

Existence is Futile

BY JENNIFER QUARTARARO

It's a dismal November day, the leaves are losing their color, the sun is losing its warmth, and Maryanne and I come armed with Milchkaffes and a bright blue Diana F+ camera. I hold onto the iron bars which have been pushed back just enough for me to slide into the massive five-story building. Beelitz-Heilstätten, a crumbling 60-building complex and former sanatorium, is situated in Brandenburg, a region of Germany known for its white asparagus.

This is one of the most heavily wooded regions in one of the most heavily wooded countries in Europe. Recent surveys show there's more deadwood in these forests than there used to be. Trees die, the timber decomposes, fungi and lichen grow and then insects such as beetles and wood wasps bore holes through inner chambers to make homes. There's more timber regrowing than Germany uses, though the soil of Brandenburg isn't suitable for farming, having earned the region its nickname, "The sandbox of the Holy Roman Empire."

In 1898, the Berlin Health Insurance Authority purchased 140 hectares with the intention to build a tuberculosis sanatorium and nursing home. It was opened in 1902. It first housed 600 beds. On August 3, 1914 all of

the patients were forced to leave when the complex was taken over by the Red Cross and used to recuperate injured soldiers from WWI, including Hitler, who spent two months at the palatial space nursing a wounded leg. At its peak the sanatorium housed 1,338 beds, 30 percent of which were occupied by those with lung diseases, the most common being tuberculosis. The patient pavilion was constructed in an east-west direction to allow for maximum sunlight on the terraced balconies, called 'air baths'. Beelitz also housed a post office, a washhouse, a bakery, stables, a butcher shop, a rifle range, a psych ward, a theater, and its own cogeneration station, providing the complex with both heat and electricity. It was said that the power station was so strong that snow never settled on this ground.

The sun is beginning to sink behind the tree line to our right, in an hour it will be dark. We quicken our pace and continue north along a path dense with Douglas fir, crunching over dead leaves. Each turn along the narrow road unearths another grand, crumbling structure, each with plywood covered windows and padlocked doors. Further north, in a clearing surrounded by black alder and birch trees, a decrepit brick building covered in thick, dangling vines looms tall and ominous. There is a single open window five feet up, the wrought iron bars just wide enough to slide up and into, the interior pitch black and still. Maryanne is too short, so I go in alone.

Stories circulate about the inhuman experiments that might have taken place in the psychiatric ward while the complex was under Nazi reign. Between the years of 1989-91 Wolfgang Schmidt, a serial killer and former police officer known as “The Beast of Beelitz” killed five women and a baby. Schmidt had a thing for pink underwear. He often waited in the brush for his victims, under the cover of firs and pines. The Soviet Union abandoned the complex in 1994 after seizing control following WWII. Potential private investors lost interest in the space in 2001 and the complex continued to fall into disrepair. Seven years later a 20-year old model was beaten with a frying pan and raped here and all remaining interest was also lost.

Branches come through the broken glass of the windows and I jump down to the cavernous space. It’s colder inside than out, and the floor is a pile of debris, dead leaves and disintegrating pieces of plaster. The wallpaper peels off in chunks, huge sheets of faded yellow and brown, while the grimy windows block out the grey sky outside. Each footstep across the floor echoes, the reverberations felt deep within the walls. I climb up to the second floor, where it’s hard to sense the end of the hallway, though the shadowy profiles of chairs jutting out at odd angles help to punctuate doorways.

The Aveda lip liner in my bag is made from forestry certified wood from Germany. The timber from the Swiss Pine in these forests is good for

making tool handles, shovels and hammers. More things will be built from the pieces cut down. Brandenburg is a region of Germany that's seen a sharp economic decline over the last few decades but interestingly enough, that economic neglect is thought by some scientists to have benefited the flora and fauna of the region. Birch trees grow from the rubble. When someone kisses me some of this forest rubs off.

On the fourth floor of Beelitz-Heilstätten time moves differently. There is the slow disintegration of blue tiles and shredding of pale yellow curtains. There are the wool-like sheets of dry rot, tiny orange dots of decay. There are the trees protruding from rooftops. There is the return of snow in winter. I am no longer Maryanne's friend that is temporarily living in Berlin, no longer sister to Stephanie, no longer girlfriend to Ray. I am no longer a girl with a valid Maine license, or a stable checking account at Bangor Savings or a frequent drink card to the Hungry Ghost coffee shop. I am blood rushing through veins, dirt on palms, air bursting through lungs as I collapse on the ground outside.

[*Author's note: One year after this visit took place a pop-up picnic was held on the lawns outside of the women's sanatorium. Food trucks served brats, schnitzel, black bean and chorizo arepas, and cold brew coffee. The band "Send More Cats" played a set, though blankets were not provided. It's unclear how much new timber grew in that time.]