

The German Minority in Czechoslovakia after the Expulsions
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While on a research grant in Berlin during the 1998-1999 academic year, I compiled a bibliography of German-language literature by writers from Czechoslovakia from 1945-1990. While there, I repeatedly encountered what became a familiar refrain, namely, that there were no ethnic Germans left in Czechoslovakia after the Benes decree of 1946. This opinion came from disparate sources. One of the faculty members at the Humboldt University with whom I was working, himself the son of expelled Sudeten Germans, suggested that I was looking for something that did not exist and would be better off working with existing exile associations such as the Sudetendeutsche Landsmannschaft to document the literature of the expellees. On another occasion, I mentioned my project to a librarian from the National Library in Prague, who instinctively, and rather forcefully, told me that there was no German minority left after the expulsions. I noted that many of the items I had already located elsewhere contradicted his assessment, and asked him if, as the library of deposit for all materials published on its territory, the National Library might happen to hold certain obscure German-language materials. He said no, which turned out to be the case. More recently, when I mentioned this conference and my topic to a German-American colleague who spent many years at the Staatsbibliothek in Munich, she, too, reflexively told me that there were no Germans left after the expulsions.

The reasons for the denial—on both the Czech and German sides—of the existence of a German minority in Czechoslovakia after 1946 are likely numerous and worth examining. For example, for the Sudetendeutsche Landsmannschaft to admit openly that Germans remained after 1946 would relativize their own status as victims and bring up undesirable questions about their political activities pre-expulsion. There are many other possible explanations, but they are not the focus of this talk. The lack of recognition that a German community existed in Czechoslovakia after 1946 provided the impetus for my project. Based on what I had read as preparation for the research year, it seemed evident that there were indeed Germans in Czechoslovakia after 1946, and by documenting their literary activities I sought to record a portion of their cultural heritage.

The main source for the bibliography and for most of the information I gathered on the German community was the German-language newspaper *Aufbau und Frieden*. It first appeared in 1951 in Prague. In the inaugural issue, the editors expressed their desire that the paper would be “a joyfully welcomed adviser, information source, and aid for the building of socialism, and at the same time a guide and adviser for the preservation of world peace.” This quote foreshadows a

long-running conflict in the newspaper between the editors, who were generally obliged to use the paper as an outlet for official propaganda, and the readers, who cherished the paper as their only domestic source of information on the German community. Throughout the Communist era, readers repeatedly demanded that more space be made available for local news and stories. In January 1965, the paper changed its name to *Die Prager Volkszeitung*. It is still published.

Compiling the bibliography meant flipping through 40 years of this newspaper looking for literary contributions—poems, stories, essays—from the German minority in Czechoslovakia. (Fortunately, for my sanity at least, it wasn't on microfilm.) While completing this task, it occurred to me that the newspapers represent the most comprehensive cultural document of the German minority. Perusing the paper provided the opportunity to track the Germans' attempts to maintain their cultural identity and to establish themselves as part of the ethnic makeup of Czechoslovakia. The specific aspects I will address today are their efforts to foster a literary community and to found cultural associations.

Prior to the second World War, German writers in Bohemia and Moravia had strong connections to the larger world of German literature. Writers such as Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach, Adalbert Stifter, and others that don't occur to me at the moment are all accepted as part of the German literary canon, although they spent most of their lives in the East. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a literary circle in Prague formed with such notable writers as Franz Kafka and Frank Wedekind at its center. The literature of this period is now commonly referred to as pragerdeutsch, or Prague German, literature.

After the expulsions in 1946, this era comes to an abrupt end. In her essay on German literature from the East after 1946, Carola Gottzman notes "eine deutsche Literatur Böhmens und Mährens gibt es nicht mehr" (there is no longer a German literature in Bohemia and Moravia). Viewed narrowly, she is correct in her assessment. A literature in the sense that one uses this term to describe, for example, East German, Romanian-German, or Swiss literature—i.e. - a distinct and prolific literary environment with active critical discourse—cannot be found among the German community in Czechoslovakia after World War II. If, however, one takes a more liberal approach and considers a literature simply the result of people writing poems, stories, and novels for public consumption on whatever scale, then there most certainly is, or was, at least, a German literature in Bohemia after 1946.

Most prominent German intellectuals in pre-war Czechoslovakia, many of whom were Jewish and/or Communist, went into exile when Nazi Germany occupied the Czech lands. Despite the Benes decree, a small group of German-language writers and scholars did choose to return to Czechoslovakia after 1946, among them Louis Fürnberg, F.C. Weiskopf, Egon Erwin Kisch, Oskar Kosta, Paul Reimann, Theodor Balk, and Lenka Reiner. Fürnberg and Weiskopf had both

published before and during the Nazi occupation, first from Prague, and then in exile. It was Kisch, however, who was well known abroad as a representative of the Prague German literary scene. His journalistic reports and his swashbuckling style had earned him the nickname the “rasender Reporter,” or racing reporter. Unfortunately, he died suddenly in 1949 and his direct influence on the post-war German community was minimal.

