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A Literature of "Truth": Writing by Gay Men in East Germany

Abstract

In the last few years of its existence, the East German socialist state had initiated a campaign of tolerance and integration of its homosexuals into socialist society that seemed to cast the GDR in a more progressive light than West Germany. Breaking with the taboos of the previous era, gay literary works were allowed to be published for the first time. These works were in genres (a diary, representative interviews, a confession) that suggested unmitigated truth. Yet a closer analysis reveals them to be works not so much of 'truth' as of compromise and cooptation by a state policy of containment.

Keywords

Truth, gay, men, East Germany, East German, DDR, socialist state, tolerance, integration, homosexuals, socialist society, GDR, progressive, West Germany, taboo, gay literary works, genres, diary, representative interviews, confession, compromise, cooptation, state policy of containment

A Literature of "Truth": Writing by Gay Men in East Germany

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Tolerance under Mounting Pressure

"The most boring, predictable country in the world" was the way one East German wit characterized his homeland up until the fall of 1989. Yet the German Democratic Republic was nonetheless good for a few surprises, particularly in regard to homosexuality. The liberal policies officially espoused in the GDR stood in marked contrast to the treatment of homosexuals in other East Bloc, socialist countries. Homosexual acts between consenting adult males were criminalized in the old Soviet Union and continued to be in the Russian Federation under the Yeltsin government until the summer of 1993. In Romania, the police forces have had a notorious history of entrapment, torture, mutilation, and murder of gay men. In Czechoslovakia, lesbians were pressured to undergo state-financed sex change operations as "treatment" of their homosexuality. The GDR, by contrast, seems, on the surface of things, and in the last few years of its existence, to have been a bastion of enlightenment on the part of the state. Consensual same-sex sex acts between adult males were decriminalized by the Volkskammer in 1989 before the Wall fell, after prosecution of male homosexuals under paragraph 151 of the criminal code had been suspended by a high court ruling in 1988. Lesbian sex had never been criminalized in the GDR.

A concerted and widespread effort began in 1987-88 to advocate tolerance for homosexuals and their integration into socialist society. This message was repeated endlessly in a media blitz that included newspaper articles, the first published monograph on homosexuality, a series of interviews with gay men (and, to a far lesser extent, lesbians) in a popular magazine, panel discussions by medi-

cal experts on television—even pop songs broadcast on the radio chimed in. The message was uniform: the minority that is different should not be discriminated against by the majority that is normal but should be tolerated since socialist society calls for the integration of all its members.

The high water mark of this campaign was reached the night the Wall fell when Heiner Carow's feature film *Coming Out* premiered in East Berlin. This film about a young male high school teacher struggling with and gradually assuming his gay identity became *the* box-office hit in the year left to the GDR between *Wende* and reunification. The public identified not necessarily with the gay subject matter with the quest for one's own identity at odds with the declared social norm.

Yet the campaign for tolerance and integration in the waning years of the GDR can only be understood as a (late) reaction to mounting internal pressure. Changing the criminal code was a relatively easy step. All it involved was an act of fiat by the ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED). One of those involved later compared it to an act of enlightened absolutism which had little connection with popular support. The more interesting question concerns its motivation. Decriminalization and the effort at tolerance were undertaken under mounting pressure from a rapidly emerging gay rights movement that had been organizing and expanding in the Lutheran church since the early 1980s.¹ The attempts by lesbians and gay men a decade earlier, in the early 1970s, to organize in a secular venue at the same time that the West German and American gay lib movements were getting underway, were thwarted by the party and police. The gay men holding a placard signed by a self-avowedly *socialist* Berlin gay group welcoming visitors in East Berlin to the world youth festival held there in 1973 were beaten bloody by uniformed members of the communist youth organization. Where the first attempts in the 1970s to organize an East German gay lib movement were stifled in the cradle, the rights movement of the 1980s convened in the churches and was thus protected by the only institution outside of immediate state control.

The SED and its state were highly suspicious of and perturbed by the church-based lesbian and gay rights movement. The state security apparatus looked askance at their international connections and pegged them as "dissocial elements" and possible fomenters of social dissent manipulated by the "class enemy" to the immediate

It was consequently essential to take the wind out of the sails of the rapidly expanding church groups. One way of doing that was by initiating reforms to defuse the situation. The other was by furthering new, non-church-based gay groups with links to the SED and express political allegiance to the state, in the hopes that these well-financed new groups and social nights for gays in the state-controlled youth clubs would draw away the church groups' membership. If this was not possible, then at least the church groups could serve the function of indispensable information collectors: their participant lists, their meetings, lending patterns of their library books, discussions, and plans for info stands at church congresses were all meticulously reported by gay men and lesbians who had become informants ("informelle Mitarbeiter" or IM) for the state security apparatus, the notorious "Stasi."

