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*Ahnen (Forefathers)*

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It starts with the fact that my password is 'Panzerdivision'. I chose it years ago when applying for accreditation for the lower level of the Bibliothèque nationale, the section reserved for researchers. To reserve seats and order books online, you need a pseudonym. I could of course have chosen something meaning lime-blossom or silkworm. I'd chosen Panzerdivision. It was a nickname once bestowed on me by an extremely charming Frenchman invincible in the high art of irony – albeit an art which has since fallen in my appreciation – a name that must be pronounced with as nasal an accent as possible, a soft 's' and the stress on the final syllable: *pansèredivisiòn*. This name, which not only applied to me as a German, but was also intended to match certain very personal characteristics of mine, and presumably does, was something I had once found amusing. In the context of the research I plan to carry out with the aid of this password, it no longer sounds quite so funny. My research is into a German who spent several years in Poland. My great-grandfather. To clarify from the very beginning: my great-grandfather didn't invade Poland. The area around Poznań where he lived had been annexed to Prussia in 1815. Nevertheless, I still want to change my library pseudonym. Once chosen, the lady in charge of issuing cards explains sourly, a personal password, a so-called alias, remains as it is forever. Panzerdivision.

The name is like the past itself; we all know there's no running away from it. It seems to be the case: you go to a foreign country, like me, settle there, learn to speak and write the language so well that you're taken for a native, at least sometimes. You think you can submerge yourself in the culture. But wherever you go and however long you've been living abroad, everyone there has already read our wanted notice. And they laugh or curse at you: Panzerdivision!

So the password stays as it is. And ultimately, I can't rule out that the book I plan to write about my great-grandfather won't be overrun by the German invaders, sooner or later.

I shall start by giving him a kind of password or name of his own; I don't want to write either 'my great-grandfather' over and over, that not being the most important role in his life, or his full name, Florens Christian Rang, or indeed Florens Christian, as I always heard him referred to in my paternal family, which takes a familiar but respectful approach to him, let alone 'our hero' – something I like in neither its ironic nor its literal sense. FCR (like JFK) would be

short and practical, but is clearly too suggestive of a football club. So, what password would I choose for him if I had to apply for an annual ticket for him at the French national library? There are plenty of adjectives that would suit him: seeking, insane, floundering, radical, irrepressible, tempestuous. What I'm looking for, though, is a name, a password. I choose – after a bird I've often seen following the back and forth of the waterline on French coasts – Sanderling.

[...]

You should apply for the Bosch Foundation's border-crossing grant, says someone I tell about my plan to follow in Sanderling's footsteps to Poland. I'm not particularly surprised to hear that this border-crossing thing is almost perfectly tailored to my needs, apparently – there is financial support to suit pretty much any project in Germany. Why not, if it is tailored to your needs, I tell myself. And immediately after that: Do you need the money? Can't you go to Poland without outside support? In the end you'll have to include an acknowledgement to the Robert Bosch Foundation in your book, advertising for the Bosch company. Proudly eschewing such funding, I consider, would be a sign of dignity. As I think about it, still veering between honour and money, I realize I've already begun my journey and am suddenly halfway between Florens and Panzerdivision, between Sanderling and me.

*Boche* is one of the most common insults applied to the Germans by the French; incidentally, it is often used these days in implied quotation marks, with a certain measure of irony that can also serve, in rare cases like this, not to intensify spite but to mitigate it. Because the word is pronounced exactly like the German company Bosch, I assumed for many years that it derived from this root. Since someone pointed out my mistake I've looked into the matter, and it's true. It seems to be nothing but a remarkable coincidence that the company name is a phonetic match for the cuss word. Where does this defamatory term come from, then?

