

Jerry Glenn

**An Embarrassment of Riches:
German-American Poetry and Novels**

Childhood in the Third Reich: World War II and Its Aftermath.

By *Kaye Voigt Abikhaled*. Lewiston: Mellen Poetry Press, 2001. 74 pages. \$14.95.

Provenzalische Gedichte.

By *Peter Beicken*. University Park, MD, 2001. 20 pages. Limited edition of 50 copies.

Ingeborg in Grand Rapids: Ingeborg Carsten-Miller liest im Rahmen des 25. Symposiums der Society of German-American Studies in Grand Rapids, Michigan am 4. Mai 2001.

By *Ingeborg Carsten-Miller*. Silver Spring, MD: Carmill, 2001. 32 pages.

Zillis wieder im Bildgespräch: Gedichte zur romanischen Kirchendecke von St. Martin in Zillis.

By *Margot Scharpenberg*. Beuron: Beuronener Kunstverlag, 2001. 48 pages. DM 24.

Land of Dreams.

By *Dolores Hornbach Whelan*. Morris, CT: Rossel, 2000. Irregular page numbers. \$12.95.

Landing Attempts: Selected Poems.

By *Gert Niers*. Translated by Jerry Glenn and Clarise Samuels. Max Kade Occasional Papers in German-American Studies, 4. Cincinnati: University of Cincinnati, 2000. 22 pages.

Kahn & Engelmann: Eine Familien-Saga.

By *Hans Eichner*. Wien: Picus, 2000. 367 pages. DM 39.80.

Mephisto ist nicht tot: Roman.

By *Geertje Subr*. Düsseldorf: Grupello, 2000. 223 pages. DM 36.

Manhattan-Serenade.

By *Karl Jakob Hirsch*. Edited by Helmut Pfanner. Bern: Lang, 2001. 159 pages. DM 55.

Three volumes of German-language poetry have appeared in the past year. As the titles indicate, each has a specific focus. All of the *Provenzalische Gedichte*, written by **Peter Beicken** in July and August 2000, have titles related to the theme; most of them specify the location and some the time: "Chartres, mittags" (3), "Arles, nachts" (7). The collection is strongly unified. The poems are written in a poetic free verse, are approximately the same length (most fifteen to twenty lines in length), and address aspects of the region, its cultural heritage, and its local color—"local color" in both senses of the phrase, the actual colors of the landscape and the feeling a visitor gets when experiencing the physical beauty, the culture, and life as it is lived today.

A sense of color is pervasive. In the first poem, "Chartres, mittags," we move from observing the surroundings—"Aus den flimmernden Weizenfeldern / und dem plastikweißen Gewerbegebiet"—to the famous cathedral—"steigen die beiden ungleichen Türme / der Kathedrale." The presentation of the interior is no less interesting: "Innern filtern die Fenster / das himmlische Licht, prismatisch / bunte Legenden, Geschichten, Gleichnisse. / Gott ist die Stimme der Farben." References to painters associated with the region (Van Gogh, Cézanne) add to the strong visual element.

The poems are vivid in their visual effect, but the other senses are not lacking. Numerous references to music are present, and we hear "Das sanfte Plätschern der Fontäne" (10); here, as with the visual images, not all is pleasant: "das Mopedknattern, / schmerzvoll laut" (7). The numerous flowers suggest the sense of smell, and this is occasionally made explicit: "Lavendelstauden mit tiefem Geruch" (4), a line that echoes in the later image "Lavendel, erotisch violett" (18). In summary, this collection offers a pleasing sensual and sensuous experience.

As the title indicates, the new volume by **Ingeborg Carsten-Miller** collects the poems read on a specific occasion, at the symposium of the SGAS in May 2001. It is often difficult consciously to recognize the thematic plan behind a selection of poems during a reading, and it is especially interesting to have the opportunity to study such a selection on the basis of the printed text. Close analysis does reveal a careful plan. The collection begins with three winter poems, the last of which, "Warte nur" (11), points to the coming of spring (which had just arrived in Grand Rapids in early May), "wenn der Frühlingswind / die letzten Altjahrsblätter / von den Zweigen bricht / und klare Vogelstimmen / ihre Partnersuche / beginnen." A sketch of a cheerful pelican graces the facing page.

