



Katharina Raabe

As the fog lifted

Literature in eastern central Europe since 1989

After 1989, uncensored editions of many classics of contemporary eastern European literature became available, and numerous authors were discovered for the first time in the West. Meanwhile, a younger generation of writers, their imaginations liberated by events, were quick to respond to the new appetite for understanding the communist past. Katharina Raabe, editor for eastern European literature at Suhrkamp Verlag, surveys some of the most important of these authors and describes German publishers' role in bringing them to western readers.



More than twenty years ago, "it seemed to the western mind that through the Manichaeian division into East and West a whole section of Europe had been swallowed up by the fog", as the Serbo–Hungarian Jewish writer Danilo Kis put it.¹ Today the fog has lifted. But the landscapes that were once veiled have in some cases altered to the point of being unrecognizable. Kis' gloomy prediction that this part of Europe would be lost forever has come true in a different way from anything Kis could have thought possible: the Iron Curtain has gone. But could Kis have imagined that whilst for the "Eastern Bloc" the separation was largely peaceful, his own Yugoslavia would sink into bloody wars, ethnic expulsions and massacres?

Today the map of eastern Europe is made up of smaller units, and the boundaries are more numerous. It still seems incredible that the European Union now includes the former Baltic Soviet republics as well as the former Yugoslav republic of Slovenia, alongside Slovakia, Romania and Bulgaria. To speak of eastern and western Europe seems a political anachronism. And yet this "eastern Europe" obstinately lingers in the consciousness.

If we look at the literature it becomes apparent that this division has merely been shifted; that with the emergence of individual literatures out of the uniform greyness of the socialist landscape, the contours of old *Mitteleuropa* are showing through on the new map. It becomes clear, too, that the only literary centre remaining in the East is Russia.

One of the challenges of the postcommunist era has been the need to get to know not only the new political realities in the nations that emerged from the fog but also their historical and cultural situation. Travelling, intercultural exchange and building and developing relationships depended, however, on the existence of a sound basis of understanding, communication and translation. Writing a common European history, which after the fall of the Wall suddenly seemed achievable, could not be done without a common memory. How else could a common history come into being?

Books and libraries have a special role to play here. The literature of the twentieth century has shown itself equal to the task of describing even the breakdown of civilization that was Auschwitz and Kolyma. But until 1989 this literature was insufficiently known, and its reception forms part of the description of the literary process that has occurred since 1989. So too does the study of the texts that have inscribed themselves into the emerging grand narrative of the end of communism — an end accompanied by the rise of a national and post-national Europe.

In November 1990, almost a year to the day after the fall of the Wall, the renowned Kafka scholar Eduard Goldstücker travelled from London to Berlin. Speaking in debate at the Czech Centre, Goldstücker, a symbolic figure in the Prague Spring who would return to Prague from exile a short time later, made a thought-provoking statement. The most powerful novels depicting the present age, he suggested, would come from eastern central Europe, where people were confronted with their history in a more radical and inescapable way than in the West.

Who could Goldstücker have been thinking of? What books come to mind today when we recall his prediction? And what was the role of literature in the rehabilitation of the "European consciousness paralysed down one side", to quote Jorge Semprún, speaking in Buchenwald in 1995? What part does literature play in the work of remembering?

A western publisher makes a start and pulls off a coup

The idea was born around Christmas 1989 and became reality a few weeks later. Keen to play their part in shaping and giving expression to a historically unique situation, Michael Naumann, publisher of Rowohlt, and Ingke Brodersen, editor of the *rororo*-aktuell series, founded Rowohlt Berlin. The subsidiary was the first publishing house to be established as a direct response to the collapse of communism in eastern Europe. Berlin, the point where East and West meet, would be the ideal place to bring out publications dealing with the collapse of communism and the forceful return of history. This list would contain topical non-fiction publications, standard historical works, non-fiction and memoirs, plus a small and carefully chosen literary programme. Ingrid Krüger, who had been responsible for the literature of the GDR and the Soviet Union for Luchterhand Verlag since 1971, was engaged as an editor. Rowohlt Berlin's great coup, which they pulled off right at the start, was to sign general contracts with Imre Kertész and Péter Nádas, authors who hitherto had been represented by the Hungarian state literary agency Artisjus.

Goldstücker's prediction came true in overwhelming fashion. One book single-handedly caused expectations to soar for literature from the East: Péter Nádas' *A Book of Memories*,² which had appeared in Hungarian original in 1986 (German trans. *Buch der Erinnerung*). The 1300 page-long work, translated by the doyenne of Hungarian literature in Germany Hildegard Grosche,³ was published in autumn 1991 by Rowohlt Berlin (English trans. 1998). The critics were euphoric. They saw in it a "psychogram of an era" (Radio Bremen), a "milestone of Hungarian and probably of European prose" (*Neue Zürcher Zeitung*), even "the book of the century" (*Die Zeit*). More than 25 000 copies were sold in under a year. Nádas' narrative art, a scrupulous, moody realism, unfolds in long, meandering sentences reminiscent of Thomas Mann or Hermann Broch, which extend over pages and touch on a thousand details. In a prose driven by the imagination but firmly controlled by experience, ideological clichés dissolve as if in acid. Where did the author find

the tranquillity and the determination to create an "individuality" that in its complexity evinced all the features that Theodor W. Adorno had attributed to the developed and refined late bourgeois subject?⁴

