

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Against the Flow

Tom Fort

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About the Book

Twenty years ago, Tom Fort drove his little red car onto the ferry at Felixstowe, heading east. The old order that had held eastern Europe in its grip for half a century had gone, and no one yet knew what the new order would be. Politically, spiritually, economically, everything was changing at a speed people found hard to comprehend. What hadn't changed were the landscapes, and the rivers that flowed out of the mountains of Poland, Slovakia and Romania, and across the plains of Bohemia and Hungary.

Over the next two decades a new Europe was forged, so different that it's hard to recall the old one. The European Union and NATO opened arms to the former Eastern Bloc countries. Young people flooded west in search of work and prosperity. Quite suddenly the UK was full of Poles, Polish shops, Polish businesses, even Polish pubs.

As the human tide flowed and then ebbed, Tom Fort wondered what had happened to the places he remembered so well, and to the friends he had made all those years before. In the end he went back, starting this time on the bus from London to Krakow, and retraced his steps, wandering the rivers and streams again. With a fishing-rod and a pair of waders, of course.

About the Author

Tom Fort went to Eton and read English at Oxford before becoming a local newspaper reporter. He joined the BBC and worked as a journalist there for more than twenty years. He is married with five children, and is the author of *Under The Weather* and *Downstream* (published by Century) and *The Grass is Greener* and *The Book of Eels* (published by HarperCollins).

Also by Tom Fort

The Grass is Greener (HarperCollins)

The Book of Eels (HarperCollins)

Under the Weather

Downstream

**AGAINST
THE
FLOW**

**TOM
FORT**



arrow books

To my brothers James, Matthew and Johnny - and my sister
Elizabeth



Chapter 1

Leaving

EUROLINES SERVICE 194 for Kraków swung out of the dark cavern of Victoria Coach Station at exactly 1.30 on a Monday afternoon, 9 June 2008. London was sunlit, warm, at ease: no bombs, no dark clouds in the sky, no mention of Lehman Brothers, no sign of gathering storm. Sunbeams danced across the brown Thames below Vauxhall Bridge. I looked down, trying to work out which way the tide was flowing. Upstream, Battersea Power Station squatted at the water's edge, brooding on its fate.

The lady ticket inspector made a lengthy announcement in Polish. I waited for the English version, in vain. I felt isolated as well as uninformed, as if I was already in a foreign place where unfamiliar customs prevailed.

Crossing the river, I was thinking of another journey, another time.

May 1990, a gorgeous early summer's day, the sun sparkling on the smooth blue sea as I drove my little red Peugeot on to the ferry at Felixstowe, bound for Hamburg and points east. One great high-pressure system covered northern Europe, giving blue skies and blissful sunshine across the continent. But although we happened to have the same weather, eastern Europe was still a faraway place then, in a way difficult to recall two decades later. Huge upheavals had upset the familiar geopolitical landscape: one earthquake, one landslip, one tidal wave after another. At the same time, Czechoslovakia was still Czechoslovakia -

just. We still talked about East Germany and West Germany and the Soviet Union, for a while longer anyway. The Warsaw Pact had not yet been formally dissolved.

Over there, behind the rail from which Churchill's Iron Curtain had hung for so long, people were waking to a new order. They blinked in wonder, torn between hope and fear. And I - what was I doing in my little red car?

At that time I was working as a sub-editor at a BBC news desk in London. From within familiar, unshakeable Broadcasting House I watched and listened to the great events unfolding in Gdańsk, Prague and Berlin, and helped refine them into a form digestible to our Radio Four audience. Like the listeners, I was stirred by the extraordinary spectacle of Europe coming apart at the seams; like them I was ineluctably detached as well. The Polish shipyards exploded. The Berlin Wall was ripped down. The regimes in Prague and Budapest ran for cover. In the Romanian city of Timișoara a priest no one had even heard of before preached revolt, and within a month Nicolae Ceaușescu faced an impromptu firing squad.

I watched and marvelled. We all watched and marvelled. Then we took the train home. I gave the children their breakfast, mowed the lawn, walked the dog.

Distinguished and not-so-distinguished BBC correspondents dashed to the hotspots and, amid the wreckage of the divided continent that we had all grown used to, tried to make sense of it all. They reported what they were told, citing the sources, they analysed as best they could, they speculated as intelligently as the general confusion permitted. They discussed matters with local journalists whose primary - sometimes only - qualification was fluency in English, and with politicians, experts and supposedly informed sources selected on the same grounds. Passers-by were grabbed by eager producers, retained if they could string together a sentence in English, discarded if not.