Three transitional poems, including her native "Pommern" (16-17)—a common theme in Carsten-Miller—lead into the central section, "Dichter-Gewimmel im Savoy-Café, Canti 1-V." The first two short poems set the scene: the (stereo)typical gaggle of would-be artistes at a poetry reading in a literary café, complete with saxophone music. "Das Bild ist perfekt, / wenn man / die Ohren / schließt" (19). The longer (two-page) third and central poem offers a snapshot of the climax of the evening, a reading by an aging hippie whose poetry, worldview, and reading style are "Zerfahren—zerfetzt / wie Deine / ungepflegten / Bartspitzen." The concluding two canti return to the audience, "Halb schlafend," which, in the end, "geht dann / gelangweilt / von / dannen" (23).

Transitional poems follow, one on the topic of translating, with a play on "überzusetzen" (easy) and "zu übersetzen" (difficult). The concluding poems reveal a decidedly optimistic vision: "Die Hoffnung bleibt" (29); "Morgen / ist der Tag, / an dem ich vieles tue, / was mir heute nicht gelingt" (31).

In *Zillis*, Margot Scharpenberg returns to the medieval religious paintings on the ceiling of St. Martin's church, the subject of her first collection of poems about paintings, *Bildgespräche mit Zillis* (1974); in fact, seven of the twenty-four poems in the present volume are reprinted from the earlier collection. In each case, the poem (e.g., "König David," "Reitender König") is now printed on the left-hand page, in two columns if necessitated by the length of the poem, while the facing page contains a reproduction of the painting and, beneath it, a relevant scriptural passage (some from the Apocrypha). This format reflects a decided improvement over that of *Bildgespräche mit Zillis*, in which some poems extended over to a second page so that the entire poem could not be read with the picture in view.

Some general comments are valid for the entire collection. Scharpenberg writes a lyrical free verse, decidedly modern in its style and tone. (Two poems do have rhyme, one, "Reitender König" occasionally, one, "Ruhe auf der Flucht," consistently.) Her style is reflective, and the reader is required to participate. The lack of punctuation is one of the devices that contributes to this quality. The approaches taken in the poems, however, differ quite significantly. Two examples will suffice to give a sense of the nature of the collection.

The illustration to "König David" depicts the bearded, but still youthful king seated on a throne, holding a knife in his left hand and pointing to the viewer's right with the index finger of his right hand. The Biblical passages cited are Ezek. 34, 23-24; Ps. 89, 4-5, and Ps. 132, 17-18. The poem begins with a reflection on the part of the speaker: "Könige thronen / was haben sie vorher getan / eh sie die Krone trugen" (6). A reference is made to the "Beschneidungsmesser / . . . / es meint die Priesterschaft," and David's life is adroitly summed up as "Täuscher Tänzer Töter / schön anzuschauen / vertraut mit Saitenspiel / und mit Frauen." The final two stanzas offer an interpretation from a Christian perspective: "er ist vor allem Vorfahr / mit der Rechten / weist er auf Kommendes." David was unable to attain the status of shepherd and prince of peace: "das wird ein anderer Hirt / der wahre Gottessohn / vollbringen."

The "Reitender König" is one of the three wise men, depicted on a horse; the Biblical passages are Mark 2, 1-2 and Mark 2, 9. The poem written in the first-person singular; this *ich*, however, is not the subjective lyrical speaker, but rather the king, whose impatience is expressed in the opening lines: "Halt mich keiner auf / ich bin in Eile / gerufen bin ich / —und bins nicht alleine— / zum neugeborenen Herrn" (12). As in the case of "König David," description is secondary to commentary and interpretation, although now in the form of an interior monologue of the king: "ich möchte endlich / mein Geschick verstehn."

Zillis is a stunningly beautiful collection of beautiful religious poetry. Not only are the illustrations superb, the layout, typography, and even the quality of the paper leave absolutely nothing to be desired.

For obvious reasons it would be inappropriate for me to review the next book. I

asked a colleague to do the review; his text follows.

Gert Niers's *Landing Attempts* is a unified selection of deftly translated poems. The poet reflects on the passage and irrecoverability of time, the fragmentation and fading of memory, and the difficulty of discovering and expressing one's identity in a new land. Sometimes language for the immigrant, "sequestered / in the thicket of a strange tongue" and/or "submerged by language," serves more as impediment to self-expression than as tool for its realization.

