"I'm playing hooky for the rest of the day," the small, frail, white-haired lady whispers to me. She winks and then giggles. A broad smile irradiates her face on this warm mid-October morning; she seems blissfully oblivious of the rush of passersby. "It's too much school for me. It's just too much."

We are standing outside the little church in Roecken, a village of 130 residents near the city of Weisenfels in eastern Germany, about 15 miles outside Leipzig. A series of lectures by eminences from both western and eastern Germany, politicians as well as professors, is well underway inside; almost 1,000 people are crammed into Roecken's church.

The occasion? A philosopher's birthday. But not just any philosopher: The state of Saxony-Anhalt in eastern Germany is staging a sesquicentennial gala to honor the birth of the region's famous son, Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844-1900), whose works had been verboten here for more than four decades under the Communist regime of East Germany. This birthday party is Nietzsche's official comeback.

The philosopher was born in the little rectory adjacent to Roecken church 150 years ago on October 15 and lived here until the age of five; his father was the hamlet's parson. Largely ignored during his life, Nietzsche's works began to gain attention after he suffered a nervous breakdown in 1888. Nietzsche became known as "the mad philosopher" who, in the throes of expressing his strenuous ideas, lost his sanity; he lived out the last 12 years of his life as a vegetable, under the care of his mother and sister. Medical experts judged that his condition was a case of progressive paralysis induced by syphilis: the disease attacks the nervous system and had finally reached Nietzsche's brain. But the illness only added to Nietzsche's growing fame, and by the time of his death in 1900, he was the world-famous prophet of the coming Übermensch (Superman), a thinker increasingly regarded as the leading philosopher of modern Europe.

The vicissitudes of Nietzsche's posthumous history were no less dramatic. Lionized by intellectuals and noblemen before the Great War, he was the darling of Italian fascists and German Nazis in the 1920s and 1930s, becoming the "state philosopher" of the Third Reich. His ideas about the Superman and the "blond beast" were given a racial twist and exploited to justify Aryan supremacy; Hitler himself befriended Nietzsche's sister.

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Elisabeth and gave her personal funds to support the running of the Nietzsche Archives in Weimar. Perhaps inevitably, when Stalin’s armies rolled into eastern Germany in 1945, Nietzsche immediately became a nonperson. Under the East German Communists, memorials to his name were taken down, streets were renamed, all editions of his books were removed from libraries and bookstores, new editions were never printed, all schools were forbidden to teach him; even scholars could only study his work in order to denounce him as the “trailblazer of fascism.” In a rancorous debate among East German intellectuals in 1987, one leading cultural critic even urged that Nietzsche’s grave in Roecken be razed and his ashes scattered to the wind.

Nietzsche’s exile from his own home state persisted until the fall of the Wall in November 1989; shortly thereafter, a Friedrich Nietzsche Research Association was founded in the last days of the Communist era. The rehabilitation of Germany’s once—and perhaps future?—philosopher-sage had begun.

And now: 1994. Commemorating Nietzsche’s birth in a church, with the village pastor presiding over the entire affair? It was an irony I had to ponder. The Lutheran pastor noted earlier this morning that the sesquicentennial planners are aware of the irony, and have called today’s festivities as a Gedenkveranstaltung (memorial event) rather than a celebration. The program’s announced theme—based on a famous line of Nietzsche—also seems carefully chosen: “How one becomes what one is.”

But what—or who—is Nietzsche in Germany today? Yes, I wonder: Would Nietzsche—outspoken atheist, author of The Antichrist and Thus Spake Zarathustra, proponent of the Will to Power and the Eternal Return, and herald of the modern gospel that “God is dead”—have been angered or amused by such a ceremony?

And what about the welcome sign now greeting visitors to the village? “Welcome to Roecken, home of the birthplace of Friedrich Nietzsche.”

The old sign had read: “Workers and farmers in socialist agriculture! Go forward to great achievements in the stalls and in the fields!”

II

“And why have you come to Roecken?” the elderly lady asks me.

Her question has a concerned, almost grandmotherly air about it. I explain that I teach literature and history in the United States, and have long been interested in Nietzsche’s life and work. Nietzsche is the greatest philosopher of modern Europe, regarded in the West as a thinker equal in significance to Kant and Hegel.