I used occasionally to wonder, in between bursts of word-churning for news bulletins and summaries, about the story we never heard. Away from the rage and exhilaration foaming through the streets and squares of the cities, there were people – probably quite like us, with children to give breakfast to, dogs to walk, even, conceivably, lawns to mow – looking on. Ordinary people with ordinary lives to organise. They must have been bemused, excited, fearful, uncertain. But who were they?

I had an idea that nagged at me until it drove me into the office of my BBC manager with a request for five months' unpaid leave. The idea was simple. The borders were now open. What if I crossed them? What if I kept away from the cities where the action was concentrated? What if I had a way to reach some of those onlookers and find out what they made of it all and how they were managing? I thought I had a way.

They had rivers, those countries, and where there were rivers there were fish, and where there were fish there would be anglers. I was an angler, and I knew that the passion was essentially the same wherever it was found. It flows between frontiers and differences of culture and language, and creates bridges where politicians and diplomats encounter walls of brick and concrete. If I could find the fishermen and go fishing with them, I would get a different story. That was my idea.

Rather to my surprise (I half-thought I was indispensable), my BBC manager readily agreed to let me go. At the time I was also writing a fishing column for the *Financial Times*, and the wise and far-sighted editor of its Weekend section, Max Wilkinson, commissioned a series of articles about my forthcoming travels and even contrived a useful contribution towards my expenses. The final piece fell into place when a rich friend, with more faith in my abilities than I had, said he would underwrite the enterprise.

So I went. From Hamburg I drove east around Berlin into Poland, then south-east, past a string of grim towns with impossible names such as Strzemieszyce, Zabrze and Krzeszowice, to Kraków; from Poland to Bohemia, Slovakia, Hungary and Romania. I went fishing with a dentist, a doctor, a vet, two factory workers, a traffic policeman turned glass engraver, a company boss, a refrigeration engineer and a painter, among others. In Romania I slept twice in beds that Ceauşescu himself had slept in, and stayed in a village where, the week before, a woman rounding up cattle had been fatally mauled by a bear.

In most of the places I got to I was the first Englishman who'd ever asked for a fishing licence. Apart from letters collected *poste restante* and very occasional telephone conversations from PTT offices on abysmal lines, I was cut off from family and the familiar. I always felt very far from home. There were no laptops then, no email. No one had a mobile phone. It was a very different Europe.

When I returned to the BBC newsroom colleagues peered up at me with short-lived interest and asked if I'd had a good holiday. I wrote a narrative of my journey which ended with my driving across the Danube from Romania to Bulgaria at half-past one on a steamy night, and looking down at the river: 'silent, shrouded in darkness, gleaming quietly like coal, lit here and there by the lights on top of the buoys swaying in the current'. It nearly got published by a reputable publisher, but not quite; which was a great disappointment at the time because I was unsettled by urges to be a writer rather than a BBC word-churner. Much later I realised that whoever had rejected my manuscript had unwittingly done me a favour. There were good things in it, but not enough of them.

I settled back into the old newsroom routine, still troubled by the urges. My first marriage foundered. In time I married again, left the BBC, had more children, wrote some books which were published. A new Europe took

shape, which made me think of the old one and of the story I had happened upon there, still untold. I thought I should try again.

* * *

This ancient history came back insistently as I sat in my seat on Eurolines service 194, bound for Kraków. At the same time I began to take more notice of the human geography around me.

The seats immediately in front of me were taken by a woman and a boy, presumably her son, who was clutching a *Charlie and Lola* book. They were seen off at Victoria Coach Station by a man who repeatedly pulled the boy to him in a desperate, longing way, whispering urgently in his ear. The parting between mother and father - assuming that's who they were - was perfunctory. There seemed to be a finality in the air around the three of them, which the boy either did not feel or was unable to acknowledge. The mother was young and pretty in a dark, smouldering fashion. I feared that if I tried to talk to her she would assume that I was trying to pick her up; and that even if I managed to persuade her that this wasn't the case, everyone else on the coach would assume that it was.

Across the aisle from the mother and son was a young woman on her own. I could see only the top of her head, but I knew she spoke English because she was having an urgent conversation on her mobile in which she said she was going back to Wrocław with no money, no clothes, nothing. Her tone was anxious bordering on distraught. I didn't want to intrude. She might also have thought my motives were amorous, even predatory.