In this too short collection Niers sometimes merges the physical and the metaphysical as though they exist on one and the same level and were a single concern. Language becomes a kind of landscape. In a poem dedicated to Margarete Kollisch, about whom Niers has written in his study of exile writers, the word itself becomes a place and has a geography and topography. Although he would probably agree with T. S. Eliot that words "slip and slide," in his compact tribute to fellow exile writer Kollisch, Niers envisions the "solid interior of the word."

In the well-positioned last poem, "Song of Growing Old," a classic of its kind that crackles with wit and self-deprecating humor, Niers brings together his preoccupation with time and concern for the relationship between the physical and the metaphysical. This reviewer's single criticism is in effect a recommendation for some publisher: expand this short but rich selection to reveal Niers's talents and vision more fully to readers of poetry in English.

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Norbert Krapp

Kaye Voigt Abikhaled is a new voice in German-American poetry. Like Whelan, Eichner, and several others, she is a member of the older generation making a belated literary debut. As the brief biographical note in the present collection informs us, she was born in Berlin, came to America in 1950 on a Kiwanis high-school fellowship, and immigrated in 1960. She has published poems in journals and anthologies, but this is her first book. To get a negative point out of the way: the technical editing leaves something to be desired, e.g., inconsistent use of single or double hyphens for dashes.

The one-page introduction begins "This manuscript is partly autobiographic. It relates the impressions of a six year old living in Germany at the beginning of World War II. Written mostly in free verse and divided into chapters, the story recalls childhood memories, impressions, and conversations overheard when adults thought no one was listening" (1), and goes on briefly to describe some of the themes—the "chapters," twenty-five in all, which even with this hint I will simply call longish poems.

The first poem is set in pre-war "Berlin," when "We were happy. / Life was good. / The world was good" (3). Here, in the concluding lines, the short, simple sentences represent the perspective of a child. Elsewhere in the poem, the mind of an adult poet is clearly at work: "Those days, our house / teemed with friends and relatives / who stayed until all hours. / Tugged into beds we strained to listen / to

conversations echoing on sleepy minds" (2). The image in the last two lines is wonderful: the children being reluctantly tugged rather than cozily tucked into bed, and their internal battle between curiosity and sleepiness.

A considerable amount of material—events, impressions, retrospective political analysis—is packed into the poems devoted to the war years. An especially interesting and consistently developed theme is some form of the conflict between good and evil, or more accurately in many instances, good guys and bad guys. We see, for example, two Polish POWs assigned to help the family with chores. One "maliciously tripped and kicked us / mumbling Polish threats and curses" (42), while the other, "his blue eyes sparkling with kindness // . . . smiled a lot at me" (43). A more sinister contrast is depicted in "Air Traffic" (36-38): two contrasting pairs of "American mustangs / . . . / In two's, / . . . / diving toward target . . ." The first of these pairs, labeled the "A-Team" and "out for blood," shot at "anything that moved / . . . even small dogs running / as in target practice." Team B, on the other hand, was "sometimes compassionate, / sparing the prone body in a ditch / . . . / They were our heroes / in those last uncharted days of war." What a telling definition of hero: a fighter pilot who does not strafe children. A final contrasting pair, after war's end, can be found in the father and the mother. The former, "in his prime" (59) and bored with his family, simply departs, delivering "a final humiliating sermon / of obscene accusations / as the last act of personal vengeance." The mother, on the other hand, pulls herself together and instills a sense of pride and hope in her four children: "Against all odds they were going to keep their hopes / and aspirations high" (62).

The primary incarnation of evil is Hitler, who is occasionally mentioned, and all he represented. His opposing pole, in a sense, is the American soldiers, and all they represent, who appear near the end of the collection. Contrary to what the population has been lead to believe, the Americans feel compassion for the suffering women and children, even though they are reluctant to show it, "blaming an icy wind / for falling tears." The Americans are also juxtaposed to the British forces, who "took stock, appropriated, / took time to confiscate anything of value" (51), and, at considerably greater length and over more than one poem, with the Russians, whose behavior, both as conquerors and as occupiers, need not be recapitulated here.