The complex structure links a coming-of-age novel from the Stalinist Hungary of the 1950s with the experiences of a writer in the northern German town of Heiligendamm around 1900 (with unmistakable echoes of Thomas Mann) and a homoerotic love story played out in the East Berlin of the 1970s. Significant political-historical events — the year 1953, with the death of Stalin and the workers' uprising in East Berlin; the Hungarian revolution of 1956; the crushing of the Prague Spring in 1968 — remain in the background and yet are present in every fibre of the text. It is not, however, quite accurate to say that the three strands of the story are "linked". Nádas writes "parallel memories of several persons, slightly time-shifted [...] And I *could* be all these different persons even if I'm not in reality."⁵

Nádas wanted "to examine impersonal history in the most personal manner possible" and so centred his existential self-searching on the body. Not since Proust, surely, has it been possible to find sensual, erotic perception described with anything like such subtlety or such tender, glowing intensity. Nádas writes that once his imagination had developed its own momentum he had to wait: he withdrew into a "prettily furnished but hellish apartment on the eighth floor" and there, for two years, lay on the bed, wearing ear-plugs because of the noisy building work going on outside, and let his imagination work undisturbed. One day he got up and started to write — and didn't stop another ten years.

What was new about his novel was the radical attempt to depict the most intimate emotions of the human subject as a place where social repression and ideological violence were played out. "Feelings that conflict with the rules" are the most effective barometer of the human condition in a dictatorship. When the '68ers in the West proclaimed that "the private is political", they probably never had this kind of pain in mind, yet for the first time their slogan acquires a precise meaning: the deformations of the individual extend as far as the erotic sphere, the fear of betrayal and of betraying others, the conflict between obedience to authority and desire, the interweaving of happiness, shame and the pangs of conscience.

No, this is not the religious fear of Stephen Daedalus in Catholic Dublin or the erotic torments of Gustav von Aschenbach in Venice. The systematic destruction of the personality in the Stalinist societies of the 1950s, which in eastern Europe directly followed the devastation of war, the Shoah and the mass deportations to the camps, was the result of seismic changes that left no sphere of life unscathed. In a description of a night stroll through East Berlin in the early 1970s, the first-person narrator is taking a walk with his lover Melchior. They avoid the new residential districts, whose brutal architecture expresses the degradation of the human being; instead they

choose routes where one could still see, feel, see something of the city's ravaged, continually deteriorating, patched-up, blackened, disintegrating individuality. I might say that we took our walks through the stage set of individuality's Europe-size tragedy, though in the end we could choose only between the beak and the bleaker — that was the extent of our freedom.⁶

In this novel, characters appeared and conflicts arose that were nowhere to be found in books by contemporary western German writers: characters that had to come to terms with their mortality, with the fatal power of love, with betrayal, hatred and above all guilt. For a writer to describe life under socialism using the poetic and speculative means of introspection, maintaining his grip on reality without sacrificing the dreamlike dimension, set new standards for a work of literary imagination and critical intellect. If works of equal calibre could be looked forward to in coming years, then a new age was about to dawn.

From censorship to the dictatorship of the market

The rise of Rowohlt Berlin coincided with the decline of the publishing houses in the east of the city that had traditionally specialized in the literature of eastern Europe.⁷ In the publishing houses of the GDR, there had been specialist editors who systematically sifted through a nation's literature, who could read small eastern European languages like Georgian or Estonian. In western Germany, however, only a handful of editors could even manage Russian. While publishing the literature of every country from Azerbaijan to Hungary had once been the field of East German publishing houses such as Volk & Welt, in the new publishing landscape there was — with rare exceptions — no further need for the expertise of all these readers, editors and translators.⁸ In the reunified Germany, the degree of interest in the majority of these writers was minimal. Publishers no longer aspired to introduce voices from the former socialist countries — it just was not worth it. Hence, the question facing the surviving eastern German publishing houses was now: which of these authors would hold their own in a competitive book market?

In 1990, Rowohlt Berlin was still working on its first programme, which comprised exposés such as *Tatort Politbüro* (Politburo — the scene of the crime), the memoirs of Walter Janka (the publisher of Aufbau who had spent years in prison), and topical books by Günter Schabowski, Vaclav Havel, Jiri Dienstbier and others. That spring, Volk & Welt, liberated from the restraints of censorship, made an impressive showing. Works by Shalamov, Platonov and Bulgakov appeared, many for the first time in uncensored editions. Contemporary authors emerged who had previously been denied a readership. Volk & Welt reacted to the increased interest in east European literature three years later with a programme consisting of more than forty titles, under the heading "Now read the Russians!"

However it would be incorrect to say that the literature of eastern Europe, especially that of Russia, had been neglected by the west German market before the fall of the Wall. As late as 1989, the first novel of a new Russian author, Tatyana Tolstaya, had been published, appearing simultaneously in two different German translations with Luchterhand and Volk & Welt, to considerable acclaim from western critics.⁹ And in 1988, an unknown Yugoslav called Milorad Pavic had caused a sensation with a "dictionary novel" in male and female versions, the "Khazar dictionary" (*Chasarisches Wörterbuch*). Scarcely anyone showed an interest in the origins of the author or the political implications of his problematic historical mystifications. Ever since the appearance of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* in 1984, Milan Kundera, who was living in exile in Paris, had been a best-selling author, and Hanser Verlag was able to commission Susanna Roth to make new translations of his earlier titles. Kundera's fellow-countryman Bohumil Hrabal, who lived in Prague and was published by Suhrkamp, was on the point of becoming a

classic in his own lifetime. Thanks to the translator and long-serving intermediary Karl Dedecius, Polish literature was particularly well represented before 1989; scarcely a single important twentieth century author was overlooked. As with the Czechs, exiled Polish writers in France, the US and Canada played an important part in arousing interest and preparing the ground.