The progressive face the GDR assumed outwardly toward homosexuals in its last years masks these underlying motivations and deflects attention from a continuing practice of chicanery and intolerance at the hands of the state. What follow are two highly illustrative examples of official attitudes and administrative practice. The first is a quotation from Hermann Axen, the Central Committee member responsible for ideological purity:

Wir trennen uns von all denen, die ein falsches Verhältnis zu unserem Staat, zur Arbeit und zum anderen Geschlecht haben.

We sunder ourselves from all those who have a false relationship to our state, to work, and to the other sex. (qtd. in Laabs et al. 78; see also Klaum 120)

This quotation, with its characteristic arrogance, was repeated by the middle cadres in Party meetings as a clear and welcome indication of Party sensibility. It sums up an entire way of thinking: these are the values our state incorporates. Their corollary in the administrative practice of the GDR was Article 5 of the officially allowed reasons for emigration from the GDR. Article 5 listed homosexuality, nothing more.

The second example is taken from a report by a group of eleven lesbians who set out to honor the memory of lesbians killed by the Nazis in the concentration camp at Ravensbrück, one of the camps for women:

On March 10, 1984 the homosexual self-help working group, Lesbians in the Church, on the occasion of Women's Day, registered and were given permission to make a trip to Ravensbrück. After their visit to the National Memorial of Warning, the wreath that they had left and their inscription in the guest book were removed. After their protest because of this, they were told among other things that each citizen of the GDR as an individual person would be permitted to honor the victims of fascism, but not a group or organization not recognized by the state.

[A year later] On April 20, 1985 eleven of us women, all friends with each other, tried to go to Ravensbrück in order to participate in the large, state-organized public ceremonies to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the liberation. . . . On April 19th, the woman who had ordered the wreath was visited at about eleven a.m. in her apartment and asked to go along to the police station to explain the matter. After questioning lasting an hour, she was informed that our honoring the victims of fascism was not going to be permitted. Putting our names on the ribbon denoted us as a group—a group that was not recognized by the state. As she left the interrogation room, they yelled “don't try to make differences among the victims of fascism!” . . . When the women stepped out of the house early Saturday morning, two men dressed in civilian clothes were already waiting for them on the other side of the street. . . . At Fürstenberg train station, on the excuse that the transportation police were conducting a search, we eleven women exclusively were detained, our identity papers were collected and we were told to wait in the main hall of the station that had been cleared of other travellers. Only the eleven of us, twenty transportation police, and the two gentlemen in civilian clothes already mentioned remained. After about a quarter of an hour we were encircled by about thirty riot police and driven with insults, pushes, shoves, and arm holds to a police truck about 100 meters off.

With expressions such as: “Get on up there, go on go on, hurry up. You'll be able to sit your ass flat enough later on!” we were driven onto the flatbed truck under constant verbal and physical abuse.

On the truck, that first waited for a long time, then started to drive through Fürstenberg and environs, we were watched over by five men in uniform. . . . They regaled us with such

bon mots as "rather fuck a dead pig"; when we asked them where we were headed, they answered, "to the concentration camp." (qtd. in Sillge 139-41)

This was the administrative and police practice in a state that had defined itself as "antifascist." As it later turned out, one of the women in that group was a Stasi informer.³ The experience narrated here delineates the sort of atmosphere in the mid-1980s that lesbians and gay men had begun to react to and organize against. Parallel to the lesbian and gay groups organizing in the churches were others in academia.

In a series of interdisciplinary conferences beginning in 1985, they put forward the issue of sexuality as a social construction, one with a history possessing forms of social administration and punishment, one that preferred one sexuality and prosecuted the other.⁴ The sociologist Rainer Warczok formulated it like this:

Das Vorhandensein von Vorurteilen gegenüber der Homosexualität resultiert im wesentlichen aus materiellen und ideellen Bedingungen vorsozialistischer Gesellschaftsordnungen. In verschiedenen Epochen benutzten die jeweils herrschenden Klassen entsprechend den konkret-historischen Umständen Ablehnungen des gleichgeschlechtlich ausgerichteten Verhaltens und Empfindens, um ihre politischen Ziele leichter durchsetzen zu können, diskriminierten Homosexuelle und sprachen ihnen die Schuld für unterschiedliche gesellschaftliche Zustände zu.

The existence of prejudice against homosexuality results from material and ideational conditions of pre-socialist forms of society. At various periods of time the ruling classes of the moment—corresponding to the concrete, historical circumstances—made use of the rejection of same-sex behavior and desire in order to accomplish their political goals more effectively. They discriminated against homosexuals and claimed that they were responsible for a variety of societal circumstances. (133)

Two themes emerge here, as they did from the conference as a whole:

(1) prejudice has its origins in pre-socialist society and has no place in a socialist society;

(2) discrimination against homosexuals has historically been connected to arbitrary and discriminatory ways of maintaining certain political and social hegemonies.

The church groups and their leaders on the one side and the academic Marxists on the other, separate though they were, were nonetheless united by a common determination to bring about social change in view of a discriminated minority. They created mounting pressure for the existing system to expand the limits of its legal and social tolerance.

