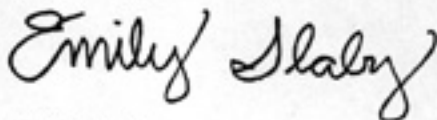


19 April 2000
Begegnung mit Deutschland
Lufthansa Award Committee

To the Directors of the Competition:

Enclosed please find a copy of my essay "On the Road to Bestai" which I am submitting for the 2000 competition of the Lufthansa Award for Excellence in German Studies at MIT. I am currently a student in Frau Crocker's Deutsch II course, having successfully completed Deutsch I with her in the fall of 1999. I would like to request that I be notified either by phone (617.628.5605) or email correspondence (slaby@mit.edu) should you decide to publish my entry on your web page. Thank you very much for your time, and thank you also for the opportunity to submit my essay to this competition.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Emily Slaby". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed name.

Emily Slaby

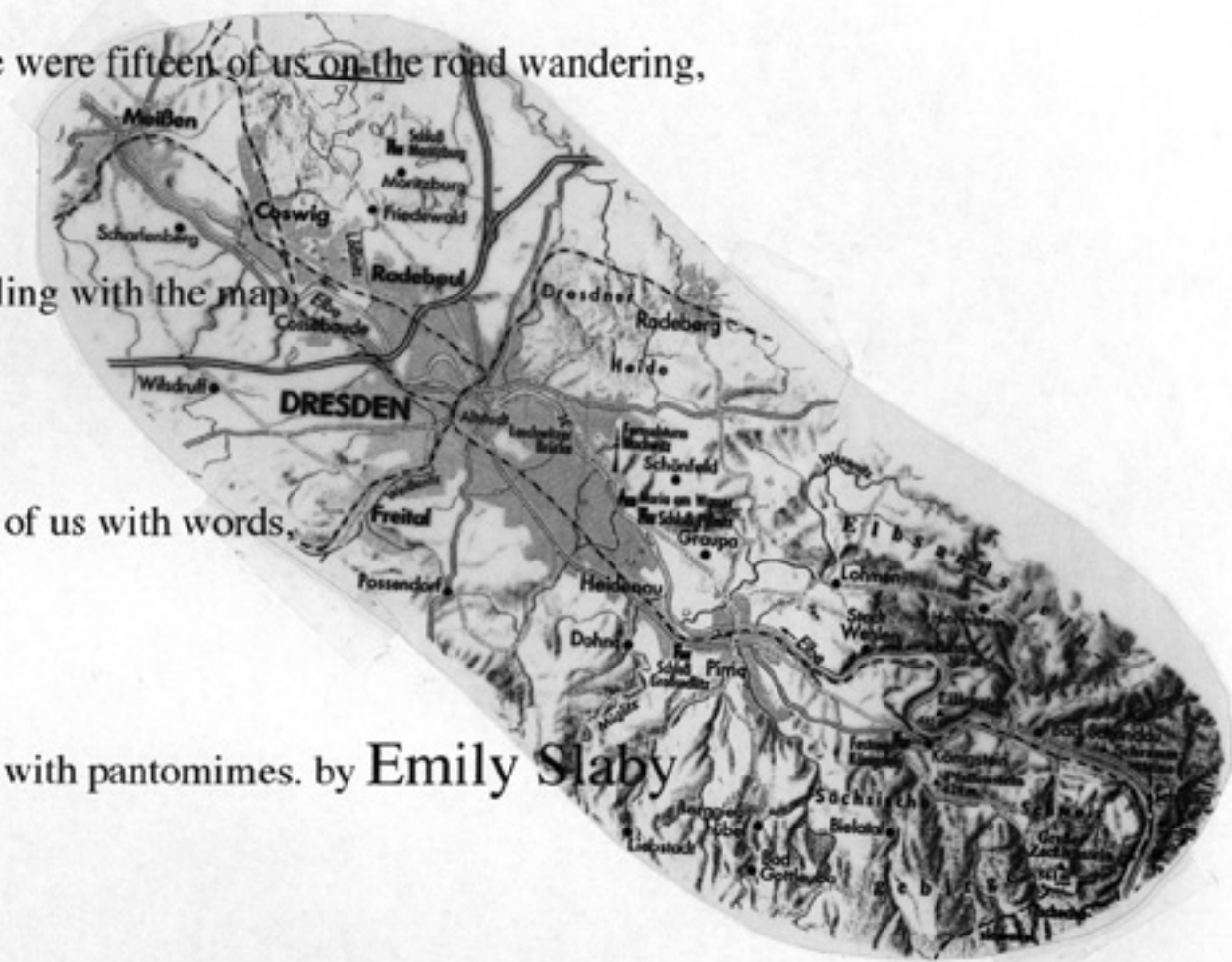
on
the
road
to
Bestai

There were fifteen of us on the road wandering,

fumbling with the map,

some of us with words,

some with pantomimes. by Emily Slaby



WE WERE TAKING THE BUS AS FAR AS SCHLUSS PILLNITZ and then we were going to walk to Bestai. A simple plan, plotted from a deceptively simple map. The journey had seemed a rather short zigzag from the grand Prussian king's hunting castle in Pillnitz to the witchfinger white cliffs of Bestai. In retrospect, we chose the plan because as foreigners we did not understand that we could not connect the names on a German map like a simple dot-to-dot puzzle. At the time we had thought ourselves rather romantic and clever.

