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Zur gesellschaftlichen Stellung der Frau in der DDR

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The New Sufferings of Young W.: A Novel.
by Ulrich Plenzdorf. Trans. Kenneth P.
Wilcox. New York: Frederick Ungar Publish-
ing Co., 1979 xii + 84 pages. \$2.95.

This translation of Plenzdorf's novel will be an important addition to courses in translation on the GDR, contemporary East and West Germany, and recent German literature and culture. Since the book is sure to be widely used, it is a great pity that Kenneth Wilcox's translation is not better than it is. Certainly the work is a difficult one to translate into American English precisely because of its reliance on American culture, and a gifted translator would have recognized the necessity of devising linguistic strategies to convey the strangeness of Edgar's Americanisms in an East German context. But even from a translation which is not brilliant readers should be able to expect an accurate and idiomatic American appropriate to Plenzdorf's characters. Instead, Wilcox disappoints us on many counts, as the examples I cite here--taken from many--will show. Important recurring phrases are translated inconsistently, so that "über den Jordan gehen" becomes variously "the Great Beyond" (7) and "bite the dust" (48), "sie rumkriegen," "bring her round" (4) and "lay her" (26)--which Edgar would never have said about Charlie. Edgar sometimes uses contemporary expressions and sometimes uses slang which has not been spoken by American teenagers for at least fifteen years: "broads" (10), "croaked" (11), "to be hot for a woman" (68). Wilcox is often unidiomatic: "Wahrscheinlich hatte ich sie aufgestört" becomes "I'd probably roused them" (81). Sometimes he is so literal that the translation makes no sense: "Mother enlightened me" (4) or "Stop howling" (23) ("Heul doch nicht."). And sometimes Wilcox's translation is simply wrong. Most shocking is his distortion of Edgar's explanation for why wearing jeans after one has joined the establishment is a contradiction in terms: "Das ist, wie wenn einer dem Abzeichen nach Kommunist ist und zu Hause seine Frau prügelt." In Wilcox's version, Communism and wife-beating are conjoined: "That is, if they're card-carrying Communists and beat their wives" (14). As this political misunderstanding might indicate, Wilcox's edition also does little to clarify the novel's East German setting for American readers. His infrequent notes on GDR references are misleading as often as not. Though his introduction attempts to locate Plenzdorf's work historically and literarily, he fails to explain the real issues of Plenz-

dorf's novel as GDR readers regarded it. In some respects, as in his introduction's ominous last sentence, Wilcox even perpetuates the stereotypes about the GDR which American readers already possess: "Looming behind almost everything to which Edgar takes exception is an official policy of the Party controlling the society in which he lives" (xii). It appears that we will nonetheless have to make do with this translation: it is easily accessible, inexpensive, and Plenzdorf is an almost essential component of many of our courses. Forewarned, instructors can at least counter the translation's worst faults and advise their students that Die neuen Leiden is a much better work than it appears to be in English.

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Zur gesellschaftlichen Stellung der Frau in der DDR. Herausgegeben vom Wissenschaftlichen Beirat "Die Frau in der sozialistischen Gesellschaft" bei der Akademie der Wissenschaften der DDR unter Leitung von Herta Kuhrig und Wulfram Speigner. Leipzig: Verlag für die Frau, 1978. 376 pages.

This is a Sammelband by an Autorenkollektiv of twenty-one authors, the majority of whom are women. Of the contributors, nineteen are wissenschaftliche Mitarbeiter and/or chairpersons of their respective departments, or directors of their specific institutes (such as the "Institut für Soziologie und Sozialpolitik an der A. d. W." in Berlin, the Research Institute for Labor in Dresden, the Departments of Agriculture and Veterinary Medicine at the Karl-Marx-Universität in Leipzig, the Law School and the School of Education at the Humboldt-Universität in Berlin, the Central Institute for Food Research in Potsdam, the Institute for Child and Adolescent Hygiene in Berlin, etc.). From this very impressive and varied list of contributors one should expect a wide variety of topics to be expertly and thoroughly discussed, and this reader, once she had stomachached in each chapter the apparently obligatory initial paragraphs of socio-political and socio-economic "laudations" of the GDR, was not disappointed. After these self-congratulatory paragraphs in each chapter ("Undenkbar wären die Erfolge unserer Sozialistischen Republik ohne die Mitarbeit der Frauen. Sie haben entscheidenden Anteil am politischen, sozialen und geistig-kulturellen Fortschritt unserer Gesellschaft," etc., etc.), the authors present an assortment of factual material, including