She nods.

Is it a nod of approval or disapproval? Do my remarks also ring of “too much school”? I’m not sure.

Dozens of Nietzsche admirers are walking through the church courtyard and taking photos of Nietzsche’s grave. Word passes through the courtyard that the Minister-President of Saxony is starting to speak; the crowd rushes to enter the church, emptying the courtyard. The elderly lady watches bemusedly. Nearby, a man is hawking reprints of a 1912 postcard of Nietzsche’s second childhood home in Naumburg (with Nietzsche’s name misspelled “Nitzsche”—just as in the original, and thus a real collector’s item, the man says). He is also pushing his self-designed telephone cards featuring Nietzsche’s image, actually worth DM 6 in phone calls (which he sells for DM 30).

Suddenly, an attractive younger woman approaches. She asks the elderly lady to pose with a middle-aged man for a photograph in front of Nietzsche’s grave.

“Oh, must you?”
Without reply, the younger woman guides the pair into place.

"It's been several years since I've been here," the man murmurs in half-explanation, shrugging his shoulders.

The elderly lady returns and pats my hand after the snapshot.

"That's my son," she whispers proudly, clasping my hands in her own. She releases me, smiles, and squeezes his right shoulder. Then she turns toward the woman and takes her arm.

"And my publisher," she adds, making the introduction.

"Your publisher?" I ask.

The publisher steps forward.

"Do you know that this is Ursula Sigismund...?"

The publisher's voice trails off; she looks me direct in the face. She pauses a split second—as if by habit upon such an announcement—evidently waiting to see if the name registers and unsure whether I am a mere Nietzsche tourist or "serious" Nietzschean. My knowledge of Nietzscheana fails me; I make no reply.

The publisher reaches into her bag and takes out a copy of Frau Sigismund's autobiographical novel, *Zarathustra's Clan* [Zarathustras Sippschaft]. My pulse begins to race.

The publisher continues:

"...Nietzsche's closest living relative?"

III

"No, not really 'niece,'" Frau Sigismund corrects me, as we take a bench in the now-deserted courtyard. She points to the pastel drawing gracing the cover of *Zarathustra's Clan*. See the barefoot young woman in the blue dress holding the baby? That's her in her early 20s. And that's her son. He takes a mock bow and chuckles. Now in his 60s, he says that he waits until the close of his mother's novel—which ends with the war years—to make his own grand entrance. Frau Sigismund points again to the scene on the book cover, resting her finger on the figure seated in the center, next to the famous marble bust of Nietzsche with the massive untrimmed moustache of his last years. See that woman? That is "Aunt Elisabeth" Forster-Nietzsche—the philosopher's younger sister (and only sibling); the rest of the family is grouped around her. Frau Sigismund lets her finger trace the figures in the watercolor painting on the cover. If you want to find out more about our family, she says, read my novel. Much of my youth is in here.

But I'm still trying to figure out Frau Sigismund's exact relationship to Nietzsche. All right: Your family referred to Nietzsche's sister Elisabeth as "Aunt Elisabeth." Was then "Fritz"—Nietzsche's family nickname—your "Uncle Fritz"?

Not exactly. Frau Sigismund explains that she is a cousin—a second cousin—of the philosopher. Nietzsche's mother was the aunt of Frau Sigismund's father. That would make her Frau Sigismund's great aunt. Frau Sigismund's father, Max Oehler, was a first cousin—a "cousin german"—of the philosopher; like Nietzsche, he attended Schulpforta, the Eton of nineteenth-century Germany, and was a top student in German. He was 25 years old when Nietzsche died.

Frau Sigismund reviews the tangled lines of consanguinity. Her own grandfather was the little brother of Nietzsche's mother, Franziska Oehler. Frau Sigismund's grandfather was born in 1839, just five years before young "Fritz" Nietzsche. Frau Sigismund, 82, never met the philosopher of the family personally. Nor did she know "Aunt Franziska" Oehler, as the Oehler family referred to Nietzsche's mother.