The final three poems deal with the protagonist's extremely positive encounter with America. "Going South" (70-72) is especially charming, as the young German with a passing command of British English encounters her first black person, Southern hospitality, and unintelligible dialects and accents. The linguistic confusion is charmingly reflected in rhymes, half-rhymes, and off-rhymes: "I took to guessing what was said, / nodded 'yes' and simply prayed / that half the answers would be right. / Southern drawl a wonderful fright!"

Dolores Hornbach Whelan follows up *Adrift between Two Worlds* (1997; reviewed in the 1999 *Yearbook*) with another substantial collection of English poems. It is divided into three expressly labeled "chapters": "The Spiritual Life," eleven for the most part serious poems on that topic and containing frequent references to death; "Living with the Past," fourteen poems on a variety of themes including the burden of collective guilt often placed upon a German-American; and "Life in These United States," an

eclectic group of twenty-nine poems. The divisions are far from rigid, as poems in one section contain themes that are equally applicable to a different one. Although there is an underlying unity of tone (of "poetic voice"), the form varies tremendously, ranging from prose to free verse to serious rhyme to humorous rhyme (the rhyme words in the first stanza on p. 4a are degrees, seas, trees, and debris). The page numbering is not continuous; each poem is numbered (as poem 4 in the example just cited), and if the poem is longer than one page, subsequent pages become 4b, etc. As is the case with Abikhaleh's book, technical problems (now including repeated lines) are not lacking.

A detailed comparison of certain themes here and in *Childhood in the Third Reich* would be interesting. An eerily similar experience to one described above is found in "Strafed Memories (Spring 1945)." Two teenage girls are bicycling down a rural road, when "Suddenly, out of nowhere, two fighter planes / Swooped over our heads, dove down so we could see / The pilots' laughing faces; they had a little fun. // Allowed their machine guns to hammer a path / Into our country road." (14b). This must have been a common phenomenon; my wife was strafed as an eight-year-old while wheeling her infant brother in a baby carriage along a sidewalk.

The image of America in this collection is even more negative than in *Adrift between Two Worlds*. This becomes strikingly apparent in the first line of "The Great Escape" (which also illustrates the thematic overlap between the chapters): "In the third year of my American imprisonment" (9a). The book's title is ironic. To the question "How do you like / Our freedom here?" she can only respond "I love nature in Connecticut" (17c), and later the title assumes more tangible form: "<<\$\$\$dream, dream, the American dream>>\$\$ / <<<\$\$\$ Of liberty, of dollars and equality>>>\$\$\$" (37a). The social criticism is sometimes ironic, as in the treatment of the commercialization of Christmas ("Oh, unto us profit is given," 50 f.), and, in general, the stereotypical uncultured myopia of Americans. On other occasions, the ironic distance vanishes and the speaker climbs on a soapbox to defend, e.g., Europe's much maligned system of socialized medicine.

The general—spiritual—positive framework does not disappear with the conclusion of the first section. The final two poems conclude with similar positive images: "In all that golden wrap-around / You feel God's warm embrace" and "And through the thickening haze they face / She feels God's warm embrace" (55, 56).

The embarrassment of riches continues with no less than three—very different—novels. **Karl Jakob Hirsch** (1892-1952) belongs to that large group of exiles who had begun to establish a literary reputation in Germany, but had not gained the stature that would open doors for them in the United States. He was able to publish his novels in this country only in serial form, in the New York *Neue Volkszeitung*, while supplementing his earnings as a creative writer and journalist by working at menial jobs. *Manhattan-Serenade* was serialized in 1939 under the title "Heute und Morgen" and now appears in book form for the first time. After his return to Germany in 1948 Hirsch corrected and revised the novel with the intention of publishing it as a book, a goal that he was unable to realize. Helmut Pfanner has incorporated these changes, for the most part minor, with the exception of a significantly revised conclusion; the original conclusion is printed in an appendix. The editor has added an extensive

Nachwort, as well as detailed notes explaining New York geography, English words like nickel and funeral home, and a few literary and historical references ranging from the "blaue Blume" to Franklin Roosevelt.

