One of Henri Bergson’s crucial and most opaque ideas is that ‘the past is preserved in the past.’ It hinges on his conviction that the mind is larger than the brain, that the brain is not a cupboard for storing memories but our organ for ‘attention to life; a gearbox, as it were, or a switchboard, that enables us to reach into the unconscious for recollections we need at a particular moment. A past moment becomes part of the past in general and can only be retrieved and reconfigured as memory when we actually need it to perform the present, or for our fruitless attempts to foresee the future.

I have often marvelled at the precision with which memories of a place, and of inhabiting it in my earlier incarnations, hit me the very moment when I set foot in that place again. I almost never fail to transport myself back to the time of my last visit, or the visit before that, or my very first visit. This is also true about my various encounters with what used to be the German province of East Prussia. I have, until my latest visit there, regarded it as an illustration of Bergson’s thesis: preserved in the past and stuck in a mode of existence that appears real only to those who have to live there.

The name Prussia was outlawed by the victors of World War II in 1949, and we are now left with an awkward Russian exclave in the south-eastern corner of the Baltic Sea between Poland and Lithuania. Kaliningrad enjoys no political autonomy from Moscow, although local power-brokers had such hopes after the implosion of the USSR in 1991. The province was, however, proclaimed an economic free zone. That decision is now being implemented, up to a point, and moneymaking has become a favourite concern among the young in Kaliningrad. Globalisation, in the nouveau Russian version that includes smoked-salmon sushi, thus provides the present backdrop for my own Prussian history, which unfolds in five brief chapters.

CHAPTER ONE. THE VIRTUAL VISIT

In the early thirteenth century, the site that was to become the city of Königsberg was at the intersection of areas inhabited by two Baltic Prussian tribes, the Sam-ibians to the north and the Natangians to the south. After the definite failure of the Crusades in Palestine the powerful religious orders, fearing redundancy, turned their attention to the eastern shores of the Baltic. These were the last pagan territories of Central Europe.

The Prussian tribes resisted Christian conversion and assimilation by the German-speaking knights of the Order of the Cross, but in the end they succumbed of course. We do not know how long the Prussians had lived in these parts or if anyone was there before them. Surely, the most reasonable thing is not to award any ethnic group aboriginal status in the area, but to assume that everyone is a relative newcomer.

This is how I would argue today. But in the mid-1980s, when I was a student of art history and Baltic linguistics at the University of Stockholm, I was driven by a near-obsession for the prehistory of culture and language. I always wanted to peel
away the layers of readable history (perhaps to save myself the effort of actually reading it) and get to the core, the authentic before everything that, although mute, would restore to history its true voice.

Old Prussian, the language of the pre-German population as it was preserved in three editions of Martin Luther's catechism and a few other text fragments, was part of my curriculum. I felt strangely comfortable with the inflections of this archaic extinct language, rather closely related to modern Lithuanian. Its last speaker is said to have died in the pest of 1709. I still have my copy of William R Schmalstieg's *An Old Prussian Grammar* with its ugly mauve washable cover. But I remember only very little of the actual grammar and vocabulary taught in this course, possibly the most obscure of all my obscure undertakings so far.

What I do remember is the almost occult sensation that I belonged in that blissfully forgotten pocket of cultural space-time: medieval Prussian-speaking Prussia. I visited East Prussia virtually, studying photographs of the old Königsberg waterfront and reading German novels, thin ones by Johannes Bobrowski and thick ones by Siegfried Lenz. I went to Gdansk in Poland and, walking from the ferry landing to the city centre carrying a blue cardboard suitcase, I imagined myself a couple of hundred kilometres east. In August 1985 Kaliningrad was not only off the map, it was also off limits to western visitors.

Even if we are lenient with my youthful fascination for 'useless' fields of study, which made me construct elective affinities with an obliterated culture, and even if we find some quaint charm in my historical telepathy of more than 20 years ago, we should always resist the drive to rush backwards through lived history and discard it in favour of abstract origins. It has certainly caused much grief in the eastern Baltics, where indigenous populations and cosmopolitan elites have often been pitted against each other. And is not the biggest danger of such abstractions that they make us clairvoyant and blind at the same time? We see straight through what actually happens, but we turn our eyes away from what really matters: contingent, individual life.