The Diary at the Beginning of East German Gay Literature

If the campaign for tolerance and integration into socialist society that began in 1987 marked a watershed in the official policies of the East German state towards its homosexual minorities, then the literary accompaniment of that campaign caused a noticeable commotion. Homosexuality was transmogrified overnight from a scarcely mentionable taboo into a publication by the most prestigious publishing house in the country—a novelty. And one designed by its author to draw attention.

Ulrich Berkes's *Eine schlimme Liebe* (*A Nasty Love*) seemed to strike out into new territory in form, in language, and in subject matter. In form, it is split into two entirely different texts: on the one side the notations of an utterly unremarkable everyday life in the GDR, on the other the diarist's studies, preoccupations, textual exegesis, and long quotations from the nineteenth-century French *poète maudit* Isidore Ducasse/Lautréamont. A juxtaposition of opposites: verbal pyrotechnics in the dazzlingly aggressive, poetic language of Lautréamont directed against the moral universe of the nineteenth-century French bourgeoisie on the one side, and the staid and inhibited language depicting a staid, stalwart, and inhibited life in the GDR on the other. There could be no greater contrast. Here is an example. First, a quotation from Berkes's diary entry describing his frustrating longing to speak about love and sexuality that concludes with the resigned remark, "perhaps it is something that one does not speak about."

Abends zu Christian und Karsten, es sind auch noch einige andere da, die ich kenne. Wieder über Homosexualität. Wie gut sie alle reden können. Mir ist das zu theoretisch. Mich würden persönliche Erfahrungen mit Liebe und Sexualität

interessieren. Warum frage ich sie nicht danach? Vielleicht spricht man darüber nicht.

In the evening to Christian and Karsten's. A couple of others are there that I know. Once again about homosexuality. They can all talk so well. It's too theoretical for me. I'd be interested in personal experiences of love and sexuality. Why don't I ask them? Perhaps one doesn't speak about it. (251)

Now a characteristic passage from Lautréamont's *Les Chants du Maldoror*, one of many that Berkes quotes at great length:

Ich bin schmutzig. Die Läuse zernagen mich. Die Schweine kotzen, wenn sie mich ansehen. . . . Eine boshafte Viper hat meine Rute verschlungen und ihren Platz eingenommen: sie hat mich zum Eunuchen gemacht, diese Elende. . . . Zwei kleine Igel, die nicht mehr wachsen, haben einem Hund, der nicht ablehnte, das Innere meiner Hoden vorgeworfen: die sorgfältig gewaschene Epidermis haben sie als Wohnung genommen. Den Anus hat eine Krabbe besetzt; ermutigt durch meine Trägheit bewacht sie den Eingang mit ihren Scheren und tut mir sehr weh.

I am dirty. Lice gnaw on me. Pigs puke when they catch sight of me. . . . An evil viper has devoured my dick and taken its place. It has made me into a eunuch, the wretch. . . . Two stunted little hedgehogs have thrown the insides of my testicles to a dog that didn't hesitate, and have taken up house in the carefully washed epidermis. A crab has occupied my anus; taking courage from my indolence, it stands guard over the entry with its claws and causes me great pain. (170-71)

It must be kept in mind that Berkes's text does not present a literary analysis, strophe by strophe, as he puts it, of the *Chants du Maldoror*, nor do the passages on the French poet's life conform to conventional biography. Instead, Berkes is fascinated by "the unpredictable days of [his own] life" "touching" or "crisscrossing" or "nearing" or "distancing themselves" from Lautréamont's. What can he possibly mean? Lautréamont's principle—language as an attack vehicle for an apparent amorality—is utterly and absolutely absent from Berkes's own text. Lautréamont as a poet of moral rebellion, whom Berkes characterizes as more radical than Rimbaud,

is not conjoined by any language of rebellion in Berkes's case. What, then, is the principle of parallelism, of crisscrossing, of approach? Why the bifurcated approach at all—and not simply a literary study of Lautréamont or a GDR diary?

The principle seems to be one of wish fulfillment, a grand identification with Lautréamont's life as poetic rebel—an illusory one, since Berkes can make no claim to this aspect of Lautréamont's life and work. Wish fulfillment for a life as poetic rebel and rebellious poet. Identification with a text that longs, again and again, under ever new names, for an unnameable relationship with young men:

“Junge, verzeih mir. Einmal aus diesem vorübergehenden Leben gegangen, will ich, daß wir umschlungen bleiben während der Ewigkeit; nur ein einziges Wesen, mein Mund an deinem Mund gepreßt. . . . O Junge mit blondem Haar, mit so sanften Augen. . . .” Nachdem du so geredet hast, wirst du einem andern Menschen Böses getan haben und gleichzeitig von ihm geliebt werden: das größte Glück, das man sich denken kann.

Das ist es.

Ducasse will geliebt werden.

Selbst wenn er diese Liebe durch eine extreme Herausforderung erzwingen muß.

Der blonde Jüngling ist Georges Dazet, natürlich.