But Frau Sigismund—nee Ursula Oehler—got to know the philosopher's younger sister, Elisabeth Forster-Nietzsche, who lived until 1935, very well indeed. Although she knew Elisabeth only as an elderly woman—Elisabeth was 65 years old when little Ursula was...
Frau Sigismund remembers her astonishing vitality and charisma. Elisabeth worked tirelessly on books and articles about her brother in her study in the Nietzsche Archives in Weimar, over which she reigned like an imperious queen. In Elisabeth’s later years, as her eyesight began to fail, Ursula often read aloud to her.

“I thought of her as a very dear aunt, almost a grandmother,” Frau Sigismund says. She liked to visit her, and especially to peek into the philosopher’s room, which Elisabeth had preserved as he left it. “Yes, we all called her ‘Aunt Elisabeth.’ She had no children, and so we always got wonderful presents from her—for good report cards, at Christmas, and especially on our birthdays.” Frau Sigismund’s own birthday, July 9, was the day before Elisabeth’s.

In hindsight, it may seem inevitable, as the oldest child in the Oehler family and a strong personality in her own right, that Frau Sigismund would come to identify with Elisabeth’s superhuman energy and enterprise—and, like Elisabeth, eventually launch a literary career of her own. And as I listened to and, later, read about the story of their relationship, as well as of the Nietzsche Archives itself and the rest of Zarathustra’s clan, I began to understand the complex story behind the story of the Nietzsche sesquicentennial “commemoration” in Roecken—and of the village’s new welcome sign.

What is that story? The answer began to crystallize for me in a passing comment from Frau Sigismund. Tapping lightly on the cover of her novel and then gesturing toward the courtyard and little church, she said simply: “We’re part of all this.”

As I came to understand, the story behind the sesquicentennial commemoration was the subtle role that interpersonal relations have played in the rise and fall of Nietzsche’s reputation, especially the propagandistic function that Nietzsche’s own family members assumed in transforming him into the Swastika Superman of Nazi racial ideologues and—inadvertently—the Bogeyman Brownshirt of East German Communist hacks.

IV

Born in 1912 in Danzig, Ursula Oehler was still a small child when the Oehler family moved to Weimar. Her father Max, who pursued a military career and eventually rose to the rank of major, had already worked on various editing projects in the Nietzsche Archives. Unable to find good employment after World War 1, he accepted Elisabeth’s offer to become head archivist and devoted himself to editing the 23-volume Musarion edition of Nietzsche’s oeuvre.

Little Ursula joined Zarathustra’s clan at the peak of Nietzsche’s international popularity. In the summer of 1912, the International Nietzsche Committee—whose board of directors included famous literary and political names ranging from George Bernard Shaw and H.G. Wells to Walter Rathenau and Prince Bernard von Bulow, the German Chancellor—won approval from the German Olympic Committee to build an Olympic-size stadium outside Weimar. Nietzsche had called himself “the Good European.” To his admirers, the image of a Nietzschean hero imbued with the Will to Power embraced not only the ideals of Athens but also those of Sparta; the grandeur and glory of Weimar in the Nietzschean era signified more than erudition, scholarship, or even cultural eminence: it was a summons to action in the world. Nietzsche was not just an intellectual but a modern Olympian; his command had been, “Become hard!”—both in body and mind. The stadium planners now prepared for youth from throughout the world to compete in honor of Nietzsche’s gospel. Unfortu-
nately, when the Great War broke out in 1914, the “good Europeans” who had pledged themselves to international solidarity became caught up in a holy crusade against one another. Plans for the Nietzsche stadium collapsed; the murmur for international cooperation were drowned out in the calls to arms.

Even as a child, Ursula realized that Elisabeth Forster-Nietzsche—a widow since her husband, a leader of a German nationalist and anti-Semite organization, committed suicide in 1890—was a towering figure. Everything in the Oehler family revolved around Elisabeth, who was not only world-famous—by 1923, three times nominated for the Nobel Prize for Literature—but also her father’s employer.

Frau Sigismund writes in Zarathustra’s Clan that Elisabeth was “a small lady with the bearing of a general.” She let her hair fall in demure silver-grey locks, but sported a commanding bun on top. She was “the protectress and the editor of [Nietzsche’s] works, the owner of this celebrated house, and she reigned over a group of subjects—my father was one of them....” Of Major Oehler, she demanded “discretion and Prussian obedience, and she aimed to rule her co-editors and even German professors similarly.”

