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Jurij Brězan: Der Brautschmuck und andere Geschichten

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Der Brautschmuck und andere Geschichten. By Jurij Bržan. Berlin: Verlag Neues Leben, 1979. 164 pp. 16 M.

Jurij Bržan, the most talented GDR author of Sorbian descent writing today, has drawn heavily upon his unique cultural heritage in this entertaining and at times provocative collection of 24 stories for children and young adults. In fact, most of the stories find their source of inspiration in Bržan's own Sorbian childhood and in the legends, tales, and anecdotes told to him by his elders.

The title story itself, in its retelling of an old legend about a valuable necklace passed down from generation to generation, with each successive owner contributing a new coin to enrich the original, becomes symbolic for the entire collection of stories, which similarly have come down to their present "custodian," Bržan, who in keeping with custom, has made his own inimitable contribution to each story.

The result is a rich collection of stories which, while varying considerably in tone, nevertheless all have as their common focal point, the author's own land and people, past and present. There are stories like "Schilderel" which satirize bureaucratic efforts at re-districting, alongside others which are wonderfully naive in their innocence and charm--stories like "Der Staunemann" or "Die Perlbeche," which touch upon extramarital romances in such a fairytale-like manner, that young readers may become aware of adult situations, without, however, feeling prematurely forced to make any sort of potentially disruptive judgement.

Then there are stories which express a Brechtian kind of folk wisdom as in the concluding "Märchen" which tells of a simple judge who wisely renders a verdict equitable to all parties in a dispute involving personal versus public rights to land use. And there is the poignant story of a youngster caught up in the incomprehensible reality of his parents' imminent divorce--recording onto tape passages from their love letters in a vain effort to somehow preserve the love they once shared, while he himself is experiencing the ambiguities of the first love, and while a younger sister plays at marriage unaware of the truth in her brother's blessing: "Bleibt zusammen, bis es euch zu langweilig wird" (152).

Despite this variance of tone and the long history of some, all the stories are strangely actual and in this sense will confront readers with a number of possibly problematic aspects of contemporary life in the GDR: the treatment of minority groups like the Sorbs, the country's fascist past, war and revolution, familial relationships, the role of the church, problems of maturation, death, and so forth. Each story thus has the potential of allowing its readers to discover something about themselves and the world around them, perhaps previously hidden from them--to venture out into oceans of dark emotions, as in the story "Kolumbus" where "irgendeinmal ist jeder ein Kolumbus und entdeckt sein Amerika" (50), which may turn out to be none other than "die Räume und Winkel im Eigenen, die man vor sich selbst verschlossen hat..." ("Das Traumpferd," 48).

To assist these young explorers on their journeys of discovery there are the charming illustrations of Renate Totzke-Israel, who has succeeded in capturing the essence of each story and translating it into purely visual terms for the enjoyment of Bržan's young readers along the way.

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GDR. An Historical Outline. By Heinz Heitzer. Dresden: Verlag Zeit im Bild, 1981. 265 pages.

This work by a leading scholar of the GDR is of interest for several reasons. It is a handy, brief history of the GDR until 1978. It presents the official GDR view of historical developments and interprets the past and present relationships of the country with other nations, particularly the Soviet Union, socialist Eastern Europe, and the Federal Republic of Germany. The short volume introduces the Western reader to the vital ideological framework necessary for understanding life in the GDR today. Divided into four equal parts, the book covers the three distinct periods in the history of the GDR: I. "The antifascist-democratic revolution" of 1945-1949; II. "Establishment of the foundations of socialism," 1949-1961; parts III. and IV. deal with the further development of the socialist society, 1961-1970 and 1971-1978, respectively. Little scholarly apparatus is employed and only thirty-seven footnotes and a brief list of names are used. However, the sixty-four pages of photographs of people, places, and activities are excellent. Reproductions of charts and documents appear within the text in addition to the photographs.

Heinz Heitzer is one of the "new teachers" educated in the GDR since WW II. He graduated from Leipzig University and received his doctorate at the Academy for Social Sciences attached to the Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party. He received a position at the Central Institute of History of the Academy of Sciences of the GDR in 1961 and became deputy director in 1970. He is author or co-author of several important standard works, including: Klassenkampf, Tradition, Sozialismus. Von den Anfängen der Geschichte des deutschen Volkes bis zur Gestaltung der entwickelten sozialistischen Gesellschaft in der DDR (1974 and 1978); and Unbewältigte Vergangenheit. Kritik der bürgerlichen Geschichtsschreibung in der BRD (3rd edition, 1977). This latter work is valuable for an understanding of how Germans of the two states differ in interpreting their past; the results appear in GDR, An Historical Outline.

As one would expect, this book differs markedly from Western accounts. It attempts to answer the question "as to how this state, which its enemies long maintained would collapse before long (a result they did their best to bring about), managed to win and assert a place among the world's top industrial nations." Heitzer explains that there was no vacuum left by the destruction of the Third Reich as maintained by bourgeois historians. Rather, communists and "class conscious" social democrats and anti-fascists were ready to set out for the objectives "for which the revolutionary German labour movement had been fighting for years." He details the eradication of the social and economic forces which bred fascism through the Potsdam agreements, as well as socialization measures and the division of the great landed estates. With the failure of Four Power Occupation, the GDR's transition to a socialist nation and its development until the end of the 1970's receives the greatest attention here.

Western historians will find much with which to disagree, particularly the author's treatment of the creation of the SED, the Berlin Blockade, 1953, and the Berlin Wall. Heitzer is forthright, however, in discussing problems and mistakes. Agrarian hostility to collectivization, the overemphasis on heavy industry at the expense of consumer goods (which led to "negative effects" on workers in 1952-1953) and the "imbalances" and "disproportions" that developed during the five-year plans of the past two decades are discussed. This book is recommended for the teacher of German Studies who wishes to have students understand the history of the GDR from its own historians' point of view.

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