Since the mid-1970s, Hungarian writers had frequently spent time in West Berlin; in 1981 Nádas had been a guest of the DAAD artists programme in Berlin. In 1979, Suhrkamp, György Konrád's publisher,¹⁰ had brought out Nádas' *The End of a Family Story* (German title *Ende eines Familienromans*, English trans. 2000), a book that made Nádas' name outside Hungary and established his reputation as one of Hungary's most important writers.

Modern classics, in "bibliophile editions", were also produced. For example, in 1981 Suhrkamp began to publish a Polish Library that would eventually comprise 50 volumes. In 1984, Ammann Verlag in Zurich began to publish the complete works of Mandelstam. Hanser had a share in the production of the collected works of Blok, Platonov and Tsvetaeva, rights for which had been acquired in the GDR.

In the GDR, eastern European literature as a whole had been very much dominated by Russian and Soviet literature. In West Germany the situation was broadly similar. One difference, however, was the additional large selection of contemporary "dissident" literature from publishers such as S. Fischer, Piper, Ullstein, Suhrkamp, Luchterhand and Diogenes. In 1971 West German readers were gripped by Nadezhda Mandelstam's autobiography "The century of the wolves" (*Das Jahrhundert der Wölfe*), and in 1974 Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* came as a shock to the many who had previously been unaware of the Soviet system of camps. Thanks to the GDR licensed editions, principally from Luchterhand, but also in smaller leftwing publishers, West German readers were offered the whole range of literature, from the socialist realist novel to the Moscow conceptualists. Even works that were known to the editorial offices of the GDR but could not be published there appeared first in West Germany. These included Venedikt Yerofeev's *Moscow Stations* (*Moskau -- Petuski*, English and German trans. 1978), Andrej Bitov's novel *The Pushkin House* (*Das Puschkinhaus*, 1983; English trans. 1998) and the novels of Nabokov — key works of modern Russian literature.

From the beginning of perestroika in 1985, the interest of readers in Russian literature in particular had grown considerably, and this trend continued until the mid-1990s. Underground books and books from the "alternative culture", however, were not published by Volk & Welt but by Haffmanns, Piper, S. Fischer or Rowohlt Berlin. Vladimir Sorokin's *The Queue* (*Die Schlange*; English trans. 1988) and Viktor Yerofeev's "Russian Beauty" (*Moskauer Schönheit*) — a novel that had not seen the light of day since 1982 and then suddenly became a bestseller — marked a new development. They were a sign of things to come, whereas the last programmes of Volk & Welt looked back to the past.¹¹

A literature no one knows yet

On the lookout for new discoveries, publishers in the West decided to follow up a hunch. This was that in the eastern European countries there had to be a number of as yet unknown books that did not fit into the accepted East-West frame of reference, texts whose authors were neither dissidents nor

conformists, writers who were neither emigrants nor mouthpieces of the state. Texts that had never made it past the obstacle course set by the authorities could now be found directly, without diversions via copyright agencies and publishing functionaries.

The couriers — chiefly journalists and translators — who had once smuggled manuscripts or just names and rumours out of Russia and the states of eastern Europe now came into their own. They acted as go-betweens that put editors in touch with "the right people" in Moscow, Budapest, Prague and Warsaw. They became indispensable assessors and formed the small network of reliable readers that did the job of a whole panel of experts. Many had been on the lookout for new literary publications in their countries for decades.¹² Others — translators, editors or publishers' readers — had been introducing "their authors" to publishers since the late 1950s or mid-1960s and were simply continuing this work.¹³

The "right people" — publishers, readers, translators, editors of periodicals and of course writers — welcomed their colleagues from the West with open arms. It was important to them that the visitors got some idea of how they lived and what tasks lay ahead of them. The rapid build-up of a private publishing sector in eastern and eastern central Europe is one of the most impressive developments of the years of transformation. Since then these contacts have become stable publishing relationships, especially with colleagues in Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Russia, Slovenia and Croatia.¹⁴

At that time it was the private publishing businesses emerging from the dissident scene, emigration or the underground that brought out the books that we as publishers and publishers' readers were looking for — books by authors who told us our own story, a story that we did not yet know. It was the story not only of an unknown past but of a present unfolding before our eyes.

The day the age exploded

In the early summer of 1993, the Czech novelist Jáchym Topol, then aged 31, was sitting in a country house in the Eifel and writing his first novel. This was the retreat offered by the Heinrich Böll Foundation to writers suffering political persecution. But if Topol, almost four years after the Velvet Revolution, felt he was being persecuted, it was chiefly by the immense everyday problems of living in transformation-era Prague and the need to earn money by churning out innumerable articles for newspapers and periodicals. Almost twenty years earlier, in 1974, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn had been a guest there. Böll's summerhouse in Kreuzau-Langenbroich was the first staging post on the Soviet writer's journey into American exile. Famous black and white photos of Böll and Solzhenitsyn adorned the walls. Topol liked Böll, who in August 1968 was in Prague visiting his writer friend Bohumil Hrabal; together they had watched the tanks roll in. Now Topol, the literary descendant of Hrabal, literally had them in front of him, the "veterans of the past, of the time of fear and hatred". They were images of an era that came to an end in 1989.

