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My Place

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## **Introduction**

**by Roger Hillman**

A number of German authors were asked to contribute to a literary “atlas” that appeared in 1965. Their assignment was to write about a place that had been particularly significant in their lives. Peter Weiss considers conventional options in the opening paragraphs of his text, before settling on a choice that is all the more startling because it is a place he has been for a single day, but that will clearly continue to “inhabit” him forever.

By now Weiss is remembered in the English-speaking world primarily for his plays, with *Marat/Sade* at the helm. The short prose piece “Meine Ortschaft” appears in the 1968 Suhrkamp collection of Weiss’ work titled *Rapporte*, but not in the 1991 Suhrkamp edition of Weiss’ *Werke in sechs Bänden*. An English translation by Christopher Middleton (“My place”) appeared in 1967, but is now out of print. So simply on the score of making available a work by an important writer, this translation hopefully serves a purpose.

But the work’s own claims for ongoing attention are immeasurably greater, and if anything the particular perspective it brings to its subject matter has become yet more challenging. At the time, it was probably the closest approximation in the German-speaking world to the Alain Resnais film *Night and Fog* (1955), in tone, economy, starkness and effectiveness. By now there is an extensive literature about the limits of representation of the extreme historical nadir that was the Holocaust. Registers and perspectives inconceivable when Weiss penned this work in the mid-’60s have emerged. (To cite just three better known examples indicative of the range, the graphic novel *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale*, Benigni’s film *Life is Beautiful*, and Anne Michaels’ novel *Fugitive Pieces*.) At the same time, memory studies has emerged as a sub-discipline within history and cultural studies, along with contested concepts such as “prosthetic memory” (“privately felt public memories that develop after an encounter

with a mass cultural representation of the past, when new images and ideas come into contact with a person's own archive of experience" – Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York; Columbia UP, 2004: 19)).

Weiss' text is clearly germane to such debates. Alongside the growing mainstream status of the documentary as genre and mode, however, its ultramodernity lies perhaps in a more peripheral debate about history, namely counterfactual history. Except that here the counterfactual element is the autobiographical narrator's survival, as someone pre-ordained to have been an inmate of the place he later visits and describes. There are two parallel timeframes here, separated by over twenty years. Yet the narrator projecting himself and us as readers into the earlier frame is not recalling; the only flashback is at the level of historical time, not of resurfacing personal experiences. The authenticity of this voice is silenced only by the meaninglessness of the deaths this place witnessed, not by sharing death with those whose ghosts he evokes, nor (outwardly, in this text) by survivor's guilt. For in that sense he didn't survive the camps; he survived – barely less incredible – the all-enveloping summons to the camps.

The passage of history has overtaken only some of the subject matter of this lament. Holocaust denial still surfaces. This was not the last instance of 'ethnic cleansing' on European soil. The discrepancy between the 119 captive children of Zamość, awaiting their fate, and the busload of schoolchildren who, in the narrator's presence, treat the site somewhat as a theme park, has not disappeared. Indeed, it is accentuated by the greater historical distance, as it is by new forms of commemoration, such as the open, public nature of space in Berlin's Holocaust Memorial. The final sentence of the piece no longer evokes the Federal Republic of Germany of the mid-'60s, but neither is it anachronistic.

The main translation issue that this text presents is the challenge of retaining the lapidary style, which is frequently pregnant with associations. The title is a prime instance. “Place” really corresponds to the imprecision of “Ort,” whereas “Ortschaft” has the dimensions of a village, a small community. There is an overtone of dreadful historic irony embedded in the simplicity of the text, an undertow that only rarely surfaces in the form of a direct comment or lament. One can assume that the original reader of Weiss’ title in a literary atlas would have been lulled into a sense of some intact corner of “Heimat” – a welcoming German homeland – whereas in fact the place referred to emerges as being Auschwitz. Towards the end, the word “Birkenwäldchen” refers to a camp compound, relatively small in size. It embodies a lament for the lost innocence of meaning (“birch wood”) and the diminutive form “-chen,” again correlating with “Heimat” rather than Auschwitz. It further creates an inevitable sonic parallel with “Buchenwald,” yet another word divested of all original associations.