Elisabeth conducted her campaign to win Nietzsche—and herself—literary immortality with tactical genius: she raged, she cajoled, she flattered, she bargained. Above all, she played her trump card: her unique, privileged status as Nietzsche’s sister.

“She complained and whined when others had a different opinion, and always with the slogan, that Fritz had only felt understood by her—and no one else,” writes Frau Sigismund. “It was true that she had believed in him—but she had believed more in herself. And she had happily taken money from everybody—Jews, fascists and Nazis, it was all irrelevant to her. She had used her winning personality and her charm to get the money.... ‘We,’ she said, and by that she meant herself alone. ‘We,’ Elisabeth, the royal sister, the Founder, the editor, the single intimate of this unique, wonderful man. Never have siblings understood each other better than have Fritz and me, she said. We always confided everything to each other.” She treated her brother as if she owned him, admits Frau Sigismund, as if he were her “expensive Persian rug.”

“‘Aunt Elisabeth’ even harbored notions of a social marriage for Ursula that would secure the financial future of the Archives, Frau Sigismund confides to the reader. When Ursula was 14, Elisabeth arranged for her to visit a wealthy Swedish family, the father of which was a Nietzsche admirer who had given a pile of money for the founding of the Archives.” The son of the rich Nietzsche expert would mate with the daughter of the archivist. “How useful for the Archives!” writes Frau Sigismund ironically. She adds that nothing came of the plan, because her father, on that rare occasion, opposed Elisabeth forcefully.

As a schoolgirl, Ursula was frequently asked by outsiders about the famous philosopher of the family. One German teacher assigned her to deliver a class report on Nietzsche’s life; she recounts in Zarathustra’s Clan that she sharply criticized Nietzsche’s unworldliness, his male chauvinism, and his love of war. Her classmates were aghast.

“Are you crazy?!” they shouted at her. “He’s a world-famous philosopher! How can you! Do you have any idea of what you’re saying!” Frau Sigismund says that her criticisms focused on the man, on “Fritz.” “The world-famous Professor Nietzsche and poor, lovable Fritz were two different people for me, and my relation to them was consequently a divided
The division was further complicated once the schoolgirl read Elisabeth's sanitized, hero-worshiping two-volume biography of Nietzsche, which Ursula received from Elisabeth for her sixteenth birthday in 1928. The biography burnishes Nietzsche in the nineteenth-century style of great-man history, and it explained away his insanity as the outcome of bad medicines from quack doctors. Ursula had some doubts about Elisabeth's version, but, as she recounts in Zarathustra's Clan, it was still a shock to learn from a girlfriend that Nietzsche probably went insane due to a syphilitic infection acquired from a prostitute. The only person who didn't believe that was Elisabeth, the girlfriend told her, because Elisabeth "wants to turn him into a saint.... It's a godsend for him that he's not alive to see what she's doing to him with her Archives, my father says.... But when somebody is someone special, he's always going to be misunderstood and turned into a memorial...."

The passage continues:

"But couldn't this smart, extraordinary man find a woman anywhere who loved him and suited him? He had to go to a whorehouse, because the fine ladies, who revered his intellect, didn't want to sleep with him?... I asked [my girlfriend] whether a scholarly man could be so inexperienced. She shrugged her shoulders and said: "I think so. Those are just the ones who are like that."

On numerous occasions, during a pause when she was reading aloud to Elisabeth, Ursula wanted to ask about Nietzsche's love life. She wanted to know more about Nietzsche's possible love affair with Lou Salome, the 21-year-old Russian intellectual beauty who captured Nietzsche's fancy and whom Elisabeth hated; but the opportunity never arose. Instead Ursula asked her father about Lou, but he was only a boy in 1882 when Nietzsche's unconsummated infatuation with Lou developed. And so the only version that the young Ursula ever heard was the one presented in Elisabeth's biography, The Solitary Nietzsche.

