

***“Von Ost nach West - ein deutscher Fall?”***  
**Thoughts of a latter-day Australian Leichhardt**  
**in the extended Federal Republic of Germany**

JOHN MILFULL

I still remember quite clearly the last meeting of the Australia-GDR Friendship Society, Sydney Branch. It was established in the early 70s, when the first Australian Labor government for twenty years beat the Americans to the draw by not only recognising the PRC, but the GDR as well. Later Fred Clarke, old Communist and, for many years, secretary of the Teachers' Federation, told me of the quiet panic that this totally unexpected initiative had given rise to in the Party leadership – it was clear that a Friendship Society ought to be founded on the traditional basis, but the requisite knowledge of the German language and the GDR was nowhere to be found. And thus it came to pass that Fred, who knew not a word of German and had never been to the GDR, was able to crown his party career with the office of President. I was very fond of him – his old-fashioned idealism, untroubled by any detailed knowledge of the less attractive aspects of everyday life under state socialism, but mixed with a good portion of sound Australian cynicism, appealed to me immediately, and when he approached me as brand new Professor of German and rumoured expert on GDR literature to act as one of twelve patrons of the new Society, I said yes at once. After all, the flavour of the epoch was *détente*, improving contact with people in East and West, and I felt myself personally and professionally obliged to join in.

But now we were sitting together in the year of grace 1990, wondering what the future held, My friend John Perkins, an economic historian with pronounced anarchist tendencies, and I had been summoned to give advice. Our colleagues from the union movement could not fathom the immensity of the change – as there was no more GDR, they suggested, the Society would need to be renamed! I am rather ashamed of having made the sarcastic suggestion that the only alternative was a Ludwig Leichhardt Society. Not only had good old Ludwig been born “on the territory” of the vanished GDR – with the help of the League for Friendship between Peoples, we had recently celebrated his jubilee in the presence of a Leichhardt grand-nephew and lookalike, specially flown in from Cottbus for the occasion. And Leichhardt could offer us the only appropriate motto for the new Society, *Von Ost nach West* (*From East to West*), even if his planned crossing of the Australian

continent – seen from Europe, from left to right – had ended in the sands of the desert. *Absit omen*.

“*Von Ost nach West – ein deutscher Fall*”, the dissident ballad-singer Wolf Biermann had written some fifteen years before, in his splendid if slightly fraudulent lament on the defection of Florian Havemann (son of the best-known GDR “system critic”, Robert Havemann) to the West. Its title, *Enfant perdu*, he borrowed from Heine and of course, the Bible. The pun is brilliant – “*ein deutscher Fall*” means both “a German fall from grace” and “a typically German case”, with overtones of “court case” – fleeing the Republic was of course a crime in the GDR. Biermann foretells a Leichhardt-like disaster for young Havemann – he will end up as “left-wing clown” in the deserts of West German capitalism. Ironically, Biermann himself ended up as a right-wing clown in the West, while “little Flori Have” is now a lay member of the Brandenburg Constitutional Court, doing his best to ensure the project of “capitalism with a human face” and, coming full circle, agreeing to stand as a PDS candidate in Saxony for the next elections. I was never a great fan of Biermann’s – and indeed, the wave of solidarity that the withdrawal of his GDR citizenship during a concert tour of the West inspired in the GDR intelligentsia had less to do with his literary talent and his personality than with the horrified rejection of this “final solution“ for internal critics. Since the *Wende* and the ensuing flood of testimonies on early insights into the “unreformability of socialism” it must seem incomprehensible that GDR intellectuals should have protested at one of them being allowed to leave – the benevolent party leadership even organised a *surprise party* in Cologne – and that the West German press, as the vanguard of democratic socialism, ran to support their East German colleagues with light sabres gleaming. But then things were a little more complicated than is admitted nowadays.