How this end came about and just what it was that ended — that was what Topol wanted to understand. At one moment he would be writing in a state of euphoria, and the next he would be overwhelmed with sympathy for the two elderly men, living as he now was "in the freedom they had only been able to dream of".¹⁵ In a frenzy of activity, he filled hundreds of pages, and after three months and two weeks the novel was finished. In 1994 *Sestra* (published in English as *City, Sister, Silver* in 2000) was named book of the year in the

Czech Republic. The central European novel of 1989, the epic of postcommunism, had already been produced when the search for it had only just begun.

The action begins months before the Velvet Revolution, when East German refugees arrive in Prague, the city "behind the barbed wire". From their windows and balconies, the Czechs observe the "flight from communism" — Czechs who "themselves had nowhere they could go, because this land was their only land". Potok, the first person narrator, understood "that it had started [...] the movement, there was something of a carnival atmosphere even about the exodus of the Germans, and the carnival is still going on just as it did on the day the age exploded."¹⁶

From the first pages, Topol makes it clear what he is aiming at. He wants to describe the volcanic eruption of autumn 1989; the landscapes and their radioactive and ideologically contaminated residues; a dark present with no way out. The very language generates an apocalyptic flood of images and sets the tone. It is made up of a mishmash of illegitimate, aborted and mutilated national and regional languages, with a scattering of German expressions and chunks of Russian, "the argot of the protectorates".

The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, reviewing the German translation, wrote: "There is probably no writer in western Europe or the USA at the present time who still believes the novel could have this incredible power to say everything and conjure up the world in its totality."¹⁷ It may have been simply the realization that he was finally living outside the barbed wire zone, in freedom, in a democratic system, that gave Topol the confidence to be able to "say everything". What distinguishes him from the majority of his contemporaries who began their careers as serious writers during the system change is the exhilaration and sheer pleasure he felt in his newfound freedom, and his forceful articulation of this experience.¹⁸

Yuri Andrukhovych also felt liberated from the chaos of his country of origin when in January 1992 he came to the West for the first time. Having won a bursary, he wrote his novel *Moscoviada*, about the fall of the Soviet Union, at the Villa Feldafing on Lake Starnberg. Like Topol, it took him just three months to complete. His hero, the western Ukrainian student of literature Otto von F. (for Feldafing), lives in the halls of residence of the Gorky Institute in Moscow, the "rotten heart of the half-dead empire". Around him, the poetic hopes of the new young national literatures are flourishing: Estonian and Usbek Akhmatovas, Buryat Pushkins, Czech Khlebnikovs. A shopping trip to the department store Detsky Mir, right next to the Lubyanka, ends in a nightmare: Otto von F. gets lost in corridors and staircases and finally ends up in the sewers, where the secret service is breeding an army of rats. In the end he manages to escape by catching the train to Kiev, while behind him Moscow sinks into a sewer. Like Topol, Andrukhovych unleashes a bizarre carnival, a history show, to dramatize his "burlesque farewell to the Soviet Union" (*FAZ*).

These two writers had both been eye-witnesses of the collapsing communist system: Topol in Czechoslovakia, Andrukhovych in the Ukraine. There, in the summer of 1989, "the middle-class resistance to the Soviet empire entered its active phase", and in the winter of 1989/1990 millions of citizens formed a human chain between Kiev and Lviv.¹⁹ Buoyed up by the popular mood, Andrukhovych went to Moscow, took part in opposition rallies of hundreds of thousands of people and studied at the Gorky Institute of Literature. For him, 1989 ended with the independence of Ukraine in August 1991, after the failed

putsch against Gorbachev in Moscow. "The future, which had so far been hovering tantalizingly around the threshold, thrust open the door and entered our lives."²⁰

The long shadow of Auschwitz over eastern Europe

Topol's novel was published in 1994 by Milan Kundera's publisher Atlantis, in Brno. The German translation followed four years later in Volk & Welt. *Moscoviada*, which first appeared in the Kiev periodical *Suchasnist* in 1993, was not published by Suhrkamp until 2006. Books have their hour, and historical clocks do not run synchronically — especially when they tick in two hemispheres that until very recently were quite separate. Media interest in books that appeared in eastern Europe after 1989 was strongly influenced by matters of public concern: German reunification; war in the former Yugoslavia; the turmoil in the Russia of the 1990s; the debates on memory surrounding the expulsion of Germans from former German territories; the crimes of the communist rulers; the yearning for the idyllic central Europe of the imagination.

Literature from the nations of eastern Europe was received as a documentary account. While some attention was paid to the style of the writing, the interest of the public was mainly documentary. There was a yearning for a new Nabokov or Márquez to ignite the imagination of western readers. People wanted to understand the conflicts and tragedies, the psychological and spiritual situation, the omnipresent pressure under which people in these closed societies had suffered and which was finally being eased. This was the burden of history — a history that could only now be told, after the nations had freed themselves from party dictatorships. Expectations of what literature could achieve were high.

As the fog lifted, two giants emerged, authors who told German readers once again about the most terrible chapter of their own history — and told in a way that they had never known before. Aleksandar Tisma from Novi Sad, born in 1924 in a village on the Pannonian plain, and Imre Kertész, born in 1929 in Budapest. Their appearance in translation, much later than the original editions, must be rated as one of the great publishing events in Germany of the 1990s.

"The use of man" (*Der Gebrauch des Menschen*; original title *Upotreba coveka*) by Aleksandar Tisma, which came out in 1976 in Belgrade and in 1985 in French translation,²¹ reached German readers just as Yugoslavia was disintegrating. After Slovenia and Croatia declared their independence in June 1991, the Serbian president Slobodan Milosevic mobilized the Yugoslav People's Army. Many people read the book in their summer holidays, as the first images of people lying dead in flowering southern gardens flickered across television screens.