"We're going to Bestai, baby! On foot! No German Sashas here!" had been the cry that morning in the farmhouse in Omsewitz, the first Saturday morning in a three week trip. We had come on a service exchange to renovate the Omsewitz farmhouse into a community and youth center -- fourteen American college kids on an early summer holiday. The call to Bestai had been delivered that morning by our group's leader, a fiery blond pirate self-dubbed Sasha Guenther. In his other, American life, he was a substance abuse counselor named Jeff.

We were fifteen in a place of beauty

We were all on

It was just past three in Pillnitz when all fifteen of us piled out of the bus. Besides hiding the hunting castle of old King Augustus of Prussia in a stately grove of trees, Pillnitz was a harmony of hill sides bricked with cabbage terraces, white trim on geometrical green roofs, and cream-colored houses with a sense of quaintness, majesty, and permanence accentuated by their scaffolding. The wall had been dismantled and sold in Berlin, and now eastern Germany was in a constant state of reconstruction.

Richard, blond, tan, and in a state of constant enthusiasm at being a foreigner, bounded off the bus and exclaimed, "Farewell to insulting buses! 'Here is a word you don't know: Leutewitz. In another five seconds we will tell you another word you don't know and you can feel worse about yourself as everyone gets off -- except .. for .. You!'" He jogged off across the street towards a sign with

far from home, rattling around inside ourselves.

the road to Bestai.

the word "Pillnitz" carefully crossed out with thin black lines, and called back, "Here is a word I do know. Hello, Pillnitz. Hey, so which way is Bestai?"

I unfolded our map. Pillnitz..Bonnewitz.. Birna..Bestai. These were unfamiliar names to our American tongues, but even if we didn't understand the exact context of each name -- of each dot -- we could still connect them in order, like counting. It seemed so easy -- almost as if one could draw a castle, draw a set of cliffs, and draw in the lines inbetween. In fact, some of the lines were already there as roads and electrical wires which crisscrossed the countryside. Perhaps that was the key -- follow the electrical wires along the road until we could see Bestai and then head straight for the mountains.

I passed the map to Rich and looked up at the road ahead of us. An older woman sped by on a bike with a crocheted mat woven through the rear wheel, spinning a mauve-yellow-orange-mauve blur. Another woman in an ankle-length trench coat parted the knee-high grass a hundred meters up on our left and stepped out onto the road. Framing us like the rim of a bowl were a ring of

hills etched with lines of squatting electrical towers.

There were now fifteen of us on the road, fumbling with the map, shouting incoherent incorrect ideas. We were fifteen in a place of beauty far from home, rattling around inside ourselves. Some of us with words, some with daisies over our ears, some with pantomimes -- we were all on the road to Bestai.

Amy, who prided herself on living every day in Germany as if it were just another in the hippie commune, softly started singing "Country Roads." Kate, pulling her red hair up into a ponytail, joined her.

"Hey, it's just like flaming West Virginia here, baby," Amy said to Rich, offering him a daisy.

Jeff looked up from the map as Amy's last chorus faded into the cacophony. "O-kay, rise and shine to Bestai." He had a lilt in his voice and a jagged determination in his march up the hill to an intersection. Like a grand parade, we fell in behind him, mimicking his exaggerated footfalls. Rich muttered "Red man. Green man. Red man. Green man," all the way up the hill.

In a large pack, even attempting to cross the street becomes a production. Rich is left behind at the crosswalk and although there are few Trebants on the road, or even busses, Rich stubbornly waits on his side of the street.

"Why is he stopping?" Amy asks, readjusting her patchwork bag, and swishing her long brown hair behind her.

"I don't know. That red man, he's a pretty shady character. You don't want to cross him," Jeff replies. The red man is the German equivalent of a "Don't Walk" sign which our contacts back in Omsewitz made sure we obeyed like the German First Commandment, even if a street was perfectly empty and we were running to catch a train. Jeff looks across Rich, who is flipping a Deutschmark in the air with his thumb. "He's waiting for the green man."

"Aren't we all?" sighs Kate, with a shake of her ponytail.

