

BOOK REVIEWS

Hans von Oettingen: Irrwege und Einsichten eines Unbedachten. Berlin: Verlag der Nation, 1981. 405 pages. 11.80 M.

It is not at all clear, at first glance, why these memoirs should have been written or, once written, why they should have been published. Aside from the author's decision for East Germany over West Germany, doubtless a factor in its publication (but one shrouded from my view by the absence of pages 385-400 from the copy available to me), the author's experiences are by no means unique or even unusual for a German born in 1919. An aristocrat making his way through the Weimar Republic, the Nazi period, and the postwar epoch is not remarkable, though his ardent National Socialist father and the nostalgia associated with the institutions and habits of traditional German life are of some interest. What redeems this volume of memoirs is the vividness of the writing and the rebelliousness, seemingly quite authentic, that allows the author's recollections to illuminate the fraudulence of much of the history he has lived through. His recollections become, in effect, an acid commentary on all that went wrong in the Germany of the post-Wilhelmine era. Admirably, the author claims no credit for his anti-Nazism or for his genuine democratic preferences. The memoirs portray a continuous tension between the power of the prescriptive--be it aristocratic, Nazi or military--and the assertion of individuality, not always commendable but always at odds with precept. Here lies that most valuable of autobiographical commentaries, the irreverent display of individuality, however flawed, at odds with official pieties. The pieties of the GDR do not come in for much of this treatment, largely because the rebellious military figure turns into an invalid writer. Oettingen's memoirs, nonetheless, provide a scintillating view of the Weimar and Nazi epochs, one that far exceeds the initial promise of the undertaking. It would not be unfair to characterize this book as the triumph of literary quality over political considerations, however those may have figured in the book's appearance.

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Elisabeth Schulz-Semrau: Die Beurteilung. Halle und Leipzig: Mitteldeutscher Verlag, 1981. 229 pages. 7.20 M.

The first impression of Elisabeth Schulz Semrau's new novel is one of strong affinity to Christa Wolf's Der geteilte Himmel, a novel written at the outset of Wolf's career. Yet almost two decades have passed between the publications of the two books: in contrast to Wolf's heroine Rita Seidel, Schulz-Semrau's hero Kolja, a young artist born in 1951, is entirely the product of a socialist country. He grew up secure in the ideals and the love of his mother, Gisela Hildebrand, a dedicated socialist, and these beliefs have been strengthened through his years at school and university. But then the woman he loves moves to West Berlin, and two negative lines in an otherwise highly positive evaluation--he is judged wrongly as being "indifferent"--make it impossible for him to return to the university and to research. Yet the "divided sky" is an accepted fact in 1981; and not the East-West conflict is the actual topic of the novel, but the conflict of the generations. This is presented here primarily as a confrontation: life experiences and claims on life of two generations of a socialist society are seen from the view of the two main figures, mother and son; the novel investigates whether a productive togetherness (Miteinander) of the two is possible.

Over the past fifteen years the right for self-realization within a socialist society has become a central theme of the GDR-novel; but now the claims of the individual have become louder and more strident than in the sixties. Thus, when Schulz-Semrau looks at the relation between individual and society, she focuses on Gisela, Kolja's mother, a member of the generation which built the socialist society, who critically examines her life, her own actions, and those of her comrades: Do they allow for the doubts and questions of a contemporary socialist generation? Does the socialist society ensure, for the present, the possibility of free personal development? The author's conclusion remains positive, of course: although the ending is apparently left open, the reader knows there will indeed be a "productive togetherness", just as there is never a doubt that the young, questioning intellectual will remain in his socialist homeland, the GDR.

Schulz-Semrau's sensitive portrayal of inter-human relations and feelings as experienced by a woman may lead to the impression that the novel describes a period of life of someone similar to the author. Schulz-Semrau relates the story by present reflections or flashbacks. At times, however, simplistic, stylistic devices are employed to reveal the son's innermost experiences: conveniently Kolja's mother falls upon his diary and a 10-page letter addressed to a casual friend. Moreover, the author overstrains the usage of recurring images. Thus the symbol of die Blitze, of flashes of lightning, is used frequently. Obviously it stands for the mother's ideals as they have been transmitted to her son, and which were questioned at the very beginning ("Wo sind die Blitze, Kolja?") and affirmed again in the final paragraph ("O meine lieben Blitze"). Certainly the reader is not in need of a detailed explanation of the image as provided toward the end of the novel. Nevertheless, the novel is worthwhile reading since it is entertaining and enlightens the non-GDR readers about contemporary life in the GDR.

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