The novel tells the story of the Nazi invasion of Novi Sad, where hitherto Hungarians, Serbs, Croats, Germans and Jews had co-existed peacefully in the small town. The story centres on the fates of four young people who had all attended the German classes given by the *Fräulein*. One of them is killed fighting for the resistance, but the others survive, one physically mutilated, another incapable of finding a way back to everyday life after the war, the fourth finally destroyed by the trauma of having been an "Auschwitz whore". Whether perpetrators or victims, they are unable to avoid each other. With great precision, Tisma describes how violence takes control of the lives of

people and destroys them: "An agonizing masterpiece", wrote one critic, "that burdens its German readers with feelings of guilt about our history that we would prefer to repress; never before has the shame of the victims been so precisely described as in this novel."²²

Tisma's novels and stories about World War II, which appeared in the following years, dealt with torturers and persecutors in "The school of godlessness" (original title *Skola bezboznistva* published in 1978, French translation 1981, German translation 1993 as *Die Schule der Gottlosigkeit*); with the guilt felt by the survivors in *The Book of Blam* (original title *Kniga o Blamu* published in 1972, French translation 1986, German translation as *Das Buch Blam* in 1995, English translation 1998); and — in Tisma's most magnificent and terrifying book *Kapo* (original published in 1987, French translation in 1989, German translation in 1997) — with the victim who became a perpetrator in Auschwitz, who lives on not only in the hell of guilt but also in fear of reprisal, in a world where nowhere is outside the camp any longer. The fact that the war in Yugoslavia was going on at the time may at first have had a positive effect on the reception of Tisma's books. But it is impossible to explain it entirely by this. Tisma himself, who claimed to see in the human being "only the manifestation of living matter",²³ only ever replied evasively when questioned about current events: "Everything that is happening now is a repetition. We are seeing the same type of person as we saw in World War II, the same passions, the same thoughtlessness, the same madness."²⁴

It was a strange situation. An author of world rank, who had lived his entire creative life unknown in Novi Sad, came on to the German scene at a time when his work was finished. He had said what he had to say.²⁵

Imre Kertész too had to speak through a book that was twenty years old when, in the spring of 1996, he undertook a writer's tour with his *Roman eines Schicksallosen* (original title *Sorstalanság*, published in English translation as *Fateless* in 1992 and in a retranslation by Tim Wilkinson as *Fatelessness* in 2004).²⁶ Writing entirely from the perspective of a boy who, unlike the reader, does not know what awaits him, he tells of deportation to Auschwitz and of slow deterioration in the camp. The story ends with the liberation of Buchenwald (where he had been transferred), his return to Budapest and his scandalous nostalgia for the concentration camp. The critics saw the author as the equal of Primo Levi and Jorge Semprún. It is doubtful whether the all-pervasive presence of the Nazi concentration camp, and the way its logical laws were learned, has ever been so radically expounded. Without comment, in an attempt to get under the skin of a creature entirely deprived of freedom, whose life is totally determined by others, the author Kertész (not his narrator!) wrote about the world of the camps as the most extreme form of experience. For him, the fact that existence in totalitarian Stalinist society was a continuation of his internment prompted him to write this book — in contrast to Primo Levi, Tadeusz Borowski and Jean Améry, who all took their own lives.

Surviving Auschwitz is the theme of all Kertész's books. Unlike Tisma he chooses to wear stylistic masks — the tone of Thomas Bernhard in *Kaddish for an Unborn Child* (original published in 1989; German translation in 1992, English trans. Tim Wilkinson 2004), the mask of Kafka in *Fiasko* (original published in 1986; German trans. 1999) — and grapples with modern literary (and musical) methods in search of an answer to the question that has tormented him for decades: how to tell the untellable.

Whereas the reception of his first books — *Kaddish* was followed by "Galley Diary" (*Galeerentagebuch*) in 1993 — was very muted, *Fatelessness*, coming shortly after the end of the Auschwitz memorial year of 1995, was his breakthrough. The shockingly new approach of this book was keenly felt, coming as it did after a year in which readers, far from being wearied by the profusion of new eye-witness accounts, memoirs and studies, had acquired a new sensitivity and curiosity.

Making up for lost time, writers tried to explore their own past and come to terms with it by telling the story of the catastrophes of the twentieth century as they affected eastern Europe — catastrophes Germany was responsible for triggering off — thus making them accessible to imagination and empathy. This literature compelled the whole of Europe to examine its conscience anew.

Opening up the historical space

The discovery of Kertész and Tisma, to whom we must add Hanna Krall, the great chronicler of Nazi crimes and of the sufferings of the Jews in Poland, coincided with a new phase of reflection on the Nazi past in reunited Germany. In August 1996, only a few months after *Fatelessness*, came the publication of Daniel Jonah Goldhagen's historical study *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, which unequivocally blamed German anti-Semitism for the Shoah. 1995 saw the opening of the exhibition on the crimes of the Wehrmacht in eastern Europe, which led to years of animated debate. The shocks from the past continued to reverberate. As the darkness lifted after the end of communism, "the East" was revealed as a mass grave, a devastated territory, contaminated with German guilt. There seemed to be not one square metre of ground in eastern Poland, Lithuania, Belarus, Ukraine or Russia that was not steeped in it. The writer Wolfgang Büscher called this East, after crossing it on foot from Berlin to Moscow, a "graveyard of history".