statistics, to substantiate their arguments. Occasionally there is even mention of some remaining difficulties which women in the GDR still encounter. Questions are raised whether women make use of all offered possibilities to further their professional and political development, whether they fulfill their obligations toward their children and families, and, though criteria such as personal happiness and individual fulfillment are never mentioned, women's health is discussed attentively. E. g.: In 1975 maternal mortality per 10,000 births was 2.3 in the GDR, 4.0 in the FRG. Infant mortality, per 1000 births, 15.9 in the GDR, 19.6 in the FRG. Comparisons with the US are not given. The lower infant and maternal mortality rates are even more interesting when we realize that in the GDR 87% of the women work outside their homes, in the FRG barely 40%.

Despite the tremendous strides GDR women have made in their socio-economic standing, the change of roles within the family structure is difficult to assess, because the re-orientation of roles is a psychological rather than socio-political phenomenon, often resisted by a large segment of the male population, even when lip-service is paid to it. Irmgard Morgner's statement (also made in 1975) in Leben und Abenteuer der Trobadora Beatriz that ". . . it is never pleasurable for a ruling cast to lose their privileges and difficult to give them up voluntarily," seems to hold true also for a considerable number of GDR men in the seventies. But then, in another thirty years--the book covers the past thirty years--another generation will have grown up, and sex prejudices in the GDR may have been overcome. One is inclined to believe so, particularly when reading the chapters on marriage, family, health-care, and the counseling done in these areas.

Perhaps it would be a bold gesture, but I would not consider it entirely inappropriate to send a translated version of the book to the various departmental heads of our own Department of HEW. They might be enlightened.

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". . . der Kurs auf die Realität:" Das epische Werk von Anna Seghers (1935-1943). By Frank Wagner. Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1975. 318 pages. DDR 10, - M.

Wagner examines three major novels and several short stories written during the author's

exile in France and Mexico. Her purpose in all these works, according to Wagner, is to depict reality, which is for Seghers the life of the people, class struggle, and the human striving for historical progress. The main concern of Die Rettung is the growing political consciousness of the main character, the unemployed miner Bentsch. Bentsch's problem is a subjective one which has serious political consequences: he must develop a philosophy which will remain steadfast in the long course of history and yet be appropriate to his present situation. Wagner sees the issue of whether the individual will be blown about by the winds of history or become one of its movers as the main theme of Die Rettung and central to all of Seghers' works.

Wagner briefly summarizes the main ideas of Seghers' antifascist essays and speeches as well as of her correspondence with Lukács during the 1930's. While this information is necessary groundwork for his discussion of Das Siebte Kreuz and Transit, not much new is imparted here. More useful are two short pieces included at the back in a section entitled "Dokumente": Seghers' essay "Zum Schriftstellerkongreß in Madrid" and her short story "Wiedersehen," which first appeared in Die neue Weltbühne in 1938. Neither of these works was included in the essay collection Über Kunstwerk und Wirklichkeit edited by Sigrid Bock.

In his essay on Das Siebte Kreuz Wagner discusses the role of the narrator as imparter of a history which otherwise would have been lost, the role of organized help in the successful escape of Heisler from the concentration camp, and the importance of the common people as a source of strength during times of adversity. Perhaps most interesting are the sections on the short stories "Die schönsten Sagen vom Räuber Woynok" and "Sage von Artemis," which Wagner terms "Phantasiestücke." He observes correctly that these pieces should not be dismissed as mere exercises in imagination, but that they enhance the longer works. The two pieces demonstrate in a fanciful manner the importance of story-telling: only in the openness of relating the events of his life to others does the individual experience himself as a personality, and the communal consciousness is the prerequisite for political action. The discussion of Transit is a revised version of an essay which appeared in Weimarer Beiträge in 1969. The novel is regarded by some critics as pessimistic and therefore an anomaly among Seghers' historically optimistic works. While Wagner admits that the novel was written under emotionally trying circumstances as the German Army continued to advance, he maintains