Fürnberg and Weiskopf played an important role in the early 1950s as the German community in Bohemia and Moravia began to reorganize after the chaotic years following the Benes decree. Fürnberg and Weiskopf, although the latter spent much of this period in the Czechoslovak diplomatic service in China, contributed frequent fiction and non-fiction pieces to *Aufbau und Frieden*. Both were committed antifascists and Stalinists, blithely overlooking such atrocities as the Slansky trial and subsequent executions while writing verses to commemorate Stalin’s birthdays and ultimately his death. Fürnberg left Czechoslovakia for Weimar in the German Democratic Republic in 1954, where he edited the noted literary journal *Weimarer Beiträge*. Weiskopf had already left in November 1953 for East Berlin, also to assume an editor’s post with *Neue Deutsche Literatur*.

It is significant to observe how Fürnberg and Weiskopf viewed their place, and that of their German peers, as writers in Czechoslovakia. While in exile, their works appeared in several anthologies of exiled Czechoslovak writers. One of these anthologies bore the title *Stimmen aus Böhmen* (Voices from Bohemia) and included their works, along with those of other German authors, alongside those of their Czech-speaking colleagues. As late as 1953, an article from the *Berliner Zeitung* reprinted in *Aufbau und Frieden* referred to Weiskopf as a “well-known Czechoslovak writer.” From these examples as well as self-referential remarks that both made in their writing, it is apparent that despite the devastating effects of the Benes decree on the German population, Fürnberg and Weiskopf, still identified with Czechoslovakia as their home and saw themselves as citizens of that nation despite their German ethnicity. That both chose to leave Prague to assume positions of editors of literary journals in the GDR would seem to be a paradox. Given the lack of a large German intellectual community in Czechoslovakia, however, their decision to move to a more intellectually stimulating environment seems reasonable.

Of the returned exiles, Oskar Kosta perhaps best represents the fate of German intellectuals in postwar Czechoslovakia. Before the Nazi occupation he had been a literature teacher at a prominent German Gymnasium in Prague. From his prolific essays and verse that appeared in *Aufbau und Frieden* and the *Volkszeitung*, he appears to have been less concerned with building socialism than with German literature and his role as a teacher. While other contributors to the paper wrote glowing poems dedicated to Stalin, Lenin, and other great Communist figures, he tended to write essays on Goethe, Herder, and Schiller. As a German-Jewish intellectual, it is not surprising that he was imprisoned in the

wake of the Slansky trials, although we do not learn of this fact in the newspaper until 1967. He spent time in the 1950s and 1960s in psychiatric treatment, only to reemerge and continue to write his excellent prose. Newspaper accounts of his hospitalization implied that he suffered from the aftereffects of exile and imprisonment. Despite this difficult life, he remained in Czechoslovakia until his death in 1973. Following his death, it is interesting to note that many of the literary essays that appeared in the *Volkszeitung* were written by Jaroslav Kutak, a Czech who had learned German while studying Germanistik in Berlin. As the last surviving member of the pre-war German intellectual community, his death marked the end of that tradition.

The founding of a new literary community took place only in fits and starts and as political conditions would allow. The inauguration of the newspaper *Aufbau und Frieden* in 1951 created a publishing outlet for a new generation of German writers. Ironically, figures such as Fürnberg, a published and recognized author, stymied the development of a community of writers by publishing long diatribes on *Kulturarbeit*, or cultural activities, that exhorted those who wanted to engage in the arts to first devote themselves to the study of Marxism-Leninism and to immerse themselves in Czech and Slovak culture. The cultural pages of the paper frequently had slogans from various party bodies printed in bold type at the top, such as “Cultural workers! Following the example of Soviet masters of art, raise the ideological and artistic level of your works.” This ideological milieu dictated to a large degree the type of works that could appear in the paper. Additionally, the paper arose in a period of intense Stalinist purging and show trials, less than ideal creations for stimulating intellectual exchange.

Nevertheless, by 1953, the paper began printing letters to the editor calling for the paper to change its editorial policies and include more reader contributed literature. One reader, Jan Grünhut, wrote in September 1953 that the paper existed for the German readers in Czechoslovakia and for it to survive would have to depend on their artistic contributions, yet the paper had only published two poems in six months. Similar calls for more space for literary contributions from the community led the editors to announce a short story contest in February 1954. Shortly thereafter the winners were announced, along with a scathing editorial about the quality of the submissions, hardly constructive criticism. Subsequent contests held throughout the 1950s usually concluded with similar harangues; after a contest in 1956 the editors published a letter stating that the contributions were so dreadful that they refused to award a first prize in the prose category. Such withering critiques from what was the only realistic publishing outlet for the German community hardly created an environment that fostered the development of a literary and language community.

