Perhaps the last word, though, should go to Taciek, who I met on a Gdansk Old Town street on a Sunday morning, wearing a tatty red coat and carrying a confusion of dirty bags. He stopped me for money, and surprised me by speaking passable English. In the couple of minutes or so that we spoke, putting down his bags he gave me a snapshot of his life in modern Poland. Estranged from his two wives, one daughter an economic migrant to Austria, the other not wanting to speak to him. Things had got very difficult, he said in explanation, since he lost his job as shipyard accountant. He had lost one thing after another. I asked him if he wanted the old days back again, if he preferred communism, with all its faults, to this.

‘Yes, I do. Yes, I do,’ he said, vehemently. ‘Many old people want them back. I lost my job, my family, I lost everything.’ His face was as scored by experience as an old school desktop. I had assumed he was in his seventies; he told me he had just turned 54.

All through our conversation, his eyes looked on the verge of crying. He seemed hounded, exhausted, and it was only 11 o’clock.

‘The winter is coming,’ he said, picking up his bags again. ‘And I don’t know at all where I’m going to go.’

GERMANY

From Poland I went on to Germany, for the 20th anniversary. On the way to Berlin I stopped off in Lubeck, the Baltic town which had lain so close to the Iron Curtain. Picturesque when viewed from the air, it was drab on the ground, as reliable and solid as the pork and dumplings served for lunch. Yet it had produced three Nobel Prize Winners – Willi Brandt, Gunther Grass and Thomas Mann – and as such this tiny city was a kind of cultural and political superpower.

The Nobels' museums were a mixed bag: The first I visited was the house of Gunter Grass, a seminal German for me – eccentric, dry, pipe-smoking, moustached, a living myth and a literary titan, halfway to God. There was about him a fierce, unapproachable sobriety – when you saw photos of him glaring over that wonderful, Stalinesque moustache, and his greasy side-parting, you felt an awed certainty that had he put his energy into politics rather than art, many millions would have suffered. But instead he had created an entire world, both earnest and fanciful, with his rats and dogs and talking flounders, and children who by sheer heel-digging will had resisted the call to adulthood, stunting themselves into cosmic, drum-beating, howling dwarves. His books seemed to possess both the allure of the playful and the dauntingly, indigestibly dense: in 39 years of life I had never met anybody who had finished the *Tin Drum* or any of the others. Everybody talked about its significance: it was one of those books you wanted to wrestle with and master – it had the rite-of-passage appeal of war, you would be a man after reading it, you wanted to dominate the bitch, but like most readers I had found it impossible to carry on after 100 pages. Grass was one of those characters you knew meant something, even if you couldn't force yourself to find out what. I was reminded of a Russian friend's comment on a Soviet author: 'I admire Platonov *enormously* as a writer. I just can't read him

The museum itself though was something else. Admittedly, Grass's workrooms, with manuscripts, prints, guillotines, shelves full of continental style paperbacks, were atmospheric and inspiring enough: work-rooms of artists are always inspiring, whether they are studies or studios, they are the nerve-centres of empires. But elsewhere the inspiration ran dry. *The Tin Drum* was enjoying a 50th anniversary, and a literal-minded curator had had a field day with the exhibits. There were stills from the film, boxes with a drum logo, red drums with a crown motif, different screen prints of Oscar the drum-playing dwarf, an installation of a hospital bed with a drum on it, walls of tin drums, piles of Grass's novel lying about here and there. Etcetera, etcetera.. Meanwhile a TV ran a loop of Grass being interviewed: grey moustached now, a touch liverish, even a touch old womanish, but a gleam of humour swimming up at times in his eyes: presumably at the thought of idiots parting with 7€ just for this.

So much for Gunter Grass then. One did at least have the sense of a magnificently large ego, and such tremendousness, even if strictly invisible, is still worth a few euros to witness. It made an interesting, light entrée to the Brandt museum, which I

visited next: solemn, reverent and predictable – though with that indelible image of his penitent and apparently spontaneous genuflection at the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising Memorial. Here, in the museum, you can watch the *kniefall* on a loop, and see Brandt, poker-faced, somehow inaccessible, falling slowly to his knees as though it has only just occurred to him, as though he is the slave of something bigger than himself. Thus, only 25 years after Hitler's suicide, after the Nuremberg executions and the liberation of Dachau, the world was given some definably renewing image, either cheesily political or arrestingly profound or, more probably, a mixture of the two. This, after all, is Brandt's great attraction – he cannot be categorised, simplified, or turned into kitsch. Lecherous, boozy, brave, idealistic, surging, defeatist, callous, humane – take him for all in all. He seems, like the best of politicians, like Kennedy, to make life seem nobler, more spacious, to make you see the stars and – most difficult of all – to take you to these extremes with peace, rationalism, common decency, and an unraised voice.

From the Brandt Museum I went to the Thomas Mann *Buddenbrook*' House, and marvelled, before entering, at the bookshop in his honour. How was it possible that a man who had written a handful of deeply daunting novels could generate such an industry of criticism, film adaptations and biographies? Usually you would have had to kill several million people or married Peter Andre to generate such overwhelming hunger among readers. Yes, this was the house in *Buddenbrooks* – solid, classical, provincial, though it quickly became clear what the museum was really about. As I walked round and looked at the sepia photos and their little chunks of accompanying text, I saw the classic arc of the Great Writer's Life laid out: the pirhouetting youthful successes, the battles with the political orthodoxies of his time, the uprootings, the exotic flower replanted in unfamiliar surroundings, the nest of prodigious children, all with their quirky, faintly ennobling Christian names. And so on.

As I looked, Mann's life seemed to take on an almost Wagnerian shape for me: ignition, flight, return, struggle, the last flaring up of the candle flame, an epic death and afterlife. He was clearly one of those people to whom the good things of life simply accrue. His private income leaves him free to 'develop a decided consciousness for pure artistry, which does not need to answer to the whims of society.' He decides to marry, and chooses as his mate 'one of the most sought after women in Munich', remarking that 'she is, after all, beautiful, intelligent, and comes from a good family. In short, she is a "princess".'

It is difficult to like Thomas Mann. He smiles rarely, and seems halfway to the divine, one of these creatures the gods favour like a semi-sibling. His life has a shape, a clear arc, a plenitude that is at the same predictable and enviable. Here are his words on his life, in early middle age:

'I am surrounded by riches. Nothing can be compared to my happiness. I am married, I have an incredibly beautiful young wife, a princess of a woman, as well as two blooming children on whom I place the highest hopes. I am the lord of a large flat in a choice location with electric light and all the comforts of the modern times. My home is well supplied. I have three excellent maids and a Scottish Shepherd, I eat sugar rolls with my morning tea and wear patent leather boots exclusively.'

Most of us making such a statement – if we could at all - would touch wood, look behind us, expect imminent disaster. Not Mann, though: he knows that such things are his by right, that the mere expectation of their continuance is self-fulfilling.

Meanwhile there is Heinrich Mann, Thomas's older brother and eternal shadow, as luckless as Thomas was blessed: afflicted by ill health, accursed marriages with suicidal wives, almost predestined underachievement, no fixed abode till his forties, and endlessly, crushingly dependent on financial help from his younger sibling. Even photographed together as children, one sees the planetary differences between them establishing themselves: Thomas impish, enchanting, already with an infant awareness of his own centrality in life, his neededness. Heinrich meanwhile is blunt-faced, overnosed, slightly stunned and clumsy-looking. In later photos, as he reaches his mid-twenties and the pfennig begins to drop with a sickening thud, he looks uncomfortable, sad, almost apologetic to be taking up the photographer's time and the world's attention.

If Thomas Mann is *them*, the Olympians, the blessed, the human bullseyes, Heinrich, for better or worse, is *us*: ugly, prosaic, all too believable, and achieving only the most sporadic flight. And of course, to coin a cliché, you could not have one without the other.

From Lubeck, I went to Berlin, for the twentieth anniversary of November 9th 1989 when the wall fell and the two Germanies, so opposite, so linked, were joined once again.

Berlin was its usual rich and disconcerting self. This was my third visit to the city – the first trip, 2 years before, had been an obsessive gallop of its historical and political museums, while on the second I'd done the Berlin Wall Cycle Route, a perfect 100 mile mixture of urban decay, river, forest, lake, politics, and exercise. This time I hoped to have a more leisurely look at the city, leading up to those 20th anniversary celebrations a week or so later. It seemed fitting that I should stay in 'Ostel', a GDR-themed youth hostel kitted out in the communist style and doing a brisk trade in *Ostalgie*, the growing nostalgia (as accurate memory fades) for all things East. Yet even Ostel, playful as it was, had caused controversy: when the owner had first floated his gimmicky idea, there were outcries from a number of East Germans about its existence, one leading cleric ranting on national radio that it was part of a creeping attempt to resurrect the GDR. Though it's difficult to take such things seriously, the cleric's paranoia spoke volumes: fear of the past's return has, in 20 years, not gone away.

Politics is never absent in Berlin: it crouches on nearly every street corner. What has the city not seen or brought about? It seems to swing from one extreme to another: Weimar Decadence to Nazi repression, a coerced and terrified unanimity to partition, division, Checkpoint Charlie, the Wall. It is strange to be on the site of these things, a kind of dark historical feast. That Berlin can now celebrate happier things – the memory of that joyful night in November 1989, when the first few East Germans

trickled their way through the wall into Bornholmer Strasse, opening the way for the Trabi-transported flood that followed, still seems a kind of miracle. For in the 20th century, no European city has been more tragic, or more of a crucible of Western neurosis.

I thought back to my first trip, shunting myself from Nazi museum to Stasi site, feverishly packing them all into four days, until I felt I'd had enough to digest and brood on for as many months: Plotzensee, and its evil outhouse with the hooks the July conspirators were hanged in nooses made from piano wire, the place where the guillotine had cut living heads from living bodies within living memory. The Stasi prison, where the dark, deserted passages, now no longer buzzing with that unassailable dark power, still cast an awful sadness, and where the prisoners' sloppy and makeshift Monopoly board, now preserved in a glass case, spoke of endless boredom, of hours, days, years to kill in the cold. Or the Stasi headquarters, left just as they were, pot plants still growing on the plywood desks alongside typewriters whose job it had been to type out those life-destroying directives in ugly prose, and where Stasi Chief Mielke's diagram to his secretaries, instructing them exactly how the eggs were to be arranged on his plate and what o'clock the orange juice must stand on the tray, seemed to say it all about the unquestioning infantilism of the powerful: Mielke who had a quarter of a million spies in East German homes and workplaces, and later, when the Wall fell, bleated to a jeering crowd, 'But I love all people.'

This time, I'd decided, was to be a more leisurely trip: the Berlin that remained when the duties had been removed. I would wander through the Tiergarten, drink the best hot chocolate in the world at Café Einstein, and visit a few galleries. Yet the Landwehr Canal which bisects the city park had been the dumping ground, I remembered, for KPD leader Rosa Luxemburg's body, and to expect art and politics to be far apart either, anywhere in Berlin, is escapism. When I made it to those galleries many of the exhibits were directly about the fall of the Wall and the change that followed, its specious and unnatural rapidity. Paintings and photos which show the vertiginous gulf between the Berlin of 25 years ago and that now – newly painted, swept, deodorised, slickened – do so, you sense, not out of triumphant pride, more disorientation, a troubled and Jeremiah-like doubt, the desire to warn of the self-deceptions and dangers of such rapid reinvention.

Again and again one sees it: in the old photos of Potsdamer Platz's desolating wasteland, now transformed – at dislocating, heedless speed – into the city's Times Square, or exhibits on the battle for street names, 'the erasing of collective memory' as one artist put it, as Otto Grotewohl Strasse, Ernst Thälmann Str, and Lenin-Platz, good Communist names all, are transformed to the blandly humanist and apolitical, severing the link with the East German past, repressing a necessary phase in its development. The works of modern Berlin artists seem a battle-cry against such repressions, the self-deceiving disownership of past madnesses. For Berlin at times seems all pendulum swings, one extreme being met, inevitably in time, by another. What else can one conclude of the city which can both blame itself for the inception of the Final Solution, and take credit for perhaps the finest Jewish museum in all of Europe?

It was at the Berlinische Museum that I saw Reynold Reynolds's *Stadtplan*, a documentary portrait of the city. It was in black and white, naturally: Berlin becomes

more, not less itself, in monochrome, the city's ghosts and murky secrets seeming to hover more authentically in those tents of grey light, just as they do in the mist on winter days. Here, in Reynolds's film, is a Berlin of ruins, corrosion, frantic reconstruction in which everything - Tempelhof, the clouds of dislodged foundation dust and those that hover over the city, Satellite dishes and red stars, the TV tower and church spires, Hitler and Stalin, graffiti and Communist slogan - seems to mirror or develop something else. This is Berlin, the 'formidable palimpsest where one historical layer always covers another'. A merry-go-round flings out its chairs on chains, characters swinging by endlessly: drinking, reading magazines, ordering afternoon vodkas, smoking, arguing without animation, without much point except to fill the gaping time. Skies, across which shrieking birds career in great angry stormclouds without a hint of joie de vivre, resemble long unwashed linen, a dirty white neck. It is a city like a vast prison-camp or a radar-station. Only the statues have a kind of eternal, serene, angelic life, the one still and contemplative thing in the city.

Speaking about Berlin, glossy travel magazines are apt to describe it as 'edgy'. Here they are right - Berlin certainly is 'edgy' - but what does it mean? Is it the knowledge simply of a dangerous, depth-plumbing past which you know must still lie in the collective memory of the citizens, a dark unconscious just waiting to send up its broken images through all the Bohemian airiness of its present, reminding Berliners that reinvention, like all kinds of revolution, has its limits? Or is it something more overt, captured in the young punks and skinheads who still cluster round the TV Tower, as if its brutalism were a symbol for themselves? Or the Russian inhabitants of the city - Russians still seeming, rightly or wrongly, to symbolize the ragged trinity of emotion, alcohol, disorder - or the tram-rides into the East, where the clothes grow darker, the colours fade, and young people on a Saturday night cluster together speaking a mixture of Eastern languages, all squishes and dark gurgles, mixing up their hell's brew of grapefruit juice and sloshed Lidl vodka as the tram clanks down Frankfurter Allee and Berliner Strasse. A ride into East Berlin takes you into greyer, more functional territory, into ugly and huddled conurbations of Soviet construction, yet oddly enough it is where you can most imagine living, where you might find that middle-aged recipe for happiness of a partner, friends, responsibility, an occasional beer, the bar where you are recognised, tolerated, even liked. Though the efforts of property developers have blurred the dividing line between the two Berlins, ten minutes on a tram will still remind you that their karmas, styles and climates have been polarised, and have not yet recovered. Yet if West Berlin can still sometimes feel like a dream of how life might be, it is East Berlin that confronts you with reality, with the day-to-day prose of life, its nuts and bolts.

So much for the edges of the city. Perhaps one might think too of Berlin's ragged demographic edges, all the richer for being seemingly spontaneous. Near Ostel - that slightly tacky and Ostalgic recreation of Berlin's communist past - was a patch of former waste ground, now filled with food kiosks, little free-standing sheds. These weren't all the Turkish or Asian cubicles of the centre, but had other nationalities too: Georgian, Russian, Polish, Ukrainian, the cheap prices giving you a sense of optimism, of exotic choice. Going there for a breakfast of pelmeni with sour cream, spattered with minced up parsley, or crisp pierogi filled with steaming potato or minced meat, was a reason to get up in the morning, even if the sense of variety and colour applied only to the food. The brown and grey anoraks and dull black trousers

for sale, round which women hovered, were like the East Berlin buildings, seemingly built against those who would use them but also having a kind of austere appeal, a complete lack of concern with peacocking or adornment. These too were a kind of unconscious to the city, a reminder, underneath those pastel colours and the gracefulness of Mitte's new life, that a different, less rejuvenated life was still struggling drably but doggedly on beneath.

Yet Berlin, for some reason, is a happy city, and feels young: I have visited it in three separate seasons and found this unfailingly the case. Its energy is inescapable, and the more unforced for not being the mandatory hedonism of a Rome or Barcelona. Everything here seems to signify: you find yourself wondering, again and again, who people are. That crabby old man with his Gunther Grass moustache, clutching his daily copy of *Die Zeit*: can he really be as misanthropic as he looks? The black haired woman on the metro, knitting with needles clicking as though her neuroses are jittering through, what trauma is she sublimating? The elderly Curt Jurgens lookalike in military cap and trenchcoat, slablike hands cradling the top of his walking stick: which side of the Wall did he spend his life on? What was his war record, what memories does he contain, is he repressing, as he sits glaring on the U-Bahn train? It is a quality of the Berlin U-Bahn too to have a living silence, a silence in which you can perceive people thinking, as the angels in Wim Wenders' *Wings of Desire*, that sporadically beautiful, interminable homage to the city, could hear them jangling away, in need of comfort, in every passenger's head. Yet still the city retains its buoyancy, its drive, and whatever heaviness there is now is decorative, not structural.

Certainly Berlin's climate is against it, with its shrouded, clammy days where dawn seems to pass its baton to dusk with barely a heartbeat of day between them, when people press on without stopping, trams are grimly taciturn inside, when the grey mist seems to breathe all the ghosts of the past at you. Yet even here a lightheartedness surprises you, reminding you that you cannot plan for happiness, that it always exists in unanticipated pockets, its duty to elude you, suddenly bestow itself, surprise and withdraw. If it were otherwise, how else could Berlin's residents survive, in a city where crosses mark the place where escapees had their hopes curtailed in an awful slice of bullets, or where Hitler's bunker still lies under the Sony Centre resurgence of Potsdamer Platz?

It was Potsdamer Platz, Berlin's Times Square, where the Celebrations took place on November 9th. There was a feeling of anticipation too as the stage for visiting dignitaries went up, and the enormous painted dominoes stretched into the distance, set to topple for more than a km along the Wall's former route at the hour when, 20 years before, East Germans in their Trabis had started to pour through. For once I felt in the right place at the right time: a London friend, attending the 10th anniversary in the 1990s, had seen Gorbachev in the flesh, and I was excited. Walesa would be there, Gorbys, writers like Timothy Garton Ash. I pictured myself rubbing close to all of them, getting swept up in a street party, really feeling at least an echo of the jubilation from 20 years before.

But the celebrations were a wash-out, at least for me. It was freezing, and raining, and packed solid with people, so that I could see nothing of the stage at all, not even on a screen, nothing but the backs of Spanish tourists in front of me. And second by second more and more people were packing in, making it more impossible to leave. I

pictured hours staring at the North Face logo of the rucksack in front of me, water running solidly off the umbrella poised above it. In Bornholmer Strasse, where the first East Germans had pushed through the wall 20 years before, things were better. I found a street party there, with no more than a speech by a local dignitary, and a hamburger and disco-dance in the rain. There were passingly interesting encounters here, with a West German woman who told me – to my disappointment – that her first conversations with Ossis were not about politics or history but a comparison of food and housing prices, or with an East Berlin woman, Hana, about 30 years old, who told me that her chief memory of the night the wall came down was of her parents arguing in the room downstairs, and that her father had later snatched her West German travel allowance – Easterners were entitled to 100 German marks, as welcome money – to buy a ring for his mistress.

But still the rain pelted down, and in Potsdamer Platz, when I returned, things were even worse than before. Now even the path along the dominoes was blocked by a human flood, while the aquatic kind continued to pour down on all of us. Water was everywhere, seeping into my waterproof boots, soaking into my leather jacket and doubling its weight on my shoulders. There was nothing for it but to go to a bar, and I did, surrounded by uninterested English tourists, watching the domino-fall (one got caught and had to be pushed over) on a wall-mounted TV, feeling no nearer to history, no closer to Gorby and Lech and the spirit of Reagan's 'Tear Down this Wall' than if I'd been in East Sheen.

Happy anniversary, Berlin!

More bitter was the realisation the next day that, with the Churchill introduction-letter in my pocket, with a bit of foresight I could have probably got a front-row seat.

A better, less ephemeral celebration of Berlin's resurgence came with a Saturday trip to Mitte, a suddenly fashionable zone which lay for 28 years, tattered and dismal, up against the Wall. Nowhere is the rejuvenation more complete. Here in East Berlin is a kind of European Greenwich Village, a real neighbourhood, uplifting and optimistic. Broad, almost Parisian streets, fin-de-siecle apartment blocks in faded blues and greens, vegetation spilling from their balconies, trees meeting over each avenue in golden, rusting canopies, some of them with necklaces of white lights wrapped festively around them. It was Berlin's peculiar strength, I thought, to be autumnal without ever making you think of death. Everywhere there seemed to be delicious soft light and splashes of colour, Berlin girls having a dress-sense which English women lack: the knowledge of how to combine soberly elegant clothing with sudden, ecstatic interludes of deep green, kingfisher blue, purple, soft orange, a kind of feast with spaces for proper digestion.