Allegedly from *alboche*, a portmanteau of *allemand* and *caboché* meaning something like 'German blockhead'. That sounds like a friendly pleonasm, friendlier at least than the word *boche* sounds when thrown at one's own blockhead. Less friendly, though, than the word *rigolboche*, another French term that refers to a jokester; in other words, the opposite of a German. I have taken the etymology of the word *boche* from the *Trésor de la langue française*, and I shall do my best to consider it correct. Does that mean, though, that it was utterly absurd to connect the Bosch company for so many years with the cuss word *boche*?

The information I find on Bosch is highly contradictory. Let's take it as an omen that almost as many contradictions as words will pave the way to this book. Some see the company's founder Robert Bosch as a magnificent saviour of human lives, some even as a man involved

in political resistance against the Nazis. He was concerned for the common good, particularly the health of his fellow men; among other things, he built a hospital in Stuttgart. And yet Hitler ordered a state funeral for Robert Bosch. Above all, over half the workers in the Bosch mechanical engineering subsidiary Dreilinden-Maschinenbau, which manufactured goods mainly for the German Luftwaffe, were forced labourers, prisoners of war and concentration camp inmates from the Kleinmachnow sub-camp. Dreilinden is a part of Kleinmachnow, where the subsidiary was based. On the one hand, on the other hand? It seems undisputed that the company's management board did not consist of fanatical Nazis, but came to arrangements with the regime to avoid the company being expropriated. And also that the company made a great deal of money out of the war that regime incited.

So, do I take money from Bosch?

I decide to apply for the grant, simply because it puts me directly on the path to the book. If I get the funding, I tell myself as temporary justification, I can always turn it down with a dramatic and demonstrative gesture. Me, accept money from you? Never! Or my application is rejected and I avoid any moral dilemma. Let's wait and see.

From Bosch or *boche* it's not far to another word station at which I'll be stopping off before I turn to Sanderling. The word imposing itself on me is one he may never have heard. With which he had no associations. It had no particular significance during his lifetime. It is a word I have heard and read a hundred times – no, a thousand times – but hardly ever uttered myself. And even now I won't say it out loud, only write it down. It is not the only word that creates a void around itself, not the only one by far that refuses to pass my lips. In this case, though, that refusal to pass my lips is not a figure of speech, but a commandment that I feel clearly. The word does not want me to utter it. I don't know whether it wants to be spoken out loud at all, and if so, by whom. It is the name of a place in Poland, and by this point at the latest everyone will know what the word is.

Some time ago I heard a programme on French radio in which the word was spoken. It's not that that's a rarity; quite the opposite. It is, as I wrote above, a word heard very often, which suggests that other people don't have the same sense of reserve as I do. On the aforementioned programme, it was the presenter who spoke the word in passing. Like all French speakers, she pronounced the 'Au' like an 'O'. And as I've been disconcerted to hear several times from French mouths, she moved the 'sch' to the end of the word. What she said, then, was a word that sounded something like 'Oswitsch'. Incidentally, the programme was not at all about the subject with which the word is now associated, if I remember rightly, but

about poetry, and the word cropped up merely as part of the now formulaic question 'Is it possible to write poetry after A.?' But perhaps my memory is deceiving me about that.

It is not deceiving me with regard to the rest of the radio programme. It was broadcast months ago and I've thought about it many times since. One of the guests was a French Jewish woman. She was the first to say anything after *the word* was spoken. In a voice so sharp it has remained with me, she asked the presenter – her request sounding more like a reprimand, or indeed a command – never to say the word again in the way she'd just said it, and she demonstrated how to pronounce it. The pronunciation she criticized and referred to as wrong appeared, in her eyes, to be an impermissible act of negligence and lack of respect for the word and all it stands for. She didn't say as much, but that was what her irritated, hostile tone expressed. The presenter apologized and went on speaking, apparently unruffled.

Now, trying to examine through the writing process what went through my head at the time and since then, I have a clear sense of the caution with which I must choose my words, on the one hand, while on the other hand I am aware, and was at the time, of my contradictory perception of this incident. It seems as if this minor episode of only a matter of seconds might reflect the entire difficulty and complexity of the relationship between Jews and non-Jews since – then.