That same year of 1928 Ursula also began attending Elisabeth's Saturday salons, which she later came to refer to as "Elisabeth's court." The range of guests was astonishing: "a cosmopolitan and serious democrat [seated] next to both an army general and a convinced Nazi, all of them together at her dinner table. If somebody had a name, she invited him!" Ursula heard lectures on Nietzsche from such luminaries as Oswald Spengler and Thomas Mann. But these intellectual occasions seemed to young Ursula just as stiff and schoolmasterly as the 1994 memorial event in Roecken appeared to Frau Sigismund. "That's no doubt how you're supposed to honor a dead philosopher," she writes in Zarathustra's Clan. "I found it all boring. But I took it for granted that it was my own fault."

Major Oehler had a stronger opinion about Elisabeth's networking: "I'll eat my hat if Nietzsche would have liked any of this." But he kept his objections to himself, muttering instead, "'She is uneducable...'... And he said it sometimes with a sigh and sometimes in anger, sometimes with a shake of the head or despairing or laughing and also laughing in his rage."

In 1931, when the 19-year-old Ursula was finishing high school, she became moderately interested in politics; two of her girlfriends were National Socialists, advocates of "the Movement." To her astonishment, her father also became a Nazi party member that year; in his presence, Frau Sigismund says, family members were not allowed to use the word "Nazi" anymore, only "National Socialist," and not allowed to criticize the Movement at all.

"Frau Sigismund remembers January 30, 1933, the date of Hitler's first day in
office as German Chancellor. It was a Monday characterized by "enthusiasm at home and tempered optimism at school: now let's wait and see what happens.... Maybe it will be a historic day."

VI

Already by this time, Elisabeth too had embraced fascism. More than that, she had hosted lectures at the Nietzsche Archives in honor of Mussolini and had even met the Fuehrer himself. Hitler would eventually make seven personal visits to Elisabeth at the Archives, testimony to her status in the 1930s as—in the common phrase of Third Reich newspapers—"the First Lady of Europe." Elisabeth told Ursula that she was merely an old-fashioned German patriot, like octogenarian President Paul von Hindenburg, and, like him, committed to using her influence to help Germany despite her advancing years. And that influence occasionally extended to opposing Nazi ideas: for example, on one occasion, Elisabeth wrote the Fuehrer and asked him to assure her personally that no harm would ever come to the Jews; on another occasion, she urged him (this time successfully) not to turn Schulpforta into a special Nazi school.

Frau Sigismund says she too met Hitler on his visits to the Archives: her most vivid memory involves the last meeting, in 1935, when he spent a lengthy afternoon visiting with Elisabeth. Ursula shook the Fuehrer's hand and made small talk. "I was too cowardly to tell my aunt or anyone else that I despised him," Frau Sigismund tells me. Just as Elisabeth was planning her ninetieth birthday in November 1935, with Hitler invited to host the great event, she died quietly in her sleep. Hitler attended the Weimar funeral and laid the wreath on her grave in Roecken; the ceremony was given front-page coverage in the leading Nazi paper, the Voelkischer Beobachter.

Ursula had visited her aunt the day before; Elisabeth had seemed fine. Frau Sigismund later wrote: "Neither relatives nor friends had the opportunity to gather around her bed, no one heard her last words, there were no nurses who cared for her, no physician gave her any medicines. If her soul were taken by the devil due to her many small evils, her hypocrisy and her forgeries—which I don't believe happened—it must have been done in a very careful way. Her corpse lay so peacefully and so comfortably on her deathbed! Besides, who knows whether or not she succeeded in winning over the devil himself with her charm?"

Major Oehler was almost happy about Elisabeth's death. For years he had been dutiful and diligent and had made the best of his situation; now, still under 60, it was finally his turn to run the Archives himself.

Ursula herself was now 23. She had married and delivered two children, winning the standard Nazi kudos given to fertile women: Mother of the Reich. But her husband and her father did not see eye-to-eye politically. Her husband had a thinly veiled contempt for Hitler and the Nazis, an attitude that contrasted sharply with Major Oehler's Nazi Party membership and the Oehler family's formal commitment to National Socialism. In Zarathustra's Clan Frau Sigismund relates that her husband considered Hitler just "a mouth protruding from an empty head." Her father replied sternly: "The world is going to have to take Germany seriously again, and the Fuehrer recognizes that. He's in the prime of his life, and he knows what the Germans expect of him. By the time your children are grown up, you'll understand what I'm saying." Her husband threw up his hands: "Your clan is just too much for me." He wanted to emigrate, but Ursula persuaded him to stay in Germany.