In Kollewitz Platz I found myself in a Saturday market, which had no element of raffishness but was like an impromptu German Neal's Yard or Covent Garden. Silk scarves, lavender-posies, handmade baskets, flower stalls selling rosehip stems and mini fir-trees, urns dispensing camomile and blackberry tea, stands selling chopping boards, natural remedies, pestles and mortars, baby's booties, romper suits, expensive-looking toddler's t-shirts with the Berlin TV-tower knitted into it by hand,

showing two penguins smiling cheerily in the control room. On the back of a bicycle sat a child in a soft pink bobble hat, pushed along by her parents, chatting amiably to them as a cart drawn by palomino horses, advertising bio-foods, trundled by. And all the herbal remedies and handmade goods and organic food-stands seemed to combine into a concierto of expensive, nature-celebrating, life-prolonging, middle-class chic which urges you to bring new life into the world, so that when a guitar playing busker on the corner of Kollwitz Platz let a couple put their baby's mouth to his microphone, the baby's moans, coos and gurgles singing for five minutes or more the accompaniment to his strumming, it seemed the theme of the afternoon had been given its proper symbol.

Everything in life seems simple in Berlin, including the idea of parenthood. Getting from one place to another seems simple. Getting onto a tube seems simple. The idea of putting together a full life seems simple. The city seems open in a way other places don't – an irony, considering its division and encirclement for so long, and perhaps an inevitable pendulum swing from that. If there is melancholy here, it is enjoyable, not piercing. The city urges you, in a way other cities don't, to live, find a partner, have a child. 'Look how straightforward life is,' Mitte seems to say. 'Cycle everywhere. Enjoy the seasons. Buy beautiful handmade things. Eat organic foods. Read a good book. Find a place to be a regular for Sunday brunch. Try new things. Swim daily. How simple and uncluttered the world is. See how it supports you.'

The barbed wire, the peaked cap, the machine gun have gone. The Spy has come in from the Cold, and reinvented himself, in his dotage, as a New Age café-owner.

My last stop in Germany was in Dresden which, given its history, was a suitably sombre place. Its past and our guilt in it are hard to envisage, until a single passenger plane flies over, and you feel a sense of discomfort that speaks volumes. Yet its bombsites have now gone – the Frauenkirche, for so long a heap of beige rubble, has been rebuilt, and only the dingy street lighting (the worst I've seen outside Romania or Central Russia) gives you an inadvertent sense of Dresden's trauma. For so long the 'Venice of the North', there is something disconcerting about the place. A strange mixture of enjoyably brutalist muralled architecture (Soviet period, naturally) and an Old Town which, however well-rebuilt or recoated with soot and smoke, feels somehow sterile, its lumpy and ill-dressed inhabitants moving over it with a strange disconnection as though bussed in their thousands onto a film-set. Yet away from my factory of a hostel I was to meet nice people in Dresden. Here too there were fashionable areas with their tangerine coloured coffee bars and music and second-hand clothes shops, and the young people I spoke to loved their city fervently, despite - or perhaps because of - its wounded past.

It was here, in one of those cafes selling expensive cappuccino and pain au chocolat, I was to meet a young teaching student, Karoline, and her friend Heike, a slight 24 year old working in America with sex-offenders. Both of them seemed quietly hell-bent on discovering the variety of life. Katherine did it with travel and, perhaps more

importantly, travel plans: she wanted to visit Indian, Thailand, China. The photo of her on Facebook showed her dressed in a sari, glancing upwards beatifically, looking almost possessed by the cultures she inhabited in her mind. Heike meanwhile was exploring the complexity of her life with her lonely, determined walks through the mangled and tangled pathways of her patients' psyches. Both of them, of course, were children of the past two decades, quite impossible under the old regime. Katherine's wanderlust would have collided with the Iron Curtain in a trice. Heike would have been unable to choose her life's work, perhaps to choose at all. This is the main inter-generational difference – a genuine gap – and it gives a sometimes thwarted quality to older people you meet in Eastern Europe: some talent unencouraged, a potential unrealised, a selfhood fumbling for expression only in a cultivated love of certain books and films, other people's words and images.

I pointed this out to them: that their entire lives, the passions they had been allowed to indulge and see evolve and the events they provoked were a direct consequence of the Fall 20 years before. But of course they were the last people who needed it pointed out to them, and Karolina said swiftly, 'But isn't it the same with you? All your travels over here?'

Then she added, 'Of course, with you it's a strange route. Most people choose to travel in the other direction. Some ridiculously small amount of Wessis have bothered to visit the East.' Her nostrils gave a sudden flare of irritation. 'It just doesn't occur to them, to come here and work here, or study here. They don't come to Dresden to do their degree. It's always the other way round.'

Yet I was unsure they would be accepted if they did. Karoline had told me her impression of the typical West German: a materialistic businessman, shallow, unspiritual, protected from real feeling by cashmere and Mercedes, motivated by a 'time's money' ethos that she felt – whether sentimentally or otherwise – East Germany was still broadly exempt from. What would be her reaction to a 'Wessi' in her class?

'I don't know, to be honest,' said Caroline.

'We might look at him differently,' Heike screwed up her eyes, as if to scrutinise this imaginary newcomer.

'Maybe...' said Karoline, '...it's just the Wall in the Head.' And with this time-honoured expression she tapped the edge of her hand down the centre of her scalp.

Many Germans, they told me, both Wessis and Ossis, wanted the Wall back. 'The Wessis because they don't want us, they think it's the jungle here, and people from the East because they lost their positions.' Many of the latter, I heard from others, had repositioned themselves in conventional left-wing parties, to cling on, however desperately, to their standing. East and West German economies had reached some kind of parity, but this of course was as much a matter of the West's decline as the East's ascent. Good will towards the East, so powerful in those weeks after November 1989, had soured as West Germany had realised this reunion was going to cost them dear. And along with the stereotype of the self-satisfied, unspiritual Westerner was

that – just as reductive – of the Ossi: lazy, begrudging, inefficient, expecting a free ride, their men Neanderthal, their women frumpish. Many West Germans never seemed to get over their first impression of the East: of Western air suddenly soured by the fumes of 2-stroke Trabi exhaust fumes, and the sight – distasteful and even comical – of so much snow-washed denim. An ‘Us and them’ ethos had softened the trauma of reunification, but it had proved more rigid perhaps than bricks and barbed wire. Most poignant perhaps was one West German girl’s comment to me on shared hostility towards the Turkish immigrant population: ‘It’s like both East and West needed a “them”, so that we could feel like an “Us”.’

But both Karoline and Heike were heartily pleased that the barbed wire had gone.

‘You couldn’t choose your path in life,’ said Heike. ‘They just told you what to do. If you weren’t the child of a worker you couldn’t get to University. And maybe what they gave you suited you, maybe it didn’t.’

I tried to imagine myself as a factory-worker or pharmacist, for 50 weeks of the year (and the other 2 presumably socialising with the other workers in a specially designated resort). Noted down by the Stasi as ‘different, suspicious, with bourgeois individualist tendencies.’ Beer and Korn bottles flashed into my mind as the only possible exit from such a situation. From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs had been admirably idealistic, but also bureaucratically unthinkable: too time-consuming, impractical, requiring too much imagination and empathy from those who had needed a lack of both to rise to the top.

‘Okay,’ Heike went on. ‘Now you have a situation where a lot of the older people say they want those days back, that it really wasn’t that bad. That they had some kind of security until they died. That there were things about it that were better than now.’

‘But they were shooting people at the border,’ Karoline said simply. As far as she was concerned, all other arguments splintered against this one fact. Only those who did not want to leave could be happy. And if there was one thing that defined Caroline and her friend and other young East Germans I met, it was the hunger to travel. It had replaced literature as the shared escape of choice. Young Germans would not share their passion for Kafka or Christa Wolfe, rather for Lagos and the beaches at Goa. They lit up when speaking about the countries they wanted to visit. They had an appetite for new cultures that took me back in time: I myself, pushing 40 and alive to the attractions of the settled life, had lost it.

From Dresden I caught a train out to the countryside, where I was staying with a Maria, a young East German student. Maria was old enough to remember a childhood under communism and was eager to talk about the growing apathy about the GDR past she saw among the new generation just young enough to have missed it or, worse, an idealising of the whole era. ‘It’s being trivialised,’ she said. ‘None of the films made about the GDR seem to suggest what it’s like: it’s all comedies about everyone wearing the same clothes, the same shoes.’ This notion of the past being neutered of all instructive menace was something I had seen at the GDR museum in Berlin, which seem to celebrate, more than anything else, the kitschness of the time,

all Trabis, hairstyles, tacky furniture, gelded ideology, relegating the exhibit on the Stasi to what seemed little more than a corner. What remained was a sense of rather infantile primary colours and a feeling that, provided you kept your head down and conformed, it wasn't much worse than an English prep-school. When I told a Canadian writer I met in Berlin, Rory Maclean, about this, he was incredulous: 'It wasn't colourful at all. I used to visit East Berlin in the communist time. The shops were empty. There was no colour anywhere. And one in three a Stasi informer, let's not forget that,' he said sombrely. 'I remember visiting just after the Fall in 89, and sitting in a private house with people. Every time someone passed the window, even a pedestrian, their voices would drop almost to a whisper. And then when the person had passed, their voices would rise again. And I thought, They've lived this way for nearly 40 years.'

Maria's family knew it better than most. They had been Christians under East German communism, a matter disastrous for personal ambition. Both of them had suffered, their lives proscribed, unable to attend university, Maria's mother Anke unable to pursue a medical career except as a nurse. No matter that since the changeover their lives had flourished, Anke becoming the doctor she had always wanted to be, and that she was able to say, with unfussy humility that 'I think we are the winners of the new system.' Indeed they seemed to be, with a comfortable modern house lacking nothing, solid Western cars and money to spend on holidays and dinners, yet this seemed a belated reward. Although Anke said that she 'had made peace with the communists', the look of barely controlled contempt on her face at the mention of Erich Honecker spoke eloquently of what she had been through 30 years back, and I could imagine it too: cat and mouse games, frequent interrogations, unexplained refusals, the steady erosion of one's composure and self-control.

Yet in their stubborn faith both she and her husband were carrying on a family tradition. Anke's father, a Christian himself, had been a member of the Party until the riots and repressions of 1953, when he had thought 'No more' and resigned. This had had terrible repercussions: he had lost his job and had to give up his apartment too, becoming an unperson under a system that had not come anywhere near the full repressive strength it was to reach over the next few decades. Yet he had doubtless provided his daughter with an example of integrity and sacrifice that would animate her own life too.

Later Anke told me about other relatives, Western ones, and how hard they had found it to adjust to the changes after 1989, not the least the material kind. 'They always brought us coffee in the old days,' she said. 'And we were grateful. But then after 1989, they still kept bringing it to us. They still bring it to us now, as though nothing's changed, as though they still have to feel sorry for us. Haven't they looked at the supermarkets here? There are more types of coffee than you can count. I want to tell them, thank you very much but communism's over.'

This profusion didn't mean that such variety had always been easy for Anke. She spoke of visiting West Berlin in the communist time, of going out to the local supermarket to buy some yogurt for breakfast. 'There were just this incredible number of yogurts,' she said. 'And I didn't know how to choose. I just stared and stared, not knowing how to decide which one to get. It was awful. And finally, after standing

there for several minutes, I just thought: “Okay. I don’t get yogurt.” And I went home without it.’

Anke’s story summoned up others I’d heard or read, of East Germans after the Change fondling, smelling the goods in Western hardware shops, and of an old Russian lady who, confronted by 20 different types of sausage, simply fainted, waking up with the tortured words (to which there is no good answer): ‘But *why?*’

CZECH REPUBLIC

It was from Dresden that I caught a train to Prague, surprised at how close together the two cities were. After the washout of the German Anniversary, I was determined to use the WCMT letter I had in my pocket, and this time I got on the case, bombarding the tourist board and town hall with emails. As a result I had this time a full timetable of day's events, contact names, an invitation to a select celebratory party, and so on. I was not going to make the same mistake again.

It was unexpected meetings, however, that were most telling in Prague, and it was on the morning of the commemoration that I had my first bit of luck. Up early to see a laying of the wreath on Narodni Trida, I was to find the socialist politician Jiri Paroubek, corpulent, cashmere-coated, surrounded by heavies and more reminiscent to me of a Capo di Tutti Capi than a potential statesman. As he laid the ceremonial bunch of flowers, face wearing a stagey but appropriate look of official humility, he was heckled by a group of onlookers.. Not a word was understandable to me, but the laughter of others suggested this was something worth finding out about, and two of the hecklers – courteous, studious looking, and English-speaking - readily agreed to meet me the following night for a drink.

We met at Café Montmartre, a traditional artists' hang-out in the Old Town, one of those places Prague seems to specialise in: smoky, solid, comfortingly shabby. Ladislav, a philosophy lecturer, told me a tale that was to become depressingly familiar as the trip went further south: of political decadence and corruption, and widespread disappointment with this 20 year-old democracy. The politician they had been heckling yesterday, he said, was surrounded by murk, and he was far from atypical. Other politicians, Ladislav added, were little better: a pimp in Northern Moravia had received a long jail sentence and then, when it was found he was a friend of an important politician, was realised for 'medical reasons'. Politicians were, allegedly, lining the pockets of a University Department Head to encourage him to josh their men through a degree course at scandalously high-speed (a matter of months, he said) so that, newly qualified, they could be slotted easily into official posts. The last election had been corrupt: the current President, it was rumoured, had bought vast quantities of votes. Shouting these facts in public the day before Ladislav had, rather comically, been goaded by a pro-government bystander into reporting them to a nearby policeman. The cop had dutifully jotted the details down and then gone off to perform the arrest of the century – or, as was more likely, to shake his head over the eccentricities of his countrymen, and drop the pages into the nearest street-bin.

Were these assertions broadly true? Ladislav did not seem loopy, merely unworldly, saying that he fought against these things by writing about them in 'special journals' (which I took to mean with a readership close to zero). Yet it was a tale I was to hear so often – in Slovakia, Romania, Hungary – that it seemed the air that people were breathing. Ladislav was eloquent about what had gone wrong. 'We have no constitution,' he said. 'Western democracy was implanted here, but we don't have the safeguards you have. It means this kind of galloping capitalism – the fields of politics and the economy interlace too strongly,' he said. 'It's fatal for democracy, this

democracy we were promised. Politicians keep talking about a constitution, but it keeps getting delayed. It's not in anyone's interest to have it. Not for the powerful, anyway.'

The situation he described was familiar – kickbacks, an absence of safeguards, the growing gap between winners and losers, the worlds of business and politics worryingly interconnected, a local mafia. I suggested to Ladislav that the Czechs had looked too much to Russia for their example – out of sheer habit, perhaps.

Ladislav agreed: 'Yes, we're very much going in the same direction. In our own way, of course. You know,' he said gently, 'In the Communist time everybody said, when you were thinking about your job, "Be a butcher. That way you can steal."'

I was baffled. 'How can you steal?'

'Oh, by giving people inferior cuts, or underweight rations. Or just taking some for yourself. They said the same about waiters. And that's more or less how it's happening now. Just on a bigger scale.'

He let the words hover a little. Then he interrupted: 'But you're writing this down. I don't want to make Czech Republic appear bad. I mean, people said in Communist time if you didn't steal, you were being immoral, you weren't going to feed your family. But there's an element of that kind of attitude now.'

'Get on and get your handful of money.'

'But not everybody's like this,' he added defensively. 'My job, lecturing, I mean, obviously it's not well paid. I'm doing three jobs, working in three places. The friends of mine who aren't doing this, I don't know how they survive. But if I want to maintain a standard of living, go out to a restaurant now and then...'

'Things that a forty year old man ought to be able to do,' I said.

'I think so, yes.' He nodded, slowly, tentatively, as though talking about his own needs was not habitual to him. 'The only thing that makes me unhappy is not being able to do any of my jobs as I would like to. What is that expression in English, "to spread yourself too thinly..." That's how it is. It's not something I can avoid.'

It struck me then, and later, that excellence in your job is another consumer good, a vital one, and that the lack of it is the most demeaning and tormenting of all.

'I mean, that is the main difference between Communist time and now,' he went on. 'We had nothing to do. So much time to fill. So we sat and talked about politics, literature, religion... And I mean, that way of life has disappeared totally now. It's just gone.'

We ordered another beer. I loved the way the Czechs drank it, slowly, ruminatively, in those bulbous mugs. It was a world away from our pints of lager and the loutishness they seem to contain in their cheap yellow fizz. I remembered Hrabal's description of the many pints he drank each day, remembered too that Czech's described it as 'liquid

bread', a compliment in this part of the world where bread had, traditionally, been sacred, something you picked up and kissed if you dropped it on the floor. Yet the young Czechs round us seemed surrounded by tube glasses of rum and coke, gin and tonic, vodka and cranberry juice.

I asked him about his students, the new generation: they were surely a good indication of where the country was going.

Ladislav smiled ruefully. 'They are likeable but totally different. They just want to get on, to make money, to travel. Many of them want to leave the Czech Republic, make their lives somewhere else. They want to study abroad, and that usually means business. People aren't reading as much as they used to. They have other priorities.'

This was certainly my experience too. In the late 1990s I had taught literature in Estonia. My students there had had a voracious need for the outside world's novels and poetry, filling in the decades when such books had been banned. One of my students had, in the Soviet time, been jailed merely for having a copy of Orwell in her pocket. It was a privilege to introduce them to Waugh, Auden, John Osborne, almost like missionary work.

But flash forward ten years, and everything had changed. Not only had the students read less – many of them unaware who Orwell was – but they were also more blasé about the literature they did know, and almost to a woman (for men had long drifted into economics or engineering, the 'providing' professions) were unable to supply the quirky insights into poetry that their equivalents had done ten years before. They had other outlets for their fantasies now: clothes, holidays, rock-concerts, cars. Rising affluence had brought philistinism along with it, and the study of literature had become not fundamental to good living but a kind of soft-option finishing school. Being anyone in the new Eastern Europe meant having money, which in turn meant brutal choices made early on. This was truly something Eastern Europe was losing – even an average person's erudition and the weight that literature had was part of the area's magic, even if the need for it had its roots in darker, less defensible things. I thought of Polish Dorota and her daughter's constant demands for top-end consumer products, a never-ending struggle to keep up with the Kowalskis. To be focussed all the time on the outside world of the shopping catalogue and the internet purchase was, surely, to have one's inner-life punctured and siphoned off: however understandable, even desirable, that consumer-power may be. Yet the extremeness of the whole region – the world Ladislav described was a kind of spiritless combat zone of strutting Slavic Loadsamonies – still seems to keep producing its share of dissenters - people, perhaps, far enough away from the action to be nauseated by it, and to have sufficiently little to lose to be vocal and intransigent in their complaints.

I had met another group of self-styled neo-dissidents during the commemorative march the day before. The peacefulness and widespread benevolence of the march made anything different stand out, and there was a note of ugly incongruity in a conflict which had broken out between the police and a group of young Czechs, who stood at the side of the road with a banner which read: 'Czechs! Think about what you really wanted from this Revolution, and who has really benefited.' They were a little grungy – the kind of people self-removed from society who might be protesting anywhere, actually – and the police had turned up to disperse the, take their names,

ask for ID. One of them, dreadlocked, painfully fresh-faced, and over-excited, said to me: 'It's just like Communist time. We're doing nothing wrong here but they're telling us we don't have the right to give our views in public. They're asking us to prove our identity – just like the Communists. We just want people to think about the last twenty years, how it has all gone.'

It didn't seem worth pointing out that, in the Communist time, the request for their names would have been followed by the kind of persecution that made this routine police-heaviness look like paternal indulgence. What seemed significant was that these young Czechs, whatever their grungy appearance, were still a necessary bit of grit in the machine and that, in their seeking out of injustices and evasions to decry, they were, however watered-down, the natural successors of the student-protesters of 89. Was I fanciful to project too a kind of wistfulness onto them, a nostalgia for real dragons to tilt at, a feeling that, even though the new monsters had had so many teeth pulled, they would still have to do. Yet if the spirit of Jan Palach, the self-immolating student protester of 1969, lives on, perhaps that says more about youth itself than the Czech Republic. Its tendency, wherever it is, is to be appalled by the complacency of age, which almost always seems more conspiratorial and sinister than the tired resignation it really is. These neo-dissidents did not seem naïve or misguided – their spirit of action was too laudable for that – merely to be punching the air. They deserved better, stronger opponents.

And they were, I would hear, far from typical of Czech youth in general. That night, at the post-march party, I had met Katharina, one of the organisers of Opona, a non-governmental organisation set up to provide a bridge to the 20th anniversary celebrations, and to keep those too young to have been there in 1989 informed. Their visits to schools, they said, had been depressing: an alarming number of Czech schoolchildren, Katharina said, had known nothing about 1989. If pressed, they would ask airily: 'Is that when the Russians came?', mixing it up with 1968. This came as a shock to me: I had imagined that all Czechs, born whenever, imbibed the key moments of their national history along with its Kofola cola or Pilsner beer. Opona's energies were not only going into commemorative theatre festivals, talks and exhibitions: they were trying to find money for a Totalitarian simulator (a model of it rested on a bar-table as we talked), a serious game, in which participants, having chosen their social group at the beginning (bourgeoisie, worker, communist agitator), would pass through a series of rooms and a path through life, having at each moment been forced to make crucial choices: 'Do you support the communist party? Do you oppose it? When a colleague of yours is laid off for anti-state activity, do you strike or keep quiet? Etc. etc.' Rooms would include prison-cells, luxury flats, interrogation-chambers, and so on, leading from the post-war years through to 1989, when scores would be settled and a new class of ruler emerge. It seemed an exciting idea.

