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Barbara Elling and Andreas Mielke, eds.: Voices from the German Democratic Republic: An Anthology of Contemporary East German Prose

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Voices from the German Democratic Republic: An Anthology of Contemporary East German Prose. Ed. by Barbara Elling and Andreas Mielke. Slavic and East European Arts, German Issue, Vol. 3, No. 2 (Fall, 1985). Stony Brook: State University of New York, 1985. 105 pages. \$8.00 (single issue).

Seven stories by six authors have been selected and introduced by several of the leading GDR literature scholars in US universities. By Rolf Schneider (b. 1932) is "Love Story" (1985); followed by Erich Loest (b. 1926), "Two Letters from Rohdewald" (1975); Irmtraud Morgner (b. 1933), "Broken Mythology" and "The Matrimonial Con-Lady" (both 1983); Helga Schütz (b. 1937), "Berlin 5 P.M." (1982); Helga Königsdorf (b. 1938), "The Little Prince and the Girl with Lumber-Colored Eyes" (1982); and Maria Seidemann (b. 1944), "Lennart's House -- Lennart's Wife" (1983). The texts are preceded by generally excellent introductory essays by Andreas Mielke, Peter Uwe Hohendahl, Margy Gerber, Patricia Herminghouse, Nancy Lukens, and Frank Hirschbach, respectively.

The editors seek, with this modest collection, to acquaint American readers with GDR literature, that is, to fill what they perceive as a need for understanding of GDR culture through recent short prose texts. To the extent that GDR literature is read at all in the USA, mostly in German as a requirement in German language and literature courses in US universities, it is generally regarded as a political barometer, and much attention has thus been paid to dissident literature which criticizes what is seen as being wrong with the GDR. Although the editors of this anthology would like to provide "more than just a mere promise of a literature in which political and artistic merits do not

exclude one another" (5), they do not wholly succeed with the texts they have selected.

"Two Letters from Rohdewald" treats the anxiety of a radio playwright who encounters a dissident translator recently rehabilitated after five years in prison for having attacked SED cultural policy; the playwright had disassociated himself from the translator and now anguishes over his lack of moral backbone during the fifties. And "Berlin 5 P.M." is the story of two teenagers from a town near Dresden who take a day off from work to respond to a newspaper ad offering a Rolling Stones album for sale in Berlin: "You Can't Always Get What You Want." Both stories contain points of view which are critical of life in the GDR; neither story has yet been published in the GDR.

Women play a considerably more important role in these stories than one might expect from West German, Austrian, or Swiss stories. Since four of the six authors are women and, to differing degrees, politically engaged feminists, this is as one might expect. These stories do a superb job of targeting "precisely the conflicts inherent in the emancipatory process in a society which is still run by men and largely for men ... which expects women to excel as workers, wives, and mothers" (6). The two Morgner texts, chapters 31 and 79 of her novel Amanda. Ein Hexenroman, are the most militant in this collection and are both generally delightful and biting.

The translations into English were made by Andreas Mielke (Schneider), James P. McCandlish (Loest, Morgner, Schütz, and Seidemann), and Nancy Lukens (Königsdorf). They are somewhat under-edited and read like translations. The anthology also abounds with typographical errors which more careful proofreading ought to have excised. The table of contents is hidden on page 105 following ads for Eastern European musicians and dramatists on tour. However, these faults do not detract very much from a

highly readable selection of revealing and well-written stories.

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Living in Berlin. By Barbara Einhorn.
Macdonald and Company Ltd., 1986. 45 pages.

Living in Berlin is part of a series designed to acquaint young readers with various world cities. In its abbreviated fashion it does convey important facts about the vicissitudes of life in the two complex cities of East and West Berlin. Author Barbara Einhorn discusses relevant historical, political and social reality which includes the Nazi period, the division of Berlin, the Berlin Wall, housing, education, mass transport, along with some of the more mundane details of daily life. It is a wide range of material, and Einhorn handles it effectively. Yet in her apparent desire to provide a balanced picture of two very different yet related cities, her writing suffers from an excess of caution and tact. She presents "just the facts" (but which facts?), laced with an optimism and domesticity intended to appeal to young readers. Yet such tact prevents a more hard-nosed appraisal of the differences between East and West Berlin. There is no mention of the "Ausländerhaß" that has so shaken West Berlin in recent years. Instead, we read of the "colorful mixture of <the city's> population." Nor is there mention of the orders to shoot to kill during escape attempts from East Berlin -- a powerful fact known to even very young East Berlin children. Similarly, in a brief discussion on "Families and Festivals," the author describes the Day of the Republic as "the biggest family festival in East Berlin"; yet she neglects the fact that participants in several

of that day's activities are compelled to take part, that East Berliners (including children) speak wryly of "freiwilliger Zwang" -- forced voluntary participation. These, too, are the facts; and they do require commentary which is missing in this book. As one reads through this volume, one senses that the author is avoiding some very thorny questions -- questions, by the way, that children are more than capable of asking.

At a deeper level, the author misses an opportunity to examine more closely the ways in which politics and history infiltrate individual and family life in these cities. Existentially, let alone politically or economically, it is a very different experience to be on the East as opposed to the West Berlin side of the Wall. Yet, in a brief section of this book, "Young Berliners Speak," there are, in fact, no East Berlin voices -- an important omission. Certainly a book for young people ought to shed some light on the ways in which these German children come to terms with a complicated political and social predicament. And some of these statements by West Berlin youngsters about the Wall are instructive, if brief: "I think it would be better if the Wall wasn't there. It would be easier for people to stay in touch with their families. It's sad, really." But what would an East Berlin youngster have to say? Perhaps something like I heard from a twelve year old girl in that city, after she had witnessed a televised news report about an escape attempt from her city, her home. "I'll never forget it. That was when I really began to feel like they were lying to us here. Up until then I just thought the Wall was there to keep 'them' out. But that night on the West news they told about this man who was killed when he tried to get over the Wall. There was one picture of him lying there in 'no man's land,' dead I think. And just because he wanted to go to the West. They should have just let him go; but they won't let any of us go. That's