

This sample translation was commissioned by *New Books in German*.

www.new-books-in-german.com

nbg@london.goethe.org

Andri Perl

Die fünfte, letzte und wichtigste Reiseregul

(‘The Fifth, Last and Most Important Rule of Travel’)

Salis Verlag, Zurich, 2010

Novel, 221pp

Extracts translated into English by Rachel McNicholl

Extract 1, pp. 9–11

Someone has got themselves killed; the train has come to a halt in the Engadin. Half of the train is bathed in the morning sun that heralds the first real summer’s day of this immensely important summer. The other half is in the mountain gallery that provides protection from falling rocks and dry avalanches, though obviously not from people bent on dying. Indeed, it’s almost the reverse: here the massive concrete columns can conceal the world-weary and then, when the engine driver hasn’t a hope of slowing down... Anyway, the train is at a standstill, and I’m in it.

The loudspeaker above the automatic sliding door crackles an unintelligible apology in German, followed by the same in Romansh, and then an attempt in English. Curious passengers press their concerned faces against the windows but all they can see are trees (larches, to be precise), the river (the Inn, that is) or, further back towards the mountain, the grey wall of the gallery. There are about a dozen people, maybe a couple more, travelling – though not right now – in the same carriage as me.

Opposite me, the short, strong fingers of a workman’s hand are tapping an impatient rhythm on the armrest. The yellow staining of the fingertips matches the yellowed moustache, which in turn suggests that the man they belong to, who presumably styles his grey hair exactly as he did his black hair twenty-five years ago,

is a heavy smoker. His other hand, which is gently jostling his genitals into a more comfortable position, suggests a normally placid disposition, were it not for the smoking ban that came into force on Swiss trains six months ago.

Across the aisle, a family foursome of father, mother, daughter and son are playing a game of Town–Country–River. They are on towns beginning with C. Others are passing the time reading, while behind me a couple of German senior citizens discuss the weather and the scenery in reverential tones.

I just wait; neither reading nor chatting, at least not with the other passengers. The chainsmoker, for he's sure to be one, will use the next opportunity to say something inappropriate about suicide – so I pretend to be dozing in my corner, and monitor the goings-on through half-shut eyes. Sighs of frustration from Mr Smoker opposite. He got on at Lavin too, the pretty, not to say pretty tranquil village where I spent last night. It is quite possible that the odd Lavinian is driven to jump in front of a train out of sheer boredom. Mr Smoker clears his throat ominously.

The waitress cleared her throat again, her eyes timidly following her father and boss, who had just vanished into the kitchen. Leaning cautiously across my table, she whispered, barely audibly and with a wrinkling of her nose, that it wasn't good. Another glance towards the kitchen assured her it was safe to speak. The house wine: it really wasn't very nice, she'd bring me something better, I could take her word for it. I sat there obediently and let her wait on me. That waitress in the restaurant on the village square was easily the highlight of my brief sojourn in Lavin: fresh as a daisy, coal-black curls, alluring eyes. Maybe it was a love-sick admirer who threw himself in front of... Coughing fit from Mr Smoker.

This morning was full of mishaps. I had fully intended to have a leisurely breakfast, wallowing in the pleasure of my new-found independence, and had set the alarm clock for seven – the old alarm clock, that is, because I've forsaken mobile telephony for the duration of this journey. I duly woke at seven and, wallowing in the pleasure of my new-found independence, went back to sleep. I'd have had time for a quick shower if I hadn't forgotten my shower gel or the hotel staff hadn't forgotten to refill the shower-gel dispenser – but I had, and so had they. Time was tight, at least if I didn't want to break my strict, self-imposed rules of travel on what was just Day Two of my journey into this immensely important summer. One of the rules is: *Don't take your mobile phone on your travels.* Another is: *If you want to move on, set off*

early, ideally before 9am. I checked out politely, without a word about the shower-gel dispenser.

And so I left the hotel without shower gel – not the hotel on the village square with the exciting table service; no, I had merely eaten there, and slept in the hotel on Alte Strasse: *Economise on bed, not board.* Without breakfasting, I hurried towards the station, past the recently renovated community centre, which my lovely waitress's innkeeper father had informed me was now heated sustainably by a wood-pellet boiler, and with two minutes to spare, fumbling for change, I tried to extract a snack from the vending machine, but my Hawaiian sandwich on sesame got snagged in the metal coil on its way out. The train pulled in, I kicked and cursed, implored and rattled the machine in vain, then heaved my unshowered and unfed self into one of the red carriages. That was a frustrating start, but it was not to be the worst defeat of the day in the battle of man against machine. Mr Smoker's fingers are thrumming faster; the train is still stopped.

Extract 2, p. 19 – 23 (last five pages of first chapter, where the reader learns more about the reasons for the journey and what the fifth rule of travel is)

I liked this ritual with the shoebox of memories and remember it fondly; I liked each and every piece of written or photographic history. But I particularly liked the envelope at the very bottom of the shoebox, which Grandmother would always add last to her souvenir arrangement on the round, slate-topped living room table, and then remove first: the envelope with the poems in it, her long-lost brother Lorenz's poems.

He was never talked about openly, and for a long time I didn't even know he existed. The first time I had ever asked Grandmother about her brother, about the hints and rumours, she had hesitated; hesitated and sighed, as if to say it was a long, sad story that was better left in the past. But eventually she told me that he and my great-grandfather had fallen out after the war; that Lorenz had run away and never come back to Chur. He had gone off with Federico, a friend of his, an Italian. At that point Grandmother had gone upstairs. She came back with a white shoebox under her arm: that was the premiere of the ritual of remembrance.