As Pillnitz falls away behind us, we find the gravel roads rutted not with the obligatory American potholes but instead encroached by flowers. Wild roadside bouquets spill over into the gravel under our feet -- yellow buttercups, lavender thistles, red wild grasses, and tiny white daisies. It is comforting and naive to think that the

species here could be cousins of those familiar alongside highways in the States.

"Hey, you know, this could be Wisconsin, which would be boring, except that we know it's Germany, so it's beautiful," Jeff calls out.

"Ya, give out a shout to the other WC!" Rich replies, referring to the German abbreviation for water closet.

"Ooh hoo! Vait-Say!" Jeff agrees. "Yah, this could never be Wisconsin. No silos here. No wurst there."

The rest of their conversation is siphoned away by a man on a black motorcycle. As he passes, our reflection is blurred in his visor, blending our parade of fifteen into wide line of white on his helmet.

At four o'clock we come to the village Bonnewitz. The road takes a corner and narrows to one lane. Wheat, green and tall as your hip, runs alongside. Massive fields of it extend back and overlap with rows of electrical lines. Then beyond those are peaceful hills dotted with trees, farms, and the occasional village. The mountains are still indistinguishable from the clouds, but we have hope. We are *wandern*, the German word for walking with the most relaxed sense of purpose or destination, similar to hiking or mucking around. The Germans of the Omsewitz farmhouse pantomimed marching randomly and walking with staffs until we said *aha ja!* "Wandern" is our first understanding with our hosts in Omsewitz. It becomes our motif for the day.

As we come into Bonnewitz, an old man in suspenders smiles at us from his front yard. We are a motley parade -- Jeff with his crooked staff, Rich with the map, and the baker's dozen of the rest of us, all calling out across the German air in fresh-faced English. The smiling man in suspenders goes back to pulling weeds out of his yard and putting them in canvas bags. We continue into the village, past a woman tossing a ball to her small son standing in the road, past many elderly couples watching us silently from their porches. Our voices precede us, woven together like a strange audio flag we raise to a generation of Germans old enough to know our grandfathers under more rigorous, desperate times.

**If we can name something,
and we can**

But today we are merely *wandern*, rattling around inside of ourselves, looking and smelling and waving. We are conquering the German countryside for ourselves with descriptions and

names -- everything new, everything slightly familiar. If we can name something, perhaps it can be ours for that moment, and we can pretend to understand.

Taken in the context of our own tiny villages, all these details charmed with importance here because they are recognizable would be tenuous as a forgotten penny. The daisies we rejoice in identifying alongside the road here would be dismissed as weeds along our own streets. The man pulling grasses from his garden, the elderly couples on porches -- in our homeland, all these people would be mere periphery to our existence. We could pass through this scene with a certain emotional detachment. The environment would be secondary to our rush to get Somewhere. Instead, here we trip over ourselves to offer pantomimes and smiles to these people in return for a wave, a wink, anything that could symbolise a slight connection. For in our wonder, Germany is an intense visual landscape, and at the same time our wonder is a veil, and we see nothing beyond what superficial

**perhaps it can be ours for that moment
pretend to understand.**

appearances our eyes give us. We cannot trade our wonder for acceptance, because to accept is to understand, and all we have are awkward mouthfuls of names.

We come to a crossroads with a signpost
made of an old horse hitching post,

Graupa 1.6 km —→
←— **2.6 km Birchendorf**
←— **5.0 km Birna**

“No Bestai?” Rich calls forlornly.

These names mean nothing to us. No
Bestai? we echo in our heads.

Jeff crosses the street to the WanderKarte,
or mapcard, a large brown board with a thin blue
Elbe winding across it. The mapmaker seems
determined to show all of Saxony in glorified
detail, with a 16 cm = 1 km scale. Amy places her
fingers around the dot of Birna, and Kate taps
Bestai. Dot dot.

“Oh look! WanderKarte! The Wandering
Map! Ist a gut ting das vee stopped wanderin!”
Jeff exclaims, in his own ‘pirate’ German.

*Then perception shifts like a flock
of the ribbons connecting us*

“Ja!” He finishes, blows out a quick
breath, and punctuates it with a smile.

“Ok, ok,” Rich says, peeping over my shoulder at our pocket map. “Now, it
seems to me, but I don’t know much since I’m a foreigner and this place
doesn’t make any *sense* that Birna is the next town before Bestai. And on the
little map, they don’t look too far apart.” Dot-to-dot.

Kate looks back at the cluster of cream colored homes with green
roofs behind us. “You know, if I saw a bunch of Germans come through my
small town, I’d be like ‘what the holy martian are they doing here?’”

“Ja! Ja!” Jeff extends his arm, a mock salute. “If we keep this
indecision up, we’ll get the town gang after us. We must move! Fast fast.”

