
Opening Extract from...

Germania

A Personal History of German Ancient and Modern

Written by Simon Winder

Published by Picador

Simon Winder

GERMANIA

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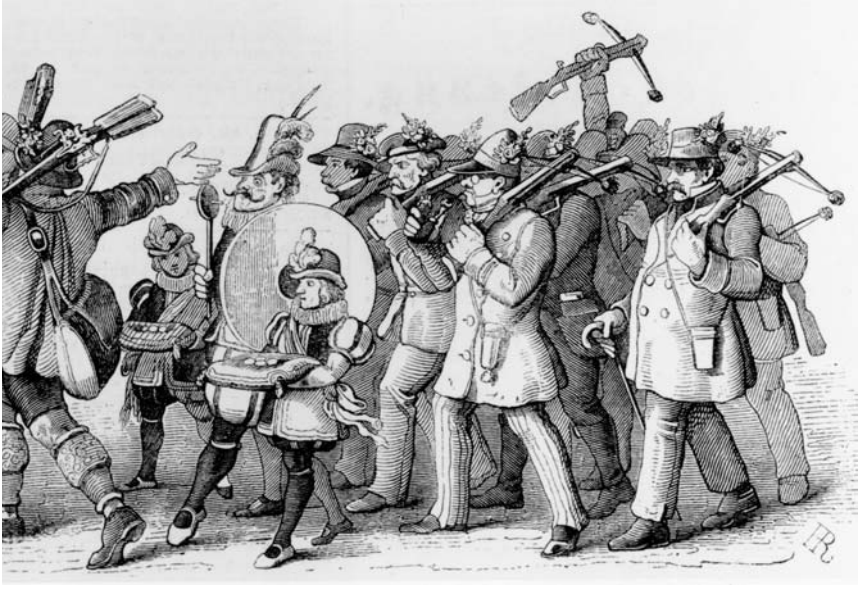