The most obvious of these new rulers was Havel himself. Though I had been denied a chance to interview him by his secretary (she groaned compassionately at the man's appointment-load and told me to phone back two months later), Havel was everywhere: not only in the rapturous cheers of the crowd when he appeared at the concert (some could see him, but not me) but also in everyone's conversation. It was significant that even those who disagreed with his politics spoke highly of him as a man, his integrity, his straightness, his humility. For his beliefs and writings he had had in the communist time a virtual season-ticket to the state prison, had endured, in

the 1980s, four unbroken years there, followed by the constant drip-drip of police surveillance. And fitting the strange surrealism of the time in which the catalysing political event, ten years before, had been the imprisoning of the Plastic People of the Universe, a Prague Rock Band, he had emerged like the Scarlet Pimpernel in '89 to direct the events of the revolution from his own theatre, knowing exactly what effects to bring off, how to marshal his supporters, create coups de theatre, use timing, crescendo, the soliloquy, the crowd, and press exactly the right buttons on the world stage. That this mythical figure was a sad-eyed, moustached and almost seedy-looking middle-aged man – physically exactly the type you see sinking beer after beer in Prague neighbourhood bars – only seemed to add to the effect. The Czechs truly had someone who had earned his place as tribal leader, and, as with certain prizes unexpectedly awarded to the right person, it was moving to think about.

The Czech commemorations themselves seemed too to be no less than the Czechs deserved. Maybe it was simply Czech marginality which made them feel more intimate, more authentic, less of a media-circus than the hulking Berlin jamboree of exactly a week before. Of course there were similarities – sound-stages, vast crowds, political speeches, but the afternoon march through Prague on November 16th couldn't have been more different. There was a kind of peacefulness and a quiet satisfaction about it, as we made our way in our thousands through the city-backstreets and up and down treelined hills. It was everything that the '89 march couldn't have been: slow, cheerful, free of fear, and above all benevolent: it was one of the few crowds I've ever been in where if you'd slipped on a banana skin, nobody would have laughed, and your fellow-marchers would simply have helped you gently, respectfully to your feet. Of course, apart from those young demonstrators there were incidents on the way, but most of them benign or affecting. At one moment a group of students unfurled a Czech flag and, holding it flat over their heads, glided slowly down the road like a phalanx. Later, as we reached the Vltava, a Chinese lantern was lit, and thousands of us clapped and cheered as it sailed into the air, narrowly missing the telephone wires, becoming first a bead of light and then vanishing into the blackness. Most memorable of all was when the crowd, spontaneously it seemed, got out their housekeys and rattled them as they'd done 20 years previously, in that 'Time to go home' message delivered to the Russians. Just as then it made the same unearthly, bell-like sound, and was disproportionately moving, like the reprisal of a Greatest Hit.

This was Prague at its best, its most living. Yet the city – yes, almost uncapturably beautiful – also had its worse side. The tourist trade, now so advanced, so knowing and cunning, has left Prague festooned with such a quantity of souvenir stands and postmodern Ye Olde Bohemia tawdriness that, other than away from the tourist centres, it is almost impossible to feel any sense of authenticity at all. How one would love to have seen this city when, 20 years ago, there was still a freshly post-communist innocence to it, when it was a rumour rather than a blaring fact and when its predominant quality, as John Banville stated, was its silence. It is still possible, if you are lucky, to find yourself in a deserted street, to hear Czech spoken rather than Spanish, English or Japanese, and to see that strange Nerudan magic caught in atmospheres rather than spires or cobbles, but the tiny accidental instant must be savoured before the sounds of clicking cameras, tour-guides or four-by-four engines spew out their aural fog once again. Unlike Budapest, which, bar the castle, has no obvious tourist centre, Prague's are all too clear and concentrated. There is considerable frustration in being in a city whose beauty has been clouded in this way,

like watching a stage masterpiece from the gods, knowing that the descending rows of previous generations had had so much better, completer, more direct a view. Serenely perfect viewed from a distance, to see Prague up-close is to meet a beautiful woman you have long gazed at, and then finding to your dismay that her jewelry is tacky and cheap, and she speaks only of money.

Certainly, if guided by a local, there were perverse pleasures too: out of the way inns with benches, white tablelinen, dumplings, goose-soup and attendants still in a class of their own when it comes to rudeness. Every Prague waiter, as Hasek had it, 'spits in the soup', though at least the soup is good and tasty. Yet it is partly Prague's virtues that put you against it: it is too picturesque, almost cloyingly splendid, every changing perspective or pictorial composition exhausting you as you move through its streets and squares and see wrought iron lamps or spires rearrange themselves against that receding forest of corner stones, chimneys and rooftops. Its beauty torments you with your own inadequacy to appreciate or capture it properly. Living here, I felt, would involve almost constant feelings of guilt or unworthiness. It is difficult to feel at home in such a place, quite apart from the endless, avid stream of well-heeled transients stepping hourly and in their tens of thousands off the budget flights, that have driven the residents themselves into the suburbs. The spirits of Neruda, Kafka and Hasek have departed from Mala Strana too - exiled, perhaps, on a Ryanair 737.

At any rate, I was relieved to get out of Prague, though I didn't know until I left quite how much it had congested me. It was in Brno, in the Czech Republic's Moravian half, that I found myself most at home and began to feel some kind of authentic Czechness. Set beside Prague, any second city is doomed to feel more marginal than most, though marginality, you feel, is the very spirit of the Czech Republic, even of Eastern Europe in general. They may justifiably object to the simple division of Europe into East and West, but they themselves draw it constantly: on the excessive ease of life in Europe's other half, the freedom from problems, the rather vapid centrality of it. And it's true, from here Western Europe seems sunny and soulless, relatively unafflicted by those misfortunes which, Solzhenitsyn said, are essential to spiritual growth. I have seen Eastern Europe (by which, broadly speaking and rightly or wrongly, one means the former Eastern Bloc) spoken of as 'Europe's shadow', a kind of dark unconscious, the place where all problems and complexes are projected, like a less favoured brother who ends up – unfairly – carrying the sins of his illustrious sibling. To some extent, Eastern or Central Europeans seem to feel it themselves. 'We're always amazed when someone is interested in Hungary,' said one Budapest to me. 'We think, "What do we have here? We're in the desert." But of course we're not. This is the exact centre of Europe. But we simply don't realise it.'

Meanwhile, cities like Brno, relatively unknown, embody this spirit far more appropriately than a touristic megabeast like Prague. Read Czech literature and you will find that the heroes are not men and women of power or position, but the invisible, the small, the seemingly irrelevant. One thinks of Hrabal's heroes – a waiter, a wastepaper-processor, a junior railway worker – neglected into abundantly magical inner lives, or the fact that Hasek chose for his hero not a Colonel or General but the Sancho Panza-ish Good Soldier Schweik, the commonest of common men. They are celebrations of second-placeness and vulnerability, of the richness of life away from the centre. Only by dwelling on the small and anonymous could one capture the spirit of the country, it seemed, and alongside Prague Brno was just that: a

four-square city, architecturally unremarkable but with immense, slow-burning charm, in its hidden beerhouses and jazz-clubs, the red trams that clang and roar around its streets, and that sudden, liberating freedom from Prague's oppressively well-trodden splendour. Perhaps, I started to think, the second city in Eastern European countries was always the more satisfying one, the more generously revealing.

Here, at any rate, I found myself noticing things once again: theatre repertories, museum posters, the playfulness of its red street signs, accents on top of letters like winking little butterflies come to rest, or old communist era neon shop-signs, in that joined-up script that mimics handwriting, now dusty and unlit for decades but still speaking vividly of the aesthetic values of the past. Brno had an innocence: its voices were Czech, its bars sleepy and unrenovated, its city squares merely tracts of rough grass, made clearly for use rather than display. Theatres and concert-halls were everywhere, and freed up from Prague's clutter I began to make plans once again: to see the rock-opera 'Spring Awakening' at the local theatre, to go to a teatime concert of Britten's carols, to visit the Moravian museum, and though I did none of these things (such is life, unless you assert yourself) the sense of inner space was vivid. Such details shone out in Brno, and made me remember what had first drawn me to Eastern Europe so long ago: the chance to have life simplified, to climb clear of all those suffocating choices, a freedom Prague had long ago lost but which Brno still retained.

On the whole two-month trip, Brno was the only place I felt the urge to stay in. Daily human life took precedence over architecture here, and everywhere you had the sense of time stretched out, of people taking life slowly. My own daily timetable evolved naturally: morning hot chocolate, emails, a pork or duck lunch the Pegas brewery, afternoon nap, evening swim, late night blog-writing and websurfing at the Hotel Continental. My nose led me to this latter place like fate – a 'Unesco protected Communist Museum', one local joked. Hotel Continental was marble crazy-paving floors, orange vinyl benches, Flotex 21, fish tanks, stalagmite lighting, old attendants selling postcards, knitting to kill the time. Fat balding men, provincially prosperous, sat in the bar in their ill-fitting suits taking a last lunchtime coffee with middle-aged mistresses, before disappearing upstairs for belting afternoon playtime, blinds swivelled against the overcast afternoon, shower, minibar and cable TV to follow as he rethreaded his cufflinks on oversize shirts and she snapped back her girdle. In another life, I thought, I could have lived in Hotel Continental, sat over my laptop day after day, people-watching, content: I had my perfect Eastern Bloc aquarium at last.

It was such routine moments that lit up Brno for me. Its delights were the small, the hidden, the surprise of those anonymous grey exteriors with the colour and life behind them: jazz clubs, antique shops teeming with picturesque junk, dimly lit bars where Aretha Franklin played on the hifi and Kofola (Czech cola) is gulped down in an endless, unpressurised afternoon. It all fitted in with my preconception of the Czech Republic's slightly surreal, squinting, surprising quality.

Along with the Hotel Continental another place I visited, and revisited, was an arcade café owned by two Czech girls, chubby, friendly, glamorous, more streetwise than their years. At regular intervals their dogs – a Basenji, an unthreatening Doberman with a wagging tail like a swinging baseball bat - wandered in and out, and I was glad

to see them: Czech Republic should be full of dogs – Jaroslav Hasek a dog-seller, the dog Karenin in Kundera's 'Unbearable Lightness of Being', Kafka's 'Investigations of a Dog'. Dogs seem to be everywhere in Czech Republic and there is the reader's pleasure, as Eva Hoffman put it, of seeing a literary motif borne out by reality. It was only later that I discovered that 40% of Czechs, a huge number, own a dog, and at least 20% more are thinking about it. Women clutch Chihuahuas and dachshunds, young men stride with Weimaraners, and bulldogs and poodles trot along with their snouts caged – a legal requirement - behind muzzles. It was only when I recognised the breed of her dog that one of the café owners, about 25 years old, visibly warmed to me, and I was after that, as the Spanish say, 'de la casa'. This proved helpful when later in Brno, for the first time in 13 years of travelling, I was comprehensively, liberatingly robbed.

The scene of my undoing was Brno's railway station, whose high ceilinged, brass fitted splendour its habitués failed to live up to. Here, as I ran to get change, my rucksack, containing nearly everything but my laptop and documents, was ripped from an open luggage-locker. My incredulity at its disappearance, opening and closing the locker three times to find out whether my eyes were deceiving me and whether it would simply rematerialise on cue, was balanced by a feeling of almost monastic lightness: I was divested of a burden; I could begin again. And, I reminded myself, think of all that lovely shopping I would now have to do.

But first was a visit to the police-station. Here Vit, chubby, moustached and straight out of Hasek, took down every detail, finally reading me a report in the densest Czech where sudden English words like 'Marks and Spencer Thermal Long Johns' and 'Play by David Hare' stood out like quaint stepping stones. 'Now you have another episode for your book,' he said at the end and requested, 'respectfully', that 'You mention me and colleague Jan in it.' Then there were phonecalls to the insurance company, to the foundation itself, feeling rather ashamed. There was nothing in the bag that wasn't replaceable, nothing I much minded losing. The only thing I had to buy – at speed – was the cable for my laptop, whose battery was now showing 5%. I could not imagine my time in Brno without those internet sessions in Hotel Intercontinental, and this had to be done today.

But where would I find a cable for this particular model in Brno? How would I explain? How would I follow the wild goose chase as I was directed from shop to shop, getting increasingly panicky and irritable? Luckily, the arcade café was open, and luckily Peter, the owner's brother, was in there.

Peter was one of life's princes: tall, toned, effortlessly good-looking and upright, with the erect, self-loving posture of the young boxer or hussar. His spiked hair, pointing skywards, simply seemed to fall into line with the rest of him. He heard my misfortune, apologised to me for 'the scum of this city I live in,' and offered to help me at once.

A few minutes later we stood in an electrical shop, Peter scrutinising the sockets of my laptop and firing out genial orders to the assistant who, when she wasn't staring at Peter's face, cast occasional admiring glances at his Luis Vuitton phone-holder. It was one of the many status symbols he had amassed, I was to find, including a smart new flat, a series of Dobermanns, a group of shiny well-heeled friends (he showed me the

photos on his mobile, of them playing Twister together), and a souped-up Corvette which he had managed to write off the summer before, emerging from the wreckage without a scratch. 'When you have luck like that,' he said breezily, 'You must share it with people. That's why I like to help them.'

Meanwhile we carried on our search for the cable. 'This is no good,' he said to the assistant, 'It's too small for the socket. Don't you have another?' Peter was used to issuing orders, I sensed. He was, he said, a local businessman, and though I was never able to pinpoint exactly what he did, his work seemed to be in armaments.

'I am an ideas man,' he said. 'Many, many ideas. I have an IQ of 170. While we are speaking, new ideas are flashing into my mind, maybe 4 or 5. But I need my partner: the things I imagine, he turns into reality. He is more practical than me.'

He said all these things to me while picking up new cable plugs, scrutinising my computer, talking of wattages and ampages and of better brands and deals elsewhere. 'Come on,' he said. 'We'll go to the Mall. I know a couple of stores there. And I need to do some shopping myself.'

If Peter called himself impractical, I did not want to think what word he would use for me.

The shopping centre, when we got there, seemed to be Peter's arena of self-expression. He strode through its mercantile world like a young lion, picking up products and dropping them lightly into his basket with an entitlement that was majestic, almost as though he were dignifying the goods by choosing them. For him the mere act of purchase had a kind of silky dignity about it, and as we walked, he spoke endlessly of things he had bought, small conquests: a solar-powered recharger for his cellphone, the new range of Apple laptops, tickets he wanted for the Avatar premiere in London, to which he hoped to fly his new girlfriend, a national beauty contestant, first class. Occasionally he would make slightly heavy handed comments about his altruism: 'One must help others. Then they will help you,' and 'London is so cheap. In one weekend I still couldn't spend all my money. I ended up giving £50 to a tramp on the way the airport. What could I do? I wasn't going to change it back into Czech crowns, was I? Just fifty pounds...'

I was insanely grateful for Peter's help and, as is the way of such things, slightly resentful too of the need for that gratitude. His generosity seemed regal, boundless.

'You said you want some swimming trunks too? There are two shops here that might have them, one on the floor above. But you know, it is the wrong time of year. I'll lend you some of mine. We can meet later at the café. Now let me just make a phonecall. I've arranged to meet someone at 6.30, but I'll put it back an hour and we can find you your cable. No, no, it's what I want to do.'

'Are you sure?' I said. 'It's terribly kind of you.'

Peter looked pleased. 'I told you before,' he said, 'I like helping people when they are in trouble.'

We found my cable, half the price I thought it would be, and I gushed my relief.

It was just an ordinary shopping mall, yet I felt inspired by Peter's mastery of it. There is something very clearcut about these Eastern European shopping centres, their sudden slickness in a world that is so often unaerodynamic, messy and bare. You feel they are almost practising grounds where people can go and hone their abilities at consumerism, and where the customers still feel – 20 years on – that they are enthusiastic novices in some world hobby that remains enjoyably fresh.

A few months before, to highlight this mania, a couple of film makers had put together a documentary, *The Czech Dream*, capturing on film one of the great hoaxes inflicted on their countrymen. Announcing an eponymous new hypermarket on the outskirts, they besieged the Czech public with a campaign of jingles, leaflets and adverts, finally attracting 3,000 hungry shoppers to its opening. But all they found when they hurled themselves towards its entrance – to their anger, dismay, quizzical amusement – was a painted façade with nothing behind it. There had been outrage, complaints to the government and press, demands for a physical beating for the film-makers who, in their defence, had run a negative campaign, telling shoppers 'Don't come!' 'Don't spend!', and had advertised unfeasible reductions, like a special solar powered television for about £10. Yet still shoppers had flocked there, desperate for a bit of consumerist communion, the benediction of a bargain. The sight of Czechs running biblically across the field towards the shopping mall is to see a kind of lemming-madness, a haring abandonment of dignity in pursuit of a bargain, or perhaps the specious self-esteem of being the first in line. Ask not for whom the chainstore public-address system jingles: this, perhaps, is where most of us are right now.

We're just a tiny land,
We're just a little place
But we can take nothing
And build castles into space
Good people live here
Beautiful children too
So kill the envious viper
And let your dreams come true
....If you got no cash,
Get a loan and scream,
'I want to fulfil my dream'.

Thus ran the advertising song, with full choral accompaniment, for the *Czech Dream* shopping centre. The film was broadly felt to have caught the Zeitgeist, and not just locally. Certainly there are telling moments in the film: the food queues of the 1970s juxtaposed with the cornucopia of 2008, a husband talking about insomnia he suffers from pressure the night before shopping, a little girl who hates going for long healthy walks with her relatives and finds peace only at the mall. The ad-executives, meanwhile, have become the modern commissars, declaring 'Our ads work even if the product sucks or doesn't exist at all,' and crowing about their abilities to manipulate people en-masse, to decide where thousands of people will go at a certain time on a

certain day. 'I thought the era of lies was over', one disgruntled shopper says as he walks away, the bubble of the Czech dream burst. 'But it isn't.'

Yet the film's inherent criticism seemed, at least to this viewer, a little puritanical, even smug, and I found myself rueing my own previous assumptions that the explosion of materialism and the corresponding death of the inner life, had been purely negative things. Is it really worse to lie awake over the pressure of shopping lists than because of an interview with the secret police the following day? How many children would honestly prefer what they are told is good for them to what's fun, fashionable and disapproved of by the adults? The title of the *Czech Dream* seemed to refer less to the present than to the past, to the dream wound up over 40 years of empty shelves and food-shortages, an understandable one: to feel modern, to experience plenty, to revel in colour, to possess beauty. Watching people's delight in purchase in the documentary – one man says he would call a shopping centre 'Oneness', another 'Harmony' – you feel uncomfortable pontificating from the security of habitual consumerist choice about the rights and wrongs of it. Though the real dissidents in future – and they will be just as unpopular – will be those who abjure these values, and though they will have earned the right to their feelings of righteousness, the shoppers of the *Czech Dream* still seemed broadly innocent in their pastime, which like all pleasures is potentially a danger in the hands of the weak or compulsion prone. What's clear is that the pendulum has well and truly swung in Eastern Europe, taking its citizens where the laws of gravity and motion say it must. And what is equally likely, surely, is that this too will wither and grow stale, and be supplanted by something else: perhaps a synthesis of the two ways of being, perhaps the best one can hope for.

Meanwhile, the shopping craze has fairly swept Eastern Europe. To be insufficiently affluent is to be excommunicated, cut off from the source of favour and fulfilment. Outside them, you feel, away from them, is a kind of half-world where the values are still different, better, more thornily individual, yet cast out of the beneficent capitalist light. In the half hour after Peter had gone, liberated by my theft and the certainty of an insurance payment, I felt myself seduced by it, filling up my basket with self-loving toiletries, choosing a new camera that was just a little more expensive than I needed, not thinking before I added a carry case and a capacious memory stick. Socks? Boxer-shorts? Jerseys? Jeans? No problem. I emerged with my clutch of thick, string-handled paper bags, tissue paper, boxes and guarantees, feeling like a player, and feeling washed clean.

The next day, inadvertently reminding myself of where we are all bound, whatever our credit rating and whether dressed in Prada or Primark, I went to the Capuchin crypt on Kapucinske Namesti, an old town street. The Czech Republic has an unabashed attitude to death, seeming to greet it like a friend, motheaten but drily humorous. The ossuary at Kutna Hora, a village near Prague, is stacked up with skulls, femurs, pelvis bones, chandeliers made from shin and forearm bones, human bodies returned to ornaments, the gravedigger's speech from Hamlet turned into interior decoration, so single-mindedly that the ossuary seems like a living character in the fable of the Czech Republic's history. The effect, however, is not grim but playful, funny, as if the Czechs (and their tortured, much-violated history) laugh at death, commandeer it into one of their puppet shows. In Brno's Capuchin crypt, there are

more dead bodies, reclining beneath thick glass, some wearing boots, some with feet snapped off, some still bearing the expression of their previous tenants. Some are dead, and some live, the open mouth and screwed up eyes of one still seeming to emit a salty joke and a wheezy laugh, an old woman's face bearing the look of the wise – or vacant – old parishioner. Some lie as if asleep, some have an aura of life still clinging to them. All are turned grey; death is grey, we find, and utterly unfrightening. I saw unconcerned little children being led round the exhibit by their parents, the atmosphere in the catacombs light and sanitised, just a 'Sic Transit Gloria Mundi' reminding you that it is coming to a theatre near you, sooner than you can imagine. But before then there is the fat on one's bones, shared jokes, loneliness, deeply personal but shattered dreams, the ownership of pets, the striving for comfort or wealth, jazz music, human encounters which may or may not yield what you dream they will, and that transiently, sports halls, procreation, tram-rides, fraternal arguments, career-changes, stomach upsets, wasted afternoons, flatsharing, the division of electricity bills, the choice of household appliances, washing-machine cycles, missed kisses, kebabs, the desire for parmesan cheese on your pasta, trips abroad planned or realised, the happiness at budget flights, new passport photos, and so on. Robbing and being robbed from, and the sudden, jerking life of puppet-shows, with marionettes that will outlast – by centuries, perhaps – the humans that manipulate them.