After the contest in 1954, one of the winners, Stefanie Kastowsky, wrote a polemic attack on the editors of the paper, demanding more space for readers' contributions and pointing out that the quality of the writing in the paper in general was terrible, as she put “formed with a hatchet.” Her letter set off yet

another wave of reader letters, all demanding more space for poems and short stories submitted by readers. A daily paper—at this point the paper was semi-weekly—was also a frequent demand. What is unclear based on the information contained in the newspaper is how much control the editors actually had over the content of the newspaper. As the current editor of the *Prager Volkszeitung*, Ingrid Pavel, points out, central authorities determined the content of the first four pages of each issue and established strict guidelines for the remaining pages that placed certain topics, such as the environment and the expulsion, clearly off limits.

The calls from the readers of *Aufbau und Frieden* and the *Volkszeitung* for more local literary content and the inevitable replies from the editors condemning the quality of most submissions were a constant theme throughout the Communist period. Nevertheless, approximately 1,000 literary pieces—poems, short stories, and essays—contributed by readers did appear in the newspaper. German language writers did not fare much better in other formats. Of the approximately 34 books published after 1946 by German language writers from Czechoslovakia, all were published in the German Democratic Republic, with the exception of four works translated into Czech that appeared in Prague publishing houses. The difficulties of publishing in Central Europe during the Communist era—paper shortages, censorship (whether overt or internal), socialist realist demands, etc.—are well documented. In the case of the German minority in Czechoslovakia, their status as an unwelcome and unrecognized minority certainly did not help their cause.

In an article he published in 1953, shortly before his permanent departure from Czechoslovakia, Fürnberg mentioned that the Ministry of Culture was considering the formation of a traveling German theater company. Viewed in light of their difficulties in maintaining a cultural sphere in other areas, the traveling theater represents a unique exception to the norm. A call for actors and stage hands appeared in the newspaper in August 1954, with the premiere—Schiller's *Kabale und Liebe*—taking place in November of that year. The premiere was a critical and popular success, and for the following seven years, the theater had a successful run with weekly articles on its productions and personnel in the newspaper. During this period, a German member of the theater wrote two plays that the theater staged. The popular reaction to both pieces was overwhelmingly positive. Most letter writers appeared to be willing to overlook artistic shortcomings and were delighted by the fact that a German writer, that is, one of “us,” had once again written a theatrical work.

Near the end of its run, the theater began to draw a familiar kind of criticism from its audience. Theater goers wrote to the newspaper asking that the theater present fewer political pieces, and instead focus on the classics that show “the noble and the beautiful.” As with the newspaper, the theater company appears to have had difficulty meshing the expectations of the audience with the state's desire to control content. As such, it is not surprising that the theater withered

and died in the early 1960s. Its dissolution did not appear in the newspaper, although in subsequent decades letter writers made frequent comments about its demise.

Parallel to the German community's attempts to develop a literary scene, there were also efforts for official cultural recognition at the national level. The first step in this direction was a governmental decree on May 24, 1953, which granted citizenship to all persons of German nationality with permanent residence in the Czechoslovak Republic. The next major step does not take place until 1968, in the wake of the Xth meeting of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia that initiated what became known as the Prague Spring. The new political climate greatly emboldened the German community in their efforts to gain political and cultural status similar to that enjoyed by other ethnic minorities, such as the numerically smaller Polish minority, in Czechoslovakia. Both staff writers and readers used the opportunity to openly declare their desire to establish a cultural organization and to open German-language schools. One reader noted that "there is no longer a German question here, yet there are still 125,000 citizens who declare German nationality, the vast majority of whom view this state as their own and feel like citizens of it." A week later, another reader wrote in and criticized the government's attempts to marginalize the German community by doctoring census results to make the minority appear smaller than it actually was. He also noted that the governments of the CSSR and West Germany were still prone to deny the existence of any German minority at all after 1945.

By May 1968, the government had granted permission for the founding of the first German cultural association. The first such group was a local organization in Most, but by November a national organization had been founded, the "Kulturverband der Deutschen in der CSSR" (Cultural Association of Germans in the CSSR). The program statement of this new organization mentioned the necessity of a publishing outlet for German writers in strong terms: "Every call for literary activity will, without the possibility to publish literary works, come to nothing. Editorial activity in the German language within the Czechoslovak publishing industry, for domestic German writers, is thus pressing."

Talk about the early successes, then mention how it degenerated into a communist hack organization.