

This description told me that Steinkirche was somewhere in the vicinity of Strehlen. Then, according to Elfriede's stories about walking her animals, ducks, geese and a goat to the railway station to meet visitors, a station once existed near the village. I wondered whether it had survived the bombing. I have seen films of the utter devastation along the Oder River in early May 1945, just before the War in Europe ended. Did the railway still pass Steinkirche? My mother's father had been a railway line pointsman, a signal attendant. From a station close to home he would have undertaken the long journeys his work demanded.

I went back to the old German maps in the National Library and located Steinkirche on one of several contiguous contour maps perhaps designed for military purposes. They covered Lower Silesia in 1938 in remarkable detail, although such detail also helped obscure the printed names of villages, which were lost in the depictions of miniature hills, rivers, quarries, castles, lakes and even houses.

Eventually I did locate the village through this superb map. Steinkirche was off the main road near the second railway station south of Strehlen, probably on a hill, something my mother had never mentioned. If one passed it, one could also locate it as station number two of the seven between Strehlen and Milnsterberg, on the railway running south of Breslau towards the Carpathian Mountains. Then I noted the Polish names for the two townships south of Wroclaw (Breslau). In the German-to-Polish Gazetteer they are given as Strzelin and Ziebice.

My intention was to take a train or a car to the new Polish ex-Steinkirche, visit it discreetly, and search the old cemetery for family connections. I wanted to photograph my two-year-old granddaughter beside my own grandfather Friedrich's grave. I wanted to look for other evidence of family history, and just savour the atmosphere of the place. I also wanted to see what had happened to Neumarkt Platz.

It was difficult to achieve anything in a hurry. In London, my daughter, granddaughter and I visited the office of the Polish Consulate. Tourist brochures were generously given to us, but none of the authoritative road maps of Poland showed the villages between Strzelin and Ziebice. Did our village still exist? And by what name?

After flying to Berlin, we set out in a hire car for Wroclaw on 13 September 2003. Beside the Hitler-era Autobahn, there are still extensive forests, between flat farmlands. It was raining when we entered Poland.