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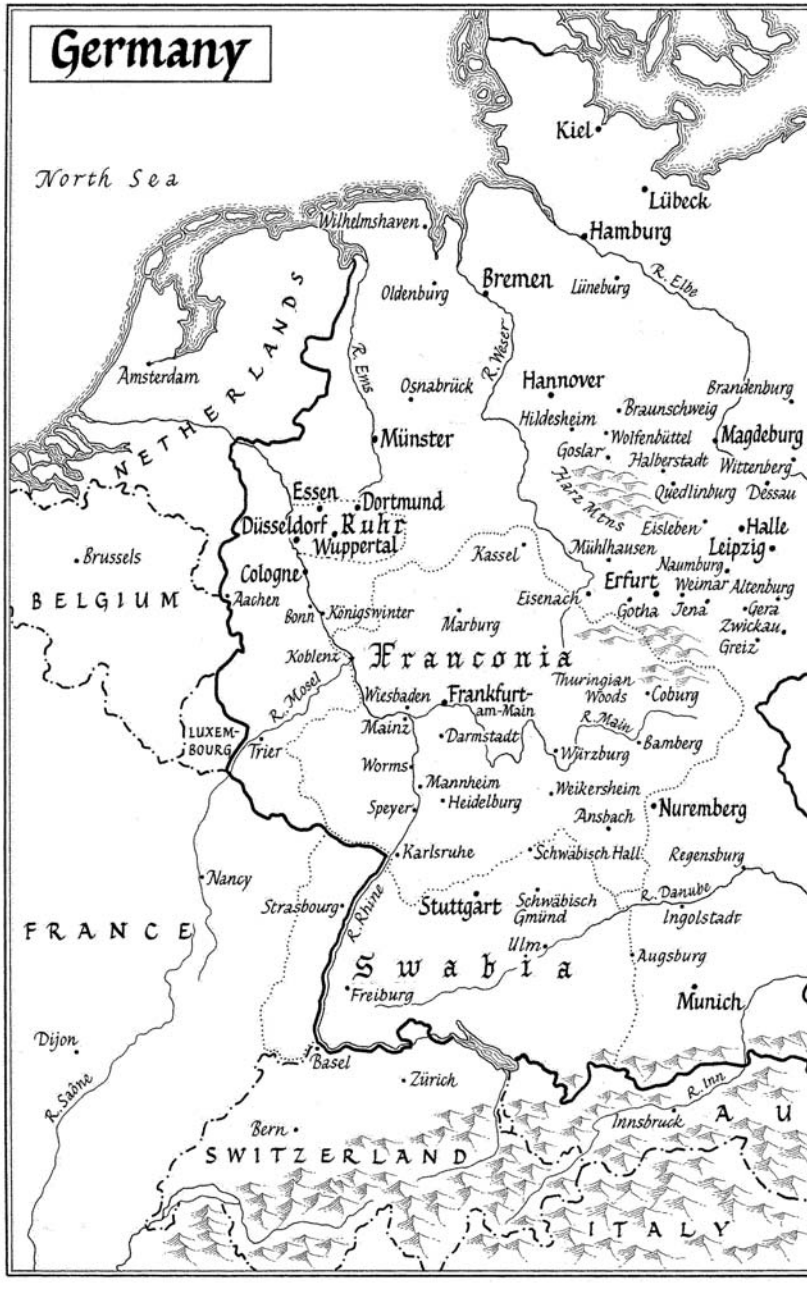
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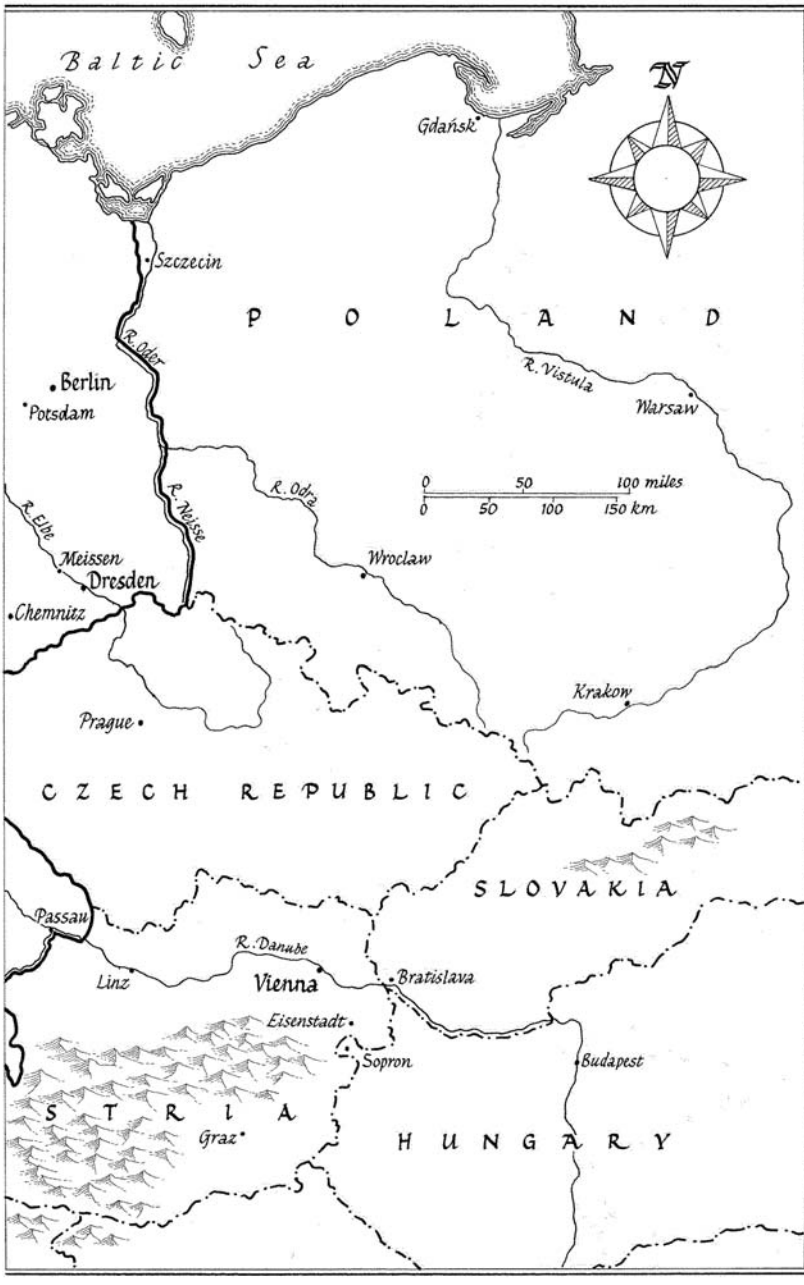
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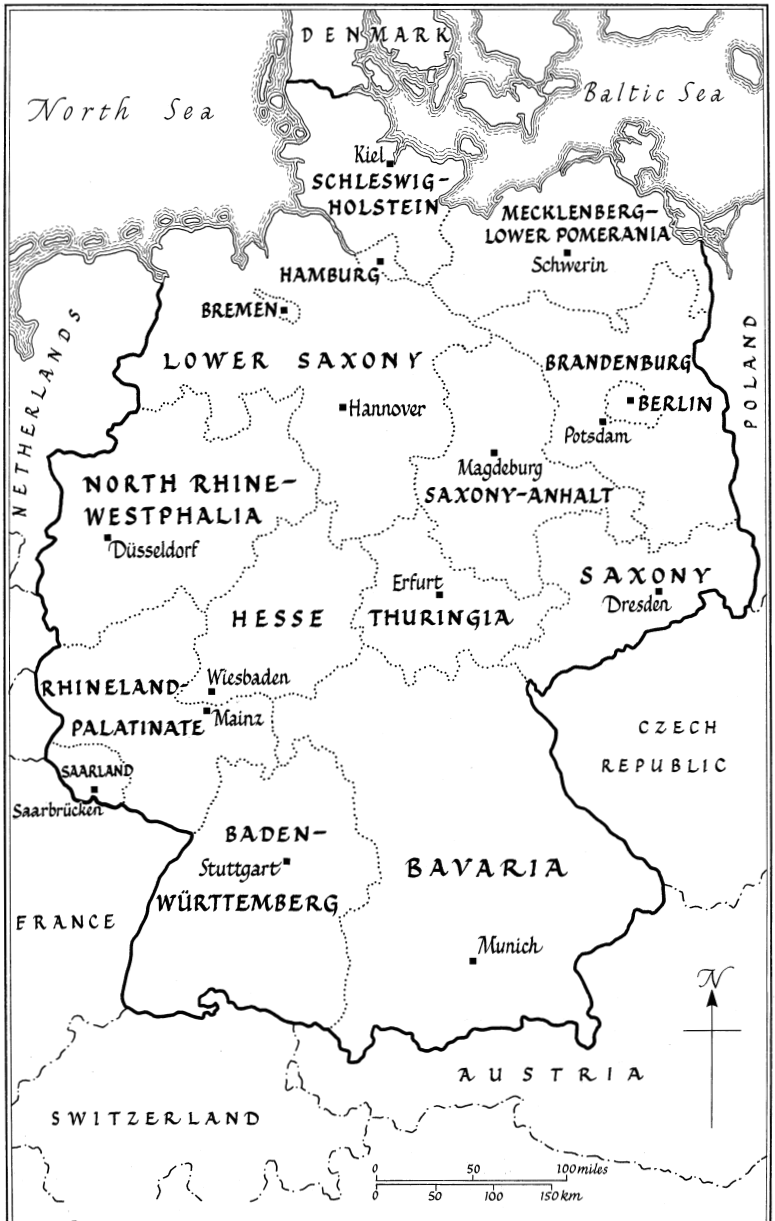