On my last day in Brno I achieved one of my dreams – to go right to the centre of the puppet-world of the Czech Republic. Puppets, or animated figures in general, had long been part of my impressions of the country, ever since in childhood I had had my expectations of life disrupted by the broadcasting of a Czech cartoon. These strange worlds, the strange music that accompanied them, was life at a slant, and it was received unquestioningly by my child's mind, along with the unfamiliar font of the captions and the names, long aberrant tangles of consonants, in the credits. Later had come the films of Jan Svankmajer, Lewis Carroll's real successor, in which – again, in that strange, fractured atmosphere - dressing gowns flew like phantoms through the air, logs devoured children and a man might plunge a spoon into the breast of his beloved before gobbling it down like ice cream. 'Like a Czech film' went the Polish simile for crazy complexity, and I expected a strong dose of this. The word 'fairy tale' which was used so often and so drearily to describe Prague did seem, nonetheless, to have some truth to it. This was the country which, in the Communist time, was called 'The Kingdom of Forgetting' (itself a kind of Narnian title) in which the government had tried to anaesthetise the entire population, with an injection of fear and a sugar pill of consumerist contentment, into a kind of oblivion in which nothing was what it seemed. Speaking of the dismissals of the 1970s, in which the gutsiest and best of the intelligentsia had been routinely sacked and declassified for refusing to sign declarations of loyalty to the Soviets, Garton Ash had written: 'That window cleaner over there: his thesis was on Wittgenstein. Before his trial, he lectured on *The Trial*. Yes, the nightwatchman is reading Aristotle. Your coal will be delivered by an ordained priest of the Czech brethren. Kiss the milkman's ring: he is your bishop.'

What could be more fairytale than this sense of disguise, in which no surface could be taken for granted, in which dreary, workaday exteriors hid abundant inner life, and in which the leading dissident, jailed for four years, had emerged to direct his Velvet

Revolution as though it were a piece of triumphant, rollicking ad-hoc theatre? Whatever else the Czech Republic was – small, marginal, victimised, a bruised but still deft newt darting about the pond of Central European history – there was one thing I expected from it more than any other: fun. And much of that fun seemed symbolised by the puppet shows in which the Czechs were masters.

But then puppetry is everywhere in Czech culture, and not only in the gift shops with their mass-produced marionettes. Hrabal, Kundera, Hasek, Kafka: their worlds too are puppet-worlds, enclosed and vivid spaces, somehow simplified, in which the characters themselves move balletically, expressing their philosophies somehow too single-mindedly to seem quite naturalistic. Kundera's novels in particular have this lightness, this clarity, and the strangely spacious mathematical precision of music. You feel the air underneath, his characters – and they are his, not realistic individuals but somehow Kunderised, made clean – dancing in slow motion on top of the currents. It was a similar case with Hrabal's novels, where apparent non-entities, living under momentous historical events, each kept their detached, unique galaxies floating like feather-clouds inside, light, playful, never coming quite to rest before a puff of the outside air set the whole pile dancing once again. Like so much Czech literature it seemed to dramatise Kundera's contrast between lightness and weight, and what was the Czech puppet tradition but a world of lightness amidst the heaviness of Czech experience? The more I thought about it, the more I saw the puppet world everywhere: in the contortions of Czech communist history, with its disappearances and surreal inversions, or the skeletons in Kutna Hora, or even the drinkers at the Pegas beerhall, rarely speaking, raising their beerglasses mechanically to their damp-moustached mouths.

I had long wanted to get inside the puppet world, firing out emails to a puppet-company in Prague, begging for permission to visit, though finally getting only tepid responses. In Poland I had attended a show, filled with children and teenagers, in which a kind of magic was created. Here the puppets were moved with rods, visibly moved by the performers, but the figures' faces were so animated and their movements so expert it didn't matter. What was impressive was the cast, telling this fairy story about a dead body brought to life by a witch: the actress gave herself to her soliloquies as though she were performing Electra, and the whole little auditorium seemed to thrum with her energy. The other actors, two old men, were like peasants who had simply walked off the fields and continued their conversation, seamlessly. I wondered what they were like: these artists who could so clearly have made classical careers for themselves, perhaps even tasting fame, but had instead committed simply to telling magic stories to the young. I couldn't help but be attracted by it, and their Eastern-ness gave the whole thing an exoticism it might have lacked in Richmond or St. John's Wood. Perhaps my sense of the how significant puppets were in Eastern Europe was connected too with the number of people I had known there who said they preferred pure fantasy to realism, who found in it, in communist times, a window into another world, a compensating place to live, a colourful and floating alternative planet where the greyness and restrictions of their lives could be redressed.

As soon as I entered the Brno puppet centre, I knew I had struck gold, even though I hadn't seen a single puppet yet. For years I had searched for my perfect Eastern European room, an image cobbled together from films and old photographs. The perfect room for an early Autumn evening, when there is chimneysmoke and a fresh

chill in the air and the shock of the daylight going early, when the clock ticks and there is a rooted silence and you seem suddenly cushioned in a cube of light against the sinister dark outside. I had seen many such rooms in communist-era movies – low-tech, beige, but full of books, full of the atmosphere of thought, writing, contrariness, of illicit conversations and laughter over alcohol or tea, all these things being more weighty, more sacred, because there were so many reasons why they shouldn't exist at all. But I knew these rooms were disappearing as surely as those other, material values were on the advance, and that when they went something would be lost forever.

The office at the puppet-headquarters was more than I had dreamed, and when I entered I had that strange sense you sometimes have, of some warm and benign energy wafting into you, that you are being taken on a magic journey somewhere. It wasn't just the 1970s easy chairs, the formica coffee table, the rubber plants, the vast manual typewriters resting on desks or chairs or the piles of books and ring-binders covering every available surface. So much could have been seen in the Stasi headquarters too. No, the room was so clearly the product of talented people: etchings, street-scenes and charcoal portraits covered the walls, an abundance of coloured teacups, each one splendidly different from the others, jostled in creative chaos in a disused pine display-chest, and unpainted wooden marionettes dangled jerkily from the bookshelves. Dried flowers, blue and green, were arranged effortlessly in an old beer-mug, a clutch of aluminium teaspoons sat beside them in a teacup, and on a mahogany stand a bowl of walnuts, perfect and resonant, lay like a still life. Old radiators crouched beneath the windows, and on those white walls bright sunlight – the most soulless and unmysterious of effects – did not reach. Instead you felt sheltered in the shadows, removed, insulated; the mass of different objects, styles, colours and the entire atmosphere of businesslike and unthreatening creativity, a species of love, turned this space into a miracle of numinousness. Only the most spiritually attuned of people, I felt in my bones, could make such a room.

Then there was my guide, Olga. She was beautiful in a blue-eyed, fair-haired, open-faced way, the cheekbones spread wide, the eyes meeting yours. But it was not an aggressive, painful beauty. She simply seemed to get on with being herself, not dropping stagey comments you were supposed to remember, or bothering much about the impression she made on you. I recall virtually nothing she said, but of her presence, reassuring, quietly welcoming – 'You can come to my studio this afternoon if you like... come and meet the other puppeteers, there is a special exhibition of puppets this weekend in the countryside, and we can tell you about it if you want to go' - I remember much. This was her life – puppets, theatre, painting, her husband, her children, her studio, intimate conversations with a procession of close friends, and I suspected that however many of them were male she had she would not inspire marital jealousy. She didn't make me feel undignified, gushing, over-alert as some people, knowing I was begging to see their world, might have made me feel. All her qualities seemed mild, essentially peaceful. She was a pastel-coloured person: the kind you can live alongside for long periods, more calming than exciting. The only discomfort caused was by the need to hide my hunger: to consume, if you like, this world she had generously opened up to me.

I felt already that day I'd had a feast, what with the room, the book, the half-made puppets slung up like foetuses on the walls. Olga didn't know what she was giving

me: as she led me through the flat, down passages with glass cases crammed full of marionettes, slouching behind the dusty glass like preserved freaks in formaldehyde. She went about unfolding this parallel universe in the most nonchalant, understated manner. But nothing prepared me for the moment when she brought down a ladder from a gap in the ceiling, and sent me up ahead of her, into the puppet-deposit beneath the roof.

It was the second room that day I'd always dreamed about, the magic toyshop adulthood does not stop you imagining exists somewhere. To have it opened specially for me was like a childish fantasy made real. For here, suspended from ranks of orange scaffolding 7 or 8 tiers deep, was an entire world, what seemed like thousands of marionettes, not twisting about like hanged men but perfectly, glacially still, emitting a compressed energy and vigour, as richly inclusive of every type of humanity, it seemed, as the plays of Shakespeare. Kings, Queens, demons, jokers, stolid farmers, soldiers, policemen, whores, doctors, angels, the cook, the thief, his wife and her lover, tinker, tailor, soldier, tyrant, the open-faced dreamer, the murdering Moor. The bride, the widow, the merchant, the mountebank, the raven-eyed beauty flexing her perfection like an angry retort, her doltish shoemaker husband, way to hell paved for his presumption, ripe for cuckoldry. Admirals, minotaurs, Cossacks, emperors, surgeons exhausted and despondent from their labours, stout, portly townsfolk, and the devils they feared after darkness. And amongst them all were the skeletons, jointed, leering, present at the lovers' first kiss and the judge's sentence, skeletons that their human equivalents would turn into and that the puppets, over centuries, never would. It was like a strange vision of the afterlife, humans mingling over the millennia, blended with their dreams and nightmares, which had accompanied them in this world as companions, benign or tormenting. Each figure was so living, so individual that you felt you were seeing an entire pageant of human history, all its realities, emotions, pretensions and paranoid projections, suspended in 3 dimensions right in front of you, the profusion of styles and shapes saying as much about the variousness of their creators – another human parade – as the figures sculpted, jointed, painted and clothed by them.

I could have stayed for hours, and would have been quite willingly locked up there: it was an eternal study. But in this strangely timeless room, where the thought of these figures hanging silently alone in the dark was both eerie and magnificent, our wristwatches both ticked on. Olga had to keep an appointment; I was hungry; a telephone was ringing in the office. And so, clicking off the electric light, descending to the linoleum corridor, we sent the ladder springing back to its hole in the ceiling, and returned to our transient, daytime lives.

HUNGARY

Arriving in Hungary was a kind of homecoming, an annual ritual. I had been there 7 or 8 times before. From the first visit when I had been trapped waiting for a Romanian visa in 1997 (the worst possible basis for a relationship with a country), finding myself uninformed, incurious and indifferent, I had later become interested, then obsessed. Budapest was, as an old friend had agreed with me, the ideal city: thermal baths, cathedral-like cafes, courtyards, high-ceilinged flats with a feel of family-history about them, beautiful, streetwise women, and the feeling that if you got bored of one half you could move to the other. Pest was grimy and pockmarked, a poignant, uningratiating yet finally entrancing spectrum of greys. Trams clattered and roared down its Parisian avenues, trolleybuses discharged sparks, and the buildings seem to breathe a weight of dark experience. It was, for me, the ultimate urban environment, the kind of city you thought of when you heard the word 'city': alienating, battle-worn and brisk. Joyce, you feel, would have been at home here.

Meanwhile Buda, green, undulating, its hills and valleys nestling their villas and covered in copses and thickets, reared up from the Danube in a series of sensual folds, supplying a feminine correlative to Pest's thumping commerce. Here, more than any other city I knew, I felt that interesting conversations and stories were happening all around me: the Hungarians are a disproportionately talented people, with all the idiosyncrasies which accompany flair, and the city gives off a feeling of intellect, introspection, depth. While Prague seems to lay out all its finery in front of you, gesturing to it insistently with over-jewelled fingers, Budapest, in its indifference, makes no concessions. It is all layers, all striations: its profusions of grime, its subterranean bath-houses, its complex cakes like the Dobos Torte or the Gerbeaud slice, each one stratum upon stratum, no intricacy or richness spared, seem to sum up the city. Wherever you go you feel this powerful sense of inner life: a middle-aged waiter may sweep you to your table with exemplary Mitteleuropa geniality, performing his job with the kind of verve and duende more associated with matadors, but when you are seated and menued you will, if you look up, see him isolated once more in his private world, standing apart, staring at the linoleum floor, eyes anxious and ruminative, pessimism playing over his heavy-jowled face. In the arts also, introspection seems to rule: it is a literary country, its poets and writers unparalleled for their descriptive powers, subtler, less bombastic than the Russians, forever digging deep into external appearances, as if both rootedness and taking nothing at face value were Hungarian obsessions. Who can blame them when so much of Budapest is hidden: its underground springs, its quiet desperation, the grinding retro-metro trains with their eau de nil walls, submarine light, their incongruously jokey little piano jingle at stations, like the scene-change refrain in a screwball comedy. Budapest works on a kind of obfuscation: beauty perceived through gauze: dreary mornings, stone-coloured skies, the pinkness of its streetlights shining through the mist. For those who like their warmer treats surrounded by austerity, it is a kind of dark paradise.

I had developed an interest in the country's past too. Hungary had characters as flamboyant, in their way, as Russia's, and a history almost Shakespearean in its heroes and villains. Men who would go to the gallows rather than recant, speeches that flipped the fate of the country, and that panorama of power-driven men in boxy dark suits, tiepins and slicked back hair who had struggled for dominance or mere survival, betraying each other casually or painfully to the torture cell or the hangman's noose. Rakosi, the demonic dwarf who had governed the country with terror and 'salami tactics' after the war, relishing his rivals' destruction, savouring their anguish; Janos Kadar who had, with a realism that amounted to the most cynical treachery, betrayed Imre Nagy, the country's acting president and the man who had once delivered him from prison, handing Nagy over to the Russians and the scaffold; Nagy himself, the unlikely would-be saviour of his country in the 1956 Uprising, bucolic, bespectacled and portly, executed by the Krushchev government, his corpse refusing to stay silent before its triumphant reburial in Budapest '89, when it was communism's imminent death that seemed just as certain, far more final. In history as well as flair – Hungary seems to fire out prodigies in mathematics, science, cinema – this country of 10 million people punched well above its weight.

'We're almost too talented here,' said Gabor. 'It's an awesomely competitive nation. And Budapest is too small an environment to house so many gifted people. If you achieve anything, someone is always waiting in line behind you for you to fail, so they can take your place.'

Gabor was tour-manager of a contemporary dance company, with a dancer's body. His website showed him photographed from below, Latin American sun on him, pectoral muscles and limber torso showing through his t-shirt. The interests it listed were eclectic: yoga, rollerblading, Proust, Almodovar, Mishima, Laclos, Tosca, Bjork. We met one evening in a Slovakian restaurant where they knew him, bringing him a dish of dumplings, bacon and cheese curd, a peasant dish he loved. was chiselled, focussed, dauntingly occupied. Even the night before our meeting, he asked me to text him the next day to remind him it was happening, though whether this was genuine or a bit of power-play, I didn't know

'There's a lot of gossip here,' he went on, 'a lot of criticism. People don't wish you well. If you aren't up to standard all the time, you won't survive. You can't say this is a friendly city. Oh, I know plenty of foreigners who have come to live here. But they generally don't thrive. They think they've made friends, but they haven't. People say they'll call them, but they don't. "We must meet again", all that, then nothing. Nincs. We're a self-focussed nation, really, not especially interested in others. And we can never really believe that others are interested in us.'

I asked him if that was why most Hungarians didn't speak English. You noticed it here, after the Czech Republic and Poland.

'Oh, they do,' he said crisply. 'Well more of them do than you think. They just pretend not to. Hungarians can't bear to do anything badly. They can't bear to make mistakes. Not if there are other Hungarians present, naturally.'

Gabor's own speech was almost too perfect, dotted with 'with whoms', and 'without which's, and 'quite in spite of the fact that's. It seemed to go well with his erect body,

his shoulders tensed back as though glorying in the sensuality of an open posture. The way he dressed, ate, the poise with which he held himself, suggested a kind of perfectionism, also the nous of someone who had learnt never to let his guard down. I suspected cruelty, an intolerance of weakness in others surpassed only by that of weakness in himself, and as we spoke, I found myself fighting not to lean forward, not to seem whimsical, not to show feebleness in any way.

All of this seemed to go against the Hungarian lack of confidence he'd spoken about, and which perplexed me: Budapest was a great city, a world city, I said. It was generally accepted.

He nodded. 'Yes, it is, I know. I know that because I've lived abroad. Many Hungarians do move abroad, you'll know that. It's easier than here. They don't feel so many people dragging them down.' He nodded a curt hello to a theatre director friend seated on the other side of the bar, and went on: 'They can flourish, actually. There are people who are much more famous in Japan or Germany than here.'

Curtiz, Cukor, Korda, Lugosi, Pressburger: I remembered them all, and a sign on a Hollywood door which had said: 'It is not enough to be Hungarian. You must also have talent.' I thought too of a description I had once read about sibling life: 'crabs fighting in a bucket.'

'But they always miss something,' he said. 'We're used to feeling different. It all starts with the language. We don't share anything, no basic words, with any of our neighbours. They don't speak our language, and we don't speak theirs. Oh, you'll meet people who speak some German. But that's all. No Serbo-Croat, no Romanian, no Ukrainian, no Slovak.'

Especially the last, I thought. Anti-Hungarian feeling in Slovakia ran high, was meat and drink to nationalists in Bratislava. I had inadvertently caused spluttering rage by using the word 'Felvidek' to describe Slovakia to a Slovakian, unaware that the Magyar term coopts the country into Greater Hungary. In the Entropa exhibition, a satirical map of European nations in Prague, Slovakia was represented as a lump of salami, wrapped up in the Hungarian tricolour. And thinking of general Magyar ignorance of their neighbour's languages, I had to remember the candid loathing between neighbours which so often exists in this part of the world, and more specifically the 1919 Treaty of Trianon, when Hungary had been forced to cede treasured territory to surrounding nations, a grief Hungary had never accepted and never left behind.

Gabor was different: he could speak French and Spanish; he spoke generously of the Slovaks, disliked, fastidiously, generalisations. He had also got out, moving to Luxemburg to work for the European Union. 'I hated it, I'm not a 9-5 person. But you know how your 20s are, you spend all your time trying to conform, trying to be like an ideal of what you think other people are. I did my job as well as I could, I would have loathed myself if I hadn't. But I loathed the job anyway.' His fingers rattled impatiently on the table. 'At least I got to improve my English. And my French. That and a little self-knowledge are the two things I got out of it. And a lasting hatred of Luxemburg, a place that makes even Hungary seem, what is it, *ample*.'

He had also realised while in Luxemburg, he said, that he was gay. ‘Well, more gay than straight. I still have “stories” with women. But they are subsidiary, exceptional.’

I envied him, having the strength of alternatives. His “stories” sounded non-committal, adult, painless. I couldn’t imagine him having the tastelessness to be visibly hurt. Bisexuality was a kind of gift of plenty, I thought, a point of strength to bargain from.

‘But I had to get out to realise it,’ he said. ‘You can’t imagine the pressures here to conform. Even in a city like Budapest. When we have Gay Pride marches here, it can get ugly. People don’t like it. They bring sticks, petrol bombs, there are scenes. You have to get away from that kind of thing if you’re going to admit things to yourself. Just to have the space to be open-minded.’

He didn’t look self-pitying when he said this. And he had forgiven his city:

‘It is great,’ he nodded. ‘It isn’t an easy city live in – it’s becoming easier, but there’s still this climate of pessimism, and you notice it when you start to live elsewhere. Other places I’ve lived – Paris, for instance, or Madrid, I spent some time there – are much more buoyant. Hungarians are great complainers. You do something for them, they don’t thank you, they just wonder why you didn’t do more. If something pleasant happens to us, we wonder what bad event is wrapped up inside it. We’re poised for disappointment, and we accept it too much.’ He signalled to the waiter, who knew him, for the bill. ‘But it a great city. In other cities, richer ones, life felt dull. Like they didn’t have to struggle for things. What is that French word, “acquit”.

“Acquit”,’ he repeated, the word sounding as sharp and aquiline as himself. ‘Like they have acquired everything they need, like they no longer need to struggle. It can be a little vapid.’

The bill came, and I paid it. I was half-glad when we said goodbye that we would not meet again – I did not want to complicate the clarity of the impression he had made on me, all sharp lines, no flab at all on the bones of himself.

