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Jizchak Katzenelson and Wolf Biermann: Dos lied vunem ojsgehargetn jidischen volk / Großer Gesang vom ausgerotteten jüdischen Volk

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BOOK REVIEWS

Katzenelson, Jizchak and Wolf Biermann. *Dos lied vunem ojsgeheartn jidischen volk/Großer Gesang vom ausgerotteten jüdischen Volk*. Köln: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1994. 237 pp.

As Wolf Biermann released his translation of *Dos lied vunem ojsgeheartn jidischen volk*, a passionate controversy over a planned monument in Berlin to the Jewish victims of the final solution had just erupted. The memorial proposed by Christine Jacob-Marks envisions a massive wall engraved with the names of millions of murdered Jews. The debate so far has focused on the questions of how many and which names to use, while some have condemned the design as a poor though enormous imitation of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. From the right comes the complaint that a monument of such scale sets the wrong tone for the new/old German capital, that is, as the capital of the Holocaust. Art Spiegelman, on the other hand, dismisses the proposal as a prime example of what he labels "Holo-Kitsch."

The question of what form a monument to the Holocaust should take is central to Katzenelson's text. The scope of the poem encompasses the most monumental of themes: the destruction of European Jewry. "Sing!" commands an unidentified, perhaps angelic voice in the first line, "dos lied dos letzte sing, sing vun die letzte jidn ojf Ejropes erd" (48). Yet the question of how to do justice to the horror of millions, and his own horror in particular, threatens to silence the poet before he even begins: "– wie ken ich singen?" answers Katzenelson in despair, "How can I even open my mouth?" The poet, the last Jew, cannot shrink from the obligation and guilt of the survivor (if only for a moment) to speak of, and to the dead: "ich spiel!" (52). To paraphrase the subtitle of Spiegelman's *Maus II*, Katzenelson's poem bleeds history.

The burden of documentation and remembrance defies the limits of even the most massive of attempts, be they the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., or the wall of names proposed for Berlin. What these and other memorials attempt in their enormity, Katzenelson's work achieves in a relatively sparse space. Katzenelson's *lied* is in many respects a very small poem. Much of the piece relates the author's personal anguish about his separation from (and the eventual murder of) his wife and two young children. Physically, too, the resulting fifteen *Gesänge*, like Katzenelson's personal history, are shockingly disproportionate to the scale of the destruction they record. His minuscule handwriting on scraps of paper, reproduced in facsimile for this volume, is barely discernible.

The poem was written over only three and a half months during Katzenelson's internment in the concentration camp Vittel, France. The Nazis had transformed

this resort and its hotels into a prison for foreign nationals not necessarily marked for deportation and death (Katzenelson was carrying a black-market Honduran passport). This camp, which, among other names, bore the designation "Ruhe- und Erholungslager," granted Katzenelson, in fact, a perverse respite between his participation in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and his execution in Auschwitz on the First of May, 1944. This brief interlude from immediate death afforded Katzenelson the space in which to compose his reflections on the Nazi atrocities and what, by then, he clearly knew to be their ultimate plan.

Katzenelson's small-scale yet all-encompassing monument exists in troubled relation to Biermann's contributions. The fifteen pages that make up the original text are dwarfed by Biermann's surrounding apparatus, and his translation and Arno Lustiger's transcription together comprise barely half the volume. Biermann's essays will be of interest primarily to Biermann scholars and fans. As I would rather read Katzenelson than Biermann writing about reading Katzenelson, I found the secondary material too often tedious and self-indulgent. Most rewarding is Biermann's introductory essay, "Jizchak Katzenelson, ein Jude," in which the poet and *Liedermacher* eloquently discusses many of the troubling questions Katzenelson raises about Jewish passivity, resistance, and even collaboration. The invisible subtitle of this section could be, "Wolf Biermann, ein Deutscher und Jude," as Biermann here thoughtfully (and at times quite aggressively) problematizes his own personal history and its bearing on his reading and translation of the Yiddish poet. The brief *Zeittafel* also provides useful personal and historic information. By the end of the first of Biermann's two afterwords, however, the relevance of his comments is at best tenuous. When Biermann describes Katzenelson as "–in lieber Menschenfresser" (171), his pathos betrays the embarrassing desperation of a performer who has remained on stage long after the applause has ceased.