“Excuse me, young man. Once departed from this transitory life, I want us to remain locked in each other's arms for eternity—a single entity, my mouth pressed to yours. . . . O young man with blond hair with such soft eyes. . . .” After you have spoken thus, you will wrong another person and be loved by him at the same time: the greatest happiness that one can imagine.

That's it.

Ducasse wants to be loved.

Even if he has to force this love by means of an extreme challenge.

The blond young man is Georges Dazet, of course. (82-83)

Longing for love. Yet the ubiquitous longing for male-male eros in Lautréamont's text, an integral part of his poetry of amorality, a countervalue—at the very least a form of esthetic resistance—to the moral order of the nineteenth-century French bourgeoisie, is

taken up by Berkes merely as a practical question on a more personal level:

Der Mensch ist dem Menschen ein Wolf, noch immer. Man könnte wahnsinnig werden. Oder melancholisch. Oder böse werden: gegen die Verhältnisse rebellieren.

Radikal sein.

Aber das versteht der brave Dazet nicht.

Und weil Ducasse konsequent in seiner Haltung ist, mault der Junge: Du liebst mich nicht!

Kann man jemand lieben, mit dem es keine geistige Gemeinsamkeit gibt?

Und wenn er auch hübsch und blond ist? Und intelligent dazu?

Um so schlimmer, um so tragischer ist es. Zum Verzweifeln. . . .

Man is a wolf to men, still. You could go crazy. Or melancholy. Or grow angry: rebel against the situation.

Be radical.

But the good Dazet does not understand that.

And because Ducasse's position is consistent, the young man pouts, you do not love me!

Can you love someone with whom you have nothing intellectually in common?

Even if he is cute and blond? And intelligent to boot? All the worse, all the more tragic. Enough to make one despair. . . .

(100-01)

Nothing but nothing remains here of Ducasse/Lautréamont's poetry of rebellion, of his ferocity of amoral attack, of a poeticized erotic and esthetic resistance. Nothing remains of the grand poetic language, of its gestures, isolation, and pain. Instead, all this is transformed into a practical question on the level of an everyday gay relationship. Can you love someone with whom you have intellectually nothing in common? Once again Wagner and Faust, with Berkes playing Wagner to a nineteenth-century young French Faust with whom he is at pains to identify his own life.

The literary study is part of a diary. A plain record containing just the facts. One inspired by poetry, but one apparently inherently at odds with it. One entranced by the linguistic high-wire act of Ducasse, but one that again and again places that grand attack in a pedestrian perspective. The contents of this life as recorded in the diary are boring. The details are enervating. The monotony of the

text slides into his life and vice versa: “Wir liebten uns schnell” ‘We made love hurriedly’ (83). No rebellion, no poetry, no life. What is left is the genre: the diary as form. Why this particular form as a literary vehicle for this particular life? The answer lies in its plainness, in the “unadorned language,” in its bald narration of the facts, just the facts, and no flight of fancy. The diary as a genre for expressing outside the constraints of a particular structure one’s individual truth. And the truth of this life is that of a male couple, everyday, making a living, conforming, nothing out of the ordinary, one of whom wants to understand a fanciful, poetic, homoerotic French text from the last century—a kind of literary vampirism pervaded by an uneventful life.

This first text of homosexuality to be published in the GDR is suffused by a normality that makes it difficult to breathe. It is the text by a homosexual that straitjackets another text by a homosexual filled with rebellious homoerotic longings buoyed up by a scintillatingly amoral poetic language. The truth of this life in the GDR is the truth of life in a “Nischengesellschaft”: a life of conformity and not of rebellion, of pedestrian prose and not poetry, of repressed sexuality and not male adhesiveness, a depoliticized, private, boring life. Accommodation and a dead poet. The voice of a nineteenth-century poet strangely imagined as one’s own.

Interviewing Gay Men as a Political Act

Ever since Maxie Wander’s collection of literarily reworked interviews, or “protocols” as they were called, with women of various ages and from a variety of walks of life hit the East German reading public like a kind of literary bombshell at the beginning of the 1970s, this genre gained a special place in the literary productions of the GDR. Protocols enjoyed the nimbus of unadorned truth. In *Guten Morgen, du Schöne* (*Good Morning, My Beauty*) women spoke immediately and poignantly of their individual lives, of constraints and fulfillment, of their hopes and reality. Their truth. Following in Maxie Wander’s footsteps after her death, others published interviews with men a decade later. They attracted little interest because these men could not or would not discover themselves and their lives. In the spring before the Wall fell, Jürgen Lemke’s *Ganz normal anders* (*Quite Normal but Different*), a collection of interviews with gay men of various ages and from various walks of life, reduplicated the sensation that Maxie Wander’s

volume had caused almost twenty years earlier. In her foreword to Wander's volume, Christa Wolf stressed the oppression of women throughout history, that it is the oppressed and marginalized who speak the unspeakable. Here gay men came out of the shadows to speak the unspeakable. No apologies. Unadorned. It was sensational. Several of the interviews were reworked into a stage version that was still a box-office smash when the theater and the building that had housed it, the Palace of the Republic, the seat of the old GDR parliament, was closed down just before German unification.

