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## 'A Brief Stop on the Road from Auschwitz', by Göran Rosenberg

Review by Philippe Sands

A son's moving account of his father's struggle to build a life in Sweden after Auschwitz – and a journey to discover the truth decades later



Göran Rosenberg with his parents in 1950s Sweden

In August 1947 a young Jewish man named David Rosenberg descended alone from a train at the small town of Södertälje, a few kilometres to the west of Stockholm. A “pitiful remnant of his almost extinguished family”, David was in his twenties, on a journey that began in the Polish city of Lodz, took him to the selection ramp at Auschwitz-Birkenau – the point of separation from his beloved Halinka – and thence on to numerous labour and death camps in Germany. Somehow he ended up in Sweden, on a train. “My dearest Halinka,” he writes hopefully to the woman who eventually became his wife, “I got to Södertälje at seven in the evening.” Has he chosen the right place to disembark?

That question threads its way through *A Brief Stop on the Road from Auschwitz*. David and Halinka are soon reunited; it is a time for “bright dreams and big projects” in a new country. They produce a son who is given a local name, Göran. He will become one of Sweden's most distinguished journalists, a success story for a child of immigrants, and years later will write this fine, captivating account of his father's journey, his own journey of discovery, and the nature of Sweden in the years after the war.

The catalyst for this project is the discovery of a cache of letters – joyful and despairing, yet silent “about the unbearable” – that passed between his parents in those dark years. *A Brief Stop* struck a deep chord in Sweden, where it was awarded the August Prize for Literature, throwing light on the country's engagement with immigrants who have been through the most terrible suffering. This English translation has been prepared with care and intelligence by Sarah Death.

Göran Rosenberg is a man driven by a “lust for research”. The author retraces his father's path to Sweden, where he struggles with loss, employment, housing, small-town life and a bureaucracy barely able to comprehend the psychological consequences of surviving the concentration camps. We learn as much about Göran as we do about David in this account. The facts he records are often brutal, which makes the restraint of the writing all the more powerful. There is, too, an unlikely humour. Driving away from Auschwitz the author is charged with speeding by a German authority, which writes to reprimand him for a criminal act that is considered to be “repulsive”. The word is perhaps not proportionate to the crime, he suggests, “particularly not to a crime committed on this road”.

People and places emerge through meticulous research. The sense of immediacy is accentuated by the use of the present tense, in a monologue from son to father. “I prefer to stick to the documents,” Göran tells David, to explain “the sadness of your existence”. We learn not only what the Germans were up to but also how postwar Sweden dealt

with the aftermath. Neither journey is an easy one, as the son cuts through years of silence of the kind that often marks families who have been through trauma.

The dark moments did not disperse after David arrived in Sweden. And there is worse to face than official incomprehension. What is to be done with these foreigners, the local newspapers ask, hoarders of food, emotionally unstable people who are prone to trickery and cunning, pilfering and selfishness. The incredulity of the locals – and the hostility towards the outsider and “the other”, neither of which his father claims to be able to see – evokes the treatment of refugees in both Britain and Sweden today. The silence of the father is picked up by the son, who is also discreet about the past (“I never let Mr Winqvist find out that I knew a few words of Yiddish,” he writes of his teacher.) This book casts aside that silence.

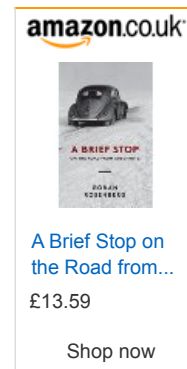
The story that Göran Rosenberg uncovers is far from unique, yet he treats the subject in an original manner. As the facts tumble out, beautifully observed, the fears about where this will lead become ever more acute.

By starting at a place that is not the obvious beginning of the story, nor indeed the end, Rosenberg leaves the reader to work out the connections between past, present and future as the book unfolds. Have we begun at the moment that David Rosenberg emerged from the darkness, or at the point when he was about to fall into it?

Thus are we drawn to the denouement, constantly asking ourselves, what will become of the father? The son knows, but he keeps it hidden from us until the very end. The moment is devastating. Has any other second-generation work done this more effectively? I can't think one that is equal to *A Brief Stop*, a towering and wondrous work about memory and experience, exquisitely crafted, beautifully written, humane, generous, devastating, yet somehow also hopeful. It forces us to reflect upon the modern-day David Rosenbergs, those individuals who walk our streets in silence, scarred by personal history and struggling for security.

**A Brief Stop on the Road from Auschwitz**, by Göran Rosenberg translated by Sarah Death, *Granta*, RRP£16.99, 336 pages

*Philippe Sands is professor of law at University College London. His 'A Song of Good and Evil', about the Nuremberg trial, will be performed with Vanessa Redgrave, Laurent Naouri and Guillaume de Chassy on November 29 and 30 at the Purcell Room, South Bank, London*



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