These narratives continue. They have become part of the grand narrative into which the generation of writers born later have woven their own statements. Since the end of communism, Czech and Polish writers have even been bold enough to write about the expulsion of the Germans — hitherto a taboo subject. Pawel Huelle and Stefan Chwin, archaeologists of the German city of Danzig, discovered remnants of the old city among their childhood haunts, briefly attracting the attention of their famous colleague and spiritual fellow-citizen Günter Grass.²⁷ Olga Tokarczuk, who lives on a farm in a Silesian village once owned by Germans, uses mythologies and phantasmagorias to conjure up a life that she believes to be present somewhere in a nearby time capsule.²⁸

Investigations like these continue right up to the present; in 2003 Wojciech Kuczok wrote his novel "Muck" (original title *Gnój*; German trans. *Dreckskerl*, 2007) about a violent father, a scholar destroyed by communism, who as a child had lived under the same roof as Germans. This is a paean of hate, inspired by Thomas Bernhard, against the torpor of the Polish Catholic family and indeed the People's Republic itself.

It is only a small step from the objects that Stefan Chwin examines in order to tease out their history to the derelict districts of a small Galician town where Juri Andrukhovych sets out to explore his family history. The eastern landscape is full of ruins that testify to the downfall of great empires: Russian, Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian and Soviet. They form the setting for Andrukhovych's books and it is to them that he dedicated his "Central eastern

memento" (*Mittelöstliches Memento*).²⁹ Andrukhovych clarifies: anyone who says "East" means Moscow; anyone who speaks of "central Europe" is thinking of Vienna. It is the historic fate of central Europe, he says, "to be sandwiched between Russians and Germans". There is a central European fear: fear of the Germans and fear of the Russians. A central European death: in the camps, in prison — a collective, violent death. And finally, a central European journey: flight.³⁰

The inevitability of writing about death in all its different manifestations is what continues to give the literature of this region its force.

This Europe of ruins, which is in danger of disappearing in the process of the postcommunist transformation, is the subject and source of inspiration for the best-known Polish writer of the middle generation: Andrzej Stasiuk. When his lyrical prose work "The world behind Dukla" (*Die Welt hinter Dukla*) appeared in the autumn of 2000 as the centrepiece of Poland's contribution to the Frankfurt Book Fair, the one-horse town in southern Poland that figured in it was enthusiastically declared the new literary capital.³¹ To lend an aura to derelict villages, empty streets, foul-smelling chicken coops and rusty farm equipment by describing, page after page, the transcendent light that falls on them — Stasiuk's aesthetic project imperceptibly introduced a new paradigm shift.

The brass plates on the gate of a renaissance house of the Lviv city market, the winch at a disused mine in Istria, the abandoned prefabricated blocks of flats at the edge of a Lithuanian industrial estate, the gravestones inscribed with Ruthenian characters in a forest near a meadow on which a Lemko (Ukrainian minority —trans.) village once stood. All this points to a lost, and frequently violent history. Stasiuk's gaze no longer distinguishes between the perpetrators and the victims, who here stand opposite another. He reads the names. He sees the mute memorials and the natural monuments, which speak of something long gone but that now fit into a new tableau, along with younger things — a stunted tree, a pheasant in a field. He elevates all this above the level of factuality and into the sphere of birth and death, of finality and the metaphysical. Everything becomes the interior of a moonlit landscape, in which the soul, to quote Eichendorff, spreads its wings "as if flying home".

Stasiuk has been attacked for glorifying the grim realities of the past and for a nostalgia that leads him to cling defiantly to a decaying way of life. Richard Wagner, who like Herta Müller is well acquainted with dictatorship and its continued existence in the violence of the rural world of postcommunism, has been foremost in accusing him of unacceptable idealization.³² This criticism is justified, as is another notion: that the central European landscape of doom, scarred by the crimes of the century and, unlike western Europe, not yet totally altered or built over, should be left undisturbed as the "exhausted heart of the era" (as Ukrainian author Serhij Zhadan put it) — an era that will soon be as distant and incomprehensible to us as the lost kingdom of Nebuchadnezzar.

The exploration of the forgotten provinces in the east of Europe started at the beginning of the 1980s in the context of the "Central Europe" debate set in motion by Milan Kundera. In "Journey of the imagination through the vanished world of East Galicia and Bukovina" (*Imaginäre Reise durch die verschwundene Welt Ostgaliziens und der Bukowina*), the Austrian journalist Martin Pollack travelled on the railway network of the Austro-Hungarian Empire from Tarnów to Czernowitz, through "semi Asia", a landscape that lives on in the literature of greater and lesser writers. Pollack's book became a

valuable source of information. Another key text in the re-appropriation of the area is Karl Schlögel's essay "The centre lies to the East. The Germans, the lost East and Central Europe" (*Die Mitte liegt ostwärts. Die Deutschen, der verlorene Osten und Mitteleuropa*), which in 1986 revealed the historical metropolises and landscapes that the "Eastern Bloc" had extinguished.³³

Since the mid-1990s, and particularly in the years before the eastward enlargement of the European Union, these texts have not only gained in topicality but have also inspired numerous further explorations. Map reading, the study of historical atlases and train travel³⁴ have helped the genre of literary travel reportage to achieve a level of productivity verging on excess. Thanks to the support of cultural foundations, there have been numerous international book projects and events that have dealt with historical and imaginative relationships between regions whose past is being lost in obscurity and ignorance and whose future is becoming endangered by EU enlargement.³⁵

The most urgent warning of the negative consequences of EU enlargement for the countries beyond Europe's new eastern border came from Andrzej Stasiuk. Connections have been cut as the borders shifted eastwards and southeastwards. The "Europe of the fringes" looks different today than it did in 1989. It is no accident, therefore, that two Polish publishing houses — Pogranicze in the northeast and Czarne in the southeast³⁶ — have become the outlet for the productive potential appearing at the margins.