"My husband was left-wing," Frau
Sigismund tells me. "He was never a Communist, but he was politically outspoken. And it was always frustrating for him to need to be so careful around my relatives. At the time, he was a student, and he feared losing his stipend if someone reported him as politically disloyal.

"And although my father did join the Party," she continues, "I don't think he was ever a convinced Nazi. Elisabeth insisted that he join for the good of the Archives, and he obeyed her. He did, at first, think that Hitler was good for Germany, but he soon learned otherwise." His most painful moment, as Frau Sigismund recounts in Zarathustra's Clan, was when the family's only son, 24-year-old Henning, fell in battle on the Russian front in 1943.

In October 1944, the Nietzsche Archives commemorated the 100th anniversary of the philosopher's birth; Frau Sigismund acknowledges that she may be the only person who has attended both the centennial and sesquicentennial Nietzsche events. The war was already a lost cause in late 1944: Allied armies were nearing Germany's borders from all sides. But the Nietzsche Archives bravely carried on, and invited Alfred Rosenberg, the Reich's preeminent official intellectual, to deliver the main address in Weimar; both Hitler and Goebbels, in a last show of fealty, sent wreaths to Nietzsche's grave in Roecken. Ursula attended both events, but her parents kept her at a distance from Reich officials because she had said some negative things at home about the Nazis and the war.

The Russians occupied Weimar in the summer of 1945, and Major Oehler was summoned a few months later. He was told that he would only be away a few hours. He wrote a note and left it on his desk: "Don't wait for me to eat lunch. I won't be back before dinner." The family never heard from him again; neither did they receive any word of his whereabouts from Soviet officials. Years later, Frau Sigismund learned that her father had received a prison sentence of 25 years and had been sent to Buchenwald concentration camp, only a few miles away in the Ettersberg forest overlooking Weimar. He died of starvation sometime in the fierce winter of 1945/46 and was buried with hundreds of others in a mass, unmarked grave. The novel ends with her unanswered questions of family guilt still ringing in the reader's ears: "Was my father really such an awful Nazi?" "Did Nietzsche intend to murder people?"

VII

The early postwar years were no easier for Frau Sigismund than life under the Nazis. She divorced her husband, Ernst Wachler, and began raising their four children in Weimar by herself. She remarried in 1949, but the politics of her second husband, Herr Sigismund, brought him into disfavor with the Russians and the German Communists. He had headed the city archives in Weimar. Communist officials accused him of having a negative political influence on his colleagues. He was jailed in 1951 and received a five year prison term. In 1955, with Herr Sigismund behind bars, Frau Sigismund decided to emigrate to West Germany. She settled in Hamburg, where her oldest son studied at the university.

"I had Angst that they would soon arrest me too, so I left for the West," Frau Sigismund explains.

Frau Sigismund reflects on the role that Elisabeth and the Nietzsche Archives have played in Nietzsche's checkered history of reputation as well as on the fate of herself and her family.

"The Communists hated Nietzsche because they accepted the simple distortion that he was the philosopher of the Nazis," Frau Sigismund says. "But that image is attributable to the success of Elisabeth's propaganda campaign.
Without Elisabeth’s affiliations with the Nazis, no one would ever have associated the Archives closely with National Socialism. And nobody would ever have taken Nietzsche as being a ‘Nazi philosopher.’"

The campaign that produced the Superman led to the reaction that resulted in the nonperson, Frau Sigismund acknowledges.

But would Nietzsche ever have achieved such prominence at all without Elisabeth’s marketing campaign? I ask.

"Maybe," Frau Sigismund says. She pauses. "Maybe yes, maybe no."

After moving to West Germany and raising five children, Frau Sigismund began her own literary career. "I always had A’s in German," she laughs. "Literature was in the family." She began writing fiction, biography, and travelogues. Several of her works address how the terror and tragedy of twentieth-century German history have expressed themselves in Germany family life. In 1963 she received the German Fiction Prize, sponsored by Stern magazine, for her novel Bedraengte Zeit [Hurried Time], which portrays the guile and gullibility of a Third Reich family similar to her own.