Some of the photographs looked familiar, the ones that were occasionally passed round at family gatherings; but I had never seen the rest of the photos, nor the

postcards, letters and personal dedications. I watched Grandmother lay out her treasures on the table, a process she would allow me observe again from time to time, until finally she placed the last item, an unaddressed envelope, at the centre of the arrangement. Now she was going to show me something, she said. Not even my father knew about it. It was her secret; from now on it would be our secret. Do you hear, Christoph? Our secret!

In the envelope were twelve poems in fine, elegant handwriting and a pencil sketch of two young men against a backdrop of temple ruins. The titles of the poems were Italian or French placenames. They traced the route of Lorenz's journey, Grandmother reckoned. They arrived one by one, every couple of months over a period of two years, always on the same stiff notepaper, though with no greeting or explanation. The sketch had been enclosed with the poem from Rome. Grandmother read aloud – quietly, but with meaning... Then she tucked our secret carefully back into its envelope and put her finger to her narrow lips.

What had become of Lorenz she couldn't say; the last letter had been from Bordeaux... maybe America was... When I asked her why no one had gone looking for him, Grandmother answered with a pitiful *Ach*. Had she ever had news of Federico again, I eventually enquired, to which she replied that *he* had not disappeared, but she was clearly so disinclined to discuss the matter that I never raised the subject of her brother or his friend again, not even on those late autumn evenings to come, those November evenings of great breadth and depth when Grandmother would dig her memories out of the shoebox and recite Lorenz's poems, quietly but with meaning.

Our secret – I kept it.

A few weeks after Grandmother's death we began sorting out her elegant villa because my older brother Florian and his fiancée wanted to move in shortly. I found the white shoebox in the bedroom, well hidden in a wooden chest. The envelope was right at the bottom of the box, and I took charge of it. Downstairs, I laid all the other mementos out on the table, everything in its place, for my father, mother and brothers. It was moving looking at these photographs, postcards and letters which Grandmother would pass round on certain occasions (birthdays, for instance, or weddings or breathtakingly dry, cold November evenings). No one but me had seen all of the mementos; at least one other besides me had seen some of them; but no one asked about the envelope with Lorenz's poems in it. Our secret – I kept it.

It is true – in spite of her death, or rather because of it, Grandmother and her legacy provided the means and one of the pretexts for my journey into this immensely important summer. She generously left a small portion of her estate to each of her grandchildren; my small portion is now my travel budget, which must last until I reach France – for the fifth, last and most important of my self-imposed travel rules, in my new-found independence, is: *Follow Lorenz's poems*.

The first one led me yesterday to the pretty, not to say pretty tranquil village of Lavin, where Lorenz probably visited his grandparents and other relations – his father had been the first to leave the place for Chur. Maybe he even found refuge with them for a while. The other poems will take me to Merano, to Venice and Florence and... It's moving at last!

The train is moving. Our carriage jolts; I don't look up. The tapping, knitting and snoring cease, the cacophony of boredom is interrupted by a moment of alert silence, then changes into a collective murmuring. The train rolls forward a few metres, and comes to a halt again. 'Rest awhile, as you wander far and wide, by mountain waters wild...'

While no one close to the family had seriously tried to find out where Lorenz ended up – Grandmother had expressly and successfully forbidden it – there were of course rumours, and of course everyone had their own theory. Without ever mentioning the poems, I asked here and there, learned this and that. Father was the only one who had anything really interesting to tell. Some years earlier, he had come across an article about Impressionist poetry in a scholarly journal – Father teaches second-level German and English at the Gymnasium – and the author's name was Federico Biancardi. This seemed to confirm rumours that Lorenz's friend had gone on to become an academic in Italy. When Father told Grandmother what he'd found, she had been so clearly disinclined to discuss the subject that he didn't insist.

Before I set off on my travels, I did a little research online. There were six entries in all for Biancardi Federico in Italian telephone directories, of which one was for a Professore Biancardi in Rome. The search engine displayed results for academic papers, mostly on the subject of German poetry. It's possible that this Professor Biancardi is Lorenz's erstwhile travel companion – who knows. I don't know whether I should look him up in Rome, whether I want to. I don't know yet at any rate; and at any rate I've only just begun my journey, and who knows how long this will last?

Our carriage jolts again, I put down my newspaper. Mr Smoker is trying to will the train along with encouraging hand signals, though this is failing to inspire great faith in the pensioners, or indeed in the family across the way, that their journey will continue. Mr Smoker is muttering imprecations under his breath. Come on. – Slowly, very slowly the train rolls into motion, gathers speed, and seems less likely to have to brake again any minute. By now the very last carriage must also have left the gallery, which provides protection from falling rocks and dry avalanches, though obviously not from people bent on dying. The train is rolling into the first real summer's day of this immensely important summer. And the opening match is on tomorrow!

Susch is not far, Zernez only a little farther. I will have breakfast, buy some shower gel and take a post bus towards Merano. And I'll try to forget Monique; to forget her and the incident the day before yesterday. Someone got themselves killed; the train is moving again at last.

A longer sample translation is available from NBG – please contact Charlotte on
nbg@london.goethe.org