Another Budapestter I met was Eszter, who came limping in to a bar on Blaha Lujza, looking frail, one Friday afternoon. She did not want alcohol, only tea, she said, and she drank only one cup through the couple of hours or so we spent together. Shy, slow to warm up, with the wide-eyed watchfulness of the soulful, slightly suspicious child, she had an engaging habit of staring between sentences up at the sky, as if to receive inspiration for her next comment. This gave her presence an airiness, full of spaces and silences which became more comfortable as our time went on. I asked her if she wanted to drink something stronger.

No, she said, she was on antibiotics, had just had an operation. ‘I’m 34 years old,’ she said slowly, ‘But it’s the first time I’ve been with the knife. That’s why I can’t stay long. I’m sorry.’

I asked if she had been frightened, as I would have been. She shook her head. 'I'm the sort of person who likes new experiences, whatever they are, so this was just another one of them. And it didn't hurt so bad. I don't... feel pain... very easily.'

Eszter worked in an office, though you would never have placed her there. There was an introverted quality about her which suggested reading, solitude, some kind of sensitivity to unshared things. Yes, she said, she had trained as a teacher in Fine Arts and English. 'But you know, teachers are paid terribly in this country. I wanted security. Something in economics. My second diploma.'

I told her that I couldn't see her working in a company.

'No, it's *nice*,' she said slowly, as though testing the word. 'I like my job. I like the people. We are a group of friends. That's very important. And the company is very flexible. I can work the hours I want.'

I had come across this so many times in Eastern Europe – the obvious but repressed artist working in a desk job, pursuing his or her passions manically in their free time, drawing consolation from conversations with their colleagues. I loved it, too. It destroyed pigeonholes, made life a constant succession of surprises about kindred spirits in strange places. A business or economics degree in Eastern Europe is not an expression of character, but a simple safeguard against starvation.

As she spoke I got the impression again of someone immensely childlike, a child that would have to be entertained or it would slip at once into its own private world of fantasy, rich and infinite. Occasionally that skinny, turned in body would fidget in its chair, or she would resume her staring up at the sky as though distracted by a thought, an offshoot. Her apparent ease with it made for comfortable pauses in the conversation, as we both stared into the distance, her at the sky and me at the ground.

More than anything, she said, she regretted the disappearance of solidarity, the everyday, neighbourly kind, in her country.

'It's true,' she said. 'I mean look around you.' We looked at the little groupings at their tables, heads leaning in. 'Everyone here is in their own world, in their own little group. It's terribly... closed. You couldn't just go up to someone and start talking to them here.'

That look up to the side and the sky again, a silence, and then she carried on.

'People don't know their neighbours any more. In the communist time, you always knew your neighbour, you could go and talk to them about a problem. Now people are hesitant. They might intrude, they might expect things of you. People don't have time for each other any more. They don't share their problems or do things collectively.'

I asked her if she knew her current neighbours.

'Yes,' she said. 'But because I *wanted* to know them. But there are so many lonely people in Budapest. We're becoming enclosed in ourselves. People suffocate if they don't talk about their problems. You need to talk.'

I agreed: 'It normalises you. Other people can tell you that you've got something out of perspective.'

'That's why I like going back to the countryside. People still talk there. They take their time. But even that is changing. You realise, I suppose, that we have the highest rate of television-watching in Europe? Yes. And the TV is getting worse. I look back on my childhood, the wonderful Hungarian cartoons we used to have. You know I played a game with a friend the other day, where we tried to remember as many cartoons as we could. I managed 50. I remembered them all. Every one had made an impression on me. But I don't know what the Hungarian children are watching now.'

Something American, I imagined, something globalised and unparticular. I thought some more about her picture of modern Hungary, a whole nation of people suffering apart. Maybe psychologists thrived here.

She gave a slow, wry smile, and nodded: 'Yes, we have plenty of psychologists. I thought of becoming one. But, you know... Seven years more study. And my astrologer...' She tailed off for a moment. 'She says I am too.... That it takes up a place in my head, that it will follow me to my house.'

She herself had studied astrology, she said. Four years, to become a professional. But it was the old story. There were so many talented astrologers. And Hungary was so...

But was Hungary so small? Or was it just the memory of Trianon embedded in every Hungarian, however liberal, the knowledge of the loss of greater Hungary, of reduced circumstances. I knew from experiences that great losses both strengthened your faith in survival, and left a kind of lingering depletion. Perhaps a lasting mistrust too: I remembered Gabor's comment that 'Hungarians don't generally like to have foreign friends.' It had disturbed me slightly, but it made sense. Eszter disagreed:

'It's not really true,' she said. 'Hungarians will shut you out when they don't know you. But slowly they will open themselves to you. Slowly they will show themselves. If you spend time around them.'

I had heard this before, in Estonia, another tiny, betrayed country. The difference was, in Hungary you felt a more abundant inner life, and one which had expressed itself repeatedly in words: this was the country of George Konrad and Peter Nadas, both still living, and the two finest descriptive writers, for my money, anywhere in the world. But I believed it about the Hungarians: a country so driven to suicide – the Hungarian vice – is not a country in which people are supporting each other. But then suicide had always been popular in Hungary – I thought of those stories about the song 'Gloomy Sunday', the legend that people had just thrown themselves into the Danube like synchronised divers after listening to it, never to reemerge. Yet Eszter spoke of this current atomisation as something new, something definably post-communist. 'I mean, it was a part of what we were, this solidarity,' she said. 'The Hungarians could always stick together. I just can't see it any more.'

Eszter meanwhile had responded by forging a relationship with an outsider, her Irish boyfriend. Both of them were obviously drawn to complexity: she perhaps by virtue

of being Hungarian, he by having moved there, a strange choice for a new life, this reticent, autumnal country in which falling leaves are more compelling than flourishing ones. Death and fall: the Hungarian patterns: the doomed cavalry charge, the failed revolution, the poetic suicide in the prime of life. 'Temetni tudunk,' goes the Hungarian saying: 'to bury people, that is something we know how to do.' Eszter told me that she and her boyfriend sat about reading the biographies of serial killers together: this child-woman, with her tense child's body, like a wide-eyed, watchful little girl, was nonetheless fascinated by the contortions of the most disturbed minds, the ultimate outsiders. Earlier I had asked her what her astrology and psychology had given her: it had made her, she said, incapable of disliking people, or of judging them. Now she said: 'Even these serial killers, I can't dislike. They are just people. You have to look behind it all.'

Such comments gave me a kind of security with Eszter, however brief our meeting. Whether she was typically Hungarian or not, it was this strangeness, this hiddenness and acceptance of complexity, which seemed to sum up her country, and was what I had always hoped to find there.

It was while I was in Budapest that I also met Tamas, leader of the young communists. I had been intrigued by whisperings I had heard of a communist comeback amongst the young, perhaps the inevitable by-product of the economic crisis that was hitting Hungary harder than elsewhere. Communism at least had given people some form of belief, some faith in change, at least in its early days, and its theoretical aspect surely appealed to the young, for whom things are often stark and simplified. I remembered my own mindset as a student: unable to believe I would turn into one of the hollow men, that stratum of grey-suited corruption and compromise standing in the way of change. I grew up under Thatcher and Major, and socialism, powerless and not remembered, had turned into pure poetry: the party of literature, brotherhood, landscape, vision, ban the bomb, of Nye Bevan and Michael Foot, the 1945 landslide almost a part of folk memory, a kind of concrete, lived Nimrod, full of air.

Is it that you lose your beliefs as you get older, I mused, or do you simply feel freer to admit what your social behaviour said they always were?

I went and met Tamas one Monday afternoon at the Young Communist headquarters on Baross St., which was much as I expected: in a slightly tatty building, an elderly Budapest lady stood in the wood-panelled hallway with her shopping bags, and a rickety old lift took me up to the top floor. There were banners, flags, posters, leaflets, a rickety and low-tech set of office rooms with bright red walls. Tamas himself bounced forward to greet me, fresh-faced, full of nervous energy, and with a little black beard reminiscent of Trotsky's. He had greeted me warmly on the telephone that morning, raising my energy levels with his ebullience, and he did not disappoint me now. We found a side-table, got an ashtray, and started smoking and talking together. The conversation quickly fell into a kind of chess: he was youthful, idealistic, full of belief. I was the middle-aged sceptic who believed in nothing. His role helped me to play out mine, as mine helped me to play out his.

I had read about Tamas's conversion to communism in an online-journal that had interviewed him. His grandfather had been a district Party Secretary, and had brought up Tamas's father to believe in the tenets of Marxism. Told by his teachers not to go near the ideology, Tamas's interest in it had instantly been sparked, and he had read Marx hungrily, finding it true. He had started to think, he said, about product and provenance, wondering how much his pen had cost to buy, and how much his parents had paid for it. Joining the youth wing of the communist party – its members, mostly students, dressed in red t-shirts and berets and called each other 'comrade' – he had risen rapidly through the ranks to become chairman at 22, either a testament to his passion – which was obvious – or how defenestrated the Party was. The membership of the youth wing numbered anything from 150-200, but the CP had, in 2006, polled its lowest in history, under 1%.

It was easy to sneer but also seemed a cop-out. Underneath all of this, however you wanted to analyse it, was the fact that Tamas and his contemporaries found modern, capitalist Hungary unacceptable, riven as it has been in recent years by strikes, 10% unemployment, pension-cuts, riots, acute economic crisis and a Prime Minister who admitted, notoriously, having 'lied and lied' to the Hungarians about the state of their economy. It is also testimony to the communist ideology's enduring appeal to youth, among a generation young enough not to remember it as it was lived.

Tamas seemed, nonetheless, a strange archaism. As we smoked together and chatted, he had the traditional communism habit – Stalinist, some would say – of starting his answers with rhetorical questions, almost like a catechism: 'So what does this mean? It means that the ideas of Marx....' 'So what must be done? We must unite to form a party of resistance...' etc. My objections to the Rakosi terror – a time of denunciations, secret police and torture camps – were brushed quickly aside: Rakosi had come in after the war, he said, a terrible time to govern. How could he have avoided compromise? Besides, he had rebuilt most of Budapest, an incredible achievement. The greyness of the Kadar, late communist years was flicked away too: things had better than now under Kadar, he said, and even his mother, an anti-communist, had told him recently he was right to be doing what he was doing.

There were no surprises in all this, though my cynicism made me feel faintly grubby. Tamas shook with youthful fervour, and his boffinish certainties commanded respect. I tried to imagine in him a future demagogue, a dictator, but I couldn't. Although they had a roomy set of offices, and a collection of attractive, earnest looking young men and women wandering in and out, the 1 % vote was an insuperable fact. Tamas's idea of a one-country revolution to be governed on Marxist precepts – this was his stated idea – seemed to founder on his equal belief that this could be done without erecting national borders, without a corresponding change in surrounding countries, without a hideous onslaught from the multinational companies which have set up shop in Hungary, and without civil unrest or a mass-exodus. It was the old dream of an unimposed communism which people would embrace voluntarily when they saw it was good for them, and which they would choose to stay and support.

I asked Tamas what he thought he would have been under the old system, whether he'd have been a good party-member or a rebel. 'I would have been the first,' he said quickly, 'Because I would have found my beliefs expressed by them.' Yet I was doubtful: Tamas was a natural non-conformist, I thought: his admission that he'd only

become interested in the ideology when warned off it seemed to confirm it. Though his instinct – qualified by regret at the loss of life – was to support the Soviet side against the 1956 rebels, it was easier to imagine him risking his life by declaiming from the top of a tank against the Warsaw Pact, against Krushchev, against the Russian presence in Budapest, than it was to imagine him remonstrating with the rebels or naming names. Was that communism's appeal now, that it flew in the face of orthodoxy, that it had the same atmosphere of cabal, belonging, intrigue that it had had in its earliest days?

Perhaps, too, I reflected after our brief meeting, the party's youth movement was a sign not of a nascent return to the past but of time moving on. Perhaps the fact that Hungary had an extreme left-wing fringe group about as populous as anywhere else was a sign of normalisation. Instead of foreboding I was left with a sense – perhaps one I had no right to – of Marx's first time as tragedy, second time as farce; and of Larkin's 'strength and power of being young... which is for others undiminished somewhere.' Tamas and his friends seemed almost to be envied, not pitied, for their refusal to be deflected by 40 years of a bleak reality they themselves had escaped. It seemed to prove, if nothing else, that youth continues to be youth, that it works to its own unchangeable laws. Beside that, waxing and waning ideologies themselves seem superficial, transient.

Yet of course, when I thought about it, Hungary was far from normalisation: the existence of the far-right political party Jobbik, 'movement for a better Hungary', and its popularity, now with 17 % of the vote and a firm foothold in Parliament – is a sign of the contrary. So is its worryingly strong popularity among students, seeming to tap into a kind of idealism, however misguided. Tamas, when I mentioned Jobbik, suggested that it was simply the funds the party had that had hooked in its superior support, yet I was unconvinced. Communism seems unaerodynamic and messy, with the scent of failure about it. Nationalism, particularly the uniformed, foot-stamping kind that Jobbik represents, is not. In fact, the movement offers, dangerously, what Fascism seemed to be offering in the 1930s – a cutting through the muddle and compromise of the mainstream parties, a chance to go outside the game altogether, and to make a fresh start. And with its frequent harping on the injustices of Trianon, its denunciations – whether opportunistic or not – or mainstream political corruption, and its zero-tolerance policy of crime – for which, among the majority of its supporters, read 'gypsy crime' – and you have a party with widespread populist appeal to a nation born, since 1919, with an engrained sense of grievance, and with a tendency to see enemies on all sides. 'They are just saying what many people are only thinking,' one girl said to me, leaving me wondering whether it was she was thinking herself.

Certainly it has a pair of telegenic and unexpected leaders. Gabor Vona is young, clean-cut, good-looking and bright, with a degree in history and psychology, a combination of subjects some would describe as fatal. Hungarians talk about his eloquence in interview, his ability to stay on top of questions, to have an answer, in perfectly formed Hungarian, for anything. Krisztina Morvai, a Jobbik MEP and one of the party's most prominent spokespeople, is if anything more complex: a human rights lawyer, Masters-educated at King's College London, a Fulbright Scholar at the University of Wisconsin, winner of a Red Cross prize for promoting Aids awareness, and with a background of fighting for the human rights of sex workers and of Arab

women in Israel. Both of them are shiny, well turned out, and would not look inappropriate as Social Democrats; Morvai, indeed, has been described as the world's only cross between Hillary Clinton and Nick Griffin. Add to this that the Jobbik website is well-presented and has an articulate English translation, and you begin to understand Jobbik's crossover – as it were – appeal.

Accusations fly between Jobbik and their detractors. Opponents say Jobbik is nationalist, neo-fascist, anti-Semitic, anti-Gypsy, and a direct successor of Hungary's 1930s Fascist party, the Arrow Cross. Jobbik replies that though it is nationalist, it is not fascist, that no Jobbik politician has been quoted making anti-Semitic comments (this ignoring Morvai's much-quoted description of Jewish state ambassadors as 'lice-infested, dirty murderers' who deserved to receive 'Hamas' kisses'), and that Jobbik policy for the Roma community is integration, not ostracism. Opponents say Jobbik, with its talk of *ciganybunozes* (Gypsy criminality) exploits the anti-Roma feeling which have seen Roma homes petrol-bombed and 7 people killed. Jobbik counters that they are simply talking about the Roma issue candidly - "We might hurt each other's feelings when we are honest, but we have to be frank." – and ask opponents to consider the non-Roma schoolteacher beaten to death for running into a young Gypsy girl, or the 'the brutal beating to death of women in their dotage for little more than the change in their pockets', crimes they lay firmly at Roma doors. Accused of developing a paramilitary guard, Jobbik argues that its uniformed supporters are armed with nothing more than handkerchieves. Opponents counter by drawing attention to the organised Jobbik marches, stamping and lockstep, through Roma communities, designed deliberately to intimidate. Supporters of Jobbik – if not Jobbik themselves – pontificate about a genetic Gypsy predisposition to criminality. Opponents argue that the crime springs from poverty, from the closure of the heavy industries that once provided the gypsies with work, from poor educational levels, barely habitable housing, and anti-Gypsy discrimination at all levels of Hungarian society.

It is almost impossible, as an outsider, to make any confident statement on these matters, and to visit the country with one's mind already made up is to make oneself absurd. Yet one can't help but be struck by the ubiquity of anti-Gypsy feeling. From Prague onwards, the most liberal comment I heard in two months was 'I always tell my children that there are good and bad Gypsies.' Otherwise, to voice anti-Gypsy sentiment seems almost *de rigeur*, part of belonging to the respectable majority in Hungarian or Romanian societies. The statement in Jobbik's manifesto that 'a segment of the Gypsy population strive for neither integration, nor employment, nor education; and wish only that society maintain them through the unconditional provision of state benefits' is received thinking in this part of the world. Indeed, I heard many people, some of them otherwise uncontroversial, voice these exact thoughts, with the difference that the words 'a segment of' were omitted. Gypsies have become the great 'they', it seems – perhaps as the Party itself was once the great 'They' on whom to blame all ills. And though there is doubtless truth in talking of high Gypsy crime-rates and customs incompatible with indigenous lifestyles – Gypsies themselves frequently admit it - to speak of a genetic disposition towards criminality is a trend which would seem in only one potentially horrifying direction. As one Romanian woman said to me, carelessly: 'If I could just be Adolf Hitler....' Before, seeing my expression, she hastily qualified what she had said.

However, even routine knee-jerk blame of the Roma is unpleasant and worrying to behold. I have seen otherwise rational people (at least two of them scientists) tell me earnestly of the Gypsy power to curse, while at a school party I attended in Hungary, when a wallet or two went missing from the rack of adults' coats, it took about five minutes for a convenient rumour to go round that 'three Gypsy men' had been seen in the building earlier. This was in a school of teenagers who statistically must have included the odd kleptomaniac or young smoker in search of pocket money. The convenient 'appearance' of three Roma to bear away their suspicion of each other seemed all too handy.

What is clear is that both communities – Magyars and Gypsies – are increasingly angry, and increasingly at loggerheads. A schoolteacher friend, herself vehemently anti-Gypsy, showed me a Youtube clip of a Roma boy beating up men and women at a Miskolc bus-stop. It was intended to bring home to me the violence and danger of the Roma, but it also made me wonder too where the boy's terrible, indiscriminate anger had come from. Aside from the disadvantages the Roma face, there have, along with those fire-bombings of gypsy houses, also been specifically targeted killings, one 54 year-old Roma man shot dead in 2009 as he left the family home for work, and a father and son gunned down as they ran from their firebombed house. These, in turn, were said to be reprisal killings for Gypsy murders of Magyars. Again, it is impossible to know where to apportion blame, nor should the casual visitor do so. What is clear is that the two communities need to be somehow reconciled, and fast. As one article recently put it: 'This needs a solution here and it needs it now.'

Jobbik says that they have a solution, and that their whole policy is one of integration and equal rights. Yet the organised marches through Roma communities would suggest something else, as would the availability of a certain publication at a Jobbik press conference, with an article about the Hungarian future entitled 'Who decides?', the piece illustrated with offensive caricatures of a dreadlocked Jew, naked homosexuals, and a swarthy thug, obviously intended to be Gypsy. Meanwhile, in Barricade magazine, a Jobbik-linked publication, covers have shown (I quote from an article by Michael J.Jordan):

'A thick-necked, dark-skinned man, drawn from behind, wearing a thick gold chain. Headline: *Gypsy Criminality! Over!*

-
- The statue of St. Gellert that perches high above the scenic panorama of Budapest holding a Jewish *menorah*. Headline: *Wake Up, Budapest! Is This What You Want?*
- Jobbik's leader clutching a medieval sword and Arpad-decorated shield. Headline: *Unwavering! Hungary for Hungarians!* '

While Jobbik claim that 'Hungary for Hungarians!' refers to nothing more than a resistance to overwhelming private foreign ownership, the Jobbik Party Political broadcast is in the same vein, an astonishing montage of sinister-looking Gypsies, Gypsy crimes, ancient Arpad rituals, fearless-far-Right-freedom-fighters, and scenes

from the anti-Government riots on the 50th anniversary of the Hungarian Uprising, in 2006, in which rioters were teargassed, beaten up with truncheons, or shot with rubber bullets. And here you come to another possible reason for Jobbik's popularity among Hungarians: the Soviet repressions of 1956, and the bad feeling and division they left behind, such that Hungary is still to a great extent fighting the same battle 50 years on, and with the same degree of bitterness.

The person who had sparked it off was Ferenc Gyurcsany, Socialist former Prime Minister of Hungary. Gyurcsany's rise to the Premiership had been an interesting one: President of the Organisation of Young Communists in 1989, financier a year later, and, by the time he became Prime Minister, the richest man in the country. In a now notorious secretly-taped speech, Gyurcsany admitted that he and his government had lied 'morning, noon and night' to the electorate about the country's economic situation, so as to be reelected. The tape was publicly played, and riots among the Right quickly broke out, as sites in Budapest were vandalised and firebombed, and fights joined with the police, seen then as later not as agents of law and order but as Gyurcsany's protective barrier. Things had simmered down by the time I visited Hungary in Autumn 2006, but then came the 50th anniversary of the Uprising, a massively important date not just in Hungarian, but in post-war communist history. There were several commemorative marches that day, most of them peaceful. But one of them was organised by the far-Right (for which read Jobbik, or their sympathisers) and was quite different in tone. Fortunately – for want of a better word – this was the march I got mixed up in, and it was fascinating to watch as things developed.

