

SHORT PROSE BY FEMALE GDR WRITERS

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Looking at a dozen short prose anthologies from the GDR, anthologies that were published during the last two decades, I note that approximately one fifth of the contributions are by female writers. Rummaging expeditions in GDR bookstores during the last two summers showed that the same gender distribution also applies to the authors of individual collections of short prose. I am not sure how the situation compares to Western conditions; in any case, women are firmly established as short prose writers in the GDR, and they speak with a strong voice. Some homogeneity is evident as far as they themselves are concerned: in more than 80% of all the stories the protagonist is a woman, trying to help shape a socialist society and, in turn, being shaped by it, whereby the touchstone of it all is her relationship to the male. It is important to point out at once that fathers, sons, colleagues, bosses, and officials in this context may be as significant in a story as the sexual partner.

Before analyzing various examples, I would like to offer some historical perspectives. In October 1989, days before liberalization and profound changes occurred, the GDR celebrated its 40th birthday—four decades of GDR literature.¹ Each decade roughly seems to comprise a developmental stage in GDR literature. In the late forties and in the fifties women, even in their own writings, chiefly kept their bourgeois traditional domestic roles. But even back then conditions existed which offered other possibilities. One such condition is Marxist theory which claims that women, if integrated into the labor force, into production, will achieve economic independence and along with it self-confidence, political awareness and, finally, equality. This theory fell on fertile ground, because East Germany, after the war in which a large percentage of males in their twenties, thirties and forties had perished, had a much depleted labor force. It was essential to encourage women to work outside their homes. Many, who were widowed and had to raise their families, needed little encouragement. The need for workers during the time of reconstruction was so great that women were accepted into many professions previously all but closed to them: engineering, truck driving, crane operation, bricklaying, to name just a few. Some of the pioneering spirit of those years, the initial optimism, is captured in scores of stories, and in novels that deal with life in the factories. Many of those came about in the wake of the Russian five-year-plan-type-novels and the demands raised in the first Bitterfeld conference, where workers were encouraged to start writing themselves and established writers were told to concentrate on the development of socialism and everyday life as reflected in the factories.

In the sixties women's increasing economic power, hand in hand with the creation of day care centers and social welfare legislation, resulted in a fair amount of independence and thus made marriages less stable. The divorce rate climbed and fewer children were born. Literature of that era, and, again, especially literature by women, reflects countless marriage conflicts. On the other hand, it also dutifully tries to reflect the government's revised social strategy, namely to stress traditional role models for women.

It can be said that after 1970 women had gained a certain measure of equality, as far as earning power, education, job

availability, etc. are concerned. Yet, they remained chafing under the double yoke of domestic and official duties. Many stories and narrations of that decade critically examine this conflict, a conflict which is by no means closer to any solution today.

In the eighties GDR women generally seem to have the feeling that their equality leaves a lot to be desired and is much overrated in the West. Another development in the eighties: social-socialist issues and concerns step farther into the background. Writers are weaned from the State. The ego becomes more important and for women (but also for many male writers) the psychological tug-of-war between the sexes assumes a centerstage position. In view of the current situation, any speculations about the nineties would be idle indeed.

Helga Schütz, born in 1937, published several narrations in the seventies, collections of stories and short novels which are all loosely connected and tell the story of the Silesian refugee girl, Jette; she first survives with her grandmother in Dresden and later moves to a small village in the Harz mountains, close to the border with West Germany, where she goes to school. (The stories all have autobiographical traits). Jette grows up in poverty, persecuted by her peers. In the centerpiece of this cycle, a narration with the title *Festbeleuchtung*,² Jette, now 16 years old, crosses the so-called green border with West Germany in order to be a guest at a wedding among her Silesian relatives who are all living in the same West German village. It is clear that the Silesians in the West have been totally assimilated into Adenauer's West Germany. Jette, on the other hand, spouts socialist ideas which she has learned in school and tries to agitate the non-comprehending Westerners.

The story is interesting for various reasons. First of all it is one of the very few early East German literary confrontations with the West (1973). Christa Wolf's *Divided Heaven*, written one decade earlier, does not really treat political East-West issues; it simply states the division. Second, and more important in this context, Jette is the prototype of the postwar East German female. On the one hand, she is obviously indoctrinated with Marxist-Leninist thought which she reports like material from any other subject taught at school, in a strangely naive and unreflecting manner. On the other hand, she is full of optimism, pioneering spirit and practical initiatives, maintaining a convincing innocence. However, this innocence is tempered, must be tempered, by historical elements.