One of the exceptions to the documentary fluency of the text comes on p. 6; the original text speaks of a set of stairs “die ins Freie führt. Ins Freie.” (“ins Freie” means “into the open,” but “frei” also has the sense of “free”). The effect of the repetition is to reinforce the concept’s emptiness in this physical setting, as well as perhaps to restore some of the voided original meaning. In a sentence on p. 7 where the original word “Macht” has been retained, Weiss does not need to spell out the other words: “Arbeit macht frei” = “work makes (you) free.” But he also alludes to “Macht” (as a noun, meaning “power”) at the top of the arch, as well as at the peak of the whole constellation of this “Ortschaft.” On p. 12 the German “Zug” has been rendered by “procession,” but it has an iridescent range of meanings that includes “train,” an overtone definitely intended here – the end of this train line figured as the end of the world.

**Peter Weiss, "My Place"**  
**Translated from the German by Roger Hillman**

As I considered which human settlement or which part of a landscape might be the most suitable for a sketch in this atlas, many possibilities came to mind. But beginning with my birthplace, which bears the name Nowawes, and which available sources place right next to Potsdam on the rail route to Berlin, continuing with the cities of Bremen and Berlin, in which I spent my childhood, right through to the cities London, Prague, Zurich, Stockholm, Paris, where I later finished up, all the places I resided in had a provisional character, and I haven't even mentioned the shorter stops in between, all these spots with names like Warnsdorf in Bohemia, or Montagnola in the Tessin, or Alingsas in western Sweden.

They were places of transit, they provided impressions which were essentially fleeting, quickly vanishing from view, and when I examine what might now be extracted from them to provide a fixed point in the topography of my life, I just finish up time and again with what is evanescent, all these cities become blind spots, and one place alone, where I spent just one day, remains.

The cities I lived in, in whose houses I dwelled, whose streets I walked on, whose inhabitants I spoke with, have no particular contours, they flow into one another, they are parts of a single earthly external world in continual flux, have a harbor to show here, a park there, here a work of art, there a fairground, here a room, there a gateway, they are present in the basic pattern of my wanderings, in a fraction of a second they can be reached and left again, and each time their characteristics have to be invented anew.

Only this one place, of which I had long known, yet which I only saw at a late stage, is totally set off from the rest. It is a place for which I was destined and which I evaded. I myself learned nothing in this place. I have no other connection to it beyond the fact that my name stood

on the list of those meant to be relocated there forever. Twenty years afterwards I saw this place. It is unchangeable. Its buildings cannot be confused with any others.

It too bears a Polish name, like my birthplace, which I might have been shown once from the window of a moving train. It is situated in the district in which, shortly before my birth, my father fought in a legendary Hapsburg army. The place is dominated by the remnants of this army's barracks. So that those working and residing there might understand it better, its name was changed into a German form.

At the station of Auschwitz the freight trains clank. Locomotive whistles and lumbering smoke. Buffers rattling up against each other. The air full of misty rain, the paths softened, the trees bare and damp. Soot-blackened factories, surrounded by barbed wire and walls. Wooden carts grind by, drawn by thin horses, the peasant shrouded in silence, the color of earth. Old women on the paths, wrapped in shawls, carrying bundles. Further off in the fields single farmsteads, bushes and poplars. Everything dismal and tattered. The trains up above on the rail embankment, rolling slowly, unceasingly, backwards and forwards, barred airholes in the wagons. Sidings lead further, to the barracks, and still further, across barren fields to the end of the world.

Beyond the settlements, which are inhabited once more after the evacuation and look like the war had only just ended, the iron bars rise up in front of the site, now rechristened a museum. Cars and buses are drawn up in the parking lot, a school class is just entering by the gate, a troop of soldiers with burgundy-colored caps is going back after their inspection of the site. On the left a long wooden barrack hut; behind a hatch, brochures and postcards are sold. Overheated sentry boxes. Immediately behind the barracks low walls of concrete, above them a slope overgrown by grass, rising to the flat roof with the short, squat, square chimney. The map of the camp tells me

that I am already standing in front of the crematorium, the little crematorium, the first crematorium, the crematorium with limited capacity. The barrack block in front, those were the barracks of the political division, that's where the so-called registry office stood, in which arrivals and departures were listed. That's where the female clerks sat, that's where the people with the death's head emblem went in and out.

I have come here of my own free will. I was not unloaded from any train. I was not driven into this terrain with truncheons. I come here twenty years late.