Lemke's collection of interviews broke the public silence of taboo encasing the lives of gay men as Berkes's literary exegesis never could have. Here was authenticity: the life stories of 13 gay men as told by themselves and reworked, following Maxie Wander's tried model, into literary form. The well-known GDR sociologist, Irene Runge, in her introduction to the collection, put it like this:

Mitunter unbeholfen, doch vertrauensvoll erzählen diese Männer von sich. Ihr Leben ist in vielem wie das Leben aller in diesem Lande DDR. Es wird keine gedachte Wirklichkeit verdichtet, sondern über eine verborgene Realität nachgedacht. Das ist und bleibt unvollkommen. Andere Männer hätten anderes zu berichten.

These men tell about themselves, sometimes awkwardly, yet with great trust. Their lives are to a great extent like the lives of all of us in this country, the GDR. An imagined reality is not poeticized, but a hidden reality reflected on. That is imperfect. Other men could have provided different reports. (Lemke 10-11)

An imagined reality is not poeticized, but a hidden reality reflected on, dependent only on the interviewer's selection of the interviewees. Runge's characterization underscores the widespread acceptance of the protocol form as adequate to reflecting reality, only placing a question mark after those selected, others likely to have said other things. What are the other things they might have said?

When I interviewed Jürgen Lemke upon the appearance of *Ganz normal anders* in the spring of 1989, he expressed a regret that so many of the men he had interviewed were from the same age bracket, having come from his own circle of friends and acquaintances. He would like to have had more diversity, he said. Yet a close reading

of the texts suggests another principle of selection that informs nearly every one of the texts presented in this anthology and lends it an unmistakable coloration as a whole.

The volume begins with Erich, born in 1900. He tells of a hard working-class life, unemployment, and, life on the streets in the Weimar Republic. But the tale he tells with greatest urgency, the one that is central to his life, is that of his internment in Nazi concentration camps. Suffering is its theme, a tale of arbitrary and unjust suffering that will out.

Ich erzähle dir aus meiner Lagerzeit und merke, ich will dich von meinen Leiden überzeugen. Das habe ich schon lange nicht mehr getan.

I'm telling you about my time in the camps and it occurs to me that I want to convince you of my suffering. I haven't done anything like this for a long time. (Lemke 28)

The trailer—I haven't done this for a long time—lends the tale a kind of authenticity. And the lesson that Erich draws from his life's experiences, one highlighted at the end of the protocol, is that in the new anti-fascist state of the GDR such grisly things could not be repeated. "Ich war politisch genügend gebildet, um zu wissen, daß das unter den neuen Verhältnissen ausgeschlossen war. Ohne Konflikte lief es auch nicht, aber leben war nicht mehr lebensgefährlich" 'I was politically educated enough to know that such things were impossible under the new conditions. It didn't go without conflicts, but living was no longer highly dangerous' (Lemke 30).

This first interview highlights an historical object lesson given flesh and blood by the working-class man who narrates it—that the GDR has rescued homosexuals from Nazi horrors. Another working-class man provides the second interview. It is a moving, delayed coming out story where, after much sorrow and a broken marriage, Dieter finally learns to accept his own (homo)sexuality. He is a man of discipline and stereotypes whose view of "homos" was that "they ran after the male member exclusively, hung out in public toilets, and acted feminine." This view he relinquishes. After all, his story is one of education through mistakes and sorrow, a gradual realization and acceptance of his "real" nature. But there is a constant backdrop, a certitude that, unlike the stereotypes in

his life of "masculinity" and "femininity," is never called into question. If Dieter narrates the story of his tapping about in the dark before finally finding and accepting his sexuality, then he is already in the possession of another "truth" from the outset, one emphasized simply because, unlike all the others, it is never once called into question. "Ich sage heute, die Sowjetunion ist mein Vaterland and die DDR mein Mutterland. Das ist mein Ernst" 'I say today that the Soviet Union is my fatherland and the GDR my motherland. I really mean that' (Lemke 38). Two identities are intertwined here: the struggle to find a gay one in a hostile ambience, and the certitude of a political one that brings him to become a member of the party. A skeptical observer might liken this story to an updated, homosexualized version of the activist literature of the 1950s and 1960s where party members confront and overcome hardship, face down recalcitrant social behavior left over from the presocialist past, and carry the day sustained by their political ideals.

Again and again, the other protocols in the volume emphasize these twin points: the fact that the GDR has put the horrors of fascism behind it, and the viability, sustenance, and necessity of socialist ideals. Lothar Berfelde, the third interviewee—and as Charlotte von Mahlsdorf, a media star in his own right, whose much acclaimed autobiography *Ich bin meine eigene Frau (I Am My Own Woman)* appeared in 1993—puts the lesson to be learned like this:

Ich bin glücklich, daß ich in eine Zeit hineingewachsen bin, in der das Ausleben meiner Psyche nicht mehr den Tod bedeutet. Einige Jahre früher geboren, und ich wäre in die Gaskammer gekommen. So einfach ist das.

