

Introduction: Into the Zone 2000

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The idea was born in 1998, at the conference "*Gravity's Rainbow: The First 25 Years*," in Antwerp: to tour the zone, following Slothrop's footsteps and visiting some of the places mentioned in *Gravity's Rainbow*. It took two years to realize, but in June 2000, the "Into the Zone" tour got underway. Some obstacles could not be overcome—because of the inexplicable ignorance and obstinacy of various officials, the recalcitrance of reality or the inflexible German laws. Thus we were unable to obtain a balloon for the trip from the Brocken to Berlin, there were no hotels to be found, much less any rooms available, in Bad Karma, the director of the Greifswald zoo stubbornly refused to provide any chimps for the boat trip to Peenemünde, and it was impossible to get a permit from the German authorities to sample six kilos of hashish for strictly literary purposes. But we pushed on in the face of adversity.

In the end, we were twelve Pynchon apostles (not counting our invisible group member, Lilith, who was to be born the following January), and the route for the trip was fixed: Starting in Nordhausen and the Brocken area, we would move on to Berlin and then to Greifswald, from where we would make an excursion to Peenemünde.

Murphy's Law, "that brash Irish proletarian restatement of Gödel's Theorem," put in some overtime at the beginning of our trip and made sure that Sally's and Robert's luggage got lost on the flight to Germany; but knowing that entropy requires no maintenance, we never expected everything to go smoothly and kept up the good spirits. The luggage arrived a few days later by regular mail, W.A.S.T.E. not yet being an available alternative in Europe.

On the morning of June 19, Nordhausen was not at all "crisp with raindrops," as Pynchon had promised us in his book. Rather it was going to be an unbearably hot day with similarly hard-to-bear sights and sites: the underground Mittelwerke and the Dora concentration camp. A small part of the factory's two SS-shaped main tunnels and forty-six galleries is open for visitors. A guided tour emphasized the terrible, literally murderous working and living conditions in the factory (more people died in the production of the V-bombs than by their deployment in the war), and the horrors and atrocities that took place in Dora between August, 1943, and the liberation of the KZ inmates by American troops in April, 1945. The "spiritual rampage" of the dead

that Micro warns tourists of in *Gravity's Rainbow* has by no means ceased to haunt and affect visitors, fifty-five years belated though we were. We wish to thank the director, Dr. Cornelia Klose, and the staff of the KZ-Gedenkstätte Mittelbau-Dora for their efforts in hosting and guiding us through this insightful and most impressive beginning of the week.¹ In the course of that visit we also learned that Pynchon's work is not unknown at the Gedenkstätte and that a conference about the representation of the Mittelwerke and Dora in *Gravity's Rainbow* was hosted there in April, 1993.

It was, and still is, difficult to switch from the experiences we had at Dora to the afternoon's pastime: a steam-train trip to the top of the Brocken, "the very plexus of German evil, twenty miles north by northwest of the Mittelwerke," as Pynchon reminds us. The appearance, if not apparition, of us twelve made no impression on the place; the place, however, did make one on us. The *Brockengespenstphänomen*, "confined" as it is "to dawn's slender interface," made some suggest that we stay overnight up there. But we puff-puffed our way back down, and the travelogue continues with another "Nordhausen in the morning: the lea is a green salad"—limp still with heat, only now Tuesday heat.



Somehow it is not easy to feel the evil atmosphere of a dark and gloomy location on a blazing hot day. From left to right: Iza, Bruno, Luc, Larissa, Inger, Duffy, John, Sharon, Dirk, Zofia, Robert. Sally took the picture: you'll see her when you turn around.

June 20 saw us en route to Potsdam, where Robert Bramkamp received us at the Academy of Film and Television, fed us with rolls and cold drinks, and previewed for us some sequences from his *Gravity's Rainbow*-based movie. *Prüfstand 7* (which has in the meantime been released) stars, among others, Hanjo Berressem (as Kevin Spectro), Eric Weinstein (as "Eric Weinstein") and Friedrich Kittler (as, well, a ghost from a kettle). After Robert himself had been set on Pynchon's own test stand, he finally got permission to use parts of the novel's plot for his film. (The author probed the director's seriousness by sending him on a quest for an alleged Berlin artist of the 1940s. When Robert could not find out anything about that person, Pynchon apologized. He let Robert know that he had misspelled the person's name: instead of K, the name begins with, of all letters, V.) In Berlin, we moreover left traces in the following day's *taz* newspaper, where an article appeared, in tone somewhat haughty, on a bunch of literary tourists travelling through East Germany according to the motto "See Europe in three days." Well informed as the journalist was about both our short visit and the film project, we totally missed noticing that someone followed us on our walk to the Truman villa, near the Babelsberg studios, which Robert showed us before we headed on to Greifswald. Sorry, Scribthrop. Maybe we stared at you, but just like Mickey Rooney, we could not recall you later. And anyway: vot ze kuck, Liebchen—with love to central (as-can-be) European *taz*.