Here, a phenomenon that since the 1990s academic historians have been calling the "spatial turn" takes the form of political and literary "local history and geography" — a kind of politically motivated regional detective work. The distinctive features run counter to the traditional definitions of East and West; blanket attributes like "eastern European" are meaningless in the coordinates of centre and periphery, universal and particular.

The metamorphoses of central Europe

The topographical or geopoetic turn completes the move away from a literature that had concerned itself with the development of the individual and the tragedy of his destruction. If, in Péter Nádas' *A Book of Memories*, the damaged city landscape of East Berlin had served as the backdrop for a drama of personality, in Stasiuk the landscape itself is submitted to the poetic and speculative apparatus. It is striking that the people we meet in Stasiuk's travel stories remain mute. They move through the picture, sit in the driver's cabin of a parked lorry, or cower next to their kiosks in the scorching heat; from a distance their backs are almost indistinguishable from the cows that graze a little further off in the meadow. They come from a timeless zone and remain there as extras as the traveller passes through. In the booming economic region of western Romania, they are a symbol of the hugely unequal speeds of modernization. At the same time, they embody the feeling formulated by the traveller Stephan Wackwitz, the one that wafts towards you as soon as you go east of Vienna: the indeterminacy of the expanse that in a sense extends all the way to the steppes.³⁷ The impression you gain as you travel from West to East is that history somehow falls away and gradually merges with the stillness of Asiatic eternity.³⁸

It seems that only Hungarian writers were able to give a voice to the motionless figures of Stasiuk's world, which stretches from the Theiss plain to the forests of Transylvania. We find these figures in the novels of Ádám Bodor, László Krasznahorkai or Attila Bartis. László Darvasi, whose tales are

set in the places described by Stasiuk, also writes about travel.³⁹ In a covered wagon, on which a blue tear has been painted, five itinerant "artists of weeping" journey through a sixteenth and seventeenth century central Europe devastated by wars, epidemics, pogroms and rebellions. They are present wherever people have been the victims of misfortune and violence. These lachrymose troubadours pass through a world that extends from Poland to Transylvania, from Belgrade to Venice, from Vienna to Szeged. Evoking human hopes, torments, injustices, indescribable cruelties and deeply moving gestures, the universe that this book traverses, in its hundreds of episodes, touches us in a unique way.

The author's talent does not consist in painting historical panoramas but in limiting himself to depicting the existential truth of his characters, all of whom are our contemporaries. When the book was written, Szeged, where Darvasi lived at the time, was a place plagued by crime, where arms smugglers operated, supplying weapons to Arkan's Serbian "Tigers" and other paramilitary gangs in Bosnia.

In the spring of 1999, after finishing his novel, Darvasi went back to the short story. In response to the expulsions in Kosovo and the Nato bombing of Serbia, he wrote the cycle "Getting hold of a woman" (*Eine Frau besorgen*). The action of the book takes place in imaginary settings at the time of the Bosnian war and describes a state of anomie, total barbarity and lawlessness. It is the only book in which he reacts directly to the war, although war was a brooding presence in the earlier books.

"Over central Europe there hovers the odour of boiled cabbage and stale beer, and the putrid smell of overripe melons is in the air," wrote Josef K.,⁴⁰ an observation that aptly describes the world of Darvasi's stories. Provinciality, superstition, fear and fathomless melancholy prevail. A character who crops up in several tales in "The saddest orchestra in the world" (*Das traurigste Orchester der Welt*) bears the name of Kopf. The obtuseness of the young man is that of a child in a world as vast as it is opaque. "You don't need to know everything", explains Baron Demeter Absolon in "The tear jugglers" (*Die Tränengaukler*) — words that not only express an insight into the incomprehensible mysteries of existence, but also suggest the resignation of someone powerless to intervene in the workings of the world, because decisions affecting him have always been taken elsewhere.

Darvasi, who describes himself as a disciple of Mészöly and Bodor, Kafka and Borges, is regarded as one of the most original European writers of his generation — and almost impossible to sell. The same applies to his contemporary Jáchym Topol. Perhaps their very ability to give expression to the turmoil of the postcommunist present and to steer clear of the glorification of central Europe counts against them.

It is probably significant that the most successful eastern European novel after 1989 was one that presented a kitschy picture of central Europe: *Embers* (English publication 2002, original Hungarian 1942) by Sándor Márai. It is the fictional story of a world that, wrote Karl-Markus Gauß, "the evening sun of the Habsburgs gently shone upon".⁴¹ Gauß pointed out that this fine author, who produced two novels a year, wrote works of variable quality and that it was Márai's more trivial books that first captured the international market — Márai was discovered by the Italian publisher Adelphi, who also secured the world rights. In the wake of the huge success of *Embers*, a wide variety of Hungarian writers of the interwar period, including Antal Szerb, Dezsö

Kosztolányi and Ernő Szép, the "elegant giants" as the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* called them, have been reprinted and have sold well.