The sixteen Länder and their capital cities

Introduction

'Bound with chains of flowers'

I have spent many years chewing over German history and this book is an entirely personal response to it. Dozens of visits to Germany and Austria form the core of *Germania*. It is an attempt to tell the story of the Germans starting from their notional origins in the sort of forests enjoyed by gnomes and heroes and ending at the time of Hitler's seizure of power, by way of my own thoughts about what I have seen, read and found interesting. Of course people travel for different reasons and what I find bewitching someone else may well find stupefying. If, for some, travel is a chance to admire Counter-Reformation altarpieces and for others a chance for a one-on-one roughhouse with a Dortmund transsexual, then these are possibly irreconcilable priorities – although they could intersect in some of the less bustling regional museums. It is therefore built into this book that I will bore or alienate some readers – but I hope not too many. *Germania* is designed to be an entertainment – although I hope the implications of some of what I am saying are reasonably thought-provoking.

Germany is a sort of Dead Zone today. Its English-speaking visitors tend to be those with professional reasons for being there – soldiers, historians, builders. One of the amusements at Frankfurt airport is seeing baffled little clumps of British recent ex-students in special dark suits waiting for planes – given jobs by German banks purely because they are part of, in evolutionary terms, an alarmingly un-diverse band who had happened to study German at university, their career choice based on a facility with languages rather than being able to, say, count, flatter clients or take smart decisions.

Germany is shunned for a very good reason – the enormity of its actions in part of the last century. But is there perhaps a point when this quarantine becomes too mutilating to Europe's culture, when in effect it allows Hitler's estimation of his own country to prevail? This book is, of course, soaked in the disaster of the Third Reich, but by beginning in those ancient forests and ending when he seizes power in 1933, I want to get round the Führer and try to reclaim a bit of Europe which is in many ways Britain's weird twin, and which for almost all of its history has been no less attractive and no more or less admirable than many other countries. Germany is a place without which European culture makes no sense, and for over sixty years Germans have been working strenuously to rebuild that culture in a way that, while admitting the legacy of the Third Reich, allows that earlier past to shine again.

