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Conferences

various authors

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CONFERENCES

THE EIGHTH INTERNATIONAL NEW HAMPSHIRE SYMPOSIUM ON THE GDR (JUNE 18-25, 1982)

Over fifty specialists on the GDR, a good fifth of them from western Europe, took part in the eighth international symposium held this June at the World Fellowship Center amid the rural unhurriedness and natural beauty of New Hampshire's White Mountains. In the course of six days they heard no fewer than 27 papers, saw the film Das kurze Leben (based on Brigitte Reimann's novel Franziska Linkerhand), and attended a recital by Christine Cosen-tino, Wolfgang Ertl, and Fritz König of poetry by Volker Braun, Walter Werner, and Axel Schulze.

As a newcomer to this annual gathering I was impressed above all by the genuine collegiality and unpretentious informality which characterised the proceedings. What a welcome change from the arid and impersonal atmosphere of so many conferences! That this spirit has been nurtured is clearly due in large measure to the unobtrusive organizing skills of Margy Gerber and the genial direction of the Center by Christoph and Kit Schmauch.

The multi-disciplinary make-up of the group as well as the large number of papers meant that the range of themes to be covered was admirably comprehensive. The danger that stimulating profusion might degenerate into unfocused diffusion was removed by skilfully structuring the program into eight key areas, each under the supervision of group leaders responsible for co-ordination. This arrangement ensured a useful continuity and connectedness between one presentation and the next and helped to foster the sense of a developing, unfragmented debate.

Current trends in GDR society proved a particular focus of attention. Arthur Stanke investigated the objectives and strategy behind the current five-year plan and discussed its feasibility; Volker Gransow treated the controversial question of national identity; Carl Pletsch discussed the role of intellectual collectives in a socialist society; Christian Lemke looked at youth policy, while--in fruitful juxtaposition to this--Dieter Sevin analysed the role of adolescent crisis and the generation gap in recent GDR fiction (concentrating on Schlesinger's

Michael, Plenzdorf's Die neuen Leiden des jungen W., Schneider's Die Reise nach Jaroslaw, and Braun's Unvollendete Geschichte); the energy and environmental policy of the GDR was Barbara Dooley's theme, and Rainer Hohl-feld was instructive on the political direction of GDR health research and technology. Especially stimulating were three papers devoted to various aspects of the Frauenfrage: Harry Shaffer presented a social scientist's analysis of the status of women in the GDR, Dorothy Rosenberg offered a combative view of the way GDR literature reflects (or denies) the tension which many women feel between the dual claims of career and family, while Christiane Zehl Romero contributed a critical introduction to the recent work of three women writers, Christa Müller, Christine Wolter, and Rosemarie Zeplin.

It is indicative of their importance that large themes such as those just indicated belong to the mainstream of western GDR research, and as such they of course deserve a prominent place in any conference on the GDR. One of the advantages of a long conference, however, is the opportunity it affords to focus attention on otherwise neglected or peripheral topics, and this opportunity is one the symposium showed a welcome willingness to grasp. Literary parodies (Wolfgang Ertl), satire (James Knowl-ton), political cabaret and social humour (Elsa Diduk), book collecting and the antiquarian book trade (Gail Hue-ting), views of the USA in the GDR (Nancy Lauckner and Elfie Schneidenbach), science fiction (William Walker)--

all were the subject of special sessions, as were no fewer than four lyric poets (Volker Braun, Axel Schulze, Reiner Kunze, and Elke Erb), the later novels by Arnold Zweig, and Erich Loest's autobiography Durch die Erde ein RiB.

Discussions were generally lively and prolonged, and this observer noted a refreshing readiness to allow specialist and layman an unembarrassed equality of status on any topic. Naturally the details of the argument begin to fade in time, but one looks forward to being reminded of them by the publication of the proceedings in time for next year's meeting.

Ian Wallace
University of Dundee

LITERATURE IN TRANSLATION

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