Putin's Postbox

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On an impulse not quite clear to myself, this morning I got in the car almost still drowsy and drove out to the edge of town to take another look at a certain originally maize-yellow but now moss-green postbox, the image of which has been in my mind since last winter. That box, I remember precisely, is installed next to the entrance to an otherwise unremarkable block of flats, and it is one of the rather unattractive models that were fitted everywhere in West Germany, mainly in the 1980s, when right angles were considered uncontemporary and rounded corners were preferred, which, however, didn't make the postboxes look more elegant but, on the contrary, clunkier.

When I first went looking for the block with the postbox, I had trouble finding the address – number 101 on Radeberger Strasse, a street that thins down to an unpaved road, then dwindles to a trodden path. The entire prefabricated housing estate is in an area that may once not have been marked on the map of Dresden at all, or merely as a blank spot, for to a certain extent it was a part of Russia – and by my impression, it still is today – albeit a piece of Russia that is unlikely to be marked on any Russian map. During the latter half of the 80s, a flat on

the third floor of the building at 101 Radeberger Strasse, once called Julian-Marchlewski-Strasse, with the postbox I recalled affixed to its façade by the Deutsche Bundespost after 1990, possibly in 1992, immediately after the last Commonwealth of Independent States troops left Dresden, was home to the Putin family.

The house numbers and entrances – as I've known since that winter, when I saw numerous footprints in the snow – are on the rear side of the long building, located on a street with no name. Upon turning onto that bumpy lane, I find confirmation of an inkling that came to me on the way; the postbox has indeed been removed since I was last here. Not even plastered-over drill holes are visible in the concrete slab dividing the ground-floor living room from the outside world, I establish, as I ascend the three steps between the clearly demarcated patches of lawn on either side of the front door.

All apartments but one appear to be occupied, as I gather from the doorbell panel – 12 parties in total. For the second-floor flat on the right – perhaps the one underneath that of Vladimir Putin – the label states: 'guest apartment'; perhaps because it's hard to rent out, because tenants can't stand the thought of the ghost of a long-vanished Russian trampling about above their heads; perhaps because guests – *whose* guests? I wonder – might enjoy spending a night or two imagining a sleepless president-to-be pacing the floor upstairs.

That seems exaggerated, however; it simply doesn't befit a man always described as extremely inconspicuous, if not to say faceless. This invisibility can't be solely due to his work as a secret service officer either; it must be down to his person, for he is a man whose life provides so little anecdotal material that his biographers regard it as noteworthy that members of a Dresden anglers' club recalled only one characteristic of their new recruit from Leningrad: his unbearable pedantry. He

stuck stoically to his views, they reported, for instance on how to affix bait correctly to the hook, or how the line had to be cast out at a particular angle, for which reason his clubmates were on the brink of losing all joy in the not exactly joyful art of angling.

While I take a look around and make notes, I am observed from one of the upper windows, by an old woman, I suspect – I don't look up very closely. She was presumably already watching me as I parked my car in the residents' parking area, got out and cast a glance through the glass door into the stairwell; as I strode along the block, nine entrances in total, recognisable from a distance by the reddish matte facing which extends six storeys up the otherwise evenly grey façade; as I turned left, having reached the far end of the block, as I spied a decrepit building, perhaps a former school, appearing between the already sparsely leafed trees. And she watches me still, as I walk back down the gentle slope to my car, where birches, maples and beeches grow wild behind the windscreen.

Here, secluded from the city, Russian is still spoken as a matter of course, as I hear when a young couple heads towards me. Only a schoolboy behind me has fun reciting the numbers one to ten in loud English, and as he passes, he says, 'Bad boys, bad boys,' shaping his hand into a gun, setting his sights on me and then issuing a few muted assault rifle sounds.

The postbox is no longer there, I note down before starting up the engine, and I think: the old woman on the fifth floor will soon have her peace and quiet again. As I drive slowly past bottle banks and an abandoned three-piece suite, towards Elbtal, and put that empty Russian space behind me, the anecdotal far from my mind, it occurs to me that I may well have provided the woman at the window with enough material for her to spend the rest of the day fabricating an anecdote to tell her husband when he returns home in the evening, as they're sitting at the

table and eating an unremarkable meal like something that might have been served in the neighbouring flat at the end of the 1980s, in the Putin family.