The book is in chronological order, although the Roman and medieval bits veer around alarmingly and are as much about why later Germans were so obsessed with these periods as they are about the periods themselves. Every attempt has been made to avoid a mere sequence of dreary dynastic events. The chronology is less oppressive than it might be because I take regular time-outs to talk about music, fairy tales, alcohol and so on. But where did this interest come from?

Some families relish action and adventure, others are perhaps more passive. Growing up, I – like all children – assumed that my own family was just like any other – that we in fact provided a benchmark by which other families were more rambunctious than ourselves or more snobbish or more gloomy. Looking back from the slightly more comparative heights of adulthood, my family (myself included) now strike me as almost crazily inert. Months would go by with effectively no form of activity whatsoever. We would engage in a restricted range of household chores, but otherwise my parents and my younger sisters and I lived, in our west Kent idyll, in a sort of enchanted castle of torpor. My mother disapproved of any form of exercise so we had no bicycles and, despite having a large garden, I had a clear sense that it was probably a mistake to

go outside at all, with its lack of comfortable chairs and reading lamps. Occasionally my father would battle to mow the moss-clogged lawn, but I certainly never volunteered to help and the garden always won. Once a summer we would stir ourselves sufficiently to have lunch outside, but my sisters and I would take turns to be alarmed by wasps, something would always get spilled and the conversation would tend to veer acrimoniously in wrong directions. My hatred for all forms of sport – stemming of course from incompetence – put the final lid on. While we were busy in the usual ways during the school term, the weekends and holidays seemed to drift by in a genial slough of inaction. This background is necessary to understand the sheer drama and excitement of my first encounter with Germanness, the unintended pivot that changed the direction of my life.

Looking back I think my father was a little frustrated by the general housebound stasis. He liked to do DIY and had run and fenced at school. His one great surprise was that he was in the Royal Naval Reserve. This was a commitment he began shortly before meeting my mother and she always hated it as it meant that for two weeks of the year he would disappear with an irritating combination of nonchalance and patriotism, while she had to deal with a pile of needy if unvigorous children. How I loved his annual trip. He would go on nuclear submarines, minesweepers, aircraft carriers (the *Ark Royal*!), fly as a passenger in Phantom fighter-bombers. Clearly the whole thing was a laugh, and because the Cold War never went anywhere, it simply became a government-paid-for way to eat huge fatty breakfasts, wear a devastatingly lovely uniform, drink a lot and fire guns. He wound up with the James Bond rank of commander, with a gorgeous peaked cap and a jacket festooned at the cuff with the sort of gold-stitching that makes fighting wars almost worthwhile. He would send me occasional, curtly mysterious postcards with suitable pictures of jets and missiles and stuff, which gave me a cumulative, phony credibility at my boarding school.

So, as may be imagined, there was what could potentially be viewed as a creative tension in the household between the day-to-

day cheerful somnolence and the secret two-week burst of apparent action and adventure enjoyed by my father. Our annual family holidays were always very happy events, almost always in France, every now and then (and much less happily) in Scotland or Wales, depending on how much money was around. In France we usually and sensibly went to the seaside, staying in little rented houses, and while the ferry journey was an epic of vomiting and distress, these trips to Brittany or Normandy were genuine idylls – sunshine, child-friendly food, just enough sightseeing and small museums to be tolerable, regular intakes of ice-cream.

But one year, when I was aged fourteen, this all changed. I have never quite dared confront my father with why he thought this was a good idea – at some level I can see why, of course, but it implied such an absolute failure to understand the weakness of the human materials at hand that it leaves me at a loss. In any event, he decided that we should go on a barge holiday to Alsace and Lorraine, taking a week to chunter along a canal to Strasbourg. Once there he would get a taxi back to our car and we would all go on to a holiday house in the Alsatian countryside.

The objections to this were considerable. The sheer lack of coast was a bit perplexing – holidays, by definition, were on the fringe of the land and Alsace and Lorraine were almost aggressively not. As a parent now myself I can see this as a wholly legitimate cry for help. Slumped on beach after beach, part of a colossal herd of bored adults, I will routinely fantasize about taking everyone off to Chad or Missouri for a holiday – a dream of inland, of an environment not shaped by the tyranny of the salty margin. But at the time we were all incredulously unable to deal with what might have been going through my father's head.

Of course the whole thing was not improved by my being in the middle of a grim, sulky, epicene sort of phase – an adolescent extension of my childhood inertia. Everything was too much trouble, too much fuss, but also everything was insufficiently glamorous or intellectually aspiring. Indeed it is, on reflection, quite possible that my parents gleefully conspired to come up with a holiday that would do most humiliating damage to my little fort of self-regard.