Iron bars in front of the small windows of the crematorium. To the side a heavy, rotting door, hanging crooked on its hinges, inside, damp coldness. Crumbling stone floor. In a chamber to the right, a big iron furnace. Rails in front of it, on them a trough-shaped metal vehicle, as long as an average human. Inside the cellar two more ovens, with the coffin-wagons on the tracks, the oven hatches wide open, grey dust inside, on one of the wagons a withered bouquet of flowers.

Without thoughts. Without any impressions beyond the fact that I am standing here alone, it is cold, the ovens are cold, the wagons are stiff and rusted. Moisture runs from the black walls. There is a doorway. It leads to the next room. An elongated room, I pace out its length. Twenty paces long. Five paces wide. The walls whitewashed and peeling. The concrete floor worn in places, full of puddles. On the ceiling, between the massive joists, four square openings, running like a shaft through the thick stone drain, a lid over it. Cold. Breath in front of my mouth. Far away outside, voices, steps. I walk slowly through this grave. Feel nothing. See only this floor, these walls. Register: the grainy concoction that gave off its gas in the damp air was thrown in through the openings in the ceiling. At the end of the room a cast iron door with a peephole, behind it a narrow staircase, leading into the open air. Into the open.

There stands a gallows. A crate with flaps that have fallen inwards, above it the stake with the crossbeam. A sign conveys the information that the camp commandant was hanged here. When he was standing on the box, the noose around his neck, he could see before him the main road of the camp, with the poplars on both sides, behind the double row of barbed wire fencing.

I go up the slope onto the roof of the crematorium. The wooden hatches, nailed down with tar paper, can be lifted up by the vents. Underneath lies the dungeon. Medical orderlies in gas masks opened the green tins, shook the contents down onto the faces reaching up, quickly put the hatch down again.

Moving on. I am still outside the camp. The gallows stands on the foundation walls of the interrogation hut, where there was a room with a wooden frame and an iron pipe above. They hung from the iron pipe and were swung and horse-whipped to bits.

The buildings of the complex stand close together, the administration building, the commandant's building, the guards' quarters. High windows above the crematorium bunker. Everywhere a view of the flat roof that the orderlies climbed up onto. Right next to it the barrack windows, through which the blows and the screaming from the swing-room could be heard.

Everything close, squeezed together. Keep going past the double row of concrete pillars topped with barbed wire. Power insulators on them. Signs with the inscription CAUTION - HIGH VOLTAGE. To the right, sheds and structures like animal pens, a few watchtowers, to the left a booth with a kiosk window, on it a board under the overhanging roof, for the stamping of papers, then suddenly the gate, with the cast-iron strip of text, in which the word "Macht" in the middle arches up to the highest point. A red and white striped boom gate is raised, I enter the area called the depot camp.

Had read and heard a lot about it. About those who marched to work here early in the morning, to the rubble pits, to the roadworks, to the factories of the overlords, and returned in the evening, in rows of five, carrying their dead, to the sounds of an orchestra playing there beneath the trees. What does all this tell me, what do I know of it? Now all I know is what these paths look like, lined by poplars, drawn up in straight lines, with side paths running off at right angles, between them the regular two-story blocks of red tiles, forty meters long, numbered from 1 to 28. A small imprisoned town with compulsory orderliness, completely abandoned. Here and there a visitor in the watery fog, looking up at the houses as an outsider. On a corner in the distance the children filing past, led by their teacher.

Here the kitchen buildings on the main square, and in front of them a little sentry box made of planks, with a turret-like roof and a weather vane, jauntily painted with a stone and mortar pattern, as if part of an assembly kit castle. It is the hut of the tally-keeper, from which the rollcall was supervised. I once knew of these rollcalls, of this standing for hours on end in the rain and snow. Now I know only of this empty square of clay, in the middle of which three beams are rammed into the earth, supporting an iron rail. I also knew how they used to stand under the track on stools and how the stools were then pushed away from under them and how the men with the death's head caps hung from their legs to break their necks. I had seen it in front of me when I heard and read of it. Now I can no longer see it.

The dominant impression is that everything is much smaller than I had imagined it. From each point the perimeter can be seen, behind the barbed wire the light grey wall assembled from concrete blocks. At the extreme right corner Blocks Ten and Eleven, linked by walls, at the front in the middle the open wooden gate to the courtyard with the Black Wall.

