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GRANTA

A life built on silence

In this haunting memoir, a son recalls his father's struggle to start again after Auschwitz

MEMOIR

Christina Patterson

A BRIEF STOP ON THE ROAD FROM AUSCHWITZ by GORAN ROSENBERG translated by SARAH DEATH
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"I'm afraid," writes the author's father to the woman who will become his wife, "I'm already boring you." He writes this at the end of a letter about his liberation from a concentration camp in the Second World War. It is just one example of the breath-taking understatement that pervades this account of a journey to and from Auschwitz, and of a new life, in a new land.

The author is Goran Rosenberg, one of Sweden's most eminent writers and journalists, and the journey is the one undertaken by his father, David, from the Polish Jewish ghetto of Lodz to the social democratic paradise-in-progress of a small town near Stockholm. It starts with Rosenberg imagining his father coming over a bridge to Sodertalje, which he calls "the Place". "I'd rather not speculate," he says, as he tries to picture his arrival, aged 24, in jacket and tie, but speculation, it soon becomes clear, is the glue that binds the fragments he has gathered of the past.

The book is divided into seven sections, each with a generic title — The Place, The Wall etc — that refers to a specific aspect of this journey, but that also gives the sense of a mythical landscape that resonates beyond this particular tale. Rosenberg even refers to himself, at least at first, as "the Child". This, he admits, is to keep himself "at arm's length", and to bring the cool, forensic eye he feels he needs to a story that might otherwise break a heart.

He draws on his own childhood memories of the sights, sounds and smells of daily life in a provincial Swedish town: "the smell of fried herring", "the whiff of tar". He describes his dawning awareness of being different, and the "ice-cold" feeling he gets when he hears the word "Jew". As he pieces together the facts about what his parents fled, that fear comes to seem the only rational response.

In Lodz, it transpires, the chairman of the Jewish Council was given the task of making "the liquidation" of the ghetto a "calm and collected affair". "Give me the sick," he says. "We can save the well in their place." And so 70,000 people were put on trains, most to their deaths. It was only through a quirk of fate that Rosenberg's father was, on his 12th day at Auschwitz, sent to a slave labour camp in Braunschweig, to build trucks. From there, he was sent to Wöbbelin, which Rosenberg describes simply as "hell, organised as the absence of every human necessity". It was a Red Cross food parcel that kept him alive long enough to make the journey to Sweden, and a new life.

Rosenberg's account of these events, pieced together from letters and historical documents, is brilliantly and lethally done. The result is a profoundly moving act of remembering, but also a searing investigation of complicity, guilt and shame. "I like your concise, low-key style," he says of his father's letters, but his own style is the

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same. Ice-cold, and almost hypnotic in its rhythm and repetitions, it allows the terrible facts to speak for themselves.

In the end, the new life is just "a brief stop". The "shadows" of his father's past are too dark to escape. The light of the new country, with its love of conformity and deep distrust of difference, proves "too bright". "It eats away the shadows," says Rosenberg. After failing to get better work, and being twice refused reparations by the German government, in the kind of language used to record the dimensions of gas chambers, he walks calmly into a lake.

It takes a while for Rosenberg to understand what his father meant when he used the word "bore". To bore, he says, is "to speak of the unbearable". In this devastating memoir, David Rosenberg has finally found a voice to speak on his behalf.

☞ *Available at the Sunday Times Bookshop price of £13.99 (including p&p) and £16.99 (ebook) on 0845 271 2135*

United The author with his parents