I was lucky to have grown into a time in which acting out my psyche no longer meant death. Born a few years earlier, and I would have ended up in the gas chambers. It's that simple. (Lemke 59)

The literarily reworked interviews chosen for this volume have a twofold purport, then. The first, overt one is to let gay men narrate the stories of gradually finding their way to an acceptance of their homosexuality, or, in one case, not finding it, and wishing he were heterosexual. Not surprisingly, several attempted suicides are narrated along the way. The reader must be alerted to the fact that the way is difficult and requires understanding from the outside.

The publications about homosexuals that appeared in the last few years of the GDR are replete with narrations about attempted suicides. Homosexuals defined as an endangered species who can only make it with the commiseration, pity, and understanding of the larger, “normal” public. The gripping opening scene of the Carow film *Coming Out* shows a young gay fellow having his stomach pumped out after a suicide attempt. The scene has no relevance to the rest of the film—a topos searching for humanitarian understanding. Only after the *Wende* has arrived in the fall of 1989 and loosened constraints is an unabashedly self-defined gay activist inserted into the stage version of *Ganz normal anders*—or perhaps one should say reinserted—for this was someone, an activist in the gay and lesbian emancipation movement in the Protestant church, interviewed for the original book but omitted from the published version.

The second, less readily apparent intent of this collection of gay life stories is far more politicized and is contained in its constantly repeated refrain: socialism is a political and social system that signifies the historical liberation from fascism, and such a historically valenced socialism is depicted by the gay men of these protocols as an actually experienced superior moral system that has put their personal lives in order. “Bei uns steht der Mensch im Mittelpunkt” ‘In our country, the human being stands at the center of things,’ as Bert, the last of the interviewees, a worker, puts it (257). Gay men’s lives narrated—and published—as proof of the success of East Germany’s socialism?

Postunification True Confessions

The radical demands for social justice, criticisms of historical forms of oppression, and strategies designed to combat the causes of their marginalization energetically brought into the open by gay people during and immediately after the *Wende* seem to have evaporated in postunification Germany without a trace. A thesis like “Schwules hat Sinn nicht als Sonderabteilung, sondern NUR in der Dimension, die bürgerliche ‘Heterosexualität’ zu paralysieren” ‘Queerness makes sense not as a special area unto itself, but ONLY in its dimension of paralyzing bourgeois “heterosexuality,” ’ formulated by Olaf Brühl at the height of the *Wende* and shot through with the principle of hope of those days, is now nowhere to be found (114).⁵ Now gay literary authors, at least judging by what has been

published so far, write for the market. This strategy has so far concentrated on two genres: sleek Krimis set in Ossiland and sensationalist confessions: I was a gay spy for the Stasi. Firma Guck und Horch uses a 19-year-old boy to land (or better: to bed) international diplomats!

With Andreas Sinakowski's *Das Verhör* (*The Interrogation*) a new genre joined the diary and the protocol/interview to tell the truth of gay men's lives in the GDR. Not only that, these particular confessions (which had begun as interviews, as the editor/interviewer Frank Goyke informs the reader in the foreword) suggest they are part of a larger process for discovering, uncovering the hidden historical events of the GDR period: the confession as "Vergangenheitsbewältigung." Are they that?

Despite all the reassurances by Frank Goyke in his foreword attesting to the veracity of Sinakowski's confessional narrative, his carefully chosen wording gives the reader reason for pause: "[Ich] lege meine Hand dafür ins Feuer, daß sich alles wie beschrieben zugetragen haben kann." 'I would lay my hand in fire that everything can have happened the way described here' (Sinakowski 10).

How is this to be taken? "Everything *can* have happened the way it is described here"—but it is not necessarily the way it did happen. Goyke suggests a fundamental substratum of truth despite any literary reworking or failing of memory over events now distanced by years; a fundamental correspondence with true events despite occasional—unintentional—aberrations. Goyke himself attests to it. He should know. He is "selbst ein gebranntes Kind" 'himself a burnt child.' As if this were not testimonial enough, other extra-textual attestations as to the truthfulness of Sinakowski's narrative are immediately asserted, but not produced:

Unter diesen Freunden die Opfer von ehemals, die immer wieder fragten, wann endlich dieses Buch zu lesen sei. Von ihnen kam die größte Ermunterung. Sie waren es, die nicht nur den Mut honorierten, der hinter dieser Arbeit steht, sondern zugleich ihre Hilfe anboten für den Fall, daß nach Erscheinen von "Das Verhör" jene Hexenjagd anhebt, die dem Aussprechen der Wahrheit allemal zu folgen pflegt.