This is a typical, perhaps prototypical novel of exile in New York. It is also a *Bildungsroman* of sorts. Tom, the educated German protagonist, arrives on a hot July day, depressed and forlorn, not knowing a soul in the city, and is immediately faced with a bewildering array of linguistic and cultural difficulties. (Fortunately his new homeland is too uncultured to be bothered by the fact that his brown shoes do not match his black suit.) He undergoes a tripartite education: learning American ways and adapting to his new working-class milieu; recovering his sense of dignity and worth; and discovering his political identity. A major influence in his development is Sylvia, who becomes his wife: "Lehrer und liebende Frauen glauben an die Verwandlungsmöglichkeit des Menschen" (45). Also helpful are Frank, Sylvia's brother, who offers advice and encouragement, and Martin, a Nazi foil, whose philosophy serves as a significant stimulus to Tom's growing political awareness. "Ich fechte nicht gegen die Heimat," he says to Martin, his position becoming clarified as he verbalizes it, "ich kämpfe für sie. Für die Befreiung der alten Heimat von Euch" (117).

Manhattan-Serenade is far from uniformly optimistic. The characters, even Sylvia, have their low points, and, most notably, Frank is murdered (by Martin). But the overall tone is inspirational; indeed, the book is in some respects propagandistic: pro-American, anti-Nazi, and pro-German, as the above quote amply demonstrates. The style is simple and straightforward, reflecting the unambiguous moral message. Pfanner's edition is a welcome addition to the available corpus of German-American exile literature.

Hans Eichner is a name familiar to many readers of the *Yearbook*, but as a professor of German literature at the University of Toronto, not as a novelist. Born in Vienna in 1921, he fled in 1938, eventually winding up in Canada after an adventurous odyssey that included Australia and doctoral study in London. *Kahn & Engelmann* is "ein Roman, in dem es zwar wenig gibt, was nicht wirklich geschehen ist, aber auch wenig, was so geschah, wie es hier berichtet wird" (from the brief *Nachwort*, 367). After a few backward glances, the "saga" begins with a brief section on the trials and tribulations of Jewish life in late nineteenth-century Hungary, leading to the narrator's grandmother Sidonie Kahn setting out on foot for Vienna with her husband and daughter. Sidonie, a young woman when her journey begins, is the first of a series of strong female characters who become successful in business. Midway through the book we meet the second half of the title, "Sandor Engelmann—mein Vater, um diesen Sachverhalt gleich festzustellen" (159). The narrative focus shifts constantly, from the personal to the financial to the cultural to the political. The final section—surely largely but by no means entirely autobiographical—traces the life of the narrator after the *Anschluss*, including references to his present circumstances, as he sits at his desk in Haifa and writes.

This literary debut is an extraordinarily rich work and only the most extensive review could begin to do it justice. It is the saga of several generations of a Jewish family, and we see them in various geographical and political situations. It is also a

highly personal account by a first-person narrator. Last but certainly not least, it is a portrait of the brief heyday of the Jewish Vienna of Freud, Schnitzler, and Co., and its destruction in 1938. Memory (remembrance) is an important theme. On a superficial level, the contrast between reported minutia on the one hand, and the narrator's frequent comments that he is not sure of something, is fascinating. And then there is the matter of Jewish memory and remembrance.

One episode subtly ties together many of the novel's themes and issues. "Gegen Anfang der fünfziger Jahre [the lack of specificity is striking] war ich zum ersten Mal seit 1938 wieder in Wien" (301-2). He visits the Jewish cemetery, searching for his father's grave. At the entrance "stand ein Dutzend Polizisten: die Lebenden hatte man nicht beschützt, aber nun beschützte man die Toten." An old man offers to accompany him on his quest amidst the "wildgewachsener Efeu, seit Jahren nicht beschnittene Zierbüsche, Unkraut und vor allem ein Gestüpp von wilden oder verwilderten Rosen. [. . .] Der Granitblock auf dem Grab meines Vaters war unbeschädigt; die Inschrift war fast völlig verdeckt von wilden Ranken, die Rosen blühten." The combination of neglect and beauty is suggestive of the Jewish past of Vienna, of which the narrator's father was a part. The old man, as promised, says a Hebrew prayer at the grave, "während ich unwissend und beschämt schwieg"—the narrator's distance from his Jewish heritage speaks volumes. Should not the city of Vienna take over the upkeep of the cemetery? "[. . .] aber ich verwarf diesen Gedanken gleich wieder: Die Wildnis mit den blühenden Rosen war wohl das richtige Denkmal für diese untergangene Welt, und selbst daß die Hakenkreuze noch auf den Mauern prangten, schien mir in Ordnung. Sie legten Zeugnis dafür ab, wie diese Welt untergegangen war" (302-3).

