

Interview with Rosemarie Zens

conducted by Frank Meyer on the *ZU GAST* programme, broadcast by RBB Kulturradio on 5 June 2018

Frank Meyer

*Where am I from? And what connects me today with the place I originally came from? These are the questions currently being explored in an exhibition now on show in Berlin – an exhibition featuring the work of the photographer and poet Rosemarie Zens. Born in Pomerania, she was still a baby when she and her mother fled to Berlin at the end of the war.*

*Rosemarie Zens did not return to her birthplace until decades later, to explore the area for herself. The exhibition is entitled The Sea Remembers, and I'm delighted to say that Rosemarie Zens is with us in the studio. Welcome!*

Rosemarie Zens

Thank you!

*Your journey back to the place of your birth was in fact triggered by – amongst other things – notes you found among your deceased mother's documents. What did she talk about in those notes?*

Well, finding those notes was a huge surprise. She talked about fleeing with me as a baby in 1945, but she only wrote about it after the Wall had come down, in 1989, by which time she was 72 – talking about events that had happened when she was 27. I was very touched by that, by the fact that she wrote about it at such a late stage in her life. It felt like it was a confession, or a testimony, along with a plea aimed right at me. It remained a fragment; for me, it rather felt like a doubt, these were not things, events, which that particular generation liked to talk about: after all, 'how could you possibly understand?' And yet, suddenly, there she was, writing about it; perhaps she thought, 'oh well, no-one will ever find it anyway, or get to read it'. I'm the only daughter, so I took it up, and, as I say, I was very moved by it and tried to give her my own answer, looking at it all with my own memory and my own background.

*How much of a topic was this within your family? You mention that you and your mother would go to meetings of the Federation of Expellees in West Germany, so clearly the topic was out in the open?*  
Yes, that was right after the war. There was a purpose to that, namely to try and find out what had happened to family members: where had they died (or been shot)? Where were any of them living now? After all, families had all been split up and were scattered all over the place. Another purpose was to obtain testimonies so documents could be submitted for the *Lastenausgleich*, i.e. for the Equalisation of Burdens after the Second World War. So these were all very pragmatic and practical objectives. Once everything had been cleared up, my parents never once went back. For them, it was all a very small inner circle, one they'd wanted to break open.

*So when you travelled there, to what is now Poland, to the place you were taken from as a baby, only six months old – did it feel like home, or anything like that, to you? Given how very young you were at the time, you could hardly have had any memories of it.*

I don't have any memories; it was just a blank space. But I wasn't expecting to find anything there either. I didn't feel any attachment to the place, but I did try and relate to what had been my mother's world and perhaps recreate her origins. And because I always had her notes at the back of my mind, her love of the land itself and its landscapes, I tried to find an answer: did the fact that I had been born there mean something, somehow? Was there an answer even though it was a blank as far as my memories and my recollections were concerned? But I did try to recreate these secondary memories, which are perhaps my mother's own memories. Indeed, I travelled the route she described in her notes,

that same day she set off on in 1945: it was also March 5 when I set off to see if there was anything for me to see now.

*Let's take a closer look at that. You took photographs, and there's also a beautiful book to go with your exhibition. We looked at a photograph that's spread across two pages. We see an avenue of trees of the kind you might see in Brandenburg, with the light breaking through the trees and, in the perspective, some very bright light, clearly through an opening in the trees – like an apparition shining in. What do you see in that light?*

Well, it's very ambiguous: on the one hand I see a blank, in other words nothing, but then perhaps I wonder if there is anything behind it after all. The way our memories are, they're always double-edged. Is there actually something there for me to perceive? Or am I projecting something onto it symbolically?

And at what moment do I see the image? I've had all sorts of responses from other people who have looked at the photograph. Some think it's all quite horrible and it makes them think of death.

*... the light at the end of the tunnel?*

... because it all fades into white ... yes, the light at the end of the tunnel. And then there are those who think it's all quite hopeful and that there's something there; it hasn't quite emerged just yet. And that's also an essential aspect of our memories and our recollections, the fact that we're receptive to symbols.

*So those are the photographs you've taken now. And then, scattered throughout the book, are family photographs from your family's own history, also snippets cropped from family photographs, with individual details. What's the purpose of these family photos?*

In my mother's notes – she had written down what she had taken with her when she fled – I was able to read about tea, bacon, certificates, and a few photographs. So what purpose did those photographs fulfil? Many people of that generation usually had a small suitcase they carried around with them, and they always took photographs along. I think those photographs played a role as an *aide-mémoire* rather than as an unmediated perspective, an inducement to jog one's memory. It's a completely different purpose to ours nowadays, where we tend to use photographs as a means of documenting things. For anyone caught up in the experience of having to flee like that, those photographs would have been invaluable.

The reason I cropped the photographs is that I didn't want to make the project so utterly personal, with images of my own grandmother and other family members. I also think that photographs and recollections are kindred spirits: memories are fragmentary, bits and pieces recalled, and photographs are snapshots of time. So in that way they overlap nicely.

*This exploration of your mother's origins, your approach to the landscape through these photographs, the landscape your mother came from: what, would you say, triggered it all for you? And what did it give you?*

I felt a greater closeness to my mother through her notes, sadly it was after the fact. And I gained a greater understanding of that generation. After all, people reacted in different ways: some talked too much; some too little. They struggled to process the whole drama of the pre-war period, the war itself, and the post-war years. Also, I became far more aware of the difference between the generations: what their origins meant to them was first and foremost a sense of loss. And what do those origins mean for me? Well, for me, 'origin' means the source of it all, and so I construct my origins by taking photographs. And, yes, I was there, and I looked around, and I created my own origins as it were.

*Let's now take a look at somewhere else.*

*You travelled east to retrace your mother's footsteps and your own origins. But your journey through life has also been very much in the West, and probably with just as much intensity. For instance you twice travelled extensively along America's Route 66, once in 1966 and once in 2010 when you yourself were already 66. What was that like, retracing your own footsteps along this duplicated journey, as it were?*

I was just curious to know what would happen if I repeated that journey. After all, in the 1960s, you're young, you're a student, and the whole wide world is yours. You had the feeling every opportunity was there for the taking, and you could make a difference to the world. That was the attitude to life I had back then. Of course, even then, it was already a cliché, an idea I had as a young student travelling by bus along the now legendary road. So I wondered whether I'd still have that same feeling about life. So many years later. And I have to say, with that vast landscape, the friendliness of the people, you travel and you have that sense of freedom, and the same attitude towards life does take over, no matter how old you are. The feeling's a genuine one, and that too is a cliché, but we know there's a limit to it all, that it's not even real. That's when I realised that the feeling can be genuine even when reality brings you back down to earth, to reason and rationality.

*The poet and photographer Rosemarie Zens, travelling in all sorts of ways, as you've just heard. And you can still catch her exhibition – The Sea Remembers – at the Kommunale Galerie in Berlin-Wilmersdorf until 2 June 2018, and, as I mentioned, there's also an eponymous book featuring her photographs and essays, published by Kehrer Verlag.*

*Ms Zens, thank you for talking to us.*

My pleasure, thank you.

(Transcribed from the interview on 5 June 2018)