Gedanken auf dem Fahrrad: Publizistik aus zwei Jahrzehnten. By Ruth Werner. Berlin: Verlag Neues Leben. 1980. 272 pages. 8,60 M.

Ruth Werner, author, novelist, journalist, but above all, seasoned socialist, articulates her "DDR-Bewußtsein" here in a series of journalistic pieces written from 1955 to 1979, describing various manifestations of economic production in the German socialist state. The image of the bicycle in the title connotes the mobility of the journalist as she goes from place to place gathering data about a factory, a trade fair, a party conference, or whatever. The book is a record of people and places, institutions and events, filtered through her own direct experience and observation. She literally joins those who ride bicycles to socialists' meetings underground at night during Faschism; she identifies herself affectively with those people on the morning shift at the chemical plant where the handlebars of their bicycles gleam in the sun. The book is in every sense a pious book, much as Vergil is called pious, in part because he carried his venerable father on his shoulders. Ruth Werner continually carries the weight of the recognized socialist venerables, throughout this collection of writings. No one is invoked more often than Wilhelm Pieck, "der erste Präsident unserer Republik," and the cumbersome name "Wilhelm-Pieck-Stadt Guben" rolls frequently from the pen with the obvious relish of the writer. If the reader seeks that other meaning of pious--devotion to the gods--that is here too. Ruth Werner is filled with the ardor of the new god within. One notes with what enthusiasm (en + theos) she denies the Christian God of German tradition. "Mir fällt die Vorstellung schwer, daß ein Wissenschaftler religiös ist, an Gott und die Ewigkeit glaubt," she remarks to a production manager whom she is interviewing, whose only reason for not joining the party is its materialism. She sums up her encounter with the Christian believer: "Mein Ziel ist, daß die Menschen auf der Erde besser und glücklicher werden. Deshalb bin ich Sozialist." The reader recognizes the religious character of her secular credo.

Each of the articles shows people developing new practices out of old, transforming existing structures through historical time into the inevitable new shapes approaching the socialist ideal. In "Der Anfang" Ruth Werner sketches the developments of the AEG Henningsdorf around 1945. As the liberating Red Army approached in the last days of the war, technical drafts and documents (especially those relating to weapons production) as well as Hitler relics, were hastily consigned to burning in the power plant and the "Nazis" escaped; the furnaces continued to be nourished however by those forward-looking enough to think of providing the region with electricity after the liberation. Ruth Werner celebrates these eight "Arbeiter" and names them along with six "Kollegen," engineers who did not flee. With deft strokes the journalist depicts how the plant was able to obtain fuel, retain the means of production, and begin immediately to respond to the needs of the people: household stoves and, mirabile dictu: plowshares! This parting of the ways, fascists there and productive workers here, signals the hero of the book--the worker of whatever sort, who, according to the "Grammatik des Sozialismus," takes a place in the collective and becomes a contributor to the socialist state. In the early part of the book a kind of heroism may seem plausible in retrospect; later, report tends to yield to recollection, critique to glorification.

Gedanken auf dem Fahrrad presents the healthful pill that every German socialist needs to swallow--their historical roots--with the sugar coating of poetic devices created by the belletristic journalist. American Germanists probably do not need this book. They ought already to have an informed and sensitive awareness of the GDR. But the American public needs it, and American politicians need it badly. Our cultural and political myopia can be cured only by antidotes like this, for this mythopoetic stuff is the heart and soul of the German Democratic Republic. Motherhood and apple pie here find a GDR counterpart.

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Wenn es ans Leben geht: Meine Geschichte. By Peter Edel. Berlin: Verlag der Nation. 1979. 2. Aufl. 2 vols. (451, 420 pp.) 19,80 M.

Peter Edel's autobiography focuses mainly on the years between 1928 and 1948, with frequent shifts forward to the present (1978, where the book begins and ends) and passages about important events of the intervening years. The result is a complicated structure that makes the book initially somewhat hard to follow. However, there is always a reason for one of these shifts in time, for they give the original events deeper meaning, and the reader grows accustomed to them. The length of the work--two volumes of more that 400 pages each--also looks intimidating, but again, once started, the reader finds the narrative compelling enough to continue. Edel has lived a fascinating life, and the friends who kept urging him to write it were right. There are very few insignificant passages and relatively little of the ideological padding that sometimes fills biographies from the GDR. Edel is a respected writer and artist in the GDR. The book is illustrated with his own sketches, including some saved from the concentration camps, as well as with photographs. For many years he wrote for the Weltbühne. In 1969 his novel Die Bilder des Zeugen Schattmann was published. It became a best-seller in the GDR and was the basis for a television film, with Edel as a consultant during the filming (an experience to which he returns several times in his autobiography). The novel itself was largely autobiographical; the autobiography relates many of the same incidents and puts them into perspective.

Edel's subject is the period of his growing up in Berlin, which coincided with the Third Reich and the Holocaust. As a Mischling, the son of a Jewish father and a German mother, he was directly affected by the anti-Jewish measures of the 1930's.

Peter Edel expected to become an artist like his grandfather, Edmund Edel. He grew up in a world of art, literature, and theater. Among the persons he met who most impressed him were Max Liebermann and later Käthe Kollwitz. After being expelled from the Gymnasium as a Jew, he took art lessons with a group of young people whose families intended to emigrate. The beginning of World War II frustrated these plans. Like many Berlin Jews, Edel was assigned to forced labor in an armaments factory. He married a long-time friend, Esther Marcus, although they were both quite young. The couple became involved in sabotage and in the distribution of underground leaflets and messages--the only means of resistance they had. They were arrested and eventually sent to Auschwitz. There, Esther was taken to the gas chamber, but Edel's artistic training saved him: he was put into a team of artist-prisoners in Sachsenhausen to counterfeit Allied (especially British) currency. After the end of the war, he made his way back from a concentration camp in Austria to the western sector of Berlin. In 1948 he chose to move to the Soviet sector, which was to become the capital of the GDR.

All these experiences are related in absorbing detail. Edel believes he has a mission to tell younger GDR citizens what happened during the war years, and he is an effective interpreter. What is not always plausible is his account of his political development. How did the middle-class boy become a communist? Was it really so straightforward and consistent? Did he not, in later years, sometimes question the policies of his own government as well as those of the Federal Republic? The answers to such questions are perhaps hardly to be expected in such a book; the questions, however, are inspired in the reading.

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