This Black Wall, with short pieces of plank jutting out at the sides as a shield, is now disguised by cork sheets and wreaths. Forty paces from the gate to the wall. Pieces of tile

stamped into the sandy soil. By the boundary stone of the building to the left, whose windows are hidden by boards, runs the drain that collected the blood of the piles of those shot. At a trot, naked, they came from the door on the right, down the six steps, in twos, held by the arms by the bunker Kapo. And behind the nailed-up windows in the block opposite lay the women, whose wombs were filled with a white substance like cement.

Here is the washroom of Block Eleven. Here those who had to go to the wall took off their miserable blue striped clothes, here in this dirty little room, the bottom half tarred, the top half whitewashed, full of rusty blackish spots and spurts, surrounded by a tin washing trough, traversed by black pipes, crossed by the shower plumbing, they stood, their numbers written in ink on their ribs.

Here the washroom, here the stone aisle, divided by iron bars, at the front the room of the block commandant, with a writing table, camp bed and narrow cupboards, on the wall the slogan "EIN VOLK, EIN REICH, EIN FÜHRER," a grid in front of the door, a peep into a showcase. Another panopticon - the courtroom opposite, with the long conference table, the volumes of proceedings on the grey cloth, for now and then the death sentences were pronounced, by men who today live an honest existence and enjoy their bourgeois honors.

Here the steps leading down to the bunkers. They made an effort to paint the walls with an edging that gave a shimmering marble effect. The central aisle, and to right and left the side aisles with cells, about three by two and a half meters in area, with a bucket in a wooden box and a tiny window. Some, too, without windows, just an airhole up above in the corner. Up to forty men were here, struggling for a spot next to the crack in the door, they tore off their clothes, collapsed. There were those still alive after a week without food. There were those whose shins bore the traces of teeth, whose fingers were bitten off, when they were pulled out.

I look into the spaces that I myself escaped, stand still between the fossilized walls, hear no boots pacing, no shouted commands, no groaning or whimpering.

Here, next to this narrow antechamber, are the four standing cells. There is the tiny opening on the ground, half a meter high and wide, with iron bars still behind it, that's where they crawled in and stood in fours, in a shaft of ninety by ninety centimeters. Up above the airhole, smaller than the palm of a hand. Stood there for five nights, ten nights, two weeks, every night, after the day's hard labor.

On the outer wall of the block there are prefabricated concrete boxes with a little perforated tin lid. From here the air forces its way through the long wall shaft down into the cells where they stood, back or knees to the stone. They died while standing, had to be scratched out from below in the morning.

For hours now I have been walking around in the camp. I am able to find my bearings. I stood in the courtyard in front of the Black Wall, I saw the trees behind the wall, and did not hear the small-bore rifle shots fired point-blank into the back of the head. I have seen the roof beams on which they were strung up by their hands tied behind their backs, a foot above the ground. I have seen the rooms with the hidden windows, in which women's ovaries were burnt by X-rays. I have seen the corridor in which they all stood, tens of thousands of them, and slowly moved forward into the doctor's room, and were led off, one after the other, behind the grey-green curtain, where they were pressed onto a stool and had to raise their left arms for the injection in the heart, and through the window I saw the courtyard outside, on which the hundred and nineteen children of Zamość waited, and went on playing with a ball, until it was their turn.

I have seen the drawing of the roof of the old kitchen, on which was painted in big letters: "There is one way to freedom - its markers are obedience, diligence, cleanliness, honesty, truthfulness, sobriety and love of the fatherland." I have seen the mountain of hair clippings in

the showcase. I have seen the relics of the children's clothes, the shoes, toothbrushes and false teeth. Everything was cold and dead.

Ever present is the clanking and shunting of the freight trains, smoke puffing from the chimneys of the locomotives, the long drawn-out whistling. Trains roll in the direction of Birkenau across the wide, flat landscape. Here where the clay path rises to the railway embankment and crosses it, the gentlemen stood with outstretched hands and pointed to the open fields and determined the foundation of the place of banishment, which now sinks once again into the marshy earth.

A single track branches off from the main line. Runs through the grass, broken apart here and there, for a long way till it reaches a faded, elongated building, a barn with the bare remains of a roof, and a tower falling to bits, runs right through the middle of the arched barn gate.

Just as everything in the other camp was narrow and cramped, here it all stretches out endlessly, cannot be taken in with a single glance.

