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# Exploring the Influence of Personal Identity and Nostalgia on Memory Reconstruction in Thomas Brussig's Sonnenallee (Sun Avenue)

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Exploring the Influence of Personal Identity and Nostalgia on Memory Reconstruction in Thomas Brussig's "Sonnenallee" ("Sun Avenue")<sup>1</sup>

**Introduction: Thomas Brussig's World of Nostalgia**

The art of retelling a story or of reconstructing the past involves several stages. For specifically the firsthand storyteller (or history writer), he first identifies the facts he knows, then organizes the sequence of events, uses a few transitions, describes a few of the characters, and the rest seems to flow naturally from his pen. Yet recounting any past event or experience in one's own life takes shape only through the minds of individuals who are also unescapably under the influence of their own memory.

Thomas Brussig delves into this dilemma of memory and storytelling through the narrator of his novel *Am kürzeren Ende der Sonnenallee* (loosely translated: "At (or On) the shorter end of Sun Alley"<sup>2</sup>). The entire novel is a reconstruction of protagonist Micha Kuppisch's life in former East Berlin, but only through the mind and senses of the novel's narrator, whom the reader can also fairly presume to be a close friend from Micha's past. The narrator at times displays an uncanny amount of insight into Micha's very thoughts and ideas which seem to culminate in his very last sentence of the novel: "Glückliche Menschen haben ein schlechtes Gedächtnis und reiche Erinnerungen"<sup>3</sup> (loosely translated: „Happy people have a bad memory and rich/abundant memories“). Through both this summarizing sentiment as well as through Micha's personal adolescent development, Brussig (through the narrator) seems to suggest that questions about story reconstruction not only have to do with memory but also with nostalgia and with the ever-evolving search for identity at either the individual or the more collective level. So although memory plays a substantial part in the narrator's account of both the

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<sup>1</sup> Original paper title: "Identität und Nostalgie in Brussigs *Sonnenallee*" ("Identity and Nostalgia in Brussig's *Sun Alley*")

<sup>2</sup> All such translations are this author's

<sup>3</sup> Brussig 157.

good and the bad episodes of Micha's life, it is Micha's personal identity and the narrator's nostalgia that seem to have the larger impact on the formation of the story, which ultimately has implications today for especially former East German citizens who are still working to reconcile a past that today's Western capitalist world often times misunderstands or simply dismisses into the history books.

### **A Combination of Positive and Negative Memories**

At the novel's foundations is the narrator's inclusion of both the good ("reiche") memories as well as the bad memories. The single most important experience for Micha was his love for and relationship with a girl named Miriam. He is so in love with her that not only does he sign up for the same dancing class as she does (and faces the "besonderes Gejohle,"<sup>4</sup> or hoots and hollers, of some onlookers from the west side of Sun Alley whenever he walks to the dance studio), but he also fabricates a collection of daily journal writings overnight just to impress her and ultimately win her heart. For Micha, this entire part of his life was golden. He was in love, and as the narrator reconstructs it, it remains a positive memory.

The narrator also cannot deny the relatively dreary social circumstances of Micha's adolescence, which collectively make up some of the more negative memories of his past. The socialist government of former East Germany was often unpredictable with its system of the STASI (secret police) and complete control over citizen employment. Amidst all of this, Micha is constantly reminded that he seems to be on the wrong side of the wall. From the teasing he gets by Westerners as he goes to dancing lessons to the memory of both a fellow citizen's sudden arrest as well as Micha's own temporary arrest, both under false pretenses, the narrator still has to incorporate such discomfiting conditions of Micha's past alongside his more positive memories in order to create as complete a picture or context as possible.

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<sup>4</sup> Brussig 46.

### **Influence of Micha's Search for Identity**

As the narrator unfolds episodes of Micha's life, he recognizes how this is also a time in Micha's life that entails a significant amount of soul-searching and self-discovery in terms of Micha's very identity. It is left to the narrator to construct Micha's story in such a way that still includes what was the most formative for him as a person, while also honoring both how Micha may have felt about those formative experiences back then as well as how he or the narrator may feel about them today. Among these experiences are conversations Micha's own mother has with him about the appeal of Soviet identity and how she would give nearly anything for the chance to have her children study at a Russian boarding school. Before they ever come close to realizing her dream, their mother likes the idea of altering their names for the time being to sound more Russian, calling her daughter "Soljanka," for example, instead of "Sabine," and her son "Mischa," instead of "Micha."

