

editorial

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For the second time in less than four years, people across central and eastern Europe are trying to rescue homes and livelihoods from catastrophic flooding. Across large tracts of the continent, from Saxony to Serbia and beyond, the sudden onset of a late spring has brought copious quantities of snowmelt water down into river valleys. The Elbe, the Danube and a dozen other rivers are in flood.

In flooded communities along the Elbe, with roads to the outside world severed, the railway becomes a lifeline, the sole remaining link to safety. Travelling the route from Dresden south through Bad Schandau to Děčín in the Czech Republic, trains creep at a snail's pace along high embankments that cut through villages from which the floodwater is only now receding. This is no normal Easter.

In many parts of eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, railways are lifelines even when there is no hint of flooding. This is a region with thousands of small towns just like Gilas, the fictional location of Hamid Ismailov's mesmeric novel *The Railway*. The book has happily just appeared in English, in a translation by Robert Chandler that preserves the poetry of the Russian original. *The Railway* is populated by Uzbeks, Russians, Jews, Tatars and 'gypsies', whose lives and fates intertwine as the trains pause at Gilas.

In this issue of *hidden europe*, we visit Kosovo, where the *Freedom of Movement* train has allowed both Serbs and Albanians to travel with safety through the region. Ethnic differences pop up again in our feature on Macedonia, and elsewhere in this issue we unravel the curiosity of a Swedish speaking village on the banks of the River Dnepr in southern Ukraine. We also recall a Welsh encounter, stop off in western Scotland and relax in Tuscany.

There are many who deserve our gratitude in helping us along the way. Special mention must be made of Adam J Shardlow, Bill McStay, Christopher Deliso and Paul Hadfield who contributed prose and poetry for this issue. Our thanks to others are recorded on the inside back cover.

This issue of *hidden europe* is dedicated to the memory of Gerlind Mayer, our close friend, who died last month. It was Gerlind, a native of Thuringia, who sealed our central European identity when she persuaded us of the true merits of dumplings.

Nicky SC Gardner & Susanne Kries
EDITORS

BAD SCHANDAU, SAXONY
EASTER SUNDAY – 16 APRIL 2006

front cover: the train to Tartu in Tallinn station, Estonia
left (from top to bottom): Wales, Tuscany (© Lidian Neeleman), Ukraine
above right: Elin Annas at Gammalsvenskby in Ukraine (photo by Åke Utas)
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