Burping along in a tiny boat down a reeking canal through an almost featureless bit of scarred eastern French landscape may have been a joke on a scale I have never managed to grasp.

The whole trip was a predictable disaster. My father stalked the bridge like a trainee version of the grizzled Captain McWhirr in Conrad's *Typhoon*, or a general sort of Conradian amalgam, grimly breasting aside Fate, thinking how nice it would be if only he could harbour some dark secret or had some hidden flaw which a crisis would fatally show up. He had the part down pat, but alas his crew, far from being the swarming, nimble lascars of his imagination, consisted of me and my younger sisters. I proved of limited value as the morning mist on the water turned out to give me a migraine, so I would lie below decks with multi-coloured thread-worms flowing through my eyes, listlessly reading an early Anita Brookner novel between bouts. My sisters were slightly more helpful but obsessed with keeping their gorgeously patterned holiday trousers from getting dirty. Each time we reached a lock we all leapt around, heaving on a variety of stanchions, nauseated by the filthy water, squealing as wet ropes slapped about. Memorably a dead rat bobbing in the lock water, inflated with gas like a bolster, burst as we incompetently crashed the barge into the concrete side wall. We were always letting go of the wrong ropes or heaving on the wrong side, my father once having to take emergency action (a Conrad-style life test that could not be failed!) as the ropes remained tied on one side of the lock and, as the water level rapidly went down, the boat threatened to be left hanging on its side from the top of the lock – presumably only for a few moments before the ropes snapped under the immense weight and we crashed to the lock's bottom, leaving nothing to remember us by but a sodden copy of Anita Brookner's *A Start in Life*.

The real sufferer in all this was, as ever, my mother. It is an odd feature of so many holidays that they are structured around having far worse facilities for cooking and cleaning than at home. So the expression of festive family special time becomes having a single little hot plate, or no washing machine. Every summer, the world fills with individuals huddled in houses, boats and caravans,

cursing a tiny gas flame and battered pot, unable to express any of the creativity which was so often a key to our shared existence. Perversely, holidays therefore dull down the heart of family life and leave only tins of soup, spaghetti and pieces of ham. This was certainly the case in our ill-starred barge. My mother was an exuberant, complex chef, but here she was catastrophically reined in. Like some woefully uninvolving card game, each meal was played out within the same set of desperate, narrow variants. Aware of this, my mother was in a permanent rage – she had not asked to chug through grey countryside on a filthy, evil-smelling, dwarf, shunned, freshwater cousin of the Good Ship *Lollipop*.

Of course, the canal cutting through a haggardly agricultural landscape and in itself harbouring frequent stagnant patches, the stage set for our barge generated a constantly changing, but massive, chorus of insects. These came in every size – seemingly fitting neatly, like keys, through different sizes of crack in the boat. The evenings were intolerable, as we grimly munched through the usual spaghetti with bits of ham and an incredible, almost Pandoran pile of flying creatures filled the room, the air thick with the reek of useless anti-mosquito smoke and the desperate, if artful, screams of my sisters. It must have been an enjoyable sight for any passing Alsatian labourer at the end of a day of toil, to see the barge rocking at its moorings, glowing with insect-attracting light, smelling strangely of Italian cooking and giving off a rich blend of buzzes, shrieks and moans.

In any event as we steadily headed eastward I little realized that I was, very slowly, being injected into the Germanic lands which have now occupied me for more than a quarter of a century; through what at the time seemed a sodden, dull part of the world, but which had been fought over by the French and Germans for centuries and in which hardly a field had not been the arena for some awful war, with everyone from Louis XIV to Patton passing through. My ignorance shielded me as, in the trip's low point, we turned a bend in the canal, looking forward to reaching Strasbourg the next morning, only to find a tunnel, blocked up with mangy old planks clearly of great age and a massive sign proclaiming that the

canal was closed – and must have been for some years. I never worked out the source of this spectacular failure of communication, but we returned to the nearest lock and abandoned the stupid barge. My father sheepishly tracked down a taxi via the lock-keeper; this took him the startlingly short distance back to the car and we then all drove on in comfort, style and speed. What happened to the barge I will never know – perhaps we were the last people poorly informed enough to use it. We stayed in a hotel for a night, resolved never to go on an action holiday again, and then moved on to our tiny house in the Alsatian countryside. I had arrived.