I could understand the woman adopting such a harsh tone; it was obvious she couldn't bear to hear the word pronounced in a way she considered negligent and wrong. At the same time, I had a rising sense of resistance against her correction. Although I almost never say the word in question, I felt as though her reprimand had been addressed at me personally. My vague sensation was and is that no matter how hard I try, being a non-Jew and a German on top, I simply *can't* pronounce the word correctly. Might that be one of the reasons why I avoid it?

Later, I think about what 'correct' and 'wrong' might mean in this context. What the French Jewish woman considered correct on the radio programme was, as she certainly knew best herself, the common French pronunciation of the German form of the Polish place name Oświęcim. From this sober perspective, her anger at the false or unacceptable pronunciation of the word doesn't seem justified. Yet her reaction was not one of reason, but something provoked by unclear and differing feelings, and the word in question and all it encompasses are more than sufficient justification for such a reaction. Yet it is also a reaction for which we, and by that I mean the non-Jews and above all the Germans, must always be prepared and for which we have nothing to counter. History forbids us from responding emotionally; almost more 'forbidden', however, is a distanced and sober response. However, I am not writing all this to complain about anything or anyone, and certainly not to present myself or 'us' as being

in a pitiable situation, but instead for the sole purpose of at least once in my life coming close to the sore spot that I've previously always tried to skirt.

What, then, would have been the 'correct' way to pronounce the word? Most likely, one might think, as close as possible to the Polish pronunciation, even though hardly anyone but the Polish probably knows how that ought to sound. I discover that it's not necessary to know a Polish person to ask; it's very easy to find out on the internet. It's merely a question of entering the word itself and then 'pronunciation'. A large black window opens up on my screen. Very possibly, the same black window, as if gazing out on a starless night, would have opened up if I'd looked up how to pronounce the words *krzesło* (chair) or *dziękuję* (thank you). I haven't tried it. All I know is what the windows look like that usually open up to the person at the screen in the digital world – they are full of pictures, not one inch is free from images or writing, and these images and sometimes even the writing are in constant motion. The window I am talking about, however, is motionless and a uniform shade of black. Only in the middle is there a slim strip of grey, to the left of it an arrow, and on the right the figure 0:01 and a loudspeaker symbol. I click on the arrow and hear a man's voice saying the word in Polish. It's not a droning robotic voice as I expected; instead it's an earnest, warm man's voice. I listen to the word over and over, at first quietly and then slightly louder. What I hear could be rendered phonetically something like this: Oshvientshim. It sounds like this is the correct pronunciation, albeit not one that might be used in conversation.

But why this long passage about a word and its pronunciation at the beginning of a book about my great-grandfather, who died in 1924?

I think of the time that lies between the two of us as a road. We are two hikers out walking along the same stretch, never meeting one another. The road that runs between us, which neither of us will ever set foot on, connects us and divides us at the same time. If I am to set off now, equipped with all kinds of knowledge about the conditions of his particular life, about his time as a whole and some of the intellectual movements and attitudes to be found during that time, to walk that long stretch of road at least in my mind, it seems to me that I can't simply skip over the connecting and dividing link by pretending nothing came in between; as though I wasn't the man's great-granddaughter but his daughter.

So I decide, in search of a possible access point to this stranger's life, to turn primarily to the turn of the twentieth century and thus his years spent in the East, in Poznań, called Posen at the time, and later in two villages in the surrounding area. For if it is possible to put what divides and connects us at the same time into a single word, then it would be the

aforementioned word that I have skirted so stubbornly, or perhaps the other word that goes with it: Poland?

If I were to meet Sanderling today, in a realm of the dead summoned up by me or somebody else – and what is the past other than an inaccessible realm of the dead? – and he were to ask me what had happened in the world that was his since he left it – wouldn't that dreaded word be the first I had to utter?