Behind me was a dumpy middle-aged Polish woman, and across the aisle from her another, older Polish woman, grey and faded. They quickly struck up an acquaintance, leaning towards one another to exchange chat in low tones. What could they be talking about? Going home? Children,

grandchildren, husbands? The English weather? The impenetrable mysteries of England and its customs? I had absolutely no means of knowing.

The coach was less than a third full, and the remaining passengers - one couple, the rest single males, presumably workers returning home - were scattered about the back half of the coach. It was strange, but as the journey went on I felt more and more separated from them, more and more inhibited from getting up, turning to face them, approaching them, asking them anything. Some kind of psychic chasm had opened between us when we took our seats. I made excuses to myself. What would I say to them, anyway? That I was going to Poland to write a book about Polish people going back to Poland? How absurd would that sound?

The truth was that I didn't have the nerve. I had somehow forfeited or mislaid the journalist's impudent assumption of the right to accost anyone and ask anything. Without realising it, I had turned into one of those islanders who, in Emerson's words, 'is an island himself, safe, tranquil, incommunicable'.

A compelling factor in my deciding to take a car to eastern Europe in 1990 was that many people there did not have their own transport. To get to the rivers I would need to drive. Furthermore I took dollars, which in those days still possessed an almost super-natural power to unlock doors in foreign parts. With dollars I would be able to obtain the fuel that was in wretchedly short supply for those with only Polish *złoty*, Czech *korun*, Hungarian *forint* or Romanian *lei* at their disposal.

Eighteen years later none of that applied. Everyone had a car, petrol was as freely available there as anywhere else, and their currencies were in more buoyant shape than the dollar or sterling. The obvious way to get around was by public transport, beginning with the coach. I could, of

course, have taken the two-hour flight to southern Poland instead of submitting myself to 26 hours on the road (by air I could have got to New Zealand in the same time). But I was persuaded that the bus was the way to get the story.

The story was, or appeared to be, this. In May 2004 eight countries in eastern Europe - Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia - had joined the European Union. Over the next three years somewhere between half a million and one and a half million citizens of the new member states made their way to Britain to live and work, roughly two-thirds of them from Poland. Curiously, no one took the trouble to measure the scale of the influx, which remains a matter of guesswork. The attitude of the British authorities appeared to be that the border was open so what was the point of checking who came in and out so long as they were legal and white (and therefore non-Islamic).

It took a while for the human tide from the east to register in the public consciousness. Then, quite suddenly, it became news. In my local town, Reading, the Poles infiltrated the Oxford Road. Delicatessens appeared where you could buy six kinds of Polish sausage, Polish smoked bacon, Polish bread, ready-made *pierogi*, beer and vodka; whose windows were filled with cards advertising jobs, rooms, travel, church services and social events for Poles. For a time the local newspaper published an edition in Polish. One of the pubs, long on its uppers for want of local patronage, sprang to life as a Polish *gospoda*.

The media woke up. Sections of it responded in the usual sour, mean-spirited, xenophobic way. Thanks to 'the EU' we had been invaded. Our jobs were being taken by an army led by a figure of mythic status, the Polish plumber. With the Polish plumber came his mate and a raggie-taggle horde of bricklayers, plasterers, electricians, bar workers, fruit-and-veg pickers, all accompanied by a train of camp followers intent upon leeching off the proverbially open-

handed British welfare system. Polish women were able to obtain the abortions they were denied at home, courtesy of the NHS. Schools were overwhelmed by monoglot Polish children. Councils were besieged by families waving EU rules on emergency housing. Police forces struggled to contain localised crime waves of a sinister Slavic kind, concentrating on drugs and under-age prostitutes, with a distinctly un-English attitude towards casual violence.

Typically, the incomers were depicted either as sabotaging the labour market by their willingness to work incredibly hard at menial jobs, for wages and under conditions no self-respecting British worker would accept (this strand of attack demanding a certain flexibility from commentators more used to berating the British working man for his laziness), or as welfare scroungers. Cultural differences were gleefully seized upon. For a while the angling press was rife with stories of barbarous behaviour by fishermen 'of eastern European origin', who declined to buy licences, poached riotously, used every imaginable illegal means (including submerging a supermarket trolley fitted with a car battery in a lake to electrocute the carp), and were implicated in the unforgivable crime of killing and eating the fish they caught instead of returning them alive.