Another short prose writer, Helga Schubert, born in 1940, describes the prototype female of her generation as follows:

Vintage 1940. The first children in Germany who did not start their classes with *Heil Hitler*. Innocents then, memories of attacks by low-flying planes, bomb explosions, growling tanks, columns of refugees, Christmas trees in the sky. These memories spoil for us fireworks, thunderstorms and the view of a parade. My generation is 40.... We were ashamed to be Germans. On tiptoes we walked through formerly German lands or countries occupied by the Germans.... We were proud when someone told us, I didn't think you were German.... Yet sometimes we are proud to belong to that nation, but we would never admit that. Never.³

But the luck to have been born too late to experience the Nazi period and become guilty, “das Glück der Spätgeborenen,” as West German Chancellor Kohl phrases it, the burden of not having experienced the past, weighs equally heavily and Schubert continues:

We walked through open doors, walked ever faster and behind us the doors swung shut. No exits left and right, only an open door in front.... I don't know, you're all so nervous, as if driven. Just be happy with the present time. Just look how difficult it was for us, Nazi time, war, the men died in the war. And you? You can study, earn lots of money. Why do you always have to complain? Open doors as an accusation. Well, not our open doors.⁴

I quoted Schubert at some length, because she sheds light on Jette's character. Doors in her society, education, profession, money, are open to her, but they are opened by the government, and they all lead in the same direction. The freedom of personal choice remains rigidly limited.

It would be difficult to speak about women's literature in the GDR without considering the work of Christa Wolf. After the optimistic initial pioneering years of constructing socialism and physically reconstructing East Germany, after the testimonies of support and faith, she is the first one to raise a critical voice. Certainly, Rita in the novel *The Divided Heaven* (1963)⁵ decides for socialism, life in the GDR, giving up her boyfriend Manfred who went to the West, but it is an agonizing decision. Rita basically is a fragile character, yet a character given to the search for her own subjectivity, for her own set of values. Her relationship to Manfred, central as it may be to her, in the end does not prove to be a *sine qua non*. The ties to colleagues, to a social task and last, but not least, to her own ego and her own possibilities and potential prove stronger, although the agonizing choice almost kills her.

Rita makes the morally right, but—Wolf emphasizes—extremely painful, choice. At that point she defines her identity, fragile as that may still be, through her involvement with her work and her society, the very sources which have always given men their sense of self and which are now being offered women as an additional dimension. With Rita's choice, Christa Wolf gives this dimension priority and suggests that the hope embodied in her East is also based upon the emancipatory and egalitarian possibilities which were opened to women by their inclusion in production.⁶

In most of Wolf's subsequent works the problem of women's self-realization within modern socialist society has been at the core. With Rita a long chain of protagonists starts, cast in the same mold: Christa T., the narrator in “Unter den Linden” (1969), the scientist in “Selbstversuch” (1974), and Karoline von Günderröde in *No Place. Nowhere* (1979). Even one of her latest personages, Cassandra, is no exception. All the female protagonists strive for self-realization at all costs. Conventional female roles intervene, impede, as do relationships with men, but in the end their persistence prevails.

In 1977 Maxie Wander published a volume of documentary stories, i.e. actual interviews in which women related their life stories and their aspirations and failures.⁷ The message in virtually all of these stories is clear: the woman

is hopelessly trapped between her own goals and desires and traditions; again here the polarity between domestic and public life. Women feel that they are subject to male value systems. Men, it turns out, do not treat women on equal terms, because of their unwillingness to communicate on the same level, to really understand women. This is hammered home again and again in this volume, but perhaps best captured in Ruth's story, when she remarks: “One always has to play theater for men; if not, they become frightened. I have never known one who wanted to find out how I really am and why. They all have had pretty specific plans with me.”⁸

In her story “Bolero”⁹ from 1978, Helga Königsdorf relates the relationship of a woman who has an affair with a married man. Her heart is not really in it from the beginning. She does it out of boredom, vestigial conventionalism. “Making love with him,” she says, “was not especially pleasant. Without introduction he came over me and busied himself with himself through me.”¹⁰ Here again the same problem; the man sees the woman as a sex object, not as a human being to be treated on equal terms. In the seventies then, women doubtlessly made gains in society, they are equal as colleagues and co-workers, but there is still the domestic problem and more succinctly the problem that men in love relationships do not treat women as equal partners, as human beings in their own right, with equal emotional and intellectual demands as men. Königsdorf knows full well that this is the ultimate protest, but not much of an attempt to solve the problem. In another one of Königsdorf's stories, “Thunderstorm,” the woman does not show the same amount of deliberate courage, although the level of frustration is equally high. Here the woman succumbs to alcohol and fear: she is the obvious and professed victim, just as the victim in “Bolero” is not the man who plummets to his death, but rather the woman, or better yet, the women who are left behind.