I am sure Biermann hates being reminded of the lines he delivered with such pathos at the time – these days I play them to my students to illustrate the difficulties of German unification:

*Wer abhaut aus dem Osten*  
Those who clear out from the East  
*Der ist auf unsere Kosten*  
have, at our expense  
*Von sich selber abgehaun*  
Cleared out from their own selves

*Laß, laß in die Binsen gehen*  
let them go down the gurgler  
*Damit wir im Osten sehen*  
so that we in the East can see

*daß der, der abfällt, fällt!*  
that desertion is really a fall  
*Wir machen hier Sozialismus*  
Here we'll build socialism  
*Trotz Rotz und Stalinismus*  
In spite of the crap and the Stalinism  
*und öffnen uns noch die Welt*  
and crack the world open yet

*Die DDR, auf Dauer*  
The GDR, in the long run  
*Braucht weder Knast noch Mauer*  
needs neither the clink [jail] nor the Wall  
*wir bringen es so weit!*  
we'll make it yet!  
*Zu uns fliehn dann in Massen*  
and then, in masses the people  
*Die Menschen, und gelassen*  
will flee to us, and we'll be relaxed  
*sind wir drauf vorbereitet*  
and prepared for that

Alas, the outcome was rather different – the Masses fled in the opposite direction, the world “cracked open” the GDR. But Biermann was by no means alone in such defiant declarations of solidarity. Even Günter Kunert, who later embarked on the great excursion from East to West of his own free will and without any obvious regret, had earlier expressed an insight which has lost none of its validity. In the poem “Schiller’s Bed” he writes:

*Ein einig etwas wollen wir sein, nicht eineiig.*  
We’d like to be a united something, but not  
*Keine Zwillinge. Keine deutschen Siamesen*  
identical twins, not German Siamese

*Vor dem Bettchen, der fahlen Decke, entfärbten*  
Standing before [Schiller’s] narrow bed, the faded quilt, the discoloured  
*Kränzchen, dem Schleifchen, stellt sich*  
wreath and bow, we are not transformed  
*nicht her, was wir nie waren: ein einig Volk.*  
into what we never were, a united people

*Ein Volk von einigen Herrschaften, vielen*  
a people with few [or: united] rulers and many

*Knechtschaften, versippt nur wie Habicht und Huhn.*  
subservients, no more akin than the hawk and the chicken.

More awkward still: unfortunately, it became abundantly clear that Biermann and Kunert, voluntarily or involuntarily, had quite definitely “cleared out from their own [literary] selves” in the process. It was the complex mixture of hope for a democratic reform of socialism and rejection of the current conditions in the GDR that gave their work its special quality. It clearly had something to do with the feeling of being taken so awfully seriously by the Party and “its sword and shield” – suddenly, the tension was gone and with it their own individual voice.

I remember attending a conference of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation some years before the *Wende*, in a five star hotel in Ludwigsburg. One afternoon, slightly benumbed by the usual culinary excesses, a group of colleagues debated the difficult issue as to whether culture would prove superfluous when we had finally reached the socialist paradise – its ultimate *raison d'être* would disappear. I must admit that I saw no great urgency in the problem, either in East or West, but I am of course aware that any argument that suggests that the deformations of GDR socialism were somehow compensated by the fact that it brought forth a rich and vital cultural scene, perhaps the only area in which it really overtook the rather spotty West German production, is morally and politically untenable. If this fearful alternative between the survival of culture and the attainment of a just society really existed, we would of course all be obliged to do without culture.

In a recent course I offered on the German-Jewish experience in the Weimar Republic, one of my students made the entirely legitimate point that sometimes I seemed to be giving the impression that the extraordinary cultural achievements of the German-Jewish intelligentsia somehow balanced the destruction of European Jewry in the Nazi death camps. The pearls produced by such an extreme irritation of the intellectual oyster may indeed be particularly valuable and beautiful, but they carry within them the curse of their origins. Nevertheless, it remains true that the cultural insights of “difficult times”, as Brecht termed them, survive these difficulties, and he had no need to worry that those that come after us and live in better times will no longer understand the problems they address. Only too often the “blossoming landscapes” of the promised new age don't arrive on time or at all, and great catastrophes are regularly followed by smaller ones, until the *Weltgeist* psyches himself up for the next big bang.