Local authorities were mocked for putting up road signs in Polish, while an accident involving a Polish driver would automatically be attributed to inability to comprehend traffic instructions in English. Councils that issued leaflets in Polish or trained staff to speak a few words of the language were accused of wasting taxpayers' money. Polish workers who sent money home were charged with depleting the UK economy.

An important element in this narrative was the incomers' mode of arrival. The coaches crossing from the far side of Europe to this little island were the symbolic equivalent of the wagons of the Boer Voortrekkers, the ships of the Pilgrim Fathers, the locomotives thrusting their

way through the American West. The budget airlines quickly muscled in on the business but the coach route remained fixed in the public perception as the pathway from the east, with Victoria Coach Station as its portal.

Obscured within this fog of myth-making and journalistic invention was a dry story of economic opportunism. A large number of people - possibly a million or so, the great majority of them young and single - had come to Britain because they were allowed to, and because they could get work easily and earn significantly more than in their countries of origin. The jobs they took were mostly generated by an expanding economy with very low unemployment and were often in sectors affected by existing labour shortages. Some stayed, some travelled home unnoticed, some went back and forth. Comparatively few came with the intention of settling in Britain for good.

The idea was that I would take the bus in order to go back the way they had come. Against the flow ... hence the title of the book. What I did not know - because hardly anyone had then realised it - was that the flow was no longer a flow but an ebb. The direction had reversed. The Polish plumber, his mate and the rest of them were in fact going home. It is now believed (the absence of precision in these calculations still strikes me as extraordinary) that by May 2008, a month before I boarded the coach for Kraków, around a half of the influx had become an exodus.

There were various reasons for this. Compared with 2004 the pound had lost a quarter of its value against the Polish *złoty*. The vivacious state of the Polish economy had caused a doubling of average wages there, so that emigrant workers in the UK were now earning only two or three times as much as they could at home, where the cost of living was still very much lower. Besides that, the UK economy was contracting, making jobs scarcer, while other EU countries had followed Britain in easing restrictions on

workers from the new member states, increasing opportunities elsewhere.

And many - nobody can know how many - left for the very simple reason that they preferred their own familiar country to this strange and often unwelcoming one, and had saved enough money to buy land, build a house, start a business or fulfil other ambitions back home.

While I was away during the summer of 2008 I obtained a perspective on this great movement of people from eastern Europe that was very different from the usual British point of view. To us, this nation of islanders, the human inflow was a major event that had a significant impact on our way of life and materially affected the way we saw ourselves in relation to the rest of our continent. To them, however, it was not a big story. Economic migration from the region has been a recurring historical phenomenon. It has happened throughout the centuries without vitally weakening any country's sense of national identity. Poles are Poles, at least in part, wherever they find themselves, similarly Latvians, Lithuanians, Hungarians and the rest. It's no big deal, my friends said when I asked. You go where the work is. So what?

Thus, in that sense, I was more with the flow than against it, although it took me a while to work that out. I liked the title, though. And as I was to spend good deal of my time working my way up rivers with a fishing rod in my hand, it seemed reasonable to stick with it.

Over the Thames I saw a sign for The Oval, home of Surrey County Cricket Club, and glimpsed the famous gasworks to the northern side of the ground. The coach went up Kennington Lane, past Tesco, along New Kent Road into Old Kent Road. I wondered what the Polish plumber would have made of this. He would probably have recognised Tesco because Tesco had invaded Poland, but would the Polish Tesco help you spend less each day or would it have

some equally fatuous and annoying Poland-specific slogan? And what of Sainsbury's, making life taste better? And what of cricket itself? My Polish friend Adam, long resident in England, would watch any sport on TV, including cricket, then telephone me to ask about the terminology. 'What is this No Ball?' he would demand. Then, ten minutes later: 'What is Extras? And what it mean, Declare?'

We passed Julius Ceasar Solicitors, Whistle and Flute Dry Cleaners, Beddy Buyz. More questions suggested themselves. A sign disclosed that Dover was 72 miles away. Leafy Blackheath, with its wide green spaces and old houses in dark chocolate brick, soothed me towards the first of many slumbers.

