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Google Earth

translated by Stefan Tobler

Trampe's plot is clearly parcelled out. Bordered on three sides by the hedge, from the street you can see it is divided into the front garden, the house, the backyard and the turnip field. Beyond that there is an unobstructed view out over the wide landscape formed by glacial drifts and rubbed smooth by the glaciers of a number of ice ages. Laboriously, the masses of ice have carried away earth layer by layer, and bunched up the end moraines into the stony hills which begin on the other side of the street. When the last glacier finally decided to retreat, its southern tip – the complicated folds of the glacier tongue – was where Trampe's front garden is now. Great blocks of ice broke off the edge of the glacier at regular intervals and crashed down to the ground.

Down, among other places, to where Trampe is standing right now and letting his gaze drift over the ground. It is still early morning, and the hedge throws a long shadow. For years it has been growing into his garden unchecked. Now several yards thick, the hedge is a big, living wall that shelters the house from the street and the neighbours. Only in one place do two concrete posts hold it in check, creating a narrow entrance. What occurs in the dark interior of the hedge, where all the spaces are filled with living beings, is something no reliable statements have been possible about for a long time.

A muted barking can be heard from the neighbouring yard. There Liebke steps out of his door to let his miniature schnauzer have a little run along the hedge which divides his front garden from Trampe's. The only thing connecting the two plots is the pigsty in Trampe's backyard. The pigsty's back wall is in the hedge, to be precise. It is so close to Liebke's place that he can hear clearly all of the pig noises. These sounds would be the only thing Liebke heard of his neighbour if his miniature schnauzer did not manage to wriggle through the hedge sometimes and drag away objects. Liebke's dog can move his legs so fast when he runs that you can't see them any more. You only see a blur under his body. He appears to glide over the lawn without any means of propulsion,

equipped with no more than his will power and a cushion of air under his body. Liebke's legs, on the other hand, are clearly identifiable during walking as the units responsible for said process. He steps across the carefully mown lawn and checks on the condition of his dwarf cypresses. From the pigsty beside him come grunting and scraping sounds. Obviously Trampe is up to something nearby, which leads the pigs to draw the wrong conclusions every time.

As Trampe goes to the shed in his Sunday boiler suit, his yard is empty. Apart from Mike in the sandpit, there is no one about, and you can't talk to Mike. He spends his time filling a tin with sand and then emptying it again, in a regular sequence of movements whose rhythm is comparable to the motion of waves on a calm sea. Mike's tin looks old, the silvery surface has dulled and its edges are rusty. For its intended function, however, no doubt about it, it works perfectly. It takes a while until Trampe makes his way out of the shed again, which is filled from top to bottom with firewood and his circular saw. When he does he has found his shovel, a flat wide one of the kind used to throw sand into a cement-mixer. He heads around the house towards the front garden with the shovel over his shoulder.

As he does so, he passes a place where the hedge bulges out a considerable way into his garden, on the side that has nothing to do with Liebke. It is because there is a tree in the hedge, which by now can only be recognized as such because the leaves at this point in the hedge look different, they are jagged and of a somewhat lighter tone of green than the rest of the hedge. Not that the tree and hedge really had a chance to do anything other than grow together and put up with each other. Beyond this knotty growth there is nothing remarkable for quite a stretch, it is a deserted wasteland of weeds and bushes.

The only place from which you could see some of Trampe's plot is possibly Fox Peak on the other side of the street. Whether there are really foxes on Fox Hill is a moot point, and the name Peak seems equally hard to justify. Nonetheless, along with a few neighbouring hills formed by end moraines, it is high enough to form a sharp edge to the southern side of the village. The

wooded, rolling flank of Fox Peak sloped off to a pond, probably formed by dead ice in a previous ice age, when the elements of the chain of hills were still scattered in the north. The northern edge of Fox Peak dropped off sharply. From there you had a good view out over the plain formed of the till the glacier had left behind. Almost no plants manage to establish themselves on the steep northern face of Fox Peak, which is why anyone who cares about these things can clearly see that the rise is a rough mixture of loam and light-coloured sand. Rarely is a large object as lacking in mystery as Fox Peak.

Meanwhile Trampe has started to dig a circular hole in his front garden. The digging appears to go easily, for the upper layers of earth are loose, free of stones and only covered with a thin growth of grass. Trampe digs out one layer of humus after another, and the deeper he gets, the farther back the year is, when the falling foliage from the hedge formed the earth now seeing the light of day. It is a journey into the past, the composted past of this wild hedge. Trampe often takes a break and climbs down into his hole, lies on the ground and breathes in and out deeply. Although the pit is not all that big, Trampe can stretch out with ease, without touching its walls. Sometimes he lies there for minutes, looking at the circular bit of sky and letting earth sift through his fingers. Earthworms poke out of the soil all around him, their ends moving in an uncoordinated way through the new emptiness.