In 1984 Helga Schubert—whom I mentioned earlier—published an interesting volume of stories with the title *Perspectives*.¹¹ She too, in most of the stories, examines the lot of women, specifically again the polarity between domestic and public roles. Interestingly enough, Schubert discusses the issue in a different light. However, to her it is of more interest to gauge the relationship between women rather than between men and women. Of interest to her is the female colleague, the neighbor lady, a total stranger she meets who tells her own story. Carefully Schubert weighs relationships in the light of different levels of education and experience; contrasts, for instance, the life of a woman working in an agricultural co-op with her own. She is a keen observer and very sensitive. The message is clear: as opposed to Königsdorf's abject images of male-female non-understanding and subsequent frustration, women do instinctively understand each other and sympathize, although the outer circumstances may be momentarily rather adverse to sisterly fellowship. Christa Wolf's women, incidentally, are very much members of the same sisterhood. However, Schubert's women do suffer as well. They suffer from social insufficiencies, suppression by men and, yes, their own vulnerability and sensitivity.

The third possibility, namely more or less splendid isolation, that is, to go it alone as a woman, is explored by Christine Wolter in her short novel *Die Alleinseglerin* (the title is somewhat difficult to translate; it basically means “someone going sailing alone.”)¹² In the course of the narration she paints the following image which seems to be indicative of the situation of women in recent GDR society:

When sailing, especially in competition, there is a situation called "the hopeless position".... Imagine, there in front of you sails another boat depriving you of the wind and its wake brakes you. But you can't turn back, because behind you is another one and next to you another whom you rob of the wind and who therefore can't speed up. He keeps you from breaking out, because you are an obstacle for him.... Strangely enough, sailing experience recommends not to turn, not to break away: no maneuvers. A competition rule says that one ought to stay in the "hopeless position," that's often better and one can still place well overall. The question then is only this: whether one knows about the hopeless position and its possibilities.¹³

In other words then, the position of women in society and perhaps in relation to males, is hopeless, but this hopelessness gives a certain amount of liberty because it absolves one from convention and certain responsibilities. It also sharpens the senses for extant possibilities. The image almost approaches Peter Gosse's Daedalus metaphor. In a poem he praises not Icarus's heedless soaring, but rather Daedalus's careful course right in the middle of both extremes—a truly dialectical approach to the political lay of the land.¹⁴

For the sake of completeness, I should add that in the end the lone female sailor founders, there is no happy ending—*quod erat expectandum*.

Yet another avenue to women's role is taken by Monika Helmecke, born in 1943, in her collection of short stories *Klopffzeichen* (i.e. communication by tapping on walls).¹⁵ The book is actually escapist in nature, because reality merges with fantasy, sanity with insanity. The title story deals with the case of a totally isolated woman who suffers from an obsession: she tries continuously to establish contact with the child she has aborted, withdrawing more and more into her own body and self to seek companionship. In her apartment she devises morse-code-type signals with which the aborted fetus tells her to eat, sleep, etc. The story ends with the fetus ordering her to go to the hospital so it can be born. Stories in which the life cycle is inverted are not new. Ilse Aichinger's *Spiegelgeschichte* (Mirror Story) comes to mind, and Helga Schubert has a similar one. But whereas those stories have existential messages, the point here is that something new is aborted, cannot be born in reality, only in fantasy, obviously an indictment of the political situation. Many other stories in the collection explore the situation of women caught between their children and self-fulfillment, a question rarely raised by men.

In many ways similar to Helmecke's stories are those by Beate Morgenstern, born in 1946.¹⁶ Her stories center on protagonists who are outsiders, outcasts who cannot conform to society. They are rejected and persecuted. Sometimes these stories are very physical, at other times rather sublime, outlining failure of attempts to communicate. The answer to the problems here is alcohol, denial, even self-destruction, i.e. again, no answer at all. Renate Apitz's *Evastöchter* (Eve's Daughters, published in 1982)¹⁷ is written in the same mode. Traditions and conventions impede real communication and understanding between the sexes. I mention Apitz's book not so much because of the topics it takes up as for its humor. All the previous works, although some of them contained a fair amount of irony, were rather serious in nature. Apitz is refreshingly irreverent and pokes fun at the issues. In her opinion, part of the problem

seems to be that everyone takes him/herself along with everything else far too seriously.