By the time the A2 delivered us into Dover, the Battle of Borodino was brewing on the road to Moscow. When my journey began I was almost two-thirds of the way through *War and Peace*, a novel which - as anyone will tell you - requires energy and a following wind to get through. I hadn't wanted to leave it behind, fearing that I might never go back to it, or if I did, that I would sink in a confusion of Bolkonskys, Bezukhovs, Rostovs, counts and princes and countesses and princesses, battle lines, retreat lines, supply lines, hussars and cuirassiers, Prussians and Russians. Like Napoleon and Kutuzov, I had to finish what I had started. But I was travelling light and the book was heavy. I had resolved that it must be finished with by the time I reached Kraków.

Cannon were booming and soldiers were dropping like cut corn as we pulled up in the port, between the green sea and the rough, blinding cliffs. An information panel at the quay informed anyone interested that the temperature was 23 degrees Celsius, and that 36,824 passengers, 7,424 cars and more than 4,000 lorries had passed through in the previous 24 hours. We all got off the coach and I asked the pretty young mother of the boy who'd been sitting in front of me if she knew how long we would be waiting. She

smiled uncomprehendingly and replied in Polish. I went inside the departure lounge and found a quiet spot. After eight hours of fighting, the French ceased to attack. Napoleon rode away from the battlefield. Kutuzov roused himself from a doze and ate some roast chicken.

Every now and then, like some junior aide-de-campe dispatched by the general to observe and report back, I went outside to make sure that the coach was not embarking without me. Eventually the incoming ferry docked and spewed forth its streams of vehicles. We were waved back on to the coach. At the head of the line next to us, a little man in long shorts tried to coax a very elderly Winnebago Chieftain into life. Its engine coughed and died. A gang of tough-looking bikers in leathers, scarves, earrings and reflective sunglasses gathered to offer advice. A couple of them partially undressed and poked around underneath the Chieftain's bonnet. Just in time blue smoke plumed from the exhaust and the gallant old wreck heaved itself up the ramp and into the dark belly of the vessel.

It was a very long while since I had travelled anywhere by ferry. After 9/11 I, like everyone else, had got used to tediously intrusive security measures at airports. Their absence at Dover - no baggage screening, no frisking, not even a glance at a passport - was at the same time oddly liberating and more than slightly puzzling. Who, I wondered as I joined the throng clanging their way up the metal stairways from the car decks, had made the calculation that our enemies would refrain from blowing up *Pride of Dover* or *Sea France Berlioz* or any of the other great, gleaming sitting ducks plying the Channel routes?

I stood on deck in the evening sunshine, drinking beer, the breeze coming off the water into my face. The surface churned and boiled at the ferry's stern, as if the kraken or globster or some other leviathan of myth might be about to put in an appearance. England began to edge away. The Kentish cliffs reared above the sea, presenting a formidable

physical barrier. Where the green of the downland met the white of the chalk, it looked as though some other monster with mighty incisors had munched its way along the coast, devouring it in a succession of clean downward bites that left tumbles of rock like crumbs where the waves rolled in.

There is no ignoring the separateness of this island. Across much of mainland Europe the dismantling of border controls has blurred the distinctions between countries, so that you have to stay reasonably alert to be sure which one you are in. Northern France merges almost imperceptibly into Belgium, Belgium into Holland, Holland into Germany. But the sea and the sea's boundaries and all that is involved in crossing them constitute an absolute division that no treaty, no political or economic union, no plague of globalisation, can disguise. Visitors from Julius Caesar to the Polish Plumber can have been in no doubt, as England's south coast appeared before them, that they were about to encounter a place very different from anywhere else.

There she goes, I thought. My England. My white cliffs. My Dame Vera.

Chapter 2

Bus to Kraków



THE LIGHT WAS beginning to fade as our coach slid out of Calais and set off around the northern fringe of a landmass that extended 8,000 miles to the Sea of Japan. And I made a friend of sorts, although I never did find out her name. She was sitting across the aisle from me, a broad, handsome, middle-aged woman in ample blouse and skirt. Beyond her, filling the window seat, was her husband, who was also built on generous lines. He didn't speak much, and not at all to me.

They came from Ironbridge in Shropshire, where she had been brought up by Polish parents. I gathered that her father had made his way to the town during the war and subsequently worked there in a factory. They were on their way to Kraków to stay with her relatives. She said her husband suffered from vertigo and had grommets in his ears, which made flying uncomfortable for him, hence their decision to take the coach. Although she spoke Polish well enough to be able to translate the announcements for me,

she had an English reluctance to part with personal information. There was a daughter somewhere, I gathered, and grandchildren in unspecified numbers for whom she liked to cook Polish food. I had visions of gleaming mounds of *pierogi* and *placki* and steaming bowls of *bigos*. 'We all love Polish food,' she said, patting her stomach and gazing fondly in the direction of her husband's. They had a basket of provisions on the floor between them which they dipped into at intervals. Whenever we stopped at a service station they sailed off purposefully to the food counter, where I would spot them with pasties filled with hot cheese and ham; or - once we got to Poland - dishes of steaming cabbage and sausage.