For a start, there were notable thugs on this route – beefily built skinheads in combat gear, army boots etc. – and there were also police helicopters flying overhead observing us as we walked. Each time one flew over, marchers would give them the finger, and not all the marchers looked like National Front supporters: there were plenty of fresh-faced students there who, when I spoke to them, simply voiced a contempt for Gyurcsany's government, who were thought to be the successors of those who had triumphed ignominiously in 1956. What they were looking for from this march was in question – certainly it was something different from the skinheads, who were soon pulling their polo-necks over their faces and putting on woollen hats. We carried on moving forward, quite innocently, and then there were bangs in the distance. A derailed tram was blocking the road like a barricade, and further on you began to smell tear-gas. People were now walking back in the other direction, some crying, and there were clouds of smoke up ahead. As the crowd thinned out you could see a line of police up ahead, in riot gear and battle formation, together with an armoured car. One of the police was firing tear-gas in our direction. I carried on watching, taking photos, until a tear-gas canister landed just beside me, sparking and burning as it fell.

I'd never been tear-gassed before, and was amazed at how far and quickly the smoke spread. Naturally I ran from the canister as soon as it landed but this wasn't enough: first your eyes stung, then they burned, and then it was simply impossible to keep them open at all, and you ran blindly towards where you thought the first side-street was. Had there been policemen there, they could have had anyone they wanted, and the idea of trying to cope with the burning eyes while blows detonated from nowhere on your head was horrible, something that might traumatise you for months. But

luckily there was no one there, and like many of the people that day I giggled while I ran, feeling for once I was at the centre of the action.

A tremendous amount of tear-gas must have got used that day, because a few hours later, it had spread over the whole city. Children more than a kilometre away were walking down the streets crying and clutching their eyes, pleading with their parents to take them home. Even the next day it was unpleasant to be outside your hotel: the eye-watering started barely a minute after you left. But whether I had weak eyes or not, I found that the gas had had its repellent effect: it was simply too painful to walk towards where the action was, and I had to watch the news-edit the next day. Aside from the explosive pitched-battle in darkness lit up by flare-guns, there were other images on the TV as well: of one skinhead, masked and hatted, walking up to the thin blue line and bravely, or insanely, begin tweaking a policeman's riot shield to see how he would react (no doubt he was one of the first to be hospitalised). There was also the protester who, climbing into a show-tank, started it up and began to drive it aggressively through the city. Like it or not, Fukuyama's 'End of History' hadn't happened in Budapest, and whatever you thought about it, it certainly wasn't boring.

The trouble was, nobody took the police response at face value. It was thought by many that the whole thing had been preplanned, Gyurcsany's chance to deal with all opponents, be they extremist or not, at the same time. The police already had a reputation as Gyurcsany's human shield. Now, having declared approvingly that 'The police should step up strongly, decisively, collectively, and with the full force of law', his government proceeded to place all the relevant files on police action that night on the secret list for the next 80 years, increasing the sense of paranoia. What was not in doubt was the further damage done to Gyurcsany's image, and the points scored for the far-right, who were seen as the successors of Hungary's 1956 revolutionaries, an association that was political platinum-dust. Voters not only swept the socialists out of power in April 2010, but also made Jobbik, not them, Hungary's 2nd party.

The Hungarian political landscape, as it stands at the moment, is proof of the knock-on effect both of the Uprising, nearly 55 years ago, and of Trianon, nearly 100. And until its various divisions – left against right, Gypsy against non-Gypsy, local against outside investor, acceptance of the losses of history versus grievance against the same – are healed, it remains potentially the most explosive country in the region. Hungarians may know how to bury people, but until they learn how to bury the hatchet and old enmities as well, that 'Better Hungarian Future' which Jobbik are promising – speciously, one can safely assume – looks very much like a return to the darkest days of Hungary's past.

TRIESTE

I had planned for half a day's boredom on the Budapest-Trieste train trip: solitude, monotony, sleeplessness under undimmed lights and the constant interruptions of border-guards. Yet the trip was full of company, and full of strange incidents. Two girls were caught trying to smuggle a puppy without a permit, and had it confiscated on the Croatian border. A rather Hrabalian scene ensued, uniformed and moustached stationmaster bustling down the platform with a cardboard box from which the puppy's head emerged, exuberant and quite carefree, as the girls lamented, about the uncertainty of its fate. I also met a Croatian, Simon, who told me how fervently he hated flags, flag-waving, nationalism of all kinds, and spoke utterly without self-pity of his mother's death during the Yugoslavian war, simply shrugging and saying: 'We all have to die some time. I'll die too, so will you. It was just the moment for her.'

Later, when we were tanked up on beer and palinka, a tubby little Hungarian joined in our conversation, boasting about his Russian girlfriend, proudly showing us photos of her, unconcerned when we found, pushing on the thumbnails, that they included photos of them both cavorting naked together, she shaved as smooth as a plucked pheasant. In Balaton, no doubt, she was slumbering in blissful ignorance, unaware that an entire train-carriage of strangers from all four corners of Europe were becoming authorities on the sight of her depilated pudenda. Finally there were the guards, who changed nationality and character as we crossed borders, the Croatians the most blokey, Slovenians almost Soviet in their officiousness, clearly longing to haul us in for a beating for laughing at them, strutting school prefects turning us all into naughty children.

After all that jollity Trieste at 7 in the morning, dark and pelted by rain, was not the usual pleasure to arrive in. What do you do for 5 hours when you have not slept, have a rucksack on your back, no umbrella and no hotel room to stay in? A morning of dismal peregrination beckoned, with too many coffees in too many cafes. It was the worst way, I realised, to arrive in a city.

I had discovered Trieste for myself a few years before, in flight from Venice, whose crowds and shrieking popularity drove me away after a couple of hours. I preferred to make my own discoveries, and in peace, yet I already knew of Trieste's uniqueness in Italy, its local dialect, and that endless, concentrated mix of nationalities among its 200,000 residents: Austrian, Serbian, Hungarian, Italian, Croatian, Slovene, Istro-Romanian, Czech. Here, at the very last outpost of the Western Bloc, I had the sense of something offbeat, marginal, miniscule but immensely complex. Here the Austro-Hungarian Empire had had its cargo ships and naval fleets, its quartermasters and admirals, its promenading society, its fixtures and fittings with the K & K Kaiserlich and Koniglich logo. Yet the tide had swept out, leaving somewhere different, a place purposeless except to be itself. The city still feels as though it is waiting for the return of life, a little like Miss Havisham and her decaying wedding weeds - yet, like her, growing daily less fit for its return. Fittingly, it is full of ghosts: of the mighty Imperial past, of Joyce, of Nora Barnacle, of the vanished or deported populations, of the Iron Curtain itself.

My dismal arrival this time was a pity, because I loved Trieste. It was the kind of place you adopted, somewhere unique and aberrant, a specific mood, the last stop once before the 'Here-be-dragons' of communism, and nothing here seems vapid, everything has weight. There is no bustle, no consoling distraction, except for the beers that the morning drunks seemed to swim into in their baize-walled bars. Yet that is all - under the surface movement may simply be emptiness or ennui: the laying of a table for one, the vacuum of unbroken retirement. Even its Mondays have the bleakness of a lonely Saturday afternoon. The cheap Chinese shops which line the area round the station, and whose only purpose is brisk and tatty low-end trade, seem faintly incongruous, beacons of mercantile motivation that stand out garishly amidst the torpor. Trieste, I knew, was relatively unimportant to Italians, an isolated point at the country's Far Eastern rim, and the students at its splendid university often bemoan its quietness, wishing they could be in a more congenial place, Venice or Rome, away from Trieste's conservatism, away from the Bora wind. Yet Trieste was beautiful too: a long bay, a cradle of ascending crags and shelves, an unfeasibly cold and pure-looking sea. It did not have the hedonistic buzz of the Mediterranean, but the sobriety of the Adriatic, that vitreous sounding sea, redolent of Herodotus and Euripides, of the hurled spear, the heroic death, the quinquereme, the squall.

I reviewed my own patchy impressions, before I had visited it for the first time five years ago, stepping onto its station-platform, which felt like the ends of the known earth, smelling the first cold hints of Autumn in the air. Trieste, I had known, was a polyglot city, one-night, transient, faintly disreputable, a border town, mentioned in T.S.Eliot's 'The Waste Land', a place whose prominence everybody once accepted, yet which had dwindled to a kind of anonymity, few people but enthusiasts knowing where it was. Myself, I knew the name too from old radio sets: it was one of those stations found on the front of bakelite wirelasses, with their rows of cities clutched together in slants: Riga, Kaunas, Beograd, Zagreb, Tallinn, Wilno, Krakow, Minsk, wirelasses through which you realised Stalin, Hitler and Mussolini have spoken, through which the history of the war and its terrible aftermath had spewed itself into tense private homes. If it's true, as Freya Stark once said, that a kind of madness comes over you at the sight of a map, it's even truer of those old radio dials, which still have the power to cast their spell, each place name standing out mysteriously, one-off words each with an evocative power. Trieste, too, had been in that trio of words making up Joyce's sign-off to Ulysses: Paris, Zurich, Trieste, a clutch of names resonating like poetry, containing all the mystique of travel, and suggesting an odyssey of Joyce's own.

I could not think of a better combination than Italian and Austro-Hungarian: the humour and sensuality of one, the weight and gravity of the other. Trieste's place on the map seems summed up by its diet, as much goulash and knodel as gnocchi and ragu. One moment you were in Italy, with its pizza and pasta and edible looking girls with their label jeans and Prada sunglasses on at 8 o'clock in the sunless morning; the next moment a bum had slouched past you, spitting Slavic words on a cloud of grain alcohol, bringing a pure (or impure) breath of the East with him. You may go for your morning latte to a typical Italian café, with its pastries and Bacio chocolates laid out, but a couple of doors down, Buffet da Pepe, Habsburg stalwart, is still serving the same boiled meats, mustard and sauerkraut that merchants and bureaucrats were forking down a century back, as they discussed, with vigorously chewing mouths and

bock-dampened moustaches, the Kaiser, the Archduke and the knotty little Serbian question. At all times you are reminded that you are at Italy's easternmost point, that a wind is blowing from the cemeteries of Eastern Europe, close enough to smell the mossy tombstones and the corpses.

Speaking to residents now, listening to the comparisons they make between their city and other parts of the country, you do not hear 'in the rest of Italy' but '*in Italy*': another country, a separate land. Trieste seems its own creature, something demographically complex and enclosed, 'the last remaining city state' as one Triestino put it to me, and a melting pot which you feel must give its more thoughtful residents, despite the city's isolation, a wide world view, a sense of having the insight of a traveller into places they have not been. Take Claudio Magris, probably the most famous living Triestino, born in 1939, author of the alienatingly erudite *Danube*, a study of the intellectual currents that have moved the history of this Europe cleaving river, and the countries which lie along it. Magris is listed as being Professor of German at Trieste University, though you wouldn't know it from his book: he might just as easily be Professor of Czech, or Hungarian, or Romanian literature. His reading, and quotation, reaches not only outwards but downwards, a seemingly total mastery of the countries he is writing about, and an ability to empathise with all of them. Was this typically Triestino? Or was the coexistence of cultures in the city due to something else, that they 'get along in indifference', as one resident told me.. Posters in the street advertise Rachmaninov Concerts, sexy looking seminars on Freud, courses on 'La Grammatica del Cinema'. In Caffè San Marcos one day, I had stumbled across a symposium on Hungarian Poet Attila Jozsef, the suicidal Magyar genius, member of the nascent communist party, writer of poetry full of stark, morbid images, who had thrown himself under a train in 1937, ending an alienated life. The symposium was well attended, open to the public, elegant, informal: it was difficult to imagine it taking place at teatime in the Groucho Club.

Certainly Trieste is a literary city: you feel it not only in events like the Jozsef symposium, or the knowledge of Joyce's long residence here, or the many busts of its writers, nestling in the shadows of the Public Park. Trieste is also, clearly, the city of the solitary and eccentric: I had never in any city seen so many people eating, drinking alone, as though the collective urban spirit were contemplative, lay in digestion, the working out of events long past when those events have moved on. Surely some of this is to do with the city's ageing population, bringing with it bereavement, abandonment, weakness. This was the place where, in one of those unforgettable images which become symbols, I had once visited the aquarium, and seen a little penguin, isolated in the gloom, as far from the atmosphere of Antarctica as one could imagine, stand desolate on a rock, tear after tear rolling down its face. It went straight into my bank of Triestine images, to join the man in a suit marching on the spot at the bus-stop, or the old ladies at Caffè San Marco, taking their coffees alone, seemingly weighed down by worry. Neurosis, you feel, has a field day here, for people seem separated by more than that stony mix of nationalities and tongues. You can understand its appeal for Joyce, its polyphonic parallels with Ulysses, and its ability to nurture those with strange or even cranky inner lives. You understand too why Italo Svevo's '*Confessions of Zeno*', dealing with failure, suicide, psychiatry and tobacco-addiction, is Trieste's book of books.

The place where I'd always stayed said something about the city too. The Hotel Locarno wasn't one of the city's luxury hotels, but an offbeat one star, in that web of backstreets where Chinese pound-stores do their brisk tatty trade and African prostitutes hover beneath canopies, sheltering like sullen cats from the deafening Bora wind. Hotel Locarno had been a strange place, huge beyond its façade, and echoingly deserted. You got a broom cupboard of a room with a train-coupe sized bed for €25 Euros a night, which for Trieste was cheap. In the lobby a fat, moustached hood sat tending the reception, his blubbery tattooed arms sticking out of an old vest. He bickered with his wife, equally corpulent, and with that peroxided hair – at 50 – reminiscent of cheap Barbie replicas. They were both almost bruisingly graceless, and seemed forever engaged in money-conflicts with guests; I preferred the tank of terrapins on the far wall, whose occupants – friendly animals – would clamber on each other's backs to get a good look at you. Crime, dilapidation, kitsch: it was a strangely winning combination, and I was sad to see this time that the Locarno had closed. In the cheap hotel I found a street or two away I booked into my first private room of the trip, waiting, cold, wet and exhausted, and with my rucksack waterlogged too, for the chambermaids to come.

The next morning, as a December mist slid in from the Adriatic, Trieste seemed cool, stony, spruce. Although one had read accounts of its inertia in the 70s, its run-downness, the Cold War bug of ennui and paralysis caught at the closest of quarters, it now has a prosperous sheen. Shop windows are full of expensive fountain pens, Tag Heuer watches, Gaggia coffee-machines, brightly wrapped and intricately flavoured truffles and cakes. A restrained yet visible enjoyment of life is taking place with that morning glass of wine, the plate of sausages and olives. Affluence seems to show not in opulence, for Trieste is discreet, conservative, inner, but in its restraint. Street signs – and I was becoming an expert in national distinctions of style and font – were not tacky or metallic looking, or playful as they had been in Czech Republic, or stately-imperial as in Budapest. Instead they were cool, classical, almost Romanesque: little oblong blocks into which the simplest, plainest letters had been chiselled. They seemed to have overtones of Emperors and Dukes, and made you think of sculpture, plinths, slabs of cold marble, expert artisans. They are in a kind of dialogue with the ancient Adriatic, the sandstone and dove grey of the palaces, the stacks of salami with the chalk of ages on them, even the heavy little espresso cups in the cafes which seem similarly weighty, their density the stuff of times with values quite different from our own. Trieste itself, with its traumatic history, is ageing, with the oldest population in Italy, topheavy with memories and regrets. Yet like many Italians, Triestinos seem to age elegantly, to demonstrate how old age too might bring its own kind of beauty. The sight of an elderly Triestino – an academic, a psychologist, an architect? – taking an espresso in the local restaurant, face tanned walnut in the way that money cannot buy, with that perfect furze of grey-white stubble, the rich cashmere cardigan, expensive glasses hanging on a cord over that navy linen shirt, all these things convinced you that senescence might, after all, have its own aesthetic appeal, its own excuse for rampant consumption.

And consumption was what I thought about in Trieste. Its priceless shop windows and atmosphere of fineness – morning cappuccino, the glass of Pinot Grigio at 11 a.m. sharp – made me bemoan my own scruffiness. I wanted frantically to go out and buy accessories, to feel made one with that beauty: a C'Aran Dache wood-barrelled fountain pen, some Dior sunglasses, a new shoulder bag in handtooled black leather

from one of the market stalls. I was beginning to understand, even at 40, that as you got older, you needed more beautiful things around you: little resting points of perfection for the eyes and self-esteem. Trieste's mercantile atmosphere was strangely inspiring, oddly clean, the vulgarity of commerce atoned for by the elegance of the products on sale. And as I climbed up the hill through its clammy streets, walls lichen-covered where the light didn't reach, past modern blocks in dull stone with their plexiglass balconies, I imagined a different future for myself here: the book-lined modern flat, a thickening waistline, the terracotta soup tureen on the table each lunchtime, early afternoon espresso brewed with local Illy coffee, a wife who would chide me firmly but affectionately for smoking black tobacco – that delicious but disappeared aroma, one-time harbinger of the continent – on the balcony outside. My name would join the others on those polished Imperial brass bell-plates, nestling among Paolini, Moretti, Jugovac, Matutinovich, that cross-section of Triestine society. And I would attend the Janacek concerts in the town centre, or the poetry readings and conferences in Caffè San Marco, that magnificent coffeehouse on Via Battisti, to which all one's wanderings through the city seem to tend.

The Caffè San Marco, opened in 1914 just before the Empire which gave it its style was vaporised forever, is relatively unchanged. It still serves oysters and champagne, its marble topped tables are still supported by those leonine feet, the lion of St. Mark, an emblem of Italian Irredentism, that movement which wanted to see Trieste reclaimed from Austro-Hungary, to see all the Italian peoples joined together, which stated, in the words of one writer, that 'we are trying to expel an intruder from our home.' Caffè San Marco had not been a passive bystander: along with its babel of languages, its ferment of poets, writers, artists, psychologists, it had housed a factory for forged passports for those wanting to flee Austro-Hungarian pursuers.

But of course I am slipping now into guidebook writing. What legendary old café in Europe – anywhere, in fact – doesn't have such a history, taunting you as you look round and see the drab modern customers with their Lonely Planet Guides, and realise glumly that you are one of them. You can treat Caffè San Marco as a museum, if you like, and explore the symbolic medallions on the wall, the relief of sculpted coffee leaves. But Caffè San Marco was not built as a museum, far from it, and thankfully it avoids being that more than its Viennese or Parisian equivalents. During the day it is still largely patronised by locals and regulars: old *nonne* who can't move from their solitary perch till their carers get back to them, all women groups meeting up to discuss – what? – fundraising, lacemaking, pasta-techniques, calligraphy, poetry, stamp-collecting, rose-growing, carp-rearing, one of that incredible range of Triestine hobbies which, I was later told, the city is famous for? In Caffè San Marco I watched them, my lack of Italian forcing me to invent their stories and inner lives, yet I realised that, if anything, I was a type more familiar and hackneyed for them. It has become a cliché – the tourist with literary tendencies setting up his laptop in a faded, legendary coffeehouse, telling himself he is living the highlife, that he has sat where Freud or Kafka or Sartre or Trotsky has sat before him. And although you always tell yourself you will sit there for hours, blending in with their furniture and becoming a camera, you never do. The postcards are written, the coffee is drunk, and you've had a quintessential Trieste experience. Time to press on with the next one.

Luckily, there were interesting things to look at in the street. A group of students marched by, one of them with beer cans plugged into a Viking hat, sucking the nectar from them with a complex of curly plastic pipes. ‘Dottore, Dottore,’ they screamed,

Dottore del bujo del cul,
Va fan cul, va fan cul, va fan cul,

(Doctor, Doctor, asshole Doctor, fuck yourself, fuck yourself, fuck yourself!), the traditional euphoric ditty students sing on graduating. Nearby were news-stands whose contents intrigued me: magazines on Padre Pio and Mother Teresa jostling with Mussolini calendars, and porn mags and dvds with titles like ‘Aprimi il Culo’, ‘Trianguli Proibiti’, ‘Abuso di Silicone’. I felt aroused, but not by the porn: there was something about Trieste’s breezy directionlessness that made you long for physical love, for afternoon sex with a stranger. Partly it is just Italy, which sometimes appears the world epicentre of femininity, its women seemingly plugged into a sensual wisdom as old as time, as eternal as running water. Had it been this way for Joyce, had he rhapsodised over the unattainable, with all the unpardonable lechery of the physically unmagnetic? How had Italian sexuality flowered then, how did it seem in a long-skirted, buttoned up Catholic society? Had he bitten his pen-fingers in hunger and frustration several stabbing times a day, staring with a mixture of disappointment and affection at Nora Barnacle, that bedraggled, crestfallen, devoted companion? Or was it as Cyril Connolly had said, had the act of literary creation warded off women’s mystical element, denying them their power until the book was completed?