In 1980, Daniela Dahn, born in 1949, published a collection of *feuilletons* with the title *Spitzenzeit* (Peak Time). The title signifies several things. Peak times are those times when life seems to be condensed, when vital decisions are made, but *Spitze* not only means "peak" it also means "point" like the "point of a spear," directed at conditions and their causes. Dahn's basic stance is curiosity and the willingness to bridge or disregard social distances. One section of the book is called "Das heutige Weibliche" (Womanhood Today). She first considers the situation: "is there something, that I'd like to do, but can't because I'm a woman?" The answer is obvious: there is nothing she couldn't do. For "I didn't want to join the air force, nor did I feel any desire to become a miner...but CEO maybe.... Why shouldn't I be president of a company, chief surgeon, diplomat, superintendent or Secretary of State? Only one thing that women still can't do: participate in public anniversary celebrations."¹⁸ Dahn continues and in a few lines gives a very precise description of the basic conflict she sees for women today:

Motherhood alone does not make a complete woman.... On the job there are equal requirements, based on male capabilities. There are no separate teams, even if women are subject to a different breeze. Only the "household-day" [employees are allowed one day per month to fulfill household duties], generously accorded us by men. Men decide: her area. As a wife today one has to be beautiful, intelligent and attractive, ever gentle, never aggressive. At cultural high points one is sociable, well read, and always informed about the latest news. As a hostess one shines with one's housewifely prowess, shows off the children with pedagogical know-how and is entertaining in conversation. At vacation time one is ready to do things, and in top condition. Pampering and medication are not necessary, because for all of this one ought to be healthy! In short, women's liberation has moved the balance. Lopsidedly into the direction of more work, more efficiency, more burdens, strength.¹⁹

Again, Dahn homes in on the bipolar role of women, public and domestic burdens, and the fact that men and their standards rule the workplace. Men are wrapped up in themselves, do not give women a chance to be women. In order to be successful they actually have to behave like men. Therefore Dahn demands a chance to be weak occasionally. In fact, she adds, it would probably be good if men too permitted themselves to be weak at times. Christiane Zehl Romero points out that "this question of strength and weakness, its definitions and redefinitions in relation to men and women, are an important aspect of GDR discussions of changing male and female identity in literature and elsewhere, albeit often in the subtext."²⁰

What do all these literary examples demonstrate? On the one hand, they show that women in the GDR have gained certain rights in the workplace and a certain freedom to work wherever they please plus some economic independence. On the other hand, male standards still dominate, there is a lack of communication between the sexes, and in those aspects GDR women are not much better off than their Western sisters and no short-term solutions are in sight.

I would like to conclude with some telling statistical information: In 1965 men did 11.6% of the housework, women 79.4%. In 1970 13.0% was done by men, 78.7% by women.²¹ In other words, in five years there was a change of only one percentage point. The sociologists Wilsdorf and Wolf therefore coined the expression of the *Jahrhundertprozess*, i.e. a task for an entire century for this development.

Notes

¹A similar discussion of GDR literature has been suggested by various critics, among others for GDR poetry by Walfried Hartinger in his article "Gedichte im Gespräch. Zur Produktion, Vermittlung und Rezeption der DDR-Lyrik" in *Ein Moment des erfahrenen Lebens. Zur Lyrik der DDR*, ed. John L. Flood (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1987) 6 ff.

²*Festbeleuchtung*, Erzählung (Berlin und Weimar: Aufbau Verlag, 1973); other books related to the same topical cycle: *Vorgeschichten oder Schöne Gegend Probststein, Erzählungen* (1971), and *Jette in Dresden* (1977).

³Helge Schubert, *Das verlorene Zimmer* (Darmstadt und Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1982) 23-24. This translation is mine, as are all subsequent ones.

⁴Schubert, 20.

⁵Christa Wolf, *Der geteilte Himmel* (Halle: Mitteldeutscher Verlag, 1963).

⁶Christiane Zehl Romero, "Changing Patterns of Male and Female Identity in Recent GDR Prose," *Studies in GDR Culture and*

Society 6 (Lanham, New York and London: University Press of America, 1986) 97.

⁷Maxie Wander, *Guten Morgen, du Schöne* (Berlin: Der Morgen, 1977).

⁸Wander, 20.

⁹Helga Königsdorf, *Meine ungehörigen Träume* (Berlin und Weimar: Aufbau Verlag, 1978).

¹⁰This quote is taken from the story "Bolero" as published in the anthology *Alfons auf dem Dach*, ed. Manfred Jendryschik, (Halle und Leipzig: Mitteldeutscher Verlag, 1982) 326.

¹¹Helga Schubert, *Blickwinkel* (Berlin und Weimar: Aufbau Verlag, 1984).

