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Joachim Schildt and Hartmut Schmidt, eds.: Berlinisch. Geschichtliche Einführung in die Sprache einer Stadt

Jeffrey B. Gardiner
Washington University

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Schildt, Joachim, and Hartmut Schmidt, eds. Berlinisch. Geschichtliche Einführung in die Sprache einer Stadt. Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1986. 445 pp.

This book was published in 1986 so as to be readily available on bookstore shelves in East Berlin in 1987, the 750th anniversary of the city of Berlin. As the title indicates, it is an historical introduction to Berlinisch, that dialect form of German which is so characteristic of the inhabitants of Berlin and many of the residents of the surrounding areas. Although the book is intended primarily for the general reader, even persons who are very knowledgeable in this field will enjoy reading this study without feeling that they are wasting their time thanks to the authors' fine writing styles and their logical and comprehensive presentation of the material.

The book is organized into three main sections. In the first chapter Heinz Seyer and Horst Mauter from the Märkisches Museum in East Berlin provide a very interesting outline of the historical development of the Berlin area from the earliest times to the present. They use significant archeological finds which have been dated from very early periods to prove that the region has been inhabited since approximately 500 B.C. Seyer and Mauter also debunk the popular myth that the modern city of Berlin arose on the site of an old German fishing village; instead, they emphasize that Berlin owes its origin primarily to its location on the Spree River, which made it an important trading center right from the very beginning. While emphasizing the significance of this genesis for the city of Berlin, the authors continue to trace the course of the later historical development of the region.

The second section of the book contains chapters written by the editors and by Helmut Schönfeld and Gerhard Schlimpert, all of whom are associated with the Zentral-Institut für Sprachwissenschaft der Akademie der Wissenschaften der DDR. These chapters describe the development of Berlinisch from the earliest period to the modern day. The authors show how the Berlin dialect reflects numerous cultural, historical and social developments. They begin by pointing out that many geographical features in Berlin have names derived from the original Germanic or Slavic inhabi-

ants of the region. Then, using the earliest available documentation (13th century), they show how Latin was first gradually displaced by the Low German dialect of the local inhabitants, and how then, in turn, the Low German was displaced by High German as the Hohenzollerns ascended to power and the influence of the Reformation grew in the area. This High German dialect became the basis for modern Berlinisch. In subsequent centuries the Berlin dialect has continued to evolve in many ways: it has picked up elements of Dutch, Czech, French and other languages; its development reflects many aspects of the long, complicated and often turbulent history of Berlin as the capital of Prussia and Germany as well as a major European cultural and industrial center.

The last section of this book is comprised of a 95-page dictionary of Berlinisch, prepared by Joachim Wiese of the Sächsische Akademie der Wissenschaften. It contains many words and idiomatic expressions which one frequently encounters but which the non-Berliner rarely understands. This list clearly reflects sharp wit, ironic humor and mocking disrespect for all presumptuous arrogance, i.e. those qualities for which the "true Berliner" is so well known.

This book is not without weaknesses. The authors claim that since 1950 Berlinisch has become increasingly "respectable" as a type of colloquial language in East Berlin. (Exception: the mixing-up of dative and accusative forms which is still frowned upon by the better educated.) They state that usage is growing rather than dying out. They also assert that the Berlin dialect is growing in popularity among the young people. Unfortunately, they do not furnish any proof for these statements. Although the treatment of the early stages of the dialect is thorough, the authors slight developments in the dialect since World War II; in addition, they totally ignore West Berlin. On balance, however, this book provides an excellent introduction to the Berlin dialect. I highly recommend it to any person interested in this subject.

Jeffrey B. Gardiner
Western Michigan University