I hovered half-heartedly around the bookshops for a while, yet failed to make contact with anyone. It would make great copy yet would interfere too with my more conventional plans: to board one of those roaring blue trams – another robust and clanking sign that the East is near – and get imperially shunted from one end of town to the other, to visit Miramare, Trieste’s seaside castle, or just to have a nice lunch, things which were straightforwardly buyable and did not involve the risk of humiliation. Trieste was in any case, I realised, one of those places more characterised by longing than fulfilment. It may have had its elements of Fellini, but its keynote was Chekhovian, to do with missed chances, nostalgia, the party going on somewhere else. Italian suicides are at their highest here, I was to discover (not at all to my surprise). Some of them may be brought on by poverty or the endlessly maddening Bora wind, but most are caused by loneliness, a state the Triestinos are too proud and dignified to admit or lament in public. To hide depression is a matter of decorum and so, often, is death, something to be done in isolation. As a result, bodies of the elderly may mummify undiscovered in city apartments for long months, before anyone knows about them.

I was told these things by Carlos, a Triestino museum guide. Bearded, black-eyed, young, with a knitwear-encased effeteness about him – the inwrought, channelled kind, obviously intellectual. He had been born in Trieste and grown up there, and seemed to know everything about the city. He stressed again and again what I’d suspected, that Trieste, the politically styled ‘Gateway to the East’, was a profound anomaly, not looking Eastwards, not really Italian, but, in Carlo’s words ‘a tiny Italian portion of the Balkans, and the last city-state in Europe, not unlike an Istrian Singapore.’ Trieste, he said, was right-wing, borderline, conservative, not a proletarian city at all; its five centuries under Austrian domination had left it with a

strong and sometimes suffocating civic sense, more efficiently run than the rest of Italy, but with tangles of red tape. He spoke about Trieste's polyglot, erudite tradition, about the 17 newspapers published in non-Italian languages in Trieste after the First World War, about an adult literacy rate which had been three times higher than in the rest of Italy. Again, one senses this, the Triestine learning, in those posters on the wall, in Magris's prose, its capacious bookshops. Carlo's own conversation was dotted with international references, to Ugresic, Freud, Nabokov, Borges, Steiner, Beckett. His reading was vast and deep: you simply had to mention a subject, any subject, for him to speak entertainingly and with insight on it for several minutes. Occasionally he would come out with the odd rhetorical question – 'So, do you know why Britain produces the best diplomats?' 'So, how exactly would you account for the crisis in liberalism?' It was better, in such situations, to reply with questions of my own, and enough for me to interject one or two of them to move things on.

He told me about Trieste in the old days, the drabness, the lack of fashion. 'And the constant pressure and presence of the border. We really felt it, Gateway to the East, the last stop before the Empire of Evil.' I asked him about the Slovenians, the Italians' closest neighbours. They were, he said, difficult to make real contact with. They were paranoid about adjoining countries, with a kind of encirclement complex. 'The only nation on earth,' Carlo added, 'that is afraid of Italy.' Now Slovenians lived in Trieste, together with Croatians, Serbs and Italians. 'We get along in indifference. There is some respect. Slovenes are hard-working, practical, no-nonsense. They make excellent architects. And of course, they've totally bypassed Trieste economically.'

How so? I asked.

'With Europe coming together we really had our chance to make this a central port again. I mean, we are perfectly placed here. Absolutely poised between East and West. But we were overtaken by Slovenia and Venice. There aren't enough highways, or construction lines here. There's no high-speed railway. And Slovenia lies at the confluence of the Trade Corridors, not us. We had our big chance and we missed it. As we always do.'

'Trieste is dead,' he said, sounding resigned to it. 'World history has started to run too fast. One cannot be optimistic about the future here.' Yet about the people, he sounded sanguine enough: 'Money isn't particularly important in this city. Even if you have it, you don't show it. What people value more is hobbies – there is a club for every enthusiasm under the sun. People don't feel the urge to travel here: they're oddly happy to stay put. It can be suffocating, living in this strange city state. Such isolation, death. I am very aware of what it has taken from me.'

It was strange: he was only telling me what I had already sensed. But how I had sensed it, I didn't know.

'But I love my city,' he said suddenly, brightening up. 'I can't imagine belonging to anywhere else. There is a hunger here, for language, for knowledge, for reading, for some kind of mastery. If I had not been born here I would not have this curiosity. I know I wouldn't.'

I could understand it: the fugue of cultures, the proximity of radically different political systems, of war and dismemberment, the knowledge that, had a few minor details of history been different, your nationality, your whole personal history, would be too. All this along with the burden of loss, of knowing you come after, and that you are now a forgotten detour on the highway of history. Trieste, said Carlo, 'is where you find out what happens when empires are dismantled.' And it seemed definably Triestino that Carlo, like his example Magris, was, in this out of the way, poignantly fading city, with its population of aged ceramicists and philatelists and tango-dancers and model railway collectors, so obviously and voraciously constructing an inner empire – one not so easily lost – of his own.

I pondered such things that evening as I made my way through Trieste's high-ceilinged railway station – built for Kaisers and Empresses, for that whole, public-spirited, feathered and epauletted pageant of Imperial Habsburg pomp, now empty save for the odd lost-looking Albanian family, solitary gypsy, and students getting the hell away inland for a weekend con mama at home. A night train was going back to Budapest, another elegaic, faintly bewildered city, and I, en route for Romania, would be on it.

ROMANIA

I arrived in Timisoara, Romania, a few days later, on a freezing December evening, after spells in Ljubljana and Belgrade.

This was my first return to Romania in 12 years. I had fallen in love with Romania – perversely in love – in 1997, when I spent a colourful month travelling the country. Romania had been a wonderful, warm mess then: not the Wild East neighbouring countries had warned me about, but a place where I felt at home almost at once. There was something of the flavour of how I'd imagined post-war Italy about it: friendly, chaotic, poor but dignified, with a palpable feeling of having emerged from some recent trauma, which they had. The reign of terror of Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu, that overblown, paranoid marriage of shoemaker's son and ploughman's daughter, a union more fatally vindictive than the Macbeths, had recently ended, in the only bloody Eastern European revolution of 1989. Over 1,000 had died, many of them students, and the images that emerged afterwards, of bloodshed, chaos, and mismanaged, bursting orphanages, had labelled Romania Eastern Europe's zone of horror, the one country whose revolution had taken place in the old style. Many doubted then and now that it had been a revolution at all, more a coup d'état by Iliescu, one of Ceausescu's disgruntled ex-ministers, who would later send in the miners to beat up protesters, some of them to death. Romania, at that time, seemed the suffering country of Europe, a region of unresolved, almost limitless anguish.

Yet I found the people there uncommonly friendly – open to long conversations on trains, walking up to me in the street and inviting me to their houses, offering me a bed for the night after half an hour's talk. I'd fallen particularly for Timisoara, the country's 'city of flowers'; here there seemed to be a joyful gathering happening every night, carnival music on cheap synthesisers emerged boppily from gardens, and I loved the square, surrounded by crumbling palaces and churches, all with their patina of flaking paint, where people came each day to fill their water bottles. Prices were rock bottom, and every day seemed to supply some new zaniness, straight out of Kusturica: an old gypsy woman sitting on Piata Victoriei, telling fortunes by getting a parrot to pick cards out of a bag, old men playing chess on stone checkered plinths under the trees, and the evening vendors of corn on the cob with rough salt sprinkled on top. I stayed in an antiquated but charming hotel in the centre, with French windows and fussy chambermaids, emerging every few hours to pick up some new novels from the British Council, to send off postcards, fixing on the stamps with glue provided in pots by the post office, or to walk along the banks of the River Bega, whose faded green grass, as though recorded on 1970s film stock, I came to love. I was lucky in Timisoara that year, meeting a tiny young woman called Adriana, who bought me ice-cream cornets and let me kiss her near the Cathedral, squeaking: 'Oh! That is the most surprising thing to have happened to me in a year.'

'Well..., maybe half a year,' she added bathetically.

In the week that I spent there that year I evolved some sort of routine: lunch was cream cheese spread on horn shaped rolls, with plums for dessert and an occasional visit to a café for ‘Ochiuri cu Telemea’ (fried eggs sprinkled with local cheese). I enjoyed taking a beer on Piata Victoriei in the evenings, making friends with the local stray dogs (loyal and almost leechlike in their servitude) and going to the opera house for a concert. The usherettes tut-tutted at my shorts – didn’t I know this was a dignified place? – but let me in to see the wonderfully bumptious violinist soak up the applause at the end, bowing and rebowing his rotund body, not trying to hide his delight. If things became bleak, there were visits to the Cathedral, pristine, spired and turreted, with its candles at a few lei each, and the tray of water where you stood them, older ones crackling their wax into it, as scarved women, some in tears, moved their lips as they prayed. .

It was only easy intermittently to forget Timisoara’s terrible history: the flashpoint of the revolution, scene of turbulent bishop Lazslo Tokes’s incarceration, and the place where the army had clashed, tragically, with young protesters, with terrible consequences. All over town it seemed, there were memorials to them, stones inset with lacquered black and white portraits, making them look absurdly young and frozen in another time, as though always marked for an early death. There was still great poverty here – beggars everywhere, a woman of Belsen thinness bashing her begging bowl outside the theatre each day, a man shitting on the ground outside the church – yet I found people generous, willing to sweep you up with them. And if a lonely weekend seemed about to come – and there were scorchingly lonely moments at times, as on any solo trip – there were always trains to be boarded, new cities to visit, with the promise of new conversations and groupings. Romanians, I found, were always willing to talk.

The train journeys were something else, with a party atmosphere to them. The Romanian public address system would crackle into life, with its jingle like an old stylophone arpeggio, and hulking locomotives would judder into the stations like Stalinist hulks. Windows would be jammed open, and arms stuck out of them, sometimes belonging to cheering children. You filled your waterbottle at one of the fountains on each platform, and climbed steps up into the carriage: invariably filthy but it didn’t matter: people unfolded in front of you, gypsies with silver and gold coins plaited into their hair would come round begging, and salesman with coloured soda pop and cheap sugared biscuits would hawk their products up and down the corridors. I had read somewhere that Romania hid nothing from you, and it was true. Each journey seemed to supply you with a short story, people’s emotions stripped bare. I saw one elderly lady biting back tears as she said goodbye to her children and grandchildren, no doubt to return to a searingly lonely flat, almost demonstrating the agonies of old age. On another journey I got chatting to a young engaged couple, who seemed compatible and happy enough, until an edibly, animally sexy young peasant girl joined us in our compartment. At once everything changed: I saw the ghost of marital strife appear as the husband-to-be became suddenly hypnotised by this new addition, forgetting altogether his fiancée, who sat bolt upright beside him, frantically fingering her engagement ring, as if to prove that it – and she – still existed.

Occasionally – as if one needed it, with Romania’s almost Gothic landscape – things would grow picturesque, peasants getting on with a basket of live geese, their heads craning out of holes cut into woven Transylvanian peasant fabrics. I would have been

happy, I thought, to see the entire country by train, never getting off them except to buy another ticket and change direction. When journeys were this good, arrival could be a letdown.

A year later, Estonia having dried up, I moved to Romania to take up a job, and found myself disillusioned. Ana, a Russian student in Tallinn, had been fond of telling a joke, about a man who is shown heaven and hell, and is asked which one he wants to live in. Heaven is peaceful and worthy, while Hell is full of discoes, parties, bars, good meals, sensational encounters. Plumping for Hell, he finds himself aghast to be offered not the wonderful nightlife he expects, but a miserable, dishevelled flat and grinding poverty. 'What happened to all those wonderful parties?' he asks the devil. 'Where have all those nightclubs gone?' 'Oh,' says the devil matter-of-factly. 'Before you were just visiting. Now you live here.'

The joke proved true. Timisoara, so colourful for a holiday, was almost impossible to live in unless you were accustomed to it. The job I had taken up at the university turned out to be an illusion, neighbours had decided I was the block's cash-dispenser, and my bed was full of bugs which would jump across the sheets, like little flashing black molecules, as I scratched myself raw through the dawn hours. Even the grapes growing on the balcony and the bullet-holes from the Revolution didn't cheer me up. . Worse still, the local British Council had taken against me, deciding I was making too free with their video and book collection, and froze me out accordingly. This was unbelievable: in Tallinn the British Council had been my second home, and a loving one at that. It was the hub around which everything in the city turned; it was the organisation that had, in the BBC series *Fortunes of War*, got me interested in travelling and lecturing to begin with, and awakened an interest in Romania too. That I could be an irritation to it rather than an asset seemed to upset some natural law. I felt like I'd been disowned by a relative. How could I prosper in a town where the British Council didn't like me?

In fact, the gods that seemed to have blessed my trip round Romania the year before now withdrew all their help. The country closed itself to me now as it had once seemed to open. It was like some strange inversion of Tallinn, where everything workwise had gone right: endless literature teaching, an employer, Krista, who appreciated me, a British Council handing out lecturing opportunities so liberally it was almost scandalous. Here I had clearly got off on the wrong foot with my boss-to-be, and some of the looks the other staff gave me weren't much friendlier: clearly my PR people hadn't been getting the message across. The literature lecturing post I thought I'd taken up turned out to be a bog-standard language job, with a salary of \$100 a month. I had found too, that it was a mistake to move from one foreign country to another, without a space between them. I found myself missing Tallinn - the dinkiness of it, knowing which factory produced our chocolate, where the beer brewery was that supplied us each evening, the dairy where our milk came from. Romania was too vivid, too in-your-face to be a halfway house; but when a Timisoaran girl took me to hang out with some local painters, I was dismayed to find I had nothing to give or receive from them, that I felt only indifference. This wasn't the renaissance I'd planned

I kept myself occupied by volunteering to work at an orphanage. One hour a day, among the babies. This wasn't one of those brutal institutions the world had read

about: it was German-owned, clean, and staffed by a gang of warm, giggly nurses. Besides, the worst orphanages had hailed from the Ceaucescu days, and his hideous policy of exacting, compulsorily, at least five children from women barely able to feed themselves. These babies, meanwhile, born years afterwards, were well-fed and looked after, and given attention in abundance. I was put in charge of nappy changing: sponging the babies down and tying freshly washed strips of linen round them. All was well until one or two were found to have nappy rash, and I was demoted sharply to attention-giver, allowed simply to hang around and play with the kids. Sweetest among them was Alessandra: huge-headed, brown-eyed, apt to stand up in her cot, grasp the side, and sway herself back and forth for hours, in that embracing of rhythm which babies and toddlers seem to love. I didn't know where Alessandra had come from, whether she was an orphan or not: sometimes a strange woman would turn up and hold Alessandra in the corner of the room, bouncing her, talking to her, eyes full of tears. My comment one day that Alessandra was easily my favourite sparked reproach from the Matron: it was important, she said, to be utterly impartial, one must not have favourites. None of the other nurses did, she stressed: they had a job to do. But after she left the room more than one nurse beckoned me, saying, rather sheepishly: 'Come on, I'll show you my favourite child too.' Most of them seemed to love Dinuzu, a chubby, swarthy little toddler of about 1½ who'd learned very early on he was more charming than others. Whenever a nurse passed, would stand up and, with a big confident smile, reach out his arms for a hug.

Now both Dinuzu and Alessandra, these babies, are well into their teens, and it is almost impossible to imagine where they are or what has happened to them in life.

Working at the orphanage was fun, the nurses welcoming and happy to sit down and share their coffee with this strange Englishman, but it wasn't enough to thaw me out for the day. Now that I didn't have the train journeys to make, life was lonely: I could go two or three days without really talking to anyone, and when I did, it felt strange, like I'd forgotten how to do it. Trips didn't go as planned this year, when I tried to start conversations with strangers, as often as not they rebuffed me. Besides, I felt guilty splashing out on train tickets when I wasn't earning, and had no prospect of doing so. I was beginning to feel like a beggar in Timisoara, subsisting on whatever crumbs of good fellowship people decided to bestow. The sense on Friday night of the coming weekend – 48 hours of empty time to fill – was fearsome. After a few weeks of this, when my only prospective private student failed to turn up, I ran down to the coach station and bought a one-way ticket back to London. My attempt to turn my holiday in Timisoara into a life there went into that special file marked: 'Fantasies discarded, theories disproved.' I didn't expect ever to return there again.

Now 12 years later I was doing just that, for the 20th anniversary of the Revolution, which had started, effectively, outside that Cathedral which I'd haunted so long before. To my surprise I loved the idea of going back: I was looking forward to staying at the old hotel, or taking meatballs at that mad café on the corner. I wondered if the egg-restaurant was still there, or the telephone office where I'd gone so many times to make lonely calls home. Returning to places – like rereading a good book – had become, over time, more attractive than visiting new ones. I was eager to see how Romania had fared too, whether it was still the mad, surreal place I remembered, where you could sit on a careering bus, old ladies perched at the front on their folding chairs, pom-pom-pom-pom brass music playing on the stereo, feeling that, if the

driver crashed, his human cargo would fly through the air with a zany, death-despising smile on their faces. I'd forgotten how the railway public service jingle went, and wanted to record it this time on my Dictaphone. All memories of trying to live in Romania were gone and irrelevant: it had been one of the most satisfying countries in the world to visit, and that was all I was planning to do this time around.

The craziness, I noted on the train, still seemed to be there. Having crossed the border into Romania, I asked the ticket-collector what time we would arrive. He thought for a moment, wanting to seem efficient before a visitor, not wanting to withhold the information, yet wondering whether his English was good enough to answer. Finally, deciding it wasn't, he settled on what someone later told me was a 'highly Romanian solution' to the problem. Taking a pen out of his top pocket he leaned forwards and, to my delight, wrote '21.30' in indelible ink on one of the leather seats.

In Timisoara it was snowing, and freezing cold, and I was arriving at night, unsure of how to get to my hotel. Outside the station I skidded along beside tramlines, looking at the Romanian Christmas lights. Strange how much you could tell about a country by the lights it chose for Christmas. Trieste's and Vienna's had been discreet, expensive looking, a forest of white fairy lights draped over everything like a magical mist. Ljubljana's, where I spent a night, were magnificent, great blocks of coordinated colour everywhere whose entire decorative design had been put, gloriously, in the hands of a Slovenian artist. But Romania's were garish and cheerful, with a whiff of the funfair, bulbs in primary colours strung along the street, looking like sugary sweets or circus bunting. That was the Romania I remembered, one devoted to simple, instant fun, unworried about subtlety or good taste.

It was while I was muddling along over the frozen slush that I met Moni and Marcia, two locals who gave me directions. They were amateur actresses, they said, just returning home through the snow from a rehearsal down the road. They seemed a symbiotic pair: Marcia young, soft, dark-eyed, rounded, a 'beautiful child' Moni had called her, and Moni, Hungarian, the natural older sister of the two. A typical Magyar face, I thought: Western features, but with those impenetrable, slightly Asiatic eyes, just as Imre Nagy, their long-executed Premiere had had, one of those notes of exoticism that make Hungary a foreign country. They walked me halfway to my hotel, gave me their numbers, and invited me to their play the following night.

That was my first 15 minutes on the ground in Romania, and I already had an invitation. Whatever I would find in the next few days, that, at least, was still there.

But if Timisoaran hospitality was unchanged, this wasn't true of much else. My first few days there were one small bereavement after another. The hotel, that elegant place with its hint of criminality, staffed by sullen pockmarked men who looked like General Noriega, had been knocked down, replaced by a dismally standardised three-star, all smoked glass, electronic doors, and mock marble. The prices had gone up too: in 1997 my hotel had cost \$5 a night; now it was 60 Euros. The telephone office had gone, and I was thrown back on a lot of shivering calls on wall-mounted telephones in the snow. Timisoara was pitilessly cold, that week. I had only seen it in summer before, when the city felt open and boundless, one freewheeling spree after another, but now all you wanted to do was map out the quickest route and get inside. There were at least no shortage of new cafes in Timisoara – mostly chain coffeeshops, or

trendy places with Blaxploitation posters on the wall. But my lovely stand-up corner cafe, opposite the Cathedral, with its dim lightbulbs and discoloured formica counters and hotdogs and atmosphere of colourful decay (and clientele to match) had gone. Now in its place was the most insipid Western-style 'sophisticated' cocktail bar, with leather sofas and plexiglass coffee tables, carpeting and pot-plants. I knew my dismay was indefensible – the traveller always wants the status quo, as Louis Macneice said, and much of this is because he or she does not have to live there – but it was also undeniable. And when I found my restaurant had gone, where they had grated local cheese onto fried eggs, and served them with wine for a pittance, and that a pasta-chain stood in its place, I wondered whether anything definably Timisoaran had remained. The city is being standardised, streamlined, airbrushed, made just like other places. A few years before I'd returned to Tallinn after nearly a 10 year interval, and was expecting so much change that I was delighted to find the essence still there. With Timisoara the opposite was true: I was depressed. And the station announcement-jingle had gone too. Presumably some apparatchik had decided it wasn't modern enough. In such tiny little homogenisations, almost invisibly incremental, the charms of a country are worn away.