As soon as the turf has been removed, the front garden looks rather different. Looking down from above, a round brown patch is visible, where a man lies from time to time. In this way Trampe's property is plainly distinguished from all the neighbour's plots, none of which have clearly outlined patches. The next brown patch lies far behind Trampe's house, in the plain, in the middle of a wide meadow, where – for reasons hitherto little researched – little grass grows. On the other side of the street further dark patches are created by irregularly formed granite boulders, which travelled south with the ice a long time ago and now lie around on the slopes of Fox Peak. In contrast, Liebke's lawn is immaculate, a model of even colouring, hard to believe there is not something funny going on there.

By now Liebke is busy carrying out his usual chores. He carefully checks the weather house his parents gave him one Christmas and which he has attached to the outside of the kitchen window. In fact, it is two neighbouring houses, inhabited by two little figures who – depending on the humidity in the air – are either in their house or stand around in front of it. One of them always has an umbrella in his hand, the other wears swimming trunks. All winter Liebke was very concerned about the weather, because for reasons he did not then know, the man in trunks never came out of his house. After much effort Liebke worked out that in every morning's thaw, water would drip off the window frame and into the weather house's chimney, right onto the horse hairs which are inside the house to measure the humidity. Soaking wet, they refused to move the figures as they should have. Liebke looks with a little pride at the new waterproof seal on the chimney. Thanks to the seal, the forecasts work impeccably now. Today, for instance, both of the weathermen are standing in their doorways looking out undecidedly.

Trampe's plan seems to be not to dig up the soil just anywhere, but where the fountain had once been. Talk of the fountain actually means a round concrete disc whose upper edge had once been on a level with the turf. No one has ever seen water in the fountain. Instead the hole above the concrete has long been filled with quite a lot of good black earth. The mixture is regularly tamped down from above, when Trampe lets his pigs tear through the front garden and his wife hangs up the laundry. At the same time earthworms and centipedes burrow through the layers and digest the last remains of the hedge waste, until finally everything has rotted. Trampe will have to break through these processes if he is to get to the bottom of the fountain.

He does not have much time. The local butcher's closes at the end of the afternoon. Mrs Trampe sells cold sausagemeat and salamis there every day. Actually she has been responsible for the meat salad for quite a while. It is made of alternating layers of raw vegetables, meat and pasta, garnished with green leaves. But barely anyone in the village buys meat salad. Meat salad, the name says it all, as if you were watering down good food with something foreign. Mrs

Trampe is nonplussed with the way things have gone, she invested time and effort, and now she can't wait for closing time.

On the way in Liebke grabs the newspaper. It is from last week, because he only gets newspapers from the week before. When his father has finished with them, he passes them on, with a little irritation, for no one else in the village except his son is interested in last week's information. Liebke, however, does not care about information. He needs the newspaper for the letters in it, and the letters of the alphabet don't age. Generally newspaper headlines contain far fewer umlauts than you need for normal, comprehensible texts. Sometimes Liebke sits at an unfinished letter for weeks and waits for umlauts. Today luck is on his side, two *Öltanker* have capsized causing *Öl*, oil, slicks. He carefully cuts the missing letters out with his nail scissors, sticks them in the umlaut gaps in his letter and nods with satisfaction before folding the letter up and stowing it in the drawer with the others.

A little later Trampe is seen going back inside his house. It is much cooler in the cellar than outside, humidity rises from the walls and a heavy fug of curly kale, old coffee and excrement hangs in the air. The rats no longer make an effort to keep quiet when someone comes into the cellar; they are superior in numbers and aggressiveness. There is an audible whimpering and rasping from the rubbish. Trampe goes down to the sugar beets without casting a glance to the right or left where a number of bolted, solid doors can be made out in the gloom. Sugar beets make reasonable food for pigs, if you boil them long enough. In any case, pigs eat whatever you put in front of them. Trampe does not even jump when a furry animal runs across his foot. He quickly collects a load of raw beets in his wheelbarrow, lays a plank down on the stairs and pushes his load up it. Once in his front garden, he empties out his beets next to the half-finished hole. The hedge's shadow has retreated so far that two thirds of the bottom of the pit is in the light. It won't get brighter down there than it is now.

It is a warm, clear spring day. The sky would be completely empty if it were not for a single trace of white which reaches in a wide arc as far as the eye can

see, rising vertically up from the lines of hills and passing directly over Fox Peak. The line looks so wide and frayed that it is no longer possible to tell if it is what is left of a vapour trail or simply cirrus cloud. Anyone who had seen it form would be better able to judge. In any case, the high winds that can create wispy lines of cirrus would point to a change in the weather. Possibly there was a connection to the undecided behaviour of Liebke's weathermen, assuming of course that it wasn't a plane.