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The Grosser Garten is on the south-eastern edge of Dresden's old centre. It is the town's largest inner-city park, a place you can take your Sunday walks for years at a time without ever getting the impression you've seen every group of plants, every copse and every cutting – although the Great Garden occupies a straightforward rectangle on the map and is largely structured along clear lines in its mixture of baroque garden and English park. The Grosser Garten is perhaps the counterpoint to the Ostragehege, or, as Caspar David Friedrich called his famous painting: *The Great Enclosure at Dresden*, an area on the other side of the old city, to the west and, as we can see in Friedrich's work – his sunset sky mirrored in a web of pools and puddles – an alluvial plain of the Elbe, a peri-urban wilderness devoid of right angles into which the Dresdeners rarely venture, or so it appears when viewing the Ostra Enclosure from the opposite bank on a walk along the Elbe.

The name Ostragehege has an echo of *Ost*, the east, and it is in fact of Slavic origin, just as Dresden's name goes back to a Slavic word for swamp dwellers – this city with its old wards like Seidnitz, Loschwitz, Leubnitz and Kleinzschachwitz is nothing more than an agglomeration of Slavic settlements built on swampland.

The Grosser Garten, in contrast, was created not on a drained swamp but on fields outside the city, originally as a site for baroque feasts, staged hunts for red deer or bears driven through wooded scenery, with no place to hide in the thickets or to escape to altogether. To this day, the Grosser Garten performs the

wilderness in consistently domesticated form, as tamed as nature appears in the adjacent Zoological Garden – or at least separated from curious visitors by bars, ditches and panes of glass. Which does not mean the wilderness disappears with the dividing line between man and beast – sometimes a glance suffices to encourage a barely recognisably wild creature, living out its years as jaded children's entertainment, to mime its wildness again.

For instance in 1867, when the Dostoevskys – on this rare occasion not short on funds – are subjected to a staging of wildness on a visit to the Dresden zoo that far exceeds what you might expect for the entrance fee. As his wife noted in her diary, Dostoevsky seeks eye contact with a one-eyed male beast in the lion house, stares it in the eye and is in turn stared back at by the lion, stands up to the lion's glare without batting an eyelid, and forces the mighty creature, through this play of the eyes, to express its wildness: the lion begins to roar wildly, yet Dostoevsky's leonine glare stands up, the lion roars and roars until the lionesses add their growls to the choir. Whereupon all present are mightily impressed, the lion family just as much as the wife and Dostoevsky himself: the expressive Russian writer has stared into the African lion's soul, forcing it without a word, not a single Russian word, to externalise its interior, to break out in leonine expression.

But what are we really dealing with in this story, told by Hans Blumenberg in his *Lions* book? Is it praise for a husband perhaps unmighty in everyday life, but certainly mighty on a visit to the zoo? Praise for the wordless understanding between man and beast, of which only an extremely sensitive mind is capable? Or praise for the Russian language, which proves mighty even when it isn't spoken at all?

No, I believe the visit to the Dresden zoo described in Anna Dostoevsky's diary bears the traces of an experience that can be read through another writer's observation, noted almost a

hundred years later. It is Elias Canetti who – without thinking of the Dostoevskys' flight across Europe, through foreign language territories – once described, in conjunction with considerations on keeping a diary, what influence travel may exert on our ideas of language. According to Canetti, our perspective on both our own and unfamiliar languages alters abruptly in foreign lands, when speaking to strangers without understanding one another; that is, when attempting to make ourselves understood by means of signs and pretended words. And he writes in 1965, as if commenting on that 1867 lion scene: 'Language, otherwise an instrument that one thought one could manipulate, suddenly becomes wild and dangerous.'

In unfamiliar lands, our own language proves to be the untameable lion itself.

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From west to east, the Grosser Garten is divided by the broad main boulevard into two equal-sized areas, its northern and southern halves. A while ago, I began to notice on my walks that this boulevard marks not only the middle of the park, but also a linguistic border – my Sunday language border when I walk around the northern part, coming from the south. Entering the park from Tiergartenstrasse at the Carola Pond on Sunday afternoons, I find myself in the midst of excursionists: families, groups, couples visiting the Carola Palace, the restaurant on the lake, disembarking from the nearest park railway station or renting a rowing boat. A tangle of voices from which I pick up German words and phrases at every turn.

From the Carola Pond, I follow the canal to the north. The park grows quieter, cyclists and skaters crossing the main path. Beyond the main path, towards the New Pond, the sound of the language surrounding me shifts all at once: Russian mingles

with German, and the proportion of Russian increases the closer I get to the northern edge of the Grosser Garten.