“We are the town gang, remember?” Rich says, taking the map from
me and folding it again. “This way.” He chooses a road where powerlines
cross overhead far in the distance. “We’ll take the next step at those
powerlines.”

“Ja! Das ist gut. Coup de ta.” Jeff spits, and we take the next step.

Past the signpost the road turns to cobblestones and we pass sheep
and a shepherd in a little green hat, and then twin girls with red hair and
matching purple dresses. Rich looks at them and sticks the whole short side
of his camera in his mouth. He begins garbling the “I’m hungry--I have
of balloons and the slenderness

all is exposed.

hunger” conjugation, which to him sounds correctly pronounced whether his
mouth is full or not. “That’s the beauty of this language,” he says, removing

the camera from his mouth. "Everything sounds more correct with a pantomime. Here, I'm eating my camera. Everyone understands what I mean."

I think of how little sense we must make to the Germans. We are a group of fifteen, exuberant in cotton shorts. Some of us sing about the joys of lederhosen; some conjugate incomprehensible verbs while sticking appliances in our mouths. Then perception shifts like a flock of balloons and the slenderness of the ribbons connecting us all is exposed. We bump together briefly; we slide past each other. We give a quick glance, perhaps even a stare, and then the others are gone. Ask that shepherd in a green hat tonight what he saw on the road to Bestai and he'll say a group of fifteen, funfzehn yankee Schwein, perhaps. Ask him a month from now and he may only scratch his ear under his little green cap and go back to herding his sheep. We are outside their perception; we are in their periphery. The importance we give ourselves relative to them -- it's all in our eyes.

Thirty minutes later we come to a place where the powerlines finally cross over the road;

the two paths we have been following together on the map have now diverged. Even they cannot decide what is the most direct route to Bestai. The mountains are hazy on the horizon, past hills lined with trees like spines. On the road in front of us, there is a small wooden sign that crosses out Bonnewitz with a quick black slash, and replaces it with hopelessness. We are only now exiting the village limits. Birna, wherever that may be, is still 5 km away.

Kate and Amy wade into the grass along side the road to have their picture taken in the so-called "monster grass." Disappointingly, the grass only comes to their waists, and not above their heads as it first appeared.

"Crawl through the weeds like Children of the Corn!" Rich suggests.

"Do your best Field of Dreams impression!" Jeff puts in.

Over our heads the powerlines crackle and zap at us, in an exotic humming language hybrid. A goat wanders across the road, "mahh"-ing gently. There are vines with little purple and white daisies draped across his back like the power lines crisscrossing over our heads. The sign says *Birna, 5 km*. Now we are all American in earnest. There is a feeling of getting the prize trout photograph. We have decided to turn around so we must get the conquerors' photograph. Look! We have come this far. We made it.

Where?

Here.

Almost there.

Anywhere.

Nowhere.

We are American and there is no one to ask directions of. The little map has failed us, with its names and its dot-to-dot. Behind Amy and Kate in their photograph, the mountains still linger, and we are all caught by the immense disappointment between these mountains and us, the distance between the Germans and us.

Even the little goat wanders back into the grasses and disappears.

We will wind our way back towards the bus stop and it will take an hour and a half, and we will stop for dinner because we will be hungry and cold and disappointed. When we do get to the bus stop there will be a tiny boot hanging unexplainedly from the bottommost ribbon of a maypole, and nearby an elderly couple will look up from their bench and initiate a quiet "Guten Tag" which we will return, and Rich will wonder if they know we are foreigners.

SIX MONTHS LATER I will find myself again "wandern" across Germany, this time on a random night train to Prague with new friends. I will pass through the Dresden Hauptbahnhof, the main train station, and I will feel an urge to step off my train into the Dresden night. All those days of names and pantomimes will rush back in a moment of retrospection Dresden will seem a place of perfect clarity in contrast to the yet unknown Prague.

When we pause to let more wanderers on, I will consider running down the stairs from the train platform, past the Asian fruit seller where tawny Asian apples large as a pirate's fist, are sold for .70DM. Down past Ihr Florist with its buckets of short stemmed daisies and tulips, the brightest smelling corner in the whole station. Out past the giant Coca Cola sign at the end of the tracks and out into the street looking at the dusk. Then I would be Home with no place to go but every expectation in the world, and then perhaps even with my poor German the riddle of the signs and conversations around me would snap into place.

I will press my forehead against the window and remember the eyes of the elderly couple as they raised their "Guten Tag," how we left without understanding, and Rich's question. As my breath puts a little cloud on the window between me and the Dresden night, I will think of the small boot at the bottom of the maypole and my hand will grip the railing a little tighter, knowing I cannot get off the train, watching the doors slide shut, the Dresden landscape slide past my mind, knowing I cannot get off because I still have no word for what the little boot symbolises.