Grenzgaenger [Border-crossers], published in 1970, deals with a group of Germans torn, like her family, by the border marking the divided Germany of the Cold War. Zarathustra’s Clan was first published in 1977; it was reprinted in 1992 on the occasion of Frau Sigismund’s 80th birthday.

During the last year, Frau Sigismund, who now lives in the western German city of Darmstadt, has been diligently at work, with the help of two Nietzsche scholars, on a biography of her father. She has 220 of her father’s letters and is planning to tell his story through them. And now that Nietzsche is a bigger topic than ever in reunited Germany, she has sometimes been invited to speak at academic conferences. At a recent Nietzsche symposium in the eastern German city of Erfurt, Frau Sigismund sought to “correct the mostly negative things” that a professor said about Elisabeth. Despite Frau Sigismund’s own sharp criticisms of Elisabeth, she wants people to understand her as a woman of her time, rather than demonize her as a Nazi villain.

VIII

People are milling about in the rectory courtyard for the 3 p.m. inauguration of the new Nietzsche Museum, which has been built next to the rectory. "Are you a Nietzsche fan?" a lady from Austria asks me. She has come with three Cubans and two Frenchmen to the sesquicentennial event. "It’s like a prayer meeting," says an elderly gentleman, noting that hundreds of people are carrying various works of Nietzsche and quoting aloud from them to one another. I ask a teenage boy why, like me, he too is taking such extensive notes. He says that he is an eighth-grader from the local Roecken school and has volunteered to give the first school report on Nietzsche since 1945.

The boy and I notice that not only has the fellow hawking the 1912 Nietzsche postcards and the telephone cards returned, but another man is buttonholing bystanders and introducing himself, complete with top hat and bushy moustache, as Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche. A nearby lady says that the Saxony-Anhalt state TV agency is covering the commemoration and that an actor has come dressed for the evening show, "Who am I?" The lady grimaces. "It’s a sacrilege," she says. "They’re turning the commemoration into a circus."

More than that—unfortunately. The wife of the village pastor shows me a small sticker, several of which have been found throughout Roecken today. "Go Right Before Left," proclaim the stickers. Members of the far-right Republican
party have left their message, she says. They want to claim Nietzsche too. The national election is tomorrow, October 16, she reminds me. She hasn't seen any neo-Nazis in Roecken, but she worries that Nietzsche's mantle might once again be captured by the German Right. “I am not a man, I am dynamite!” Nietzsche had proclaimed in his autobiography, Ecce Homo. History has already proven him right once.

The speeches to inaugurate the Nietzsche Museum are in full swing. Most are honorific and perfunctory. But the crowd registers sharp discomfort when a tall, full-bearded young man declares: “We had a personal relationship to this rectory during the Communist dictatorship.”

The last two words provoke commotion; this speaker is the first person all day to make direct reference to the East German regime: Most people don't seem to want reminding that a few of today's visiting dignitaries were also government officials during the Communist era, let alone that they served a “dictatorship.” The speaker's “we” refers to the few members of a secret “Nietzsche Society,” a Communist-era reading group that illegally procured copies of Nietzsche's works and was regularly spied upon by the Stasi, the East German secret police.

“We prayed here together, and we honored Friedrich Nietzsche's example as a freethinker,” the speaker continues. “Our first Nietzsche evening occurred in 1980. But we could only read him and speak about him in secret. Because of his misuse by the Nazis, the greatest philosopher of Germany was cast aside by the Communists. We laid a wreath on his grave, here in Roecken, year after year; now we open this museum in his memory.”

I spot Frau Sigismund a few feet away from me; she catches my glance as she nods her approval.

The mayor throws open the museum door and the crowd rushes in. The story of Nietzsche's life is told in the exhibits inside.

The area around the little church is now deserted. As I enter the church, I muse on Nietzsche's extraordinarily complicated return—his eternal return?—to German politics and letters. Here is where it all began. Here in these pews, Fritz spent countless hours as a small boy, listening to his father playing hymns on the organ and preaching the word of God. I look up at the biblical passage etched in stone on the church's left-side wall:

I live and you should also live (John 14.19).

And whether the echoes be ironic or fated, I am reminded of Zarathustra's own gospel, and of Nietzsche's self-reflexively prophetic Great Commandment:

My doctrine is: Love that thou mayest desire to live again—for in any case thou will live again!