For a time, it seemed as though the linguistic boundary in the Grosser Garten were impermeable to the south, as though Dresden's Russophone inhabitants, who live in Johannstadt in the north, only ever walked as far as the main path, or else they fell silent as soon as they followed the paths into the southern part of the park.

Gradually, though, very gradually with each passing Sunday, the boundary has been shifting. Whereas the first Russian words I heard on the southern side were a sensation, I now keep an eye out for groups of people, and wager with myself whether they will speak German or Russian amongst themselves. The language is migrating. And the languages are mingling. Although today's Russian is, of course, a 'different' Russian to that spoken in Dresden until the early 1990s, or which, more frequently still, remained unheard: the Russian of the Soviet troops garrisoned here, who rarely left their barracks and then usually in closed groups, whose best-known former member these days is Vladimir Putin.

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How does that untameable lion, our own language in foreign climes, react when it feels threatened, for instance by an unruly mob shouting and jeering in anger? Does it go on the attack, or does another creature leap – so swiftly that hardly anyone notices – into its place?

On 5 December 1989, Vladimir Putin and his colleagues are intently incinerating files at their office. Every regime so far has learned from experience that paper does not burn well in large quantities, since the flames barely get enough oxygen to nourish them, but every regime apparently has to experience this anew. Perhaps the KGB staff in Dresden soaked their heaps of files in

the famous Russian tank fuel; in any case, dense smoke forms on the grounds, rising above Bautzner Strasse and drawing a curious crowd that day, of demonstrators in the process of storming the Stasi headquarters around the corner. Later, Vladimir Putin will describe it in leonine terms, saying it was perfectly alright for him to watch the Germans tear their own secret service to pieces.

Putin explains to the unruly mob that this is not a German but a Soviet institution – they have got the wrong address, so to speak. They don't trust him. Someone asks: 'And who are you? You speak such good German.'

One might think the lamb had taken the place of the lion without the demonstrators noticing: speak the foreign language on foreign territory to convince you are tame. Especially as Vladimir Putin speaks a domesticated German, the German of language courses, and not the Saxon German of the streets of Dresden – that, too, may be the source of surprise at his 'good German'.

What he hasn't reckoned with is the fact that the German language arouses the demonstrators' distrust on this occasion, this particular evening. It exposes him to the suspicion of being a Stasi agent, despite his High German camouflage. Were he to speak in Russian – who knows, perhaps the unruly Dresdeners would be prepared, after a few easily comprehensible sentences, to regard him as a local Gorbachev. No one out there in front of the KGB office knows, after all, that Putin is merely improvising, that he envisaged everything very differently. In fact, armed security forces were to be in his place. But when he went to call them, the curt response was: 'We can't do anything without orders from Moscow. And Moscow is silent.' Not a single word of Russian on the telephone line. Even Moscow no longer speaks Putin's language.

'And who are you?' There is no record of whether the secret service agent gives his name in this situation, as he speaks with

a tamed German tongue rather than falling back into familiar Russian. He is a translator, he says. Simply a translator.

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It is said Vladimir Putin still enjoys practising the foreign language he learned back then, when he visits Germany – and perhaps in his mind's eye, while he chats with the chancellor, he sees those heaps of files smouldering.

I've never heard him speak, nor do I know how freely he actually moved around Dresden, whether a secret service officer was permitted, for instance, to leave the garrison with his wife on a Sunday afternoon purely for pleasure – but a KGB man is always on the job. Yet in retrospect, Putin's character seems to stand out from the mass of Dresden's Russians in so many facets that I wouldn't put it past him: excursions to the Grosser Garten, which over time come to seem, perhaps not to his wife but to his colleagues, like minor dares, small adventures, secretly permitted by his superiors, of course, as a reward for outstanding work, or simply in recognition of his general inconspicuousness, nothing of which will change, even on a Sunday in the city.

The Putins overstepping the boundary: In the northern half of the park, the couple speak Russian, but as soon as they reach the main path he swaps to German, as if pressing a switch, not interrupting his wife's chatter. He, a master of camouflage and adaptation as a secret service agent, and she, the wife of that master, thus stride in a southerly direction for a while, Lyudmila Putina never letting on that she may barely understand a word of her husband's. Nodding gently, I imagine, she walks by his side – her silent pride and silent observation of the fellow strollers they pass: do they notice that this not very tall man with the sober expression is not a native German speaker?