In the first few years after the *Wende*, the West German media launched a massive campaign which, starting from the entirely correct observation that the vast majority of GDR intellectuals had repeatedly affirmed their critical

solidarity with their state, took Foreign Minister Kinkel's instruction to "liquidate the GDR" as their motto and attempted to liquidate the intellectuals with it. Indeed, the extent of this solidarity was unique in the Soviet block – the number of actual dissidents was small, and included few well-known names in comparison with Warsaw or Prague. The reasons for the divergent position of East German intellectuals demand an in depth study, but I do not believe it results from a surplus of *Untertanengeist*, but rather from a shared antipathy towards their capitalist big brother and from the unique situation of the Party in the GDR, which had had to establish its anti-Fascist credentials against its own people and could never sustain the role of liberator of an "occupied" country from Nazi oppression.

Remarkably, it was precisely its origins in German anti-Fascism and its consequent ambivalence towards the German past that attracted the solidarity of the GDR intelligentsia – the sense of belonging to the "other", better Germany was strong and survived many disappointments. The Party's mission, to sow the seeds of a better society in the soil of the Soviet Zone, contaminated by the dioxin of Nazism, found many supporters among the intellectuals as well, it offered a means of coming to terms with one's own past which took place in the name of the people. The Party and the intellectuals shared a curious position, which Peter Gay has defined in another context as "the outsider as insider" – they confronted a sullen, apathetic population which, like many post-*Wende* journalists, made no distinction between forms and aims of governance. Here the so-called "remigrants" – especially those who had returned from the West – played a key role. Brecht's savage dialectical joke on the uprising of June 1953 has too often been understood in one sense only:

*Nach dem Aufstand des 17. Juni*  
After the uprising of 17 June  
*Ließ der Sekretär des Schriftstellerverbands*  
the secretary of the Writers' Union  
*In der Stalinallee Flugblätter verteilen*  
has pamphlets distributed in the Stalinallee  
*Auf denen zu lesen war, daß das Volk*  
in which one could read that the people  
*Das Vertrauen der Regierung verscherzt habe*  
had forfeited the trust of the government  
*Und es nur durch verdoppelte Arbeit*  
and only by doubling their work rate  
*Zurückerobern könne. Wäre es da*  
could win it back. But wouldn't it be  
*Nicht doch einfacher, die Regierung*  
a good deal simpler if the government  
*Löste das Volk auf und*

dissolved the people and  
*Wählte ein anderes?*  
elected another?

Like many “remigrants”, Brecht had difficulties with the “Volk” – the word itself seemed contaminated for good. In the same year he wrote:

*Vor acht Jahren war alles hier anders*  
Eight years ago, everything was different here.  
*Die Metzgerfrau weiß es.*  
The butcher’s wife knows it.  
*Der Postbote hat einen zu aufrechten Gang.*  
The postman walks far too upright  
*Und was war der Elektriker?*  
And what was the electrician up to?

For all his public and private criticism of specific measures of the regime, he shared with the Party leadership the nagging and uncomfortable feeling of distrust at speaking, as anti-Fascist and refugee from the Nazi terror, for a people that only recently had bayed their support for Hitler. Sometimes this finds expression in highly dubious images, which betray the macho man of his early years:

*(Wenn so der Dichter Führen und Verführen*  
If the poet here talks of leadership and seduction  
*In einem Atem nennt, als sei es eins*  
in the same breath, as if they were one and the same  
*Denkt er an Völker, die sich nicht recht rühren*  
he’s thinking of peoples who don’t respond normally  
*Und wollen ihr Vergnügen so, als wär es keins.)*  
and [even] want their kicks without showing it.