To the right, up till the stretches of woodland, the countless chimneys of the shabby, burned-out barracks. Only single rows remain of these stalls for hundreds of thousands of people. To the left, in straight lines and disappearing in the mist, the stone quarters of the captive women. In the middle, a kilometer long, the ramp. Even as it decays, the principle of orderliness and symmetry is recognizable. Behind the barn gate, at the junction, the track divides and heads both right and left. Grass is growing between the sleepers. Grass is growing in the rubble of the ramp, which barely rises above the tracks. It was a long way up to the wrenched-open doors of the freight trains. Over a distance of one and a half meters they had to leap down onto the sharp-edged pebbles, and throw down their luggage and their dead. Those men who were allowed to live a while longer went to the right, those women deemed able to work went to the left, and

straight ahead along the path went the old, the infirm, and children, towards the two smoking chimney stacks.

The sun, just above the horizon, breaks through the clouds and is reflected in the windows of the watchtowers. To the right and left at the end of the ramp lie clumps of ruins between the trees, the poplars at the rear enclosure stand motionless, far away in a farmyard geese are squawking. To the right is the small Birkenwald compound. I can see before me the image of the women and children encamped there, a woman is carrying an infant at her breast, and in the background a group is moving to the subterranean chambers. The architecture of the buildings can still be made out from the giant heap of stones, with the bowed iron supports and collapsed concrete roofs. Here the narrow steps lead down into the antechamber, about 40 meters long, where the benches were, and numbered hooks on the walls, for hanging up shoes and clothing. Here they stood naked, men, women and children, and they were ordered to take note of their number so that they could find their clothes again after showering.

These long stone pits, through which millions of humans were sluiced, into the rooms branching off at right angles with the perforated tin pillars, and then were sent up to the furnaces, to drift across the landscape as brown smoke with a sickly smell. These stone pits, with steps leading down to them, steps worn out by millions of feet, empty now, changing back into sand and earth, lying peacefully beneath the setting sun.

This is where they went, in slow procession, coming from all parts of Europe, this is the horizon they could still see, these are the poplars, these the watchtowers, with reflections of the sun caught in the window glass, this is the door they went through, into the rooms bathed in harsh light, in which there were no showers but only these square pillars of tin, these are the foundation walls between which they perished in the sudden darkness, in the jets of gas from the holes. And these words, these insights say nothing, explain nothing. Only piles of stones remain,

overgrown by grass. Ashes remain in the earth, from those who died for nothing, who were torn away from their homes, their shops, their workplaces, away from their children, their wives, husbands, those they loved, away from everyday life, and were hurled into what is beyond comprehension. Nothing has remained apart from the utter senselessness of their death.

Voices. A bus has driven up and children get out. Now the school class inspects the ruins. For a while the children listen to their teacher, then they climb around on the stones, some are already jumping down, laughing and chasing one another, a girl runs along beside a long, hollowed-out furrow that skirts the remains of the tracks across a fragment of concrete. This was the curved track on which the dead bodies slid to the trolleys. Glancing back on my way to the women's camp I can still see the children between the trees and hear the teacher clapping his hands to call them together.

The moment the sun sinks, the mists rise from the ground and smolder around the low barracks. The doors stand open. Somewhere I go inside. And now it is like this: here the breathing, whispering and rustling is not yet completely covered by the mantle of silence, these plank beds, three stories of them, along the side walls and along the middle section, are not yet completely abandoned, here in the straw, in the heavy shadows, the thousand bodies can still be imagined, right down at the bottom, at ground level, on the cold concrete, up above, under the diagonally slanting roof, on the boards, in the compartments, between the bricked support walls, right up close to one another, six in each hole, here the outside world has not yet fully penetrated, here you might still expect some movement inside, a raised head, a hand reaching out.

But after a while silence and numbness set in here, too. A living person came, and what happened is closed off from this living person. The living person who comes here, from another world, possesses nothing but his knowledge of figures, of written reports, of testimonies, they are a part of his life, he grapples with them, but can only comprehend what happens to himself. Only

when he himself is pushed away from his table and put in chains, when he is kicked and whipped, does he know what this is. Only when it goes on next to him, rounding them up, beating them down, loading them into carts, only then does he know what this is like.

Now he is just standing in a world that has perished. Here he can do no more. For a while total silence prevails.

Then he knows it is not over yet.