¹²Christine Wolter, *Die Alleinseglerin*, 2nd ed. (Berlin und Weimar: Aufbau Verlag, 1984).

¹³Wolter, 208-09.

¹⁴cf. Fritz König, "Peter Gosses lyrische Navigationsversuche," *Studies in GDR Culture and Society* 4: 153 ff.

¹⁵Monika Helmecke, *Klopfzeichen* (Berlin: Verlag Neues Leben, 1979).

¹⁶Beate Morgenstern, *Jenseits der Allee* (Berlin und Weimar: Aufbau Verlag, 1979).

¹⁷Renate Apitz, *Evastöchter* (Rostock: Hinsteroff, 1982).

¹⁸Daniela Dahn, *Spitzenzeit* (Halle und Leipzig: Mitteldeutscher Verlag, 1980) 150.

¹⁹Dahn, 153.

²⁰Zehl Romero, 96.

²¹H. Wilsdorf and F. Wolf, *Kollektivbeziehungen und Lebensweise* (Berlin: Dietz, 1984) 99-101.

Interviews

INTERVIEW MIT ERICH LOEST

Erich Loest wurde 1926 in Mittweida/Sachsen geboren. Er war Soldat, Redakteur der Leipziger Volkszeitung, seit dem 17. Juni 1953 unter Stasibesitzung und verbrachte sieben Jahre im Zuchthaus zu Bautzen. Ohnmächtig gegenüber der Zensur in der DDR erzwang er 1981 die Ausreise in die Bundesrepublik. Erich Loest wohnt heute in Bad Godesberg und Leipzig. Er schreibt Romane und Erzählungen, in denen er zugleich das ostdeutsche Sonderschicksal und die allgemeine deutsche Kontinuität darstellt.

Erich Loest erhielt u.a. den **Hans-Fallada-Preis**, den **Marburger Literaturpreis** und zweimal den **Jakob-Kaiser-Preis**. Seine bekanntesten Bücher sind: *Jungen, die übrig blieben* (1950), *Es geht seinen Gang oder die Mühen in unserer Ebene* (1978), *Durch die Erde ein Riß* (1981), *Völkerschlachtdenkmal* (1984), *Zwiebelmuster* (1985), *Fallhöhe* (1989), *Bauchschüsse* (1990), *Der Zorn des Schafes* (1990), *Die Stasi war mein Eckermann* (1990).

Das folgende Interview wurde Ende Juni 1991 von Gabriele Bosley (Bellarmine College) mit dem Schriftsteller in Berlin geführt.

Gabriele Bosley: Herr Loest, beginnen wir einmal mit der Vereinigung der zwei deutschen Staaten und den Vorgängen, die sie eingeleitet haben. Wie haben Sie als Opfer den 9. November 1989 sowie den Tag der Einigung erlebt und empfunden?

Erich Loest: Also, ich bin an dem Tag, als die Mauer aufgemacht wurde, sofort nach Berlin. Das ZDF sandte mich als Korrespondenten dorthin, und ich habe das also in Berlin miterlebt, mit diesem riesigen Jubel am nächsten Tag in West-Berlin. Ich war also dabei, und für mich war es natürlich ein Erfolg, ein Sieg. Ich konnte danach wieder nach Leipzig zurück. Ich bin noch im Dezember in Leipzig gewesen, habe im Gohliser Schloßchen (das ist eine traditionelle literarische Stätte) und im Theater gelesen. Eine solche triumphale Heimkehr, wie mir dort bereitet worden ist, das war wunderbar. Dann ist natürlich viel Zeit vergangen bis zum Tag der Einheit am 3. Oktober des nächsten Jahres. Mein Sohn Thomas hat noch im Januar in Leipzig einen Verlag gegründet. Wir haben fünf meiner Bücher, die nicht sein durften, in der DDR noch zum Sommer herausgebracht: *Völkerschlachtdenkmal* und *Durch die Erde ein Riß*. Das ist dann natürlich mit dem Währungsschnitt alles anders geworden: Die Leute haben auf ihr Geld aufgepaßt. Wir haben den Verlag immer noch, nicht mit diesen riesigen Umsatzzahlen. Also, wir sind wieder sofort nach Leipzig zurück und jetzt teile ich meine Zeit. Ich dritte sie: Ich bin ein Drittel in Bonn, wo ich ruhig schreiben kann, ein Drittel in Leipzig, wo ich dann viel zu tun habe als Journalist und politisch und alles Mögliche in die Wege leiten muß, ja, und ein Drittel fahre ich herum wie eben jetzt nach Berlin.