Luckily the Romanian people seemed the same – there was a Latin friendliness and good humour in the shops still, and my meeting with Marci and Moni paid off. That night I met them in a University building – all time worn concrete floors, splitting old sofas and overflowing ashtrays – to see the first production of their theatre group, Woody Allen's 'God'. I didn't know the play, and some of the actors seemed, inevitably, amateurish, given to over gesturing, too much business, too much underlining, but one of them, weasly-faced, wily and deadpan, had a kind of Kusturican quality about him, a natural comedian, born to play loveable and luckless gypsy rogues. I heard later that he had pursued Marci for years, that she had never stopped rebuffing him, a time-honoured ritual they were quite happy to perform for onlookers, a bit of theatre in itself.

Afterwards the actors invited me to go to the bar with them, a local place, old and friendly, with vinyl records tacked to the wall and tall glasses of mulled wine. I was impressed at the ease with which Romanians simply moved and made a place for you in the group, friendly but never overdoing it, as though hospitality to strangers were something so natural for them there was no self-consciousness attached. One girl told me that her favourite thing about Romania was that it was 'a family', and you get this feeling all the time. While it was difficult, they said, to get Romanians to cooperate in any group-work – painting their block of flats, clearing up the rubbish – they still felt a basic fraternity with each other, a sense of belonging. You could still drop round without appointments here, pass the day without making too many plans, let things happen spontaneously.

Predictably, conversations turned at times to their neighbours, for Romanians seem to feel beleaguered on all sides. The Romanian-Hungarian antipathy is well-established, and probably existed well before the Treaty of Trianon which transferred Transylvania from Hungarian to Romanian ownership, opening up the better part of a century of ethnic conflicts, minority issues, bad blood, and that landmined atmosphere for a visitor in which use of the wrong name ('Kolozsvár' for Cluj or, in Hungary, Timisoara for 'Temeszvár') may expose you to a sudden confusing blast of hostility.

‘We would get on with the Hungarians wonderfully if they would stop thinking that Transylvania is theirs,’ said one actress to me in a sing-song voice. ‘And this is what they misunderstand. It is not theirs. It is ours.’

Well, subject closed. But she cultivated a kind of comic glibness, this girl, and knew her words were tongue-in-cheek. Others were more thoughtful, one woman earlier that day, a journalist, telling me that in Tirgu Mures, one of the more troubled Magyar-Romanian cities, she had felt her childhood impoverished by being segregated from the Hungarians who lived there, and educated separately from them. ‘We should have been allowed to get to know them. It would have made our lives fuller. And we would have grown up not feeling like they were a different animal from us.’

For a British Islander spared border disputes and raised on a diet of post-imperial political correctness, such antipathies are strange, and, however incendiary, slightly refreshing. This, you feel, is what most people are actually like. You feel you can give your inner censor a holiday, that you can relax a little. This openness is one of the features of Eastern Europe, and you either find yourself shocked by it, or oddly – and perhaps wrongly – charmed. One can understand it too – being, ostensibly, an example for no one, they are free from the burden of setting one. It is this freedom which seems to give Eastern Europe, at times, a natural and organic quality, however dangerous the direction may be in which such feelings tend.

Meanwhile, the Romanians seem to be able to draw on a collective unconscious of infinite suffering. I was to feel this profoundly when I returned to the theatre group a few nights later to see another production, a performed reading of Romanian poetry about death. This, thank God, was the real thing. It began with an overweight actress, plain among her lissom colleagues, cradling the facsimile of a dead baby in her arms and speaking lines of grief: the agony on her face, humbling in its authenticity, seem to come from some timeless wellspring of pain. The actress’s ugliness and the feeling it must have brought with it surely made her an embodiment of how many Romanians feel about their country. This was the land where one girl on a train had said to me: ‘I lie awake at night sometimes speaking to God, saying to him, “God, you could have made me any nationality you chose. Why did you have to make me Romanian?”’

Yet you can also see at times the identity this feeling gives to Romanians, the idea that of all the countries in Europe, they are number one in having plumbed and continuing to plumb the depths. Whatever the problems of their country, there is some strange self-worth in that.

The poetry reading continued, another young actress played a Romanian old lady, scarved, blind and with eyes bound, tenderly stroking the stick of her broom, while grinding out her litany of lost children, lost beauty, lost youth, lost sight, lost everything. I had seen old ladies like this many times on my travels, and it did not feel like an amateur’s performance, more the channelling of something so many Romanians seem to know in their bones. I was moved and quietly thrilled to see these actors excelling in the depiction of their own world and its history, having failed (and why wouldn’t they?) at depicting Woody Allen’s New York. Images remain: the grieving mother and bewildered old peasant woman freezing and lapsing into silence, the younger generation taking over, soldiers dying, lovers wilting into non-existence,

each actor having mud smeared thickly on their face by the others as death claimed them, making the corpses seem almost organic, a presence in Romanian lives as palpable and ubiquitous as the flaking concrete of their tower blocks, and far more durable. Later that evening I was to see these actors dancing, flirting with each other, drinking punch at an end of production party, and wondered where those tormented ghosts they had played had retreated to. But of their constant and unenviable access to them, there could be no doubt.

Nor does there seem much doubt about the why of it. In a recent book, Victor Sebestyen's *1989*, I saw written what Romanians themselves had insisted to me: that of all the countries in Eastern Europe, under communism they had suffered most. Whatever the appalling outreach of the Stasi, Sebestyen pointed out, its intention of was the amassing of information and control. Ceausescu's principal aim, by contrast, was terror, an end in itself. A British Council Worker, ten years before, had advised me that, because of their history, the Romanians possessed 'infinite layers of subtlety which we do not have access to. Much of them remains hidden.' Whether this is true of the generation currently reaching university age or not, I found it impossible to feel older than them, however much I wanted the security of it. Listening to one young boy telling me about his fall-out with a friend over a girl, the list of his cinematic and literary tastes, or his understanding of his parents' divorce, I found he spoke with an insight that was daunting. So did the young girl, barely 25, practising as a psychologist who, as we were discussing her work, said, matter-of-factly:

'We are all beautiful.... We do not know it, but we are.... And in some way broken... And very, very complex.'

You cannot feel superior to a nation that has lived through or inherited the memory of so much organised and relentless persecution, which seems, like Polish grief and loss, to be the Romanian karma. Another girl among the actors, 20 years old, beautiful and seeming to have lived several lives already, spoke to me about her loneliness, her inability to trust people, her confiding everything only to a diary. Family had failed her, she said: her mother had left her when she was 13 for a man in Serbia, abandoning her barely adolescent daughter to fend for herself alone in the flat, washing, cooking, shopping, fixing, seeing her mother at best a couple of times a year. In a relatively disorganised country, such things are possible, and the Romanian habit of acceptance – as opposed to our ready indignation – enables it too. An average salary – if you have one – is about \$200 a month here, with rents and bills eating up $\frac{3}{4}$ of that, before you have even started to think of food and travel, let alone entertainment. Such a situation does not equip you to feel much outrage over individual injustices or betrayals: they are simply events moving with the general current. As a result, you will find few converts to capitalism – only those who have managed to secure some kind of position for themselves speak well of it. Many young Romanians speak of leaving and spending their lives elsewhere, and this seems intensely sad: few countries seem to have such need of talented leadership, and Romania's talent – in intellect, the arts, and sheer volume of life experience, the country's blatant spiritual sophistication – is surely its real and only wealth, one that one protests at seeing frittered on other, brasher places.

Yet the Romanian young are crazy for travel, a by-product, perhaps, of their decades-long isolation from the outside world. Even to speak to a foreigner under Ceausescu, even to say hello, was to risk arrest. But when I spoke of Eastern European wanderlust to one woman, she corrected me. 'That is not a mania for travel,' she said sharply. 'That is just the cage door opening, people wanting to get out. You cannot imagine what it is like to live in a cage for forty years.' She stared deep into my eyes when she said this, as if to drive the message home. Like many Romanians, she seemed sick of misunderstandings, of outsiders' assumptions, of interpretations without knowledge.

We had met on the train from Budapest, this woman and I. Ana had been happy to talk, and had the confidence of the self-made woman, running a haulage firm with her Austrian husband. Her hair and clothes were well-tended, but she was pudgy and knew it, talking of the two sizes she had gone up since marriage, how much she wanted to return to a size 10. Her feelings of triumph at her own success as a businesswoman were tempered by the knowledge that she could not, would never be accepted or feel comfortable in Austria. 'I am Romanian,' she said. 'That means only one thing to them. They are friendly to my face, but I know they talk behind their hands.'

Romanians live with their bad reputation, and almost accept it, knowing that the mere word summons up visions of criminality in many foreign minds. It is a terrible, demeaning thing to see, the surprise when people take them as they are, seem unprejudiced towards them. Ana, like so many Romanians, blamed the gypsies for the lousy image her country had abroad. 'What do you think it's like?' she said. 'When you tell people you come from Romania, and they start to pull their bags closer towards them, start to pat their pockets. It's awful. It isn't us, it's them.'

She saw my reaction now, because she added: 'Oh, I know how it is for you. You say we mustn't be prejudiced, that we must live alongside them. It's easy to say these things when it doesn't touch you, when it isn't your problem. But when it is...' She shook her head grimly, looking angry.

I did not know what to say. I had heard the gypsies maligned so often since Prague that it no longer seemed strange, yet I hadn't been able to speak to a single gypsy to even the balance. Yet I knew, from Hungary, which way the arguments ran. To probe these mindsets and get, as far as possible, to the truth of it would be the work of several years, and would require one to be utterly fair-minded, open, non-judgmental, either of those who seemed bigoted or the gypsies themselves. All I knew was that to drop in on any of these countries for a few days and impose politically correct analyses on people who lived with a situation for me entirely theoretical would both express and invite contempt.

At any rate, Ana was certain gypsy emigrants had laid the groundwork for what Austrians thought about her. Yet she had her reservations about the Austrians too. 'In the years I've lived there, I've never once heard anyone laugh from their belly. Really laugh, like we do in Romania. And I can't knock on someone's door, and just say, "Hi, I feel like a chat, I have a problem, what's up?".... you know. I must telephone first. "I will come round tomorrow at 5, does that suit you?" Or maybe not tomorrow, maybe next week.' She pressed her lips together at the awful impenetrable normality

of the national failing. 'But maybe next week I won't have a problem, I think. Maybe next week I won't feel like seeing you. I need you *now*.'

It was the same story I'd heard in Hungary, the solidarity of the communist years, how ill it equipped you for the atomisation, the invisible barriers and the selfishness with time that capitalism had brought with it, and that was more and more entrenched the further west you went. 'I tell you something,' Ana said (this was a catchphrase of hers): 'In the old days we could just drop round. Any time of day, if we had a problem. You would help each other out with small sums, if you ran out of money before the end of the month. If we needed flour, and somebody had some, we could just drop round and borrow some, pay them back another time. Or maybe we wouldn't have to pay them back at all.'

But I thought of others who had broken the myth, saying that of course they resented people dropping round, but what could you do? You had no phone, you couldn't phone ahead. And to turn someone away was to be unneighbourly. You might need their help another day. And Ana told another story too, of her mother's desperation to put together a birthday cake for her, how she had had to lie to neighbours who wanted to borrow eggs, had told them she didn't have any. 'And I came out of my room, I was five,' she said, laughing at the memory. 'And I shouted, "Yes, mummy, we do, we've got those three eggs in the fridge."' And my mother was very embarrassed, of course. Ground, swallow me. But the neighbour understood. And we laughed about it.'

'You see, we were so happy with simple things. That's the difference. I remember we would go to the pioneers (the communist cubscout brigade) and they would give us a piece of bread and jam, and we would bite into it,' she mimed a child pushing a slice of bread into its mouth, as far as it would go, 'and the jam would go all over our faces. But it tasted so good. Nothing tastes as good now.'

I was touched by her story, but also felt it related back to any childhood but the most spoilt. The sensation of the simple treat is almost impossible to recapture in adulthood, and remains sacred. Yet Gabriela spoke of a hunger which had left her, as an adult, with a raging, panicked acquisitiveness. 'When I go to a supermarket these days,' she said, 'I just want to take everything. All those different kinds of biscuits. I want packets and packets of each. My husband has to stop me from filling up the trolley. Sometimes he has to put things back on the shelves.'

Are you afraid, I said, that they'll disappear?

'Oh sure,' she said. 'Yes, it has affected me. My husband could not understand at first that if I had a can of coke and he would reach out to drink a bit, I would get fierce. But he knows to leave me alone now. It's not going to change.'

'And believe me,' she added, 'You would have this hunger too, if you'd grown up under communism, if you'd had nothing. I mean, I remember the queues, getting up at 5 in the morning, sometimes earlier. And sometimes you'd queue for hours, maybe you'd bring a stool, and there'd be nothing there..... I remember my mother having money worries, all the time.'

She stared off for a moment, into the past, and then seemed to snap to again. 'But I look around at people in Austria. I mean, I don't want to sound arrogant, but my parents had such a high cultural level. My mother read so much. She had read everything. *Everything*. She was talented. And when I see other people outside, they are so stupid. They've read nothing. Their cultural level is here,' she held the flat of her hand, dismissively, to her chest. 'It's why I get so angry, when Austrians assume they're better. You see this assumption all the time.'

I asked Ana if she ever grieved over her parents spending their whole lives under communism.

'Yes. I do,' she said. 'When I think of what they couldn't experience. Now they place their aspirations on their children. We must fulfil their dreams. And that's maybe why we work so hard. We have no time for social life. We want things. We want to buy the things we never had. We want holidays. So we must work, and work. Sometimes I get home and I can't even talk to my husband. I just want to have a shower and get into bed. And at the weekend, I work again.'

'Is it better?'

'It's just a different way to live,' she said. 'You adapt.' But even she couldn't dismiss the old system totally. 'You know what Ceausescu's son said recently, to Romania's government? He said: "The flats my father built, you cannot even afford to paint." And he is right.'

Whether right or not, Ceausescu's death had provided Ana with as much happiness as anyone else. 'I was 12,' she said. 'And what I remember is that for a whole week, the television just broadcast cartoons. Cartoons from everywhere, morning to night. I was in paradise. You can't imagine.' She was right, I couldn't. 'But even now,' she added, 'once a year, I like to shut myself in my room, with some biscuits, and just watch cartoons for hours.' It was a dream, a symbol of a paradise on earth, handed out as an end to suffering, impossible to recreate but a kind of ritual now of self-caring, of luxury. 'My husband cannot really understand.'

No, I thought. I wasn't surprised. Yet I envied him for the daily strangeness of it, the lesson given, not with words but with patterns, habits, jarring and perhaps at times almost enchanting extremities of behaviour. Of the system's strangeness, how totally and exotically it had marked those who had lived under it. It would take a special man, I thought, to engage with it and attempt to understand, rather than simply dismissing it as another example of his wife's battiness. She agreed: 'He is a special man. He's not as good looking or as tall as I would like for myself, but I knew at once how kind he was, how strong.'

We sat in silence for a while, staring out of the window as snowy grey villages went past. Suddenly she said: 'I loved him as a child. Really loved him. More than a father.'

'Your husband?' I said, baffled.

She smiled. 'Ceausescu. You must understand...' She fixed me with that look again. 'When you live in a box....'

Nostalgia for Ceausescu is on the rise in Romania, among the old and the young. On a train-trip to Cluj I listened as fellow passengers, translated for me by a young boy, reminisced about the Ceausescu years, saying that life was better then, that he had provided for them in a way the new government had not. The facts of the Ceausescu years – the terrible anti-abortion policy, starvation rationing, the wholesale exporting of the country's foodstuffs for galloping repayments of national debt, and the random menace of the Securitate – seem to have been forgotten: people simply know that they are hungry and feel no hope, that prices are due to rise as wages are cut, and that the capitalist party, wherever it is taking place, is not even providing the dullest of echoes in most of their lives. It must be a terrible thing to feel yourself, your energies, your capabilities, squeezed to the absolute limit, and yet know that your current agonies – which seem unendurable – are still low on the scale of what's coming to you. Salaries in Romania are among the lowest in Europe, and as rent and utility prices rise, it is impossible to calculate how many impossible domestic situations it is creating, or the extent to which the old communist provision of secure living conditions now seems an unimaginable dream. Children stay at home after marriage and fear they will never be able to get their own living space. Couples are unable to even contemplate having children. Parents' savings, which might once have bought a home for them, are now, though they represent a lifetime's care and caution, almost worthless. That the communist years are with many coming back into favour seems less a historical process than a spiritual pressure-valve, the need to believe in an alternative reality, even retrospectively. One sees Romanian life sometimes as a kind of shared torture, a constant application of shocks, and just as some resistance is built up, the shocks intensify. When things seem to be pointing in this direction, it's unsurprising that those who don't have the option of leaving long instead for the mythical past, at least a change of agony.

'You must understand,' said one Romanian woman to me, 'We don't have the same automatic hostility to communism here that some other countries have. It wasn't the system itself we hated.' There is a considerable longing for the days of a job and an apartment for life, and perhaps the absolved inertia that such a lack of freedom brings with it, for so much Romanian life now seems a wasting of energy to no effect at all. 'If I could have anything in life I would wish to be a tree,' one Romanian woman said to me. 'Just to be allowed to exist, to endure, to do nothing at all.' Such an attitude does not coexist happily with the free market, and it is a mark of Romanian difference that in no other country I visited did I hear such things.

There was plenty of looking back on Ceausescu last December. In Ghencea cemetery, there were burning candles on the dictator's grave when I visited, and freshly cut flowers. It was the 20th anniversary of his execution, and every television channel seemed to be full of old images, old film stock, old faces. His end has now passed into myth, with clear moments: the old man's shocked bewilderment at seeing the crowd in Bucharest boo instead of cheer him, the abortive attempt to flee by helicopter, and that humdrum, videorecorded trial in a flimsy looking barrack room, more like a domestic argument than a epoch-ending rite. When Elena Ceausescu, in her scarf and

camel coat, demands that they are killed together, there is something almost humdrum about the moment, like a rich pensioner demanding that a butcher not shortchange her on the quality of fillet steak. Those who carried out the execution – unseasoned young paratroopers – speak of never having recovered, one ex-soldier saying that the look Ceausescu gave him on realising he was going to die is in his nightmares still. So is the image of Elena Ceausescu's death: 'She didn't die easily. She was in spasms,' he said, adding: 'I had never even killed a chicken before.'

Then the clouds of smoke, the tangled, collapsed pair of bodies, the look of blankness on Ceausescu's dead face as the blood flows across the asphalt. Romanians would tell me of the scene playing repeatedly on a loop on Romanian television for days afterwards, and of their own reactions – ranging from avenged elation to a private – and unvoiceable – kind of shame.

I wanted to be in Bucharest for the 20th anniversary – it seemed the only place to be. There was a surreal feeling as I sat in the latest Western café, with its patterned banquettes and silky atmosphere and its cakes at €4 a go, and on my wifi-driven laptop read the memories of starvation, powercuts, lavatories which did not flush for weeks on end, heaters whose endlessly cold metal seemed to chill the rooms they sat inert in. Later I walked through the centre of Bucharest, that concrete monument to a man's megalomania, which had destroyed, they said, 40,000 homes and 24 churches, in some of the most beautiful districts of the city. There is something almost magnificent now about its ghoulishness, its ghostliness, something in its emptiness and ugliness that goes beyond what any film-maker could have imagined. Everything seems to sag – the balconies, the tramlines, those open electricity wires which hang in bunches over every central Bucharest pockmarked street. Look how quickly his dream has started to putrefy, you feel, set beside the centuries that those churches and houses had endured.

But at the end of the Boulevard Unirii, styled to put Paris's Champs Elysee in the shade, was Ceausescu's House of the People, second largest building in the world. It loomed through the mist like a half-repressed memory, a warning, a Behemoth still with the power to crush anyone in its path. Towering out of the fog that day, the vapours surrounding it seeming like the obscuring emanations of Romania's tortured history, it had all the force of an eternal ugly Truth. Its chiselled heights give you vertigo, a sense of the brutal depths men sink to when they aspire to be gods – the infinity, too, of that human drive to dominate, to appease one's burning sense of inadequacy, to ride out and make one's neighbour eat dirt and walk on his belly. 'The bitch that bore him is on heat again,' as Brecht said, somewhere in the world and as I write, and the House of the People's endurance seem to embody it. It is right, you feel, that it is still there: everyone should take a look at it.

It seems appropriate too that I finished my tour of the post-Communist world here in Bucharest, whose decaying monstrosity, ugliness, and air of perverted idealism seem to distil the thwarted hopes of the world – both in 1917, and 1989 – and underline the impossibility of Revolution, that a hollow happiness, whether of brotherhood or human freedom, must be paid for, that the roots of a disillusioning reality, capitalist or communist, must be sought in the dream that preceded it. And that frustration, not euphoria, is the natural human state. There was something about Bucharest which

brought back too Shelley's 'Ozymandias', whose closing lines seem to provide a fitting postscript for my entire journey:

Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read,
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed:
And on the pedestal these words appear:
'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings,
Look on my works ye Mighty, and despair!'
No thing beside remains, round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

Whether the wreck is of communism or the free market, those mutually exclusive dreams of the better existence, one dead and buried but increasingly idealised, the other disillusioning all but the strongest, wildest and most entrenched, Shelley's words hold good. It remains to be seen what flawed synthesis Eastern Europe is able to construct in the future, in its many disparate national forms, on the pockmarked ruins of both.

London, 30th June, 2010.