Somewhere in northern France, or possibly Belgium, Prince Andrei Bolkonsky died his lingering death. It was typical of him to have stood on the battlefield of Borodino, pondering eternity and his new-found love of life while staring at a smoking shell until it went off and tore his abdomen apart. I didn't miss him much. I read on, delved into my own stock of food, stared out of the window. At about ten o'clock the lights and the music were switched off and we settled ourselves for sleep. Everyone was swallowed by the darkness except for the driver, his head and shoulders a still upright shape against the orange and yellow lights of his instrument panel.

At 4.20 the next morning we stopped in northern Germany for the lavatory and a coffee break. We stood around in the yellow lamplight, keeping close to our familiar, reassuring vehicle. Most of the younger men smoked, cupping cigarettes in their hands and pulling on them hungrily. No one spoke much. It might have been a chance to open channels of communication, but the restraint on speech seemed to me almost Cistercian. Back on board the psychic barriers came down once more.

Later I watched mist rise from the meadows. We passed a sign: Berlin 215 kilometres. I bit into a cold steak-and-

kidney pie, releasing coils of meaty aroma. 'Ooh, that smells good,' groaned the lady from Ironbridge. 'I'm hungry.' She shifted in her seat. 'It's the cheeks of your bum, that's where it gets you.' She was right. We looped around Berlin to the south, heading for the Polish border through pine forests and fields of wheat, rapeseed and potatoes. Wind turbines materialised out of the mist, pale and motionless, as if waiting to be woken up and put to work. A pair of storks, emblematic birds of eastern Europe, trod carefully across the ground, heads down. The rising sun lit the flattened bodies of the host of insects spattered against the windscreen, each individual shape different, like snowflakes.

In Russia, Napoleon and his troops occupied Moscow. Pierre was taken prisoner. Petya Rostov, Natasha's younger brother, was killed. Pierre was rescued. I noticed that we were no longer in Germany but Poland, devouring the miles that had stretched before the retreating French army like an eternal punishment in that appalling winter of 1813. At half-past ten on a radiant summer's morning I bade farewell to Pierre and Natasha after a brief, abortive grapple with Tolstoy's concluding polemic on history, free will and predetermination. (I don't care what anyone says, this has to be the most tedious and ridiculous ending to any great novel. What on earth was his editor thinking of?)

One journey ends, another starts, I reflected with Tolstoyan profundity. The TV screen came alive and we settled down for the morning film. It was some kind of musical celebration of the joys of marriage, in which farcical nuptial episodes were interspersed with rapturous duets and choruses in praise of marital bliss. Our numbers began to thin. The woman who'd left England with nothing got off at Wrocław, the mother and her son at Opole.

On the outskirts of Opole the coach stopped to refuel. The service station nudged my memory. It was just the same as any other, anywhere in Europe: forecourt, shop,

café, ranks of pumps, cars, trucks, coaches with nozzles thrust into their sides.



TF with little red car, 1990

I had come this same way in my Peugeot on 3 May 1990, my head and heart swirling with apprehensions. I'd bowled along an almost empty road from the border with what was then still East Germany (for a few months more), and had suddenly come upon an enormous queue of traffic. For a moment I'd thought there must have been an accident ahead. But the queue was to one side, to let passing vehicles through. The cars - aged Polish-made Fiat 126s, East German Trabants, the odd Czech Škoda, Romanian Dacia or Yugoslav Yugo - were mostly empty. Their owners stood beside or behind them, with hands in pockets or holding a cigarette.

Further on a gap had opened up in the queue. The cars behind it were being pushed forward to fill it. The queue was a mile long at least. At its far end was a petrol station, two antiquated pumps presided over by two attendants in overalls, one to wave the cars forward, one at a time, the other to wield the nozzle. It was a scene I was to witness

many times in Poland and Romania. (They seemed to manage better in Czechoslovakia and Hungary; whereas in Bulgaria no one, not even the British Ambassador, had any fuel at all, which was why I had to leave after five days.) Usually there was a sign stating the meagre ration. Sometimes, without warning, the station would be shut and another sign would go up, telling people to try somewhere else. What never changed was the air of resignation hanging over the queue. No one showed anger or impatience. Going short and waiting in line had been part of life for so long. Everyone knew the rules.