The presence of a new war

"Europe is dying in Sarajevo", wrote the Zagreb publisher Nenad Popovic on a placard he had propped up on the desk in front of him during a discussion at the Berlin *Literaturhaus* in February 1993. Popovic, who since the beginning of the war had been an irreplaceable adviser and intermediary for journalists, publishers and publishers' readers in France, Italy and Germany, had rescued the Bosnian writer Dzevad Karahasan from the besieged city of Sarajevo and in 1993 published his "Diary of resettlement" (*Tagebuch der Aussiedlung*), an early literary document of the war. He discovered Miljenko Jergovic, today the internationally best-known Bosnian-Croatian writer of his generation. *Sarajevo Marlboro*, short stories from the besieged city, was published alongside Semezdin Mehmedinovic's slim volume of short prose pieces *Sarajevo Blues*.⁴² The book published by Popovic reacted directly to the horrors of the ethnic hatred that were unleashed, the expulsions and rapes, and also to the deliberate destruction of the Serbo-Croat language, to emigration, exile and the loss of homeland. They included Bora Cosic's "Journal of a Homeless Man" (*Tagebuch des Apatriden*); Dubravka Ugresic's *My American Fictionary* (English translation 1994) and her polemic *The Culture of Lies* (English translation 1998); and Slavenka Drakulic's *The Taste of a Man* (English translation 1997). These writers have been dispersed to all points of the compass: to Vienna, Graz, Stockholm, Amsterdam, Berlin, or like David Albahari, a Serbian Jewish author from Belgrade, to Toronto.⁴³ For the last few years Aleksandar Hemon, a Bosnian writer from Chicago celebrated in the US as a successor to Nabokov, has been creating an international furore.⁴⁴

Paradoxically, the accumulation of catastrophes enabled the most original and hitherto completely unknown voices from the former Yugoslavia to finally gain a hearing in the German-speaking countries. Here too the fog was lifting: the bloodthirsty tales of Miodrag Bulatovic were giving way to the critical and postmodern texts of Dubravka Ugresic, inspired by the Russian avant-garde and the epic narrative art of Dzevad Karahasan, recalling Ivo Andric. Danilo Kis, who died in 1989 in Paris, continued to be published in new editions. Bora Cosic's amusing and shocking book *My Family's Role in the World Revolution*, a subversive classic of Yugoslav literature originally published in 1970, came onto the market in German translation in 1994 (English translation published in 1997). There were European writers of distinction to be discovered.

Committed intellectuals returned to the scene, and they came — mostly — from eastern Europe. "Europa im Krieg" (Europe at War) was the title of a series of articles initiated in 1991/92 by the *tageszeitung*. Not unexpectedly, former dissidents, "anti-political" writers and other contributors to the Central Europe debate of the 1980s such as György Konrád, István Eörsi and Richard Wagner — not forgetting Herta Müller, Slavenka Drakulic, Lothar Baier and many others — all had their say.⁴⁵ The late-flowering career of Bora Cosic (b. 1932) owed much to the readiness of German-language periodicals, newspapers and book publishers to take southeast European writers seriously as chroniclers and commentators.

"The Sarajevo setting is putting buyers off", complained the sales manager of a German publishing house in the mid-1990s. No wonder, then, that it was at first the smaller houses, especially in Austria, that took on young writers from the nations of the former Yugoslavia. It was almost impossible to separate

publishing and humanitarian concerns, or political and personal commitment. An exemplary case was Lojze Wieser, who founded the Klagenfurt–based Wieser Verlag in 1987. From the start, Wieser's orientation was towards both Yugoslavia and the rediscovery of forgotten central European authors.

The imperishable nature of the zone

Twenty years after the fall of the Wall, Jáchym Topol finally fled eastern Europe. After two more novels, "Night Work" (*Nachtarbeit*) and "Circus Zone" (*Zirkuszone*), which deal with the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the armies of the Warsaw Pact, the expulsion of the Germans from the Sudetenland and the outbreak of World War III on the Bavarian–Czech border, he decided to write a book about... Greenland. First, a diversion leads through Belarus. More mass graves. Finally, having arrived in the north, a hurricane in the middle of the wilderness drives him to seek shelter in what turns out to be a World War II bunker; American names are carved into the walls, German ones too. Cartridge cases lie on the ground, undamaged, as though they had been fired yesterday; they never rust on Greenland's icy ground. For Jáchym Topol there is no escape from European history.

Since then, the children of the age of transformation, the children of the Topol generation, have entered the scene. In Poland and the Ukraine in particular, authors are writing in an acerbic language packed with contemporary idiom and jargon, none of which existed twenty years ago.⁴⁶ They don't need to step out of the shadow of the past, since they either carry less baggage or they have jettisoned what they had. Their communities are young, and the world they live in now is — in the words of Andrzej Stasiuk — no longer measured by the yardstick of the past. The backdrop for their work is not mass graves but heaps of beer bottles at bus stops in provincial backwaters otherwise deprived of consumer goods. The protagonists are not parents suffering from war trauma but young advertising copywriters, owners of delivery firms, nightclub proprietors, arms dealers or people out of work.

The youngest writers — particularly those who fled Yugoslavia as children or teenagers and today live in Vienna, Berlin, or London or are back in Zagreb — move in a transnational sphere and communicate in a new language. They are at home with the Internet, come from the music scene and are influenced by film and the media; they read Foucault and Deleuze, and either know the codes of the postcommunist society or connect with more distant traditions. Serhij Zhadan for example, 35 years old, a lyric poet from Kharkiv in eastern Ukraine, a postproletarian punk who is interested not in Bruno Schulz but the Ukrainian futurists and the "shot renaissance"⁴⁷ writes about the Soviet anarchist Nestor Machno and takes on an inheritance likely to concern us for longer and more dramatically than the eastern central Europe that