Besides these familial circumstances, being a true adolescent at heart, Micha starts to seek the answers to some of life's biggest questions: "Who am I supposed to be? What is my purpose in the world?" The retrospective motivation for seeking answers to these more daunting questions is something Brussig thinks may be found within every person based on the common desire to come to peaceful terms with one's past. He says: "Jeder Mensch hat den Wunsch, mit seiner Vergangenheit Friede zu schließen. Erinnerung hat die Funktion, Vergangenheit als schön nachzuerleben" (loosely translated: Every person wishes to close his past with a sense of peace. Memory serves the function to make the past a beautiful reencounter"). While the reader can only speculate why the narrator is retelling Micha's story, perhaps part of his motivation comes from wanting to accomplish just this: to explore Micha's for whatever reason more prominent

identity among them as well as its core influences so as to come to terms with their past as either individuals or as a group of friends.

### **Influence of Nostalgia**

Next to the exploration of Micha's identity, the narrator's sense of nostalgia also influences how he reconstructs Micha's past. Muriel Cormican comments on how in the context of his novel, "Brussig's exaggerated lack of adherence to fact while dealing with history's narrative underscores the narrator's tendency to romanticize, to rewrite for aesthetic effect and personal satisfaction rather than accuracy."<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the novel's opening scene is none other than World War II's prominent leaders Joseph Stalin, Harry S. Truman, and Winston Churchill deliberating the division of *Sonnenallee*. It seems it is only because Stalin quickly re-lights Churchill's cigar that Churchill then shows his thanks by designating Micha's small end of that particular street for Soviet occupation, which is behind the inspiration for the title of the novel.

With this scene, the narrator right away launches the reader into a world that seems fantastically absurd. The narrator records Micha's thoughts accordingly: "Wenn der blöde Churchill auf seine Zigarre aufgepaßt hätte, würden wir heute im Westen leben,"<sup>6</sup> (loosely translated: If that stupid Churchill had paid attention to his cigar, we'd be living in the West). There is a later scene to add to the absurdity: Micha's good friend Mario is frantically driving his girlfriend to the hospital so that she can give birth to their child. On the way, they get stuck behind a caravan of cars full of Russian officials. They have to stop, but one of the Russians gets out of his car, comes over to Mario and his girlfriend, and delivers their baby. This Russian "hatte ein großes Muttermal auf der Stirn," that is, he had a large birthmark on his forehead, a

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<sup>5</sup> Cormican 261.

<sup>6</sup> Brussig 8.

fairly direct observation that seems to imply that none other than Mikhail Gorbachev delivered their baby.<sup>7</sup>

In these and other examples, the reader picks up that not all of what the narrator writes is black and white truth. Nor can it be. These examples revolving around significant political figures of the time reflect a kind of nostalgia of both the narrator and of Micha. Nostalgia is, after all, a subjectively-based dissatisfaction with the present combined with a longing for the past, something that many former East Germans experienced both during and after surviving a rather complicated time in their country's political history. Brussig wrote this novel after Germany's unification in the early 90's, which brings up the rather interesting idea that Germans today, while still trying to reconcile the horrific events in their corner of the world during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, still have their own idea of "the good ol' days," made up of moments and experiences from the past before or in spite of adverse historic conditions that will always be significant and meaningful to them.

### **Conclusion: The Value of Brussig's *Sonnenallee***

In conclusion, Thomas Brussig's novel *Am kürzeren Ende der Sonnenallee* sends the reader on a journey page after page through the thoughts and memories of a person who not only experiences a particularly unpredictable period in Germany's history but also displays how both identity and nostalgia play a significant and implicitly helpful role in his recollection of the past. The main and most provocative question posed within the novel is: "How is a person supposed to recount the facts of a more painful or simply less desirable past when they, in all honesty, still find themselves cherishing the better moments along the way?" Its answer lies within this idea of having "...ein schlechtes Gedächtnis und reiche Erinnerungen" (a bad memory but rich or abundant memories). Happy people are only happy in that they allow the more negative

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<sup>7</sup> Brussig 156

memories to subside into “bad memory” and in that they allow the better memories to dominate their overall life story. For individuals like the East Germans who survived a social structure that ended up completely collapsing, it comes as no small blessing to learn how to embrace what memories they can and to let go of what need not remain. In this way, a person is able to establish a true sense of peace and happiness with their lives and with their own life story.

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