

1987

Christoph Hein: Passage

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Recommended Citation

McKnight, Phil (1987) "Christoph Hein: Passage," *GDR Bulletin*: Vol. 13: Iss. 2. <https://doi.org/10.4148/gdrb.v13i2.824>

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writing is not only a vocation, but also an effective means for true communication. Moreover, in light of her increasing awareness of her own mortality, writing also becomes her legacy to her people. While Eva Strittmatter's writing has caused her to become a celebrity, she staunchly and repeatedly reaffirms her identification with the "Milieu der kleinen Leute." Thus Eva Strittmatter experiences little conflict between her private self (mother and wife) and her public self (writer).

The second part signals a different stage in her personal growth which is more dominated by her private self, and we now learn more about her family life. Change continues to be a major issue; however, whereas in the first part it is largely distant and abstract, in the second part it is highly personalized: she is confronted with the deaths of friends and family members. Undeniably, the most significant change is Erwin's deteriorating health, but amid all this radical change Eva Strittmatter achieves an inner peace.

In Mai in Piestany we experience with Eva Strittmatter her ongoing struggle with change and her gradual acceptance of it. Although death and illness dominate the second part, this autobiographical work ends with a cautious optimism: she finally realizes that despite change there can be continuity which enables her to face the uncertainty of the future. An eloquent and warm language, a heightened sensitivity, and, above all, frank honesty lend unusual charm, interest, and readability to Mai in Piestany,

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Passage. By Christoph Hein. Printed in: Theater der Zeit 5 (1987), 50-64.

Not far from where Christoph Hein lives in

the Weißensee area of Berlin is an extraordinary and eerie landmark of German history: the Jewish cemetery. Except for a small area near the administration buildings with recent graves, the cemetery has remained silent and neglected since the late 1930s. The domes of mausoleums have caved in, tombs and smaller graves are tangled and overgrown with trees, vines and shrubs, many are partially overturned and in a state of ruin, some as evidence of Nazi vandalism. In one or two mausoleums great stones lie askew, revealing the two-foot crawl space where Jewish families sometimes hid from terror. Many of the plots are totally inaccessible and obscured by the primeval forest which is springing up everywhere, histories forgotten and vanished with the disappearance of all descendants. The startling beauty and peace of the cemetery creates a stunning atmosphere much more befitting the memories it contains than were it well-manicured. One large corner of the cemetery is still fairly tidy. There lie in rows with small white gravestones, all alike, Berlin's share of the some 12,000 Jewish soldiers who fell during World War I. At the head of the plot stands a modest monument erected at that time to their honor and commending them for their bravery, their service and their sacrifice for the German fatherland.

Hein's newest chamber play is set in the back room of a cafe on the French-Spanish border at the foot of the Pyrenees shortly after the French capitulation to the Hitler regime. Among the small group of Jews hidden in the cafe by members of the French underground resistance and waiting to escape over the Pyrenees and gain passage on a ship is the 76-year old Albert Hirschburg, a retired German officer who fought in World War I. Hirschburg's behavior as a proud military veteran, who believes that his patriotic military background takes precedence over all other considerations, including race, brands him as the outcast of the group. He has not acknowledged any persecution of the Jews.

Nor does it seem possible to him that such a thing could exist.

Three events, each based on historical fact, change the course of his awareness and of his actions: The group is visited by a Nazi information gathering patrol masquerading as the Red Cross. The French authorities were required by law to make known the names of any Germans on their territory and to turn them over upon request. The Red Cross Commission, directed by Dr. Ernst Kundt, saw to it that this condition was followed and was set up to inhibit emigration. During the visit one of the refugees, Dr. Hugo Frankfurter, commits suicide and Hirschburg is humiliated when he demands to be treated like an officer. Frankfurter's act is an intentional parallel to the suicide of Walter Benjamin after his failed escape. Shortly thereafter, ostensibly due to Hirschburg's unwitting breach of confidentiality about the location of the cafe (he had told his 80-year old former communications officer about it) fifteen bearded old men clad in caftans and black hats appear, essentially blowing the cover of the cafe. Fact and legend has it that such a mysterious and conspicuous group of old men made the trek on foot from Auschwitz across Germany and France, miraculously without being detained, and disappeared into Spain. Hirschburg, improbably, takes it upon himself to lead these old men across the mountains in the night, like an eerie band of ghosts, to the awe and wonderment of the remaining refugees, who themselves will leave a few hours later.

In the introduction which precedes the play Peter Reichel has pointed out the structural and intellectual relationship of Hein's play to elements found in Walter Benjamin's works, including the Passagenwerk: "das Prinzip der Montage" must be employed. The total historical moment can be understood and crystallized in the little event. "Also die großen Konstruktionen aus kleinsten, scharf und schneidend konfektionierten Baugliedern zu errichten" (p.

50). Hein's plays, according to Reichel, "sind solche wider das Vergessen" and Benjamin's analysis of Kafka attributed the origin of guilt to that which is forgotten—"das Vergessene" (p. 51). As a materialistic historian Hein is also aware of Benjamin's statement that each epoch is "nur Vorgeschichte derer, um die es ihm selber geht" (p. 50). Hein has indicated often enough that he manipulated historical themes in order to interpret and comprehend the present and that historical events ought to be preserved in memory in order to do so.

Accordingly, all the characters in the play are remarkable and strange, "merkwürdig," worthy of notice for posterity, for the present. Frankfurter has come to the realization that he was foolish to have spent most of his life trying to conform, trying to be like everyone else, trying not to be noticed. As he says to Kurt: "Ich bin merkwürdig. Und Sie sind es auch. Sonst wären Sie heute nicht hier. Wären Sie nicht merkwürdig, könnten Sie in Deutschland leben" (p. 54).

The historical reception of Passage will undoubtedly focus on the figure of Dr. Frankfurter and the issues related to Benjamin, but the figure of Hirschburg leading old men over the mountains will haunt the audiences.

The play opens this fall simultaneously in Dresden, Essen, and Zürich. Meanwhile, Die wahre Geschichte des AhQ will begin its fifth season in Berlin and Lasalle fragt Herrn Herbert nach Sonja. Die Szene ein Salon, which premiered in Düsseldorf in 1980, will open this fall for the first time in the GDR in Erfurt.

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