Among these friends were the victims of former times who asked again and again when they would finally be able to read the book. The greatest encouragement came from them. They

were the ones who not only honored the courage that stood behind our work but at the same time offered their help in case a witchhunt began after the publication of *Das Verhör*—one of those witchhunts that usually follow speaking out the truth. (Sinakowski 8)

Not to believe Sinakowski is to participate in a witchhunt against him. Yet it is not the details of the stories that are of so much interest, but their central myth, their most sensitive place of origin, the motor which brought the teenaged Andreas Sinakowski to the Stasi in the first place. Namely: Andreas Sinakowski is a Jew and the Stasi rescued him from anti-Semitic attacks. This is the bull's eye around which the narration is centered. It begins with a witchhunt. The teenaged Andreas is hunted down by his classmates. What they will do to him is left unclear. They tell jokes, asking how many Jews fit into the ashtrays of a Trabbi. The father of a schoolfriend gets wind of it and in turn notifies the Stasi, whereupon a Stasi officer, disguised as an everyday cop, appears and puts a stop to the schoolboys' pogrom *in spe*.

This, then, is the beginning of the text and sole explanation for Andreas Sinakowski's fateful liaison with the Stasi. The ensuing repeated comparisons to Faust's pact with Mephistopheles lend it a literary touch to be sure but miss the point: *in Sinakowski's pact there is no moral responsibility expressed and no guilt felt*. Quite the opposite. Young Andreas is the victim—and he continues to be the victim throughout the entire confessional narrative. A victim as Jew, a victim as abused child of a broken family of alcoholics, a victim as adopted grandson of a leering seventy-year-old stepgranny with bridal aspirations, a victim as homosexual, and last but not least a victim of the secret police in a dictatorship that knows all his secrets.

Even though (or perhaps because?) this is a narrative the reader is enjoined to believe—for to do otherwise would be to join in a witchhunt against the author—the evidence for multiple victimhood is rather apodictic. Worse: it is missing. Of what does Andreas Sinakowski's Jewishness consist? As far as this text is concerned, it consists in having been the object of an anti-Semitic campaign at school. Despite a punctilious recounting of the multiple victimhoods of his childhood, there is no mention of Jewishness, either in his own life or in that of those around him. Its single mention, the rather vague suggestion during a visit to Israel of belonging to this people

by virtue of "more than several per cent of my blood" (Sinakowski 63) might not even suffice for the blood laws of the Nazis. Andreas is a "Jew" without a Jewish identity. But a Jew under a very particular historical constellation. A Jew in an officially anti-fascist, post-Holocaust German state. A protected Jew. A species.

And this, in this particular text, is merely a sign that is made to stand for something else: despite being an informant for the Stasi, I belonged to the victims par excellence and thus bear no guilt. All of the multiple victimhoods of this author are inscribed on the plus side of the ledger and add up to an enormous credit that nothing on the debit side can wipe away. He says of his abused childhood, "Zwanzig Jahre meines Lebens hatten sie mir geraubt. Was einem Kind heilig sein konnte, wurde beim bloßen Anhauch dieser Bürger zu Schmutz und Lüge" 'Twenty years of my life they stole from me. Everything that is holy to a child, simply by being breathed on by these people, became filth and lies' (Sinakowski 62).

Victimhood, helplessness, and righteousness come to be welded together here *a priori*. The activities for the Stasi, and ostensibly this text is a confession of those activities, his betrayal of friends, his identification of "enemies of the state," his infiltration of dissident artists' circles, all of these activities are outweighed by previous victimhoods, canceled out, suspended. In this "confession," *mea culpa* is transfigured into *j'accuse*.

If the "truth" of this life lies in a string of evasions, complicity, cooptation and subjugation, then this "confessional" narrative reflects it. Ostensibly constructed in the name of truth, it is a monument to evasion. Supposedly written to the end of finally confessing, of no longer holding it in after all these years, this text is one of denial. In this confession, all the others are guilty. An interview published in the New York Times shortly after *Das Verhör* appeared quotes Sinakowski as saying "Look, if I have to live in this prison, how am I supposed to uphold any values?" (Tagliabue 4).⁶ How indeed?

Conclusion

We have come a long way from truth in the banal language of the pre-*Wende* searching for another, rebellious and scintillating poetic place to become a home, a long way from the attempt to discover, to bring out into the open, the hiddenness of the lives of gay men against an ineluctable backdrop of political rectitude, to

arrive at a true confession in postunification Germany that sensationalizes discovering “the truth”—but as a plot device, a vehicle for a fiction of innocence propelled by claiming a Jewish identity. Written in genres ostensibly chosen for the unmitigated truthfulness which they convey to the reader, all of these works by gay authors from East Germany do indeed convey a truth: a truth of compromise and cooptation, of wish fulfillment and denial. These literary authors display the lives of gay men in the GDR, perhaps unwittingly so, if one reads against the grain in which they were written, as inextricably embedded in the qualities listed above. The *Wende* was brought about by others.