Hafenstraße in Greifswald, ca. 1935, reproduced by courtesy of Stadtarchiv Greifswald.

Wednesday afternoon in Greifswald was devoted to the academic program of the tour. The general topic of our workshop was "'In the openness of the German zone, our hope is limitless': Geography in *Gravity's Rainbow*," but we also accepted papers that strayed from this theme. After all, the tour was more important than this mini-conference. Thus Sally read a paper on "Jessica Swanlake's Brief Liberation," and Robert (McLaughlin, not Bramkamp) spoke about "Imperial Narratives and the Colonial Gaze in *Gravity's Rainbow*." (The papers make up the bulk of this issue of *Pynchon Notes*.) The workshop took place at the English department of Greifswald University, just a short distance from the Hafestraße, "where Slothrop in early August [1945] may [have seen] a particular newspaper photo."

And then, on the next morning, we approached the dark center of every Pynchonite's secret dreams, the birthplace of that unholy grail, the V-2. A two-hour drive brought us—together with some interested newcomers—to Sellin on Rügen, where we boarded a ferry that brought us to Peenemünde in real Gnabish style. Here we visited the Historisch-Technische Informationszentrum (Historical-Technical Information Center); we learned just how well informed the self-declared couch potato was when he noted in *Gravity's Rainbow* that the production of industrial alcohol for rocket fuel threatened Germany's population with a severe shortage of potatoes; finally, we strolled through some of the old and then derelict (but more recently restored) buildings and, of course, took a picture of the group in front of one of the actual rockets that was raised as a memorial.



We would like to thank our guide, Herr Dirk Zache, and the rest of the museum staff at Peenemünde for their hospitality and for the fascinating and well-organized guided tour we were given.² Unfortunately, there was no way we could take a look at Versuchsstand VII, as the area is still mined and thus not open to visitors. We decided not to take the chance of an unauthorized little walk through the restricted area—and we suppose readers of *Pynchon Notes* all over the world are grateful that we did not put two of the editors into such jeopardy at the same time.³

Friday, June 23, saw us on the road again, and in a state of ongoing dissemination. (In fact, Inger had taken a train west the evening before, and Zofia, too, hit the tracks rather than the road—east.) We lost, well, dropped Dirk at his place (or Place-chazunga, as he lives not too far from the site of the *Schweineheldfest*). Separations proceeded near Kassel, where our rented car sped away from the van, toward Frankfurt, to drop Larissa, Robert and Sally at the airport hotel. The van, meanwhile, branched off on the Gießen route toward Köln and Aachen, the start of any Abishmal alphabetizations of *Gravity's Rainbow* and, as such, the homestead of Hanjo Berressem. Hanjo was kind enough to host Sharon, John, Luc and Duffy for another night before they left German soil/territory/geography . . . whatever.

"Into the Zone 2000" had come to a close. How German was it? Well, we would say it was *hübsch*, *süffig* (if not *spritzig*), definitely *blumig*, sometimes *zart*, sometimes *würzig* with that hint of *Bodinegeschmack* behind its *Körper* . . . ehm, we mean the *Schwarzbier* we drank, *natürlich!* As for other aspects of Germanness, that's not our business any more. Hanjo and John tackled that question in 2002 in Köln with another conference, Site-Specific, the proceedings of which will be duly published in another special issue of *Pynchon Notes*.

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Notes

¹Address: KZ-Gedenkstätte [Concentration Camp Memorial Site] Mittelbau-Dora, Kohnsteinweg 20, D-99734 Nordhausen. Tel.: +49.3631.49580. WWW: <<http://www.dora.de>>.

²Address: Historisch-Technisches Informationszentrum, Im Kraftwerk, D-17449 Peenemünde. Tel.: +49.38371.5050. WWW: <<http://www.peenemuende.de>>.

³As it happens, David Mindell was luckier and more resourceful during his visit to Peenemünde the previous year: see <<http://web.mit.edu/mindell/www/peenemunde.htm>>.