

Flight into freedom

A review by LARS SCHILLER

Alfred Andersch's first novel *Flight to Afar* (*Sansibar oder der letzte Grund* – »Zanzibar or the last reason«) tells a story about flight into freedom. A Jewish young woman and an object of art are being rescued from the imminent Nazi fascist arrest. The flight from Rerik across the Baltic Sea to Sweden succeeds thanks to the knowledge of waterways, shoals and currents.

Nowadays, leaving Germany is very easy, you can just go whenever you want to. Times were different though; you had to flee across the border in order to find freedom. Until 1989, even the inner German border was closed. More than 5,000 GDR citizens tried to escape, either swimming or in rowing boats – across the Baltic Sea to the West. Only few of them succeeded, others failed and were taken to prison. Half a century ago, Jewish people in Germany suffered even more; they were faced with the internment into extermination camps. This is exactly the topic of Alfred Andersch's first novel *Flight to Afar*. He describes two days in the autumn of 1937.

In the small Baltic town of Rerik four people meet with the aim of leaving the country out of political or personal reasons. Judith, a young Jewish woman from Hamburg, needs to escape from the Nazis. Her mother, old and not healthy enough due to a walking disability, committed suicide days before, so that Judith would have the chance of escaping from danger. In Rerik she hopes to find a ship that will take her to a neutral country. And indeed, at midday there is a Swedish steamship in the port ...

In Rerik, Judith gets acquainted with the communist instructor Gregor, who has to accomplish a Party order. He knows immediately that Judith is Jewish and that she desperately wants to flee abroad.

Gregor came to Rerik to contact the fisherman Knudsen, the last active comrade in town. However, Gregor has lost faith in the Communist Party, from his point of view it had failed when the Party left the power to the Nazis in 1933 without showing any resistance. Knudsen as well wants to leave the Party because he cannot see any perspective in its underground activities.

Knudsen employs a 15-year old young sailor who is bored by the anguish of daily life in the small town and annoyed by his mother's moaning. He dreams of a flight as described in one of his adventure books. »The right thing was to go away but you had to have somewhere to go to. You couldn't act like Father, who simply sailed aimlessly out into the open sea. If you had no other goal than the open sea, you always have to come back again. You'd have only got away, thought the boy, when you reached land beyond the open sea« (pp. 1–2).

Then there is another figure: the »Studying Monk«, an object of art by Ernst Barlach installed in

the church of Rerik. The Nazis regard it as »degenerate art« to be taken away and destroyed the following day. The priest asks the fisherman Knudsen to take the figure to Sweden into safety. Knudsen rejects because he doesn't want to get into a dangerous situation himself.

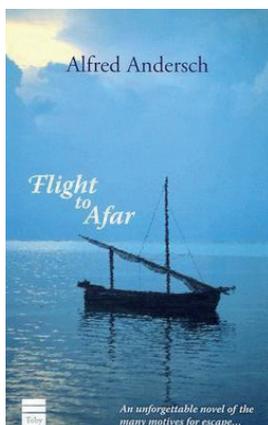
When Gregor meets Knudsen in the church to give him the instructions of the Central Committee, he sees the figure and likes it at once. The tenderness and concentrated reading posture fascinate him. Gregor proposes a joint escape to Sweden. However, the fisherman refuses; he cannot stand Gregor, a man who seemingly shirks away from the Central Committee, while he himself is only a common comrade who cannot escape.

Nonetheless, Gregor can convince the reluctant fisherman to save the figure. They agree on a nocturnal meeting point at a hidden spot on the coast. Knudsen shall leave the port with his boat as usual for everyone to see that he goes out fishing. Gregor will take the »Studying Monk« and sneak completely unnoticed to the meeting point at the headland. There, Knudsen's young sailor will pick him up with the rowing boat.

Everything happens accordingly, only that Gregor doesn't come alone with the statue, but brings Judith, whose only hope to escape with the Swedish ship, had faded desperately. The young sailor is astonished as he was only told about the strange man. When Knudsen had explained about the plan, he thought that a passenger on board would surely be brought to the other side of the Baltic Sea and not be left on this part of the coast. He would never have imagined that Knudsen were capable of such an action.

For the young sailor a story begins similar to one in his adventure books. How many times had he imagined the escape, how many times had he been waiting for such an opportunity? How many times had he thought: »If Knudsen knew how well I know the chart! (...) I've got the sea between Rerik and Fehmarn and Falster and east as far as Darss and over to Moen at my fingertips. I could take the smack across the Baltic with my eyes shut. Where to? Oh, anywhere, he thought« (p. 29).

Although they row diligently through the dark they get into trouble. A patrol boat crosses their way. They are almost detected by the control searchlights. Knudsen had warned them exactly



Cover: © The Toby Press

Alfred Andersch
Flight to Afar;
172 pp., The Toby Press,
New Milford 2004,
US\$ 14.95

against that situation, but he had also mentioned that the coastguards wouldn't be able to stop them on open water because their boat would need to stay in the navigable channels. The young sailor, who is very familiar with the area, steers the boat carefully across the waves. Where they row it is too shallow for the coastguard boat. »Gregor noted with surprise how shallow the bay was. They were rowing across a single extended shoal and frequently struck the bottom with their oars, at many points the water could not have been more than eighteen inches deep« (p. 142).

Finally, they reach the cutter where Knudsen is already waiting. When the fisherman sees the young woman he feels cheated by Gregor. They start arguing. If he would take Judith on board then there wouldn't be a reason not to take Gregor as well. That was definitely a situation which Knudsen wanted to avoid. The ex-communists begin to fight. In the end, Gregor refrains from his own flight, but he can convince Knudsen to take Judith and the »Studying Monk« to Sweden. At dawn Gregor returns to the small coastal town.

The priest observes Gregor's return and knows that the rescue action had been success-

ful. When officers come to arrest him for the disappearance of the figure the priest takes a gun and shoots the first henchman. Then he turns around, looks out of the window and feels the bullets hit his back.

Meanwhile the flight comes to a successful end. At midday the young sailor and Knudsen take their passengers safely to the southern coast of Sweden. While Knudsen accompanies Judith to the shore, the young sailor was ordered to wait in the boat. Instead he runs into the forest and hides. Finally I am free, he thinks by himself. When he finds an abandoned cottage, he decides to stay forever. He, who had always dreamt of »Zanzibar far away« is happy to be in Sweden.

Helping to realise the flight was already an important act for Gregor and the hesitating Knudsen. Their actions had nothing to do with the Communist Party anymore; it was a symbol for the just acquired freedom. The boy, who had always dreamt of flight and freedom, understands that his behaviour would harm others and returns to Germany with Knudsen. Judith escapes the concentration camp and the »Studying Monk« – an object of art, symbol for freedom of thought – is being rescued. Thanks to all the knowledge about waters that is written down in charts. [↕](#)

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