Notes

1. If one discounts the informal circles of friends in the 1950s and 1960s, and the first, tentative attempts at formal organization by lesbians and gay men in the 1970s that were disbanded under pressure by the state, it was within Church circles in the 1980s that the relatively public and organized discussion of homosexuality first took place. It began with a conference of the Evangelical Academy Berlin-Brandenburg in January, 1982: “Kann man darüber sprechen? Homosexualität als Frage an Theologie und Gemeinde.” This conference was the first not only to tackle issues connected with gayness but also to include lesbians and gay men among the conference participants. The discussion concentrated on two main issues:

- 1) using the insights of modern sexology to diminish prejudice and widespread faulty conceptualizations of homosexuality;
- 2) providing a framework for lesbians and gay men to meet and discuss issues concerning them, with a view to furthering self-acceptance.

As a measure of the needs that this conference addressed, and its success, groups (*Arbeits- und Gesprächskreise* in the terminology of the Church) were formed that same year (1982) in Leipzig and Berlin. Other groups soon constituted themselves in other cities of the GDR. They quickly grew in number to over 20, not only in all the large cities but also in lesser metropolitan areas like Magdeburg, Chemnitz, and Rostock, as well as in Zwickau, Plauen, and Neustrelitz. See Manfred Punge, “Das gebrochene Tabu.”

2. Generally inclined to mistrust and paranoia, it comes as no surprise that the party and its security apparatus looked askance at the gay groups in <https://newprairiepress.org/stcl/vol22/iss1/10>

the Church. "Politically negative and adversarial forces" saw such groups, as an official Stasi report from Magdeburg put it in 1983, as "grass roots organizations for political underground activities" and planned to make use of them for the purposes of "internal opposition" (qtd. in Stapel 6). Although they were not in fact politically organized, lesbians and gay men represented for the Stasi a reservoir of political opposition, and as such they were systematically spied on. Eddi Stapel, one of the main organizers of the church group movement in the early 1980s and during the *Wende* head of the Leipzig-based national gay political action group (Schwulenverband Deutschlands), told me the story of how a young man in prison for manslaughter had been released early by the Stasi specifically to sleep with and spy on Stapel and his church group. Letters to or from Stapel were opened or never delivered, telephone conversations tapped. An official Stasi memorandum on the infiltration and destruction of groups (*Zersetzung*) provides detailed instructions on how to destroy a group from within by, among other things, seeding mistrust, especially the suspicion that other members of the group are Stasi spies. After the citizens' grass roots groups broke into and occupied Stasi headquarters throughout the country, one such Stasi report on gay church group surveillance anonymously made its way to Stapel. It simply appeared in his mailbox one day. It outlines the systematic way in which correspondence with West Germany was opened, the identities of those present at group meetings was kept track of, and, most importantly of all, the sense of a secret conspiratorial movement that was fundamentally opposed to the interests of the state was invented and kept alive.

One of the myths about gay people that the Stasi subscribed to was that they were fundamentally asocial and easy prey for foreign information gathering services. Yet according to the coming out studies by Professor Erwin Günther at the University of Jena, the first fairly large-scale questionnaire sent out to homosexuals in the mid-eighties, around 20% of the respondents indicated that they were members of the East German communist party (SED), and others were members of other state and party organizations, indicating far more social integration and involvement than the Stasi myth allowed for.

3. According to information received verbally on March 13, 1991, from Ilse Kokula in the Berlin state government's "Referat für gleichgeschlechtliche Lebensweisen," one of the organizers of this trip was a Stasi informant. See Irena Kukutz and Katja Havemann, *Geschützte Quelle*.

4. The watershed for open discussion of homosexuality outside the Church came in 1985. Sponsored by the Marriage and Family Section of the Society for Social Hygiene of the GDR and the Andrology Section of the Society for Dermatology of the GDR, a series of interdisciplinary conferences on the "psycho-social aspects of homosexuality" began (Leipzig, 1985; Karl-Marx-Stadt, 1988; Jena, 1990) which had profound ramifications for

subsequent social policy. Although hosted by the medical profession, the conference was broadly interdisciplinary in intent. It included not only medical doctors, but also psychologists and sexologists, marxist philosophers and journalists, and especially important, as in the Church conference that had preceded it, lesbians and gay men to speak for themselves in their own voices.

Equally important is who did not attend. Günther Dörner, an endocrinologist at Humboldt University, was conspicuously absent. His notion that human homosexuality is caused by hormonal imbalances in the fetus brought on by prenatal stress in the mother, and its corollary that fetuses can be tested for such hormonal imbalances (opening the possibility of aborting them), an idea stemming from laboratory research with rats, were again and again mentioned—and massively criticized. This rejection of Dörner's ideas marked a break with nineteenth-century notions of homosexuality as pathology and set the emerging public discussion of the issues surrounding homosexuality on a track that was both morally and socially responsible.

5. Cited in Klaum 114. The panel discussions and reports by and interviews with politically active gay men from the GDR contained in *Die DDR. Die Schwulen. Der Aufbruch* stem from "Schwule in der DDR," a German/German conference sponsored by the Waldschlößchen held 17-19 November 1989 near Göttingen.

6. This review article is subtitled "A German mania for spying on others. Now come memoirs."

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