Biermann's translation is more satisfying than his commentary, though here, too, the flaws of the latter are conspicuous. The German reader – thanks to Lustiger's transcription and Biermann's handwritten glosses – can compare the original with the translation. Such a comparison reveals Biermann's often inappropriate use of slang and vulgarity. While entire sentences from the Yiddish are omitted occasionally in translation, Biermann feels compelled to enhance Katzenelson's rage with additional expletives. This is not to criticize the inevitable creation of a new work through translation. Biermann's translation is undoubtedly more desirable than the obscurity in which Katzenelson's text has languished for several years. My concern is whether Biermann's translation is a sufficiently accurate rendering of the

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work, especially when the ever-shrinking number of Yiddish-readers means that Katzenelson becomes increasingly accessible only in translation.

The flaw in this otherwise welcome volume lies in Biermann's conception of the role of the translator: "Jeder Übersetzer auch der bescheidenste, muß den Hergeiz haben, es wenigstens besser zu machen als das – Original!!" (209). Biermann has not succeeded in his ambition to improve Katzenelson, but he has managed to overshadow him. In his commendable eagerness to (re-)introduce *Dos lied* to German-speaking readers, Biermann has wrapped this already sufficient "monument" in a monumental shell.

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Kolbe, Uwe. *Die Situation*. Heinz Ludwig Arnold, ed. Series: Göttingen Sudelblätter. Göttingen: Wallstein-Verlag, 1994. 46 pp.

Kolbe's account of the writer's world in the GDR between 1975 and 1985 does not attempt to be all-inclusive. It is a personal memoir that seeks to clarify the author's own experiences and behavior within the framework of a milieu that encapsulated the best and the worst of that world: the *Szene* of Prenzlauer Berg. At the same time, Kolbe implies that to some degree his story is that of his generation, "die erste und letzte echte 'DDR-Generation'" (15). It is, without doubt, a story that contains elements representative of his generation of GDR writers and artists, betrayed by their own government, by the friends and associates that government corrupted, and finally by history.

Two figures accompany Kolbe's account and define his approach to it: friend and fellow poet Frank-Wolf Matthies, who eventually broke with Kolbe, and writer-publicist and *Inoffizieller Mitarbeiter* Sasha Anderson, who informed on Kolbe to the Stasi. Kolbe reserves most of his bitterness and venom for Anderson, quoting the latter's reports to the Stasi, made during Anderson's most active period of engagement in the Prenzlauer Berg writers' scene. Kolbe and Anderson have had their say in the well-known *Zeit* pieces of November 1991. This small book adds little new in that regard.

Die Situation was written, at least in part it would seem, in response to Matthies's piece "Einer, der tatsächlich etwas getan hat" (*Frankfurter Rundschau*, 3 January 1993). It has obviously been more difficult for Kolbe to come to terms with Matthies's reactions to the path Kolbe followed during the decade after his first poetry reading, a program in the East Berlin "Haus der jungen Talente" that he shared with Matthies. It is likely that the Stasi arranged the meeting between the two in order to recruit Kolbe to spy on Matthies, who had already been imprisoned because of the "subversive" nature of his writing. The two writers began a friendship, one cherished more, perhaps, by the six-years-younger Kolbe than by Matthies, and one that was to end because of the corrosive power of the social and political conditions surrounding it, even though Kolbe rejected the Stasi overture.

Having stayed in the GDR, watching Matthies and many others leave, Kolbe seems to need to explain – to himself as much as to those others – what made it possible for him to do so. He finds the reason in the naive belief that he and his writings could aid in the attainment of true socialism from within the GDR. Consequently, he followed the model of his mentor Franz Fühmann of "saying everything everywhere." As an explanation of his behavior, this method excuses much: "Es war harmonie-