"Unzufriedenheit bei allem, Wechsel von Beschäftigung zu Beschäftigung, Qual überall: Tu was, schreit es aus dem Kochtopf, tu was, brüllt der Staubsauger, tu was, kreischt es auf der Leinwand" (7), we read on the first page of *Mephisto ist nicht tot* by **Geertje Suhr**. The author of a collection of poetry and a published dissertation on Heine, Suhr's biography is similar to that of several other German-American writers: born in Germany, immigration as a young adult, study of *Germanistik* at the University of Illinois, debut as a creative writer relatively late in life. Like Eichner's novel, Suhr's does not have a significant German-American thematic element; like Hirsch's, it focuses on a single protagonist, Gorda. We follow her development from early childhood to early adulthood. As the introductory quote indicates, she is in a constant state of turmoil.

The book is divided into three sections, entitled "Anni," "Amerika," and "Hans," indicating her three primary focuses at three stages of her young life: her cousin, Anni, when as a child in the early postwar years she struggles, for the most part unsuccessfully, to find companionship; America, which she visits and experiences as an exchange student; and Hans, her first serious boyfriend as she prepares to enter adulthood. Intelligent and multi-talented, young Gorda is the victim of a combination of her own temperament and an unsettled family life. The family often moves, and Gorda has difficulty making friends: "Die mögen mich nicht. Mit mir stimmt was nicht. Die-Neue-die-Neue" (44). The style of this first section is strongly reflective of the mental processes of a highly active child with psychological problems, alternating

between third-person narration and childlike (childish?) interior monologue, as here. At the conclusion of this section, Gorda, now a teenager, reflects, as the perspective shifts from first- to second- to third-person: "Rapunzel vorm Spiegel im Turmgefängnis: Was soll nur aus mir werden? Eine vertrockete Jungfer bleibst du für immer und ewig. Es muss etwas geschehen. Sie will fort von hier. [...] In Kalifornien soll sich alles alles wenden" (92).

And indeed it does, as we see in a prophetic passage on the first page of the second section: "Rapunzel ließ ihren Zopf herunter. Als sie ihn hochzog, hingen daran etliche Prinzen . . ." (95). Not that Rapunzel has found utopia; but now her problems are those of a typical teenager. All in all, Gorda adapts well, and her time in America is both pleasant and educational, in the broadest sense of the word. As in the first section, the style is appropriate to the situation, reflecting the thought process of a girl of Gorda's age and temperament.

The third section has an inauspicious beginning: "Dann ist man plötzlich wieder zu Hause, aber was heißt zu Hause, wenn man sich fremd *weiß*" (151; emphasis added). How will Gorda adjust? Fortunately, fairly well. Utopia is still missing, but as in California her life is more or less normal, with the more or less normal problems of a girl in her late teens. School is, of course, a significant concern: "Die Lehrer beginnen das Einpauken fürs Abitur. [...] Lernen heißt: es tun, ohne es zu können, damit aus den Fehlern das Wissen erwächst" (215). If girlfriends dominated her consciousness in the first section ("Anni") and an entire new country and new experiences the second section ("Amerika"), her focus is now on young men ("Hans"), as well as a few who are not so young. The relationship with Hans, her first love, does not last. "Hans, sagt der Schmerz, er wird dich nie wieder küssen, er wird dich nie wieder streicheln, das hält kein Mensch aus. Hans, sagt der Schmerz, ..." (223; ellipsis in the original).

The plot of the novel offers little that is new: a gifted but difficult girl in the troubled setting of postwar Germany finds a new beginning as an exchange student in California. Upon her return, she experiences the normal ups and downs of someone approaching the *Abitur*. The style, however, is truly fascinating; I hope the many quotes will at least give an inkling of this.

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