

Marion Gräfin Dönhoff, “People on the Train” (September 18, 1947)

Abstract

In this article, published in *Die Zeit* in September 1947, the journalist Marion Gräfin Dönhoff, who herself had fled to West Germany in 1945 from her homeland in East Prussia, describes the people she observed on a train ride through Germany.

Source

People on the Train

Observations on an autumnal train ride through Germany

Every train ride is an experience. Not only because one is always amazed by how many people fit into a car and by the breadth of variations in temperament – that is, not only because of what goes on inside the car, but also because of what passes by outside. And this really *is* an optical illusion, for the “outside,” the foreign in the objective picture of the landscape, is without a doubt the travelers, or rather the train. It is probably because of this subject-object switch that traveling by train always makes me sad. It is a strange thing when actual life becomes a landscape that glides by with stubble fields, potato fields, and grazing animals – fleeting pictures that one cannot hold onto, and to which one is only an alien presence.

This already autumnal afternoon with the southern-blue sky of the Bavarian foothills is shrouded in a strange melancholy. An old woman complains [...] about the inhospitality of this area. The air raids forced her to move here, and she dreams of her homeland, the Ruhr region, where her husband had a small house with a garden, in which dahlias bloomed in the fall. Both of them had worked for thirty years, and when the dream of their lives had become a reality, the war and the bomb attacks came, and a rubble heap was all that was left of the joys and suffering of this life. Nobody said anything; her fellow travelers were all lost in their own thoughts.

[...] Suddenly I hear the voice of the young Pole across from me asking: “You too homesick?” I am quite struck by this great insightfulness, and he adds: “Back home the forests now also nice.” And we essentially leave it at that, for the certainty of our brotherhood is deeper than words and can be affirmed only with a cigarette. Strange to think that nobody can go home – we cannot because our country has become so small, and he cannot although his country has become so much larger and more spacious. When I got on the train, I had wondered whether the previous owner of his jacket, which looks like it has seen better days on golf courses and at international tournaments, had perhaps lost his life over it, and now I am sorry for having thought that. When it comes down to it, all aspects of life have changed, and all of my fellow travelers seem likeable to me, somehow.

For example, there is a conspicuous elderly lady, Viennese, who has something incredibly poised about her, despite her “shabby” clothing and the sack that functions as her only piece of luggage. She speaks softly and timidly, actually more to herself than to her conversation partners, and her gestures resemble those of a great artist. I have to think of the woman that Rilke talked about, the one who sat in a green dress in the Luxembourg Gardens at the same time every day, year after year, waiting for her lost lover.

Surely she was very similar to her. She comes from a Czech camp, and one has to be grateful that she decided not to tell us what she experienced there. She is now traveling to her husband, who has found

refuge in a village in the Allgäu, and she is like a child, amazed and pleased by the mountains and the helpfulness of people. She has not seen her husband in two years –

[...]

And then she makes countless plans about how not to scare him by her unexpected appearance. She makes plans, dismisses them, and examines the next one. Perhaps she could send a messenger from the train across the countryside to inform him that a gentleman from Vienna is on the train and would like to speak to him? Misgivings from the person across from her: “Who would go eight kilometers across the countryside so late at night?” – “Pay them?” – “Nobody does anything for money here.” – She looks utterly helpless in the face of these objections, and all those involved are similarly at a loss in the face of so much *navieté* about the world. Perhaps it is the general helplessness that is producing this strange atmosphere of togetherness. [...]

Source: Marion Gräfin Dönhoff, “Menschen im Abteil. Beobachtungen auf einer herbstlichen Zugfahrt durch Deutschland,” *Die Zeit*, September 18, 1947.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap

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