Apart from the miniature schnauzer, Liebke is at home on his own. His wife spends her days, as far as Liebke knows, cutting other men's hair in the village's only hairdresser's. This was true until a few weeks ago. Recently however, many people have made do without having their hair cut, and the fields are cultivated less too. Suddenly Mrs Liebke has a lot of time, but she carries on leaving the house on time every morning, so as not to worry her husband. He often says how much he likes the idea of her fiddling about with sharp objects on other men's heads.

The village where Liebke's and Trampe's properties are, is in a striking position. It lies peacefully at the southern end of the glacial drifts, in the right angle formed by the plain and the northern edge of Fox Peak, as if the glacier had deposited it there. It doesn't look as if someone were planning on settling the wide open space to the north. Instead, it looks as if the houses were pressing further south, and were only held in check by the hillside. Fox Peak stands out jaggedly on its own. If there were more hills like it, they would – in a row – look like a giant saw blade, sadly far too big for anyone to use.

Liebke comes outside for another smoke. He paces restlessly up and down the hedge, drawing a cloud of smoke along behind him. Each time he turns around at exactly the same spot, so that the old and new smoke mingle. After a few minutes his path is marked by a well-defined foggy trail that runs parallel to the hedge, and parallel to the trail of unknown origin in the sky. For years Liebke has been a rigorous pruner of his side of the hedge, while the other side has been allowed to grow wildly, as Trampe does not believe in using pruning shears. If

you only cut one side regularly, as you can hear Liebke tell his wife often, then over the years the hedge will start to grow only in the other direction, and so will gradually grow away from him. As a result, so Liebke concludes, his plot will gradually grow and Trampe's contract – a long-term, peaceful invasion of foreign territory and purely plant-based. Unfortunately, the immobile pigsty would in the same process grow into the hedge like an ulcer. At some point Liebke would become the owner of Trampe's abandoned pigs. Scratching his head, he stops at the spot where the pigsty's breach is to be expected.

At that moment loud noises break through the hedge. Trampe has just begun to feed the pigs for the second time today. No one knows exactly how many animals are in the pigsty, but judging by the size of the building, it couldn't be more than two – judging by their volume, it must be at least ten. The cacophony of voices starts up as soon as Trampe, labouring with a large pot of beet mash, steps near the sty. The noise rises to a furious crescendo as Trampe tips the pot's contents into the trough. At the same moment the nature of the sounds changes, the high-frequency squeaks segue into deep guzzling noises. From the slurping elements in the soundscape you can ascertain that enormous amounts of fluids are streaming into hollow spaces, are mixed with air on the way in, and to some extent drip out again. Trampe pays no attention to the melee. He wades out through knee-deep muck. Just inside the entrance he stops, gazing at the ground. At his feet, in the square of sunlight falling through the open door, something is shining. He bends down, and picks the silver ring out of the dirt with two fingers. He brushes off some traces of muck and holds it up to the light. Furrowing his brow, Trampe stows the find in his trousers and hurries towards his house.

Liebke might be right. It really does look as if the hedge has a direction. Seen from above, a number of growths point towards Trampe's property, while Liebke's side looks solid. When the hedge sways, then always towards Trampe's side. However, although this can't be known for certain, perhaps all the soil – and front garden and sty – are moving, and only the hedge is holding firm to its place

in the universe. Slowly the sty presses through the green mess. Without the hedge there it would make much quicker progress of course.

A little later Trampe appears in the backyard. He is holding a table under his arm, one of those little, short-legged items of furniture such as you put in front of a sofa, so that it doesn't look too empty there. Without letting go of the table, Trampe opens the shed door. The circular saw is right by the door, probably so that you can do without electrical light when you use the saw. Still holding the table under his arm, Trampe pulls the extension cable towards the house. The cable lies in a straight line, dividing the yard into two nearly equal halves. Although the cable runs by close to the sandpit, Mike doesn't pay it any attention; he is after all completely engrossed with his tin. Trampe holds the table briefly at head height. Most of the tabletop is a shiny light brown, although two places are stained with something dark. There are also a number of ugly scratches in the varnish. It is not the coffee table it used to be.

Trampe's circular saw is one of the loudest machines in the village. It produces a slightly threatening hum, as long as you don't put anything near the blade. When Trampe starts to saw the first table leg, it rises to a dramatic screech. This screaming regularly silences the birds for miles around, it echoes far across the plain and even Mike jumps at its highest sounds. Methodically Trampe saws one leg after another and in doing so creates a rather even antiphony of humming and screaming. Even if no one in the village knows anything about what Trampe is up to, they can be sure a saw is involved.

