



GETTING LOST IN GRUNEWALD MATTHIAS EGELER

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It's getting dark, I am a couple of weeks into my Fellowship, and I am at Hagenplatz.



The latter means that, given my sense of orientation, I don't have the faintest clue where I am. I know that it took me about an hour's worth of meandering to get here, but when it comes to finding my way back to the Wissenschaftskolleg main building's attic (my current domicile of choice), this is not particularly useful information. It's one of those occasions when I wonder whether I should also get myself one of those mobile phones that you can use to access the Internet to get a map and which seem to be so much in vogue these days. But then, observing my Co-Fellows during lunches, I suppose that I'd throw it into the Herthasee within a week of getting one, which would be slightly unenvironmental.

Still, Hagenplatz is fun, I think, while pondering the orientational usefulness (or, in my case, lack thereof) of the street sign that proudly announces this slightly sad excuse for a square to be "Hagen's Square". Getting lost and bad puns. That sounds familiar.

Flashback: in the Icelandic countryside. Somewhere halfway up some mountain.

It all had seemed so easy. You just drive up the valley (quite swampy, mostly), ignore the picturesque turf-built old church, and instead head for the steeple of the somewhat newer one, and from there you walk up the mountain, and then there are the remains of the medieval fortifications right on the crest of the first hill. The National Museum had even put up a sign at the approach road to the parsonage farm; it gave a map with a location and advertised that there was a hiking trail up to the fortifications. Now I am standing on a hilltop, seeing nothing much except for a remarkably bare hilltop, and wonder whether it is the right hilltop. Maybe how sun-bleached the official sign had been was a kind of hint. Or that the hiking trail stopped at the

picnic area immediately by the church rather than continuing up the mountain. Reluctantly, I admit to myself that I am completely lost as to whether I am on the right hilltop, nor do I actually know what the “clearly visible” remains of the medieval fortifications supposedly to be found there should look like. I have a good view of the parsonage, though, perching just where the land rises out of the waterlogged alluvial land of the Héraðsvötn river system. Flugumýri, the parsonage farm is called – not helpful for orientation in the matter at hand, but not too bad as a name. “Fly Swamp”. Quite fitting for a farm on the edge of a swamp. (I take a mental note to avoid it in fly season.) Of course, a medieval text claims that the farm is not simply named for the local fly population. (And why should it be, being perched on the edge of a wetland area?) Rather, it is named for the death of a horse: the famous horse Fluga, “Fly”, drowned there in the swamp after an illustrious career as a racehorse that won a competition against the sorcerer Örn, “Eagle”. Since Eagle had placed a high bet on this race, this defeat cost him dearly, and the loss of his money so distressed Eagle that he went up a mountain and killed himself – henceforth, the mountain was called “Eagle’s Mountain”, Arnarfell. (I hope nobody believes such nonsense as that an Eagle’s Mountain would be called so because of an eagle rather than because of a suicidally parsimonious sorcerer with a gambling problem. If and when I find my way back to the Wiko, I have to ask one of our biologists where Icelandic eagles actually do live.) So enjoying the view of Fly Swamp with all its associations of horses and sorcerers is good fun. I never found that castle, though.

Back on Hagenplatz, night is falling, and I am still lost. Apparently, it doesn’t matter whether you search for a castle or for home (and I hope I will be more successful finding my way home than I had been trying to find that medieval fortification above Fly Swamp): people always keep kidding around with the place names instead of giving you simple directions. Why is that?, I wonder. The name Hagenplatz of course seems to evoke Hagen of Tronje, coating the upmarket residential area with some medieval-heroic *Nibelungenlied* romanticism. But actually, the square is named after Otto von Hagen, who was a high-level bureaucrat in the Prussian forestry commission in the 1860s. (Incidentally, I didn’t find that out by myself. The Wiko library service did that for me.) This approach to naming actually seems to be a bit of a pattern in Grunewald. When I set out on my little walk earlier this evening, one of the first roads I took was Koenigsallee. The seemingly obvious morphology of the name misleads you to think that this is the “King’s Boulevard”, with a genitive singular in the first element of the compound (like in Kurfürstendamm, the “Electoral Prince’s Causeway”). Except that it isn’t. Felix Koenigs – note the final -s and the spelling with oe instead of ö – was a financier who belonged to the founding

members of the enterprise that in the 1880s and 1890s ran the development of the Grunewald *Villenkolonie*, “colony of villas” – today one might call it a luxury property development area or some such. He also owned a number of plots there, of course. It is rather poignant that one of the moneylenders behind this project gave himself quasi-royal status in its very main thoroughfare, which, pronounced rather than written, sounds exactly like the *Königsallee* in Marzahn or the *Königsallee* in Reinickendorf, which really are named after the king as the head of state. And of course he did it on purpose. Just behind Villa Walther, the first road that runs into Koenigsallee is Delbrückstraße, named for Martin Friedrich Rudolf von Delbrück, a Prussian Minister of State who, together with Bismarck, was one of the engineers of the German unification of 1871. Bismarckallee, named after the man himself, follows two intersections later. So Koenigs is joined by two of the most important and most powerful men of the Prussian King’s government at the moment of Prussia’s apex of power. Sounds like a mission statement to me – especially coming from a banker and property developer. (Somebody had a clear vision of the future, there, and a worryingly accurate one at that.) A more likeable illustration that the place names of Grunewald were chosen very consciously branches off from Koenigsallee halfway between its intersections with *Messieurs* Delbrück and Bismarck:



the Hasensprung or “Hare’s Leap” (for a Lovers’ Leap, those turn-of-the-century Prussians apparently were not romantic enough). Physically, it is just a small footpath with a bridge that connects Koenigsallee with the next parallel road beyond a couple of smallish lakes, whose connecting channel it “leaps” over via a bridge decorated with sculptures of two leaping hares. Very un-subtle, decorating the “Hare’s Leap” with statues of leaping hares, and all the more a statement that the Grunewald game with place names is a conscious one. When I passed the bridge, I met a fox there – I wonder whether it was the same fox that occasionally visits the Wiko Thursday evening parties. He certainly seemed to be making a statement that I was meeting the realm of Nature there. The idea was not new, though: Mister Koenigs had been there before him. There’s a whole chain of little lakes running through the central part of Grunewald, mostly purpose-built when the luxury property development area (aka *Villenkolonie*) was laid out: Dianasee, Koenigssee, Herthasee, Hubertussee, four lakes named for Diana, the Roman goddess of the hunt; the king/Mister Koenigs; Hertha, who is a nineteenth-century misspelling of a Germanic goddess whose sacred cult image, according to Tacitus, dwelt on an island in a sacred lake in which the slaves serving her cult were drowned as occasion demanded; and St. Hubertus, the Catholic patron saint of hunters. This set of names as a whole evokes a very feudal image of nature as the place of hunting royalty and gory archaic blood sacrifice; the fox simply enjoying a quiet afternoon there, without being either hunted or sacrificed, was endearingly subversive. Though, at a superficial-enough glance, one could almost think Mister Koenigs’s selection of names had been trying to introduce some gender-balanced and religious diversity: the sequence of lake names is female – male – female – male; pagan – Christian; Prussian (and therefore probably Protestant) – Catholic. But then I get a vision of middle-aged Mister Koenigs between two ever-young goddesses. One doesn’t even need to feel strongly about the blasphemy to find it cringe-making.

I am still wandering around Hagenplatz, feeling lost while also being pretty sure that I cannot really be far from home. How could somebody with my sense of orientation end up getting into place names? Circling the triangular square, I determine that one of the roads that leads off it is Hagenstraße – not helpful, nor particularly imaginative. Another is Menzelstraße – named after the Berlin painter and lithographer who mainly made depictions of Frederick the Great? That would sound about right, given the overall pattern, but is again not helpful. Fontanestraße goes off in yet another direction; contrasting the nationalist draughtsman with a very national writer, apparently (if one may call the author of the multi-volume *Wanderungen durch die Mark Brandenburg* national; “local

interest writer” might be mean-spirited – he could write, after all). It takes me two circuits and a half to realise that the really big road running on one side of Hagenplatz, where at every crossing I am more interested in not being run over than in finding a street sign, is Koenigsalle. You just can’t get away from the guy! Yet for once I am grateful, as well as faintly annoyed with myself that if I had to get lost I had to do it in such an embarrassing way. Nonetheless, is anybody still going to say that place-name studies have no practical applicability? They certainly help to recognise the road that leads back to Wiko.

Now I stroll down Koenigsallee in what I hope is the direction of the Wissenschaftskolleg, feeling very Walter Benjamin (while also trying to remember what exactly it was he had written about his *flâneur*). I also wonder what it tells me that people in turn-of-the-century Berlin were playing around with place names in a way that doesn’t seem so different from what medieval Icelanders were doing: as jokes go, Hagenplatz and Koenigsallee are neither better nor worse than “Fly Swamp” and “Eagle’s Mountain”, and they seem to work in pretty much the same way, creating ambivalence through the possibility of identifying their respective first elements with competing homonyms: Hagen could be the anti-hero from the *Nibelungenlied* just as well as Otto von Hagen; Koenigsallee (at least if pronounced rather than spelled) could refer to Mister Koenigs just as well as to the king; *Fluga* in Flugumýri could be a fly just as well as the name of the horse called “Fly”; and *Örn*, whose genitive form *arnar* is the first element of “Eagle’s Mountain”/Arnarfell, could be an eagle just as well as the personal name Örn. When I arrived at Wiko, I wanted to write a book about Iceland and the Icelandic landscape. In Grunewald, though, everything seems to work much the same as in Iceland. Maybe I shouldn’t write just about Iceland, but choose a much broader perspective and use Iceland merely as the main example?

If I manage to find my way home (which should be easy, provided I am walking down Mister Koenigs’s Boulevard in the right direction), I should ask the wonderful library service to find me something about toponyms in Berlin. And I should consult with my Co-Fellow anthropologists about whether they have similar things in Ghana and Burkina Faso. And ask the biologists about insects and eagles and hares and all those other toponymic animals. I think that’s my plan now for the next one of those great Wiko lunches.