It would be good to imply that being in Alsace was a sort of instant revelation to me, but to be honest it was more just a puzzle. We had not asked for a holiday on some world-historical fault line, but just for the usual sort of jolly vacation cottage in France generally demanded by English families. On the first morning we capered down, as traditional, to get croissants only to find that there was only a sort of crusty roll available. The houses looked funny too. If English towns were my unthinking baseline and French towns the exotic variant, then these houses fitted with neither – their whole vocabulary was just subtly wrong. The village's name was also a little confusing: Wolfskirchen. Settling down the first morning while my father negotiated with the heavily whiskered old lady in a bulky house-coat who owned the house, there were further oddities. Her French was almost unintelligible and she clearly spoke something else to other people in her little shop. Her offer of a glass of schnapps to my father (this was about eight in the morning) also seemed to cross some sort of line – particularly when he, driven on as ever by the needs of politeness, drank three in quick succession, thereby putting the rest of the day on a rather odd footing.

As with almost all important events, the significance only becomes clear in retrospect – but I do remember throwing Anita aside and becoming immediately much more alert. Walking around the mournful tunnels of the Maginot Line with its empty gun emplacements and a long-deserted underground canteen painted with elaborate Mickey Mouse murals by bored French troops in

the 1930s was perhaps goad enough for anyone with a potential curiosity about historical events: the expression in millions of tons of concrete that Alsace was eternally, if intermittently, French. An afternoon in Baden-Baden, the nearest German town, was another. My parents had never been to Germany before and were patently uneasy with the whole idea – not helped by my sisters and I wandering through the streets yelling '*Dummkopf!*' and '*Achtung!*' at each other and whistling the *Great Escape* music in a way that probably didn't promote post-war healing.

The real surprise was Strasbourg, which we at last visited, sensibly using the car. It really did seem something new to me. I was probably at a vulnerable age, but Strasbourg's grandeur and the sense it had of belonging to a culture I did not understand gave it a strange clarity in my mind. Like some acne-laden Kentish Goethe, I had arrived. Wandering around the extraordinary cathedral museum was the first occasion when I realized I had an aesthetic sense. There is a famous double sculpture there, brought down from the cathedral's facade, of a simpering maiden being offered an apple by a finely dressed and winning man. As you walk around the back of the male statue you can see that his cloak is decorated with toads and other loathsome creatures. I remember spending ages staring at this statue and being thrilled to be back in Strasbourg a couple of days later, allowing me to look at it again. This was also my first encounter with those late medieval paintings of Adam and Eve before and after the Fall – 'after' showing them as repulsive, tortured semi-corpses.

The cathedral itself again had a different atmosphere – Gothic but odd. For me its unbeatable centrepiece was the astronomical clock – a monstrous nineteenth-century confection clinging to one wall, featuring at midday a skeleton beating out the time on drums, a cock crowing in remembrance of Peter's denying Jesus and an unworkable jumble of mechanical pagan and Christian elements (Juno in a little chariot, various Apostles) cavorting around to Death's drum. And so my art sense was born: evil creatures lurking in a cloak, plague-derived Grand Guignol, dusty mechanical toys. This all now seems so long ago and yet thirty years on I cannot

say I have progressed much, still clinging to a sort of ghost-train aesthetic, despite any number of failed attempts to haul myself onto the higher ground of Beauty.

Looking back, and knowing a little bit more, Strasbourg Cathedral is what you would expect to find – a hybrid German–French building, showing in itself Alsace's tragic inability to be clearly definable as belonging to one nationalism or another. I became more and more interested in the area and found myself reading more and more. So what started with rat-filled canal locks and an odd lack of croissants ended in an adult life reading voraciously around the subject, editing (my real job) many history books about Germany and having countless conversations with historians, an unmethodical but zealous immersion that has resulted in this book.

I come, though, with a tragic flaw. In the dystopic waiting room that is one's forties it is possible to be quite serene on the language issue. I am reconciled to being useless at languages in the same way that I am now reconciled to dying *still* unable to identify tree species or remember phone numbers. But for many years I charged at language after language in the manner of someone running up against some massively barred and studded fortress door: Italian, Latin, Spanish, French, Russian, Arabic (in a moment of lunatic lack of self-knowledge), German, Ancient Greek – a catalogue of complete pointlessness. On a conservative estimate I must have spent over a thousand hours of my childhood in Latin lessons – a magnificent grounding in that tongue and the sort of steady application that takes full advantage of the sponge-like absorbency of the young mind. In an adult spasm of masochism I recently bought *Teach Yourself Latin* which, to my total dismay, showed that eight years of Latin lessons had actually only got me about twenty-five pages into a three-hundred-page book. This hopelessness extended everywhere – Italian, Spanish and French were always doomed simply because they were taught at school. I have some vague memory of being castigated in a French lesson aged eleven or so for having spent much of the lesson trying to fill my pen cap with saliva. Spanish

and Italian were exam subjects of which I now have no memory at all.