Not any more. Polish motorists had become like any other motorists, and their cars were like cars everywhere else. In two months in eastern Europe in the summer of 2008 I didn't see a single Trabant, although I looked hard. A few Fiat 126s and Dacias and ancient Škodas did survive, relics of a departed age, like horses and carts.

The coach sped along a smooth new EU-funded highway that skirted what had previously been known as the Upper Silesian Industrial District, Poland's energy and manufacturing heartland, a swathe of coal mines, blast furnaces, factories, slagheaps, towers and chimneys, overhung by an unmoving blanket of acrid fumes. Now the air smelled the same as it did in Kent and the dark ridges of coal and spoil had been cleared away. On the approach to Kraków the hoardings proclaimed the wonders of mobile phones, power showers, ride-on mowers. Ride-on mowers in the land I remembered for the swish of the scythe! We passed Spar and Ikea, and showrooms with walls of curved glass behind which gleamed burnished ranks of Audis, Mazdas, Suzukis, Grand Vitara people carriers.

As we pulled into the bus station, I tucked my copy of *War and Peace* underneath the window seat in front. I wonder who found it, and if they kept it. Maybe another traveller picked it up and turned the pages. Europe two centuries ago. Austerlitz. *L'Empereur*. Tsar Nicholas. Balls,

duels, intrigues, battles ... It would have made a curious introduction to England in 2008.

Chapter 3

Raba

I WAS MET at the bus station in Kraków by a small, bald man with a bristling moustache and brisk, bustling manner. He offered me a quick, strong handshake and introduced himself, speaking English with a strong German accent. His name was Marek Kowalski. He was an atomic physicist, and worked in some kind of research establishment in Kraków. He did not attempt to explain the nature of his work to me, perhaps because he was not allowed to, perhaps because he thought that it would be beyond my understanding, most likely because it had nothing to do with what had brought us together.

Once again, as in 1990, I was entrusting myself to the angling brotherhood, of which Marek was a proud member. Once again I had my rod with me, my waders at the ready, my tackle-bag to hand. Rivers would once more be my pathway, and the company of fishermen my education.

The introduction to Marek had been arranged by a fishing friend from my previous visit, Jurek Kowalski. Jurek said he had not met the other Kowalski in the flesh but had ascertained that he spoke good English and was a keen fly-fisherman. There was no mistake there. Marek's enthusiasm was huge and voluble. He told me his river was called the Raba, which flows north-east out of the Tatras and joins the Wisła - or Vistula in English - east of Kraków.

As we drove out of the city, Marek told me about the revolution that had overtaken fishing in Poland. In the old days it had all been organised by the Fishing Association, a

state-appointed bureaucratic apparatus that, through its local branches, exercised total control over every river, stream, lake, reservoir and pond in the country. In the Poland that had emerged during my 18 year absence, familiar monopolies had been challenged everywhere, including the riverbank.

Marek belonged to a club that had secured the rights to the prime section of the Raba by outbidding the Fishing Association. This was a very good thing, according to Marek. Under the old system the river was over-fished, poaching was rife, illegal methods flourished, and every fish caught was killed regardless of size. Now, with the injection of money, commitment and a new business model, everything was incomparably better. Bigger fish were stocked and more of them survived because more fishermen were putting them back alive. Bailiffs had been appointed - he brandished his bailiff's card at me - and the poachers had been sent packing. In fact the locals generally had been elbowed out in favour of well-heeled, enlightened Krakovians such as himself. Such was progress. You embraced it or you were left behind.

The club water was below a big reservoir created by a dam at Dobczyce, about 15 miles south-east of Kraków. The reservoir ensured a supply of cool, clean water suitable for trout and grayling. That and its closeness to the city, Marek explained, gave it a market value way beyond the reach of the peasant fish-slayers who lived in the villages along its valley.

His preparations for fishing were meticulous in the extreme. He took off his driving trousers and folded them precisely on top of socks and shoes before pulling on blue leggings and chest waders. He placed his club permit, licence and bailiff's card in one small plastic bag, his car keys in another, and his mobile phone in a third, putting each bag into a separate pocket of his many-pocketed fishing waistcoat. He took out his rod and reel and