**CHAPTER TWO. THE FIRST VISIT**

Everyone I spoke to in Lithuania advised me against going to Kaliningrad. They told me it was bleak and inhospitable, the very image of that Soviet Russia they themselves had just narrowly escaped. In 1992 I was, thanks to my non-utilitarian choice of university education which made me one of very few Swedes fluent in Lithuanian, Director of the Nordic Council Information Office in Vilnius. In June that year I was guiding a random group of Finnish and Norwegian journalists through the tentative, makeshift reality of the newly independent Baltic States, and we decided to pay a stealthy visit to Kaliningrad on our roundabout way from Vilnius to Riga.

I remember almost nothing from my first real-life visit to the city which I had pictured as a virtual twin or necessary anti-body for Vilnius, with its crumbling Jesuit façades and unpainted back alleys. Königsberg, once a city of pointed church spires and brimming warehouses, had been of great importance to the development of Lithuanian culture and learning, even if the Prussian-speaking cousins were long gone. The Lithuanians have their own name for the city, Karaliaucius, and it was here that the first books in Lithuanian were printed, during the Reformation in the sixteenth century. Some Lithuanians, as ever yielding to the temptation of determining origins, even claimed that Immanuel Kant, Königsberg's best-known inhabitant, was of Baltic stock.

I must have fallen asleep in the bus, since I do not recall entering Kaliningrad, nor what I was thinking about the degraded, decaying countryside with its occasional stretches of gracefully stone-paved German motorways. Only two images from that day impressed themselves on me: the grey colour and stale taste of the bread and the structure of the city itself.

The core of Kaliningrad, the island with the seven bridges which used to be Königsberg's Old Town, is empty grassland. Then comes a ring of 1970s highrise estates, and only outside them can any traces of pre-war architecture be seen. I left in the evening thinking that Kaliningrad was a city turned inside out, a void closing in on its peripheries, a fatal wound left deliberately undressed.

Russia was living through a desperate, though dynamic, first year following the loss of empire, of its economic and political system, of everything its people had identified with. How many today remember the decree that replaced the Soviet Union with a Commonwealth of Independent States headquartered in Minsk? How many remember the uncensored equilibristic political discussions on Moscow television? What the Russians remember is that they could no longer afford even to buy an ice cream for their children, that the world no longer feared them, that their armed forces were bullied into leaving the ungrateful Baltic republics they had liberated from the Nazis less than half a century ago. At the time of my first visit Kaliningrad was a city stupefied by the numbness that follows a sudden amputation, holding its breath in anticipation of phantom pain.

If my virtual Prussia of 1985 had existed as an abstract realm before history, the actual Kaliningrad of 1992 led a half-life outside time as an educational example of the term 'aftermath'.

**CHAPTER THREE. THE OFFICIAL VISITS**

One year later my employers decided to extend my portfolio. In addition to curating cultural and educational contacts between Lithuania and the eight entities that make up the Nordic Council (the Åland Islands, Denmark, the Faroe Islands, Finland, Greenland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden) I was also to be the organisation's liaison to the authorities in Kaliningrad.

I travelled in Scandinavia with a delegation of policymakers who wanted to secure more autonomy for the province. We studied the self-government of the Åland...
Although the landscape still offered the entropic-apocalyptic vision of the city. The city and province of Kaliningrad was expending energy to come to terms with a new version of reality: that of being contemporaneously then and now. I in fact glossing over a-historical Russian attempts to claim Kaliningrad as rightfully theirs? It is a chance conquest that they have no intention to relinquish, and particularly after the re-election of President Putin, it has become customary to avoid politics and instead try to catch up with the ‘civilised world’ (Russians enjoy using such expressions) in less dangerous ways, for instance by wearing expensive designer clothes, going on exotic overseas holidays or collecting contemporary art. My intention was to put ethnocentric views on history into perspective, but was I in fact glossing over a-historical Russian attempts to claim Kaliningrad as rightfully theirs? It is a chance conquest that they have no intention to relinquish, and building an orthodox cathedral next to the Nordbahnhof will not convince any literate observer that the one letter separating Prussia from Russia is just an obsolete peculiarity of spelling.
Continuity, or rather make-believe continuity, was the temporal trope that summed up my penultimate visit to Kaliningrad. The entropic overgrown fields we saw from the train window on our way back to Vilnius, were they any more real or natural than the English parks the Germans had tended or the sacrificial groves of their tribal predecessors? Isn’t it a delusion to imagine any unbroken line connecting one era with another, whether it is uninhabited landscape or universal human values?