Russian, Arabic and German were different because they were actively self-motivated. Trying to learn Russian was stupid – a humiliation but a short-lived one. Arabic was more serious. I had spent some time in the Middle East selling books and became completely enamoured of cultural Islam, souks and sand – but above all the shape of the letters and their artistic use. Given that I had a clear block on all language learning I'm not sure really *what* I was thinking. I was living in New York at the time and it is possible I had erroneously felt a sense of opportunity in the air. I trooped into my evening class at New York University and happy hours curling, looping and dotting followed. Many in the group were Lebanese-American men who, in their twenties, were suffering a legitimate pang of anxiety about their loss of family roots. It was curious to see the difficulties they immediately crashed into – the sense that they had some genetic relationship with Arabic which would allow it naturally to flow with a little work, a relationship which in practice did not exist at all. They had no more of a leg-up on this fiendish language than I did, with my head fizzing with images of hookahs, divans and minarets. In any event, after a perfect term learning the wonderful script there was an awful awakening – Arabic beyond the alphabet turned out to be even worse than French. My attention wandered – I may even have toyed with seeing how quickly I could fill my pen cap with saliva. So another language bit the dust and I was left with the (very briefly) amusing trick of showing friends what their names looked like in rough Arabic transcription.

There was an unhappy sequel to this. I still vividly remember wandering around the abbey of St-Denis, north of Paris, where all the French kings were buried, and vowing to improve my knowledge of medieval monarchs. I had the sequence down from 1550 or so (everyone's called Louis, in order, with a handful of easily remembered, vivid exceptions) – but the huge accumulation of earlier people called Louis or Charles was a tangle. This was when I realized the limits of the human brain. I had always assumed

I could indefinitely add stuff – battles, capital cities, dynasties. As I loaded up those Merovingian and Capetian kings I felt my brain, like some desperately rubbish, home-assembled bathroom shelf, lurch suddenly to one side, and all the Arabic alphabet fall off the other end. Shortly after that the whole thing came off the wall, taking the pointless Merovingians with it too.

So I reeled into my adult life with a virtual language blank, beyond an ability to order beer or ask for train platform numbers. I can see in my mind all my teachers: stern, bland, desirable, desiccated, impatient, prim, fiery, resigned, bitter, bilious, despairing. It is an enjoyable exercise, in fact: faces, mannerisms, bodies all so clearly recalled by my brain's purring visual functions – a stark contrast to the crashed spaceship that is the bit dealing with languages.

It was then that I encountered German. By this point in my adult life even at my most delusive I could see that I had a problem with languages. I was resigned to always flunk Tlingit, say, or Miao – but perhaps through sheer effort I could land one mainstream European language and not remain trapped in the roomy but over-familiar cage of English. Ever since that teenage visit to Strasbourg my enthusiasm for German history and literature had grown and grown. Thomas Bernhard, Joseph Roth and Günter Grass were my heroes, and it was time to be serious at last about engaging with their work and the real version of the words they had written.

And so I embarked on the last great language adventure. Thinking about it now, intellectually it seemed to be the equivalent of one of those grizzled, independent-minded medieval German warlords who, pondering too long in his isolated castle, decides to go on one final raid, having already lost most of his best hounds, horses and sons on earlier outings, galloping down to the plains in a hopeless yet honourable bid to die, yet live on in story.

Galloping into New York University again I remember being oddly buoyant and cheerful about the whole business: a new exercise book, a new language, nicely sharpened pencils. Quite quickly I ran into the usual problems – like not really understanding anything. The individual words were as sonorous and magnificent as

I'd hoped and many hours were spent rolling them over my tongue and getting what I imagined to be a rather wonderful accent. However: they knocked on the door and they rang on the bell, but Mr Language was not at home. After a term the only real breakthrough was when there was a flurry at the door and Roland Gift, formerly of the Fine Young Cannibals, was ushered into the classroom through one door and then out the other – to avoid his fans: or, more plausibly by that point, to avoid imaginary fans. In any event, happy minutes were spent thinking, 'That *really* was Roland Gift,' while issues of sentence structure drifted along in the background.