There is no way for Liebke to escape the saw's noises. His neighbour's sawing has long been an unwelcome but unalterable accompaniment to his life, just as much to be accepted as the blue of the sky, and in addition – so claims Liebke in any case – the cause of his occasional headaches. Liebke has got used to putting up with the sawing. He stands still between the garden and his house, gazing blankly across the street and not doing a thing. Obviously the start of the sawing has created a pause in Liebke's existence, a blind spot in his biography, about which there is nothing more to say.

Little by little the tub placed at the ready under the saw's table fills with the separated pieces of the table. Trampe checks that all the pieces are of roughly equal sizes, roughly of the volume of a clenched fist. When the last scream dies down, a long humming section follows to conclude the saw's concert while Trampe checks to see he hasn't missed anything. After it has been turned off, the saw doesn't immediately stop. The saw's inertia keeps it running for several seconds, while the amplitude and frequency of the humming diminish owing to friction. It must sound like this when a dying bird doesn't stop whistling. In all, Trampe has made of the table about one hundred fist-sized fragments. Visibly pleased with himself, he carries his load of wood to the front garden, empties it next to the beets and climbs back into his hole. It is obviously not yet deep enough.

By now Liebke is back in his house. His first job is to get rid of the left over bits of newspaper which have gathered under the desk. He carefully cuts the pages into scraps. They can't be larger than stamps. When he's done, he is standing in front of a beautiful five-litre bucket of scraps of newspaper. He lifts up the bucket with his fingertips, swings it this way and that a few times, and carries it down to a windowless cellar room, which only Liebke has access to. He reaches out in the dark, knowing exactly where on the wall the switch for the light is, and closes the door behind him. Liebke keeps the place tidy, that much is apparent now. All the walls are properly plastered and there are no spider's webs in the corners. Apart from a whole row of buckets, which contain either scraps of paper or wallpaper paste, the room is empty. Scarcely has Liebke placed the bucket next to the others before the miniature schnauzer is scraping at the door. Liebke could never stand the dog.

In Trampe's front garden earth is still flying from the hole at regular intervals. Of Trampe himself, only his upper body is now visible. Every lump of earth traces a clean parabolic arc on its journey out of the pit, yet disintegrates in the air into its elements, so that it ends up falling as a wide shower of small clumps. Over the course of the day a conically even pile of earth has formed. Its

outermost edge is only a little distance from the pit. Trampe has managed to transform a cylinder of soil that was in the earth into a cone, although that may well not have been his intention. Finally a horrible scratching of metal on stone is heard from the hole. Trampe has struck the concrete base of the fountain. Beads of sweat glint on his face as he leaves the empty cylinder. Leaning on his shovel, he stands calmly at the edge of the pit.

A little later he is seen running across the yard again, this time with his arms folded and apparently aimlessly. For a while Trampe stops in the light and stares at the ground. The moment of immobility passes quickly. A few seconds later he is standing next to Mike, who only notices him when his shadow falls over the sandpit. For the first time this day Trampe is heard to speak. Without waiting for a reaction, he turns on his heels and strides back towards the front garden. Mike follows him like a toy dog on a lead. At the bottom of the hole the base of the fountain glimmers. First Trampe tips his beets into the pit, then the wood of the coffee table. He clambers down, spreads it all out evenly, smoothing out the surface, and lies down. A layer of concrete, a layer of beets, a layer of wood, a layer of Trampe.

For minutes nothing happens. The front garden offers a geometrically clean image: two circular patches – the hole and the pile of earth – form a coloured-in, brown figure eight. One person is lying spread out in one half of the eight, while another is crouching down at the point where the two circles touch. No sound is heard from any part of the surroundings. For the first time in several million years, a mountain-valley structure appears in the landscape to the north of the hills formed by glacial drifts. An advance post, occupied by two strange figures who obviously don't know what they should do in their situation, exposed to geological history as they are.

Mike hesitates. He has probably never been this close to a hole before. He shifts his tin repeatedly from one hand to the other. He fills it with earth, which is heaped up beside the pit, holds it briefly between his two hands and then carefully empties it into the pit. It is a little harder than he is used to from his fine

sand, but he manages. With his next tin of earth, he is already more confident. In a relatively short period, Mike fills the tin with earth many times and empties it; scarcely anyone could develop more patience and endurance for this activity. That evening Mrs Trampe comes back from work, sees Mike engaged in his usual activity, and disappears inside. In any case you can't talk to Mike. The pile of earth in the front garden has almost disappeared by now.