Obviously, the frigid population resisted the liberating orgasm of communism in the arms of the returning anti-Fascists – I hope that in the mean time we have progressed far enough to seek responsibility for bad sex in bed and in politics in both partners. Yet it’s not hard to empathise with this recurring attitude among many returnees and converts to socialism: there must have been many times in the lives of German anti-Fascists when they would gladly have elected another people. Brecht’s joke has unexpected depths, he not only exposes the ridiculousness of Kuba’s formulation, but also understands the frustration that gives rise to it.

Many East German attempts to interpret the uprising see all criticism of the party line as of Fascist origin, not merely because West German agents did in fact try to foment the rebellion, but because the relationship of the writers to

their *Volk*, which had just spoken with many and varied voices, was anything but secure. I suspect that even the much disparaged party leadership will appear to later historians in a different light; at least it avoided the worst excesses of Stalinism with some tactical skill, and if the deaths at the Wall remain unforgivable, it was not only the policies of the Soviet Union and the GDR which led to them. Eric Hobsbawm's acute analysis of the Cold War in *The Age of Extremes* has received far too little attention in West German circles: if the West was never really serious about its constantly proclaimed *roll back* strategy, how on earth was the East supposed to know? I still remember with some glee discovering detailed plans for the conquest of the GDR on a walk in the Berlin Grunewald forest, no doubt mislaid by the friendly British forces whose children my daughter went to school with – probably during a Queen's Birthday exercise.

This alienation of the remigrants from the mass of the population was, however, a passing phase. With the years they grew reconciled, often after some inner turmoil, with the people who had driven them from their country and imprisoned them in camps and jails. This reconciliation took place in the name of a socialism which penetrated the deformations of their socialisation and the ideologies to which these had made them vulnerable to reveal human beings in urgent need of help, the victim within the perpetrator and the perpetrator within the victim. It found its expression in many films and plays, novels, stories and ballads: GDR culture provided a broad and varied range of persuasive models for a humane society. This was at once its strength and its weakness: it constructed an alternative society which was often hard to reconcile with the reality of everyday life and led to a certain chronic schizophrenia among the artists. But suddenly, in autumn 1989, it seemed that the schizophrenia had come to an end: socialism with a human face, adapted from the key texts of GDR culture, filled the streets and squares everywhere.

Precisely for this reason, the *Wende* within the *Wende*, which I witnessed myself at the demonstrations in Halle, proved a heavy blow for most GDR intellectuals. If the first protest movement, with its insistence on consensus and non-violence, seemed a historically unique expression of the values of this process of reconciliation, the irruption of muffled roars for *Deutschland einig Vaterland* ensued like the confirmation of the remigrants' worst fears: the voice of a *Volk* that was no longer a WE but once again an IT. And the Soviet Union, which had constantly thwarted reform movements in its subjected "brother states", was vaguely in favour of what seemed to be happening; to quote Kafka, "this vagueness was the real outrage". There were great injustices on both sides – the bearers of the nation's conscience, the authors who had played the role of confidant and security blanket for their readers, were suddenly transformed into characterless Stasi thugs, the brave,

good-natured workers mutated into greedy vassals of capitalism, prepared to trade forty years of proletarian culture for a video recorder.

Twelve years later, things look rather different. It's not the first time in history a dream has not been realised, and the disappointment at its collapse is now more evenly distributed. The question as to whether GDR culture actually succeeded in contributing to the construction of a more humane society must now be posed in a quite different and in many ways far more difficult context: will the people who were shaped and formed by this culture be able to transfer at least some of their values into the new structures? The by now notorious volatility of the East German electorate seems to present some grounds for hope: it is now a truism that Osis and Wesis think and act differently – as Kafka would say, “in good and in evil”. Never mind, *variety is the spice of life*. I only hope that the great journey from East to West will not end in the desert of a globalised *Standort Deutschland* terrorised by rampaging skinheads, but that with time my East Germans will make their own contribution to a lively mix of political and cultural forms in a new Federal Europe. Then the journey will not have been in vain.