There followed a fruitless few months with four other students and a Latvian dancer who was gamely attempting to use language lessons to construct a financial rope bridge between her free-form-dance-explosion income and her Village rental outgoing. These lessons were as futile as the rest, but on the subway each morning and evening I would practise by reading Heine's poems, with a crib, and became absolutely obsessed with the German language and its beauties even as my brain continued to be wrongly structured for any absorptive work. I do not know now why I chose Heine – probably just as a random find in a bookstore, in an edition that did not appear threateningly long. My head filled with Moorish princes, ivy-clad castles, sea-ghosts and roses. I would plunge along each day on the N train, unable even to manage the simplest German idioms but, with a faltering confidence, articulate enough to say that my lance and shield were stolen and my love had bound me up with chains of flowers. Once I started my wanderings around Germany I kept crossing Heine's path and he has since always stood for everything attractive and thoughtful – but I really think that my making him my mentor was an accident, and my view of Germany could equally have been shaped by other more malign, grandiloquent or stuffy figures. In any event, Heine may walk by my side, but we are unable to talk to each other.

Regensburg is a small German city on the upper Danube, tucked into a corner of eastern Bavaria and well on the way to Austria. It remains medieval in an almost cartoonish form, with its Gothic

cathedral, its swaggering merchants' houses, narrow alleys with cute and obscure names and, above all, the great bridge. By building a fortified stone bridge over the Danube, by having a town at the only point where, thanks to an island, this was feasible, by defending it over the centuries against all comers and charging everyone for going over it or round it, the Regensburgers became rich, controlling the trade between Northern Europe and Venice. The simplicity of their cunning and good fortune gives their town a happy, daft quality.

The huge piers of the bridge cause chaos for the Danube's flow, which is sedately implacable on one side and a dangerous cauldron on the other. The pleasure of this sight is much enhanced by the surviving medieval watchtower and salt depot, and a tiny, ancient bratwurst restaurant, saturated inside by smoking grills and steaming sinks. I had been chatting by this restaurant to a cheerful couple from Rottweil who, after a few minutes, nudged each other and in some embarrassment asked: 'So: why are you *here*?' They were happy to visit Regensburg themselves but could not understand what someone English could be doing there – and it was true that over several days I had bumped into nobody English and only a couple of Americans, and these were retired veterans who had once been stationed in Germany. It was as though Regensburg's amazing cathedral, a shop selling potatoes made from marzipan, a Roman wall, the site of Napoleon's headquarters, the former assembly chamber of the Holy Roman Empire and an amusing medieval torture chamber could simply not be legitimate sources of interest for non-Germans. Later, standing on the quay by the bridge, rocking on my heels, contentedly staring at the great whirlpools, thinking of where the Danube had come from, and where it went on to, bratwurst in a crusty roll in hand, it suddenly seemed impossible not to set out to write a book that might convey something of this lost country.

A note on Germany and German

The modern states of Germany and Austria only cover part of the historic German land. The entire course of Germanic history has been an argument about poorly defined borders, sometimes with the most terrible consequences. I have, with a handful of self-indulgent exceptions, restricted this book to modern borders as it is within them that there are the towns and landscapes which remain a live issue for Germans themselves. Historically the areas now called Germany and Austria have been so entangled that I generally do not differentiate between them. A different book could have been written that encompassed everything from Zürich to the land of the remaining Volga Germans, and I would love to have written it, but it would have been at least twice as long and even more chaotic than what you are holding.

It is impossible to be consistent with German names, as at different times specific names have sunk into the English-speaking conscious one way or another. In the case of cities, to refer to München, Wien or Köln would be unhelpful and pretentious. In the case of individuals, where there is not a universal English usage I have always used German. Frederick the Great, Maria Theresa, Charlemagne and Charles V all stay familiar, but otherwise everyone gets to keep their German name. The Emperor means the Holy Roman Emperor and, after 1804, the Emperor of Austria; the Kaiser means the German emperor after 1871. These are all arbitrary decisions, but mostly they work and they have the overwhelming advantage of coming out just right in the end: Kaiser Wilhelm, a name with a century-long flavour of dastardly creepiness, is far preferable to the Emperor William, who sounds like someone from an unchallenging children's story.

Aside from names I have used almost no German words at all, in order to reflect my own language ability. The reader will therefore be spared the usual analysis of complex German concepts which cannot be translated into English, such as 'the sense of self-loathing and emotional collapse men feel as they walk down the

steps into a beerhall toilet', and so on. There are only two exceptions: Ratskeller and the unavoidable Schloss. A Ratskeller does not sound terrific to non-Germans, but it is a restaurant in the cellar (Keller) of the town hall (Rathaus) and tends to be decorated with elk-antler chandeliers and serve artery-gumming food. A Schloss can be a lightning-devastated tower on a crag or a pretty town-palace festooned in allegorical figures; it can be a massive, ruinous attempt to copy Versailles or just a simple country house. Words like 'palace' or 'castle' just cannot stretch to encompass Schloss.