Kaliningrad illustrates many things, and one of them is the power of the essentially unpredictable, irrevocable action. This, of course, is another of Henri Bergson’s key concepts. Defeat and destruction have befallen both Baltic and Germanic Prussians. They have left very little behind, almost nothing that is still alive today. How could the Russians expect to outlive them eternally?

CHAPTER FIVE. THE LATEST VISIT
Joachim and I went back to Kaliningrad in February 2007 at the invitation of this journal. The brief we had been given was almost too open. What were we supposed to achieve? Simply fill in the gaps from previous visits? What were we looking for? Just additional impressions and observations of the city? We never imagined that its status as a dystopian destination could be challenged.

But when the train pulled in under the glass vault of the late-1920s central station, we looked at each other and said: “Something is different. There is optimism in the air this time.” Perhaps it was not even the tinted light of the early sunset. We could no longer make out the smell of cabbage soup, the smell of poverty, in the subway leading to the taxi stand. Had we arrived too late?

At Hotel Moscow, formerly Hotel Berlin, our travel companion Claudia Sinnig was already waiting for us, having flown in the day before. She is preparing a book based on literary texts about Königsberg in five languages: German, Russian, Lithuanian, Polish and English. She has read virtually all there is to read about the city. Claudia brought us to the sorry remains of a Jewish cemetery designed by Eric Mendelsohn, and together we tried to locate Hannah Arendt’s school. We photographed several educational buildings in the Amalienau district, but could not identify the real object of our adoration. We also looked in vain for the Königsberger Kreuzkirche. Claudia talked us through the controversies that this building in the ‘Palestinian Style’ caused when it was planned around 1910. Could East Prussia really be compared to the Holy Land?

Three fabricated links to a past preserved in the past: the linguistic presumption that a reconstruction of lost meaning is possible, the artistic attempt at using material evidence of dried-up infrastructural funding to tell a story of broken utopian promises, the pretentious architectural image of continuity between incompatible crusades. Perhaps if we had looked more closely, we would have realised that these tools for digging up the past were already broken.

There was building activity going on, even on a Sunday. Pumps were running. The motorway project had been reactivated! The pragmatic need for a faster way out of the city is now even more urgent than in the 1980s. The Kaliningrad Province’s borders with Poland and Lithuania are more or less open. Its people regularly use the airport in Gdansk, and its economy hinges on free exchange. This is nothing new; Königsberg was an important base for English traders already in the sixteenth century.

Another sure sign that Kaliningrad is no longer useful as a melancholy non-site for art research is the renovation of the Palace of Soviets. It has been repainted in the synthetic blue-grey of steel New Russian resolve. When the ruins of the Königsberg Castle were demolished in 1967 this monstrosity replaced it, but no one ever moved in. To the three of us, seeing the re-commissioned building with its new plastic window frames was even more disconcerting than learning about plans for a full-scale simulation of the Castle. Even in globalised commercial disguise, utopianism is more appealing to the art circuit than the common-sense exploitation of existing resources.

If I want to describe with necessary precision the time-image that Kaliningrad evokes, perhaps I must try using yet another term? Anteriority, posteriority, simultaneity and continuity had shown themselves only partly applicable, or useful only for specific moments of the past. Could recursivity be the term I was looking for? Not the eternal return of the same, not the seamless transcendence of living conditions from one regime to another, but the continuous and contingent reshaping of the province’s existence to suit requirements imposed on it from the outside. Recursivity is cyclical movement, but the cycles need not be identical or even identifiable.

The initial stimulus for my interest in East Prussia was that it is historically important yet strangely forgotten. At any given time the actually existing territory will be a new and different reality, depending on what is going on in adjacent areas and in the distant locations where power is accumulated. But it is unlikely to ever become a major centre in its own right. A fenced-in military camp or a well-off trading post, Kaliningrad will only be as important as others see fit.
KALININGRAD SEEMS FULL OF HOLES
Like Passaic," Kaliningrad seems full of ‘holes’, as well as tunnels and empty spaces. A vast number of entrances to a psychic space and network of tangled angled paths rumored to accommodate even a pack of wild boars and a secret subterranean city. Compared to New York City, which seems tightly packed and solid, Kaliningrad is filled with hollow spaces, and those holes in a sense are the monumental vacancies that define, without trying, a challenge to stasis and control. Empty plots, which are infused with additional meaning when contrasted with the newly built, the finished. This makes for archaeology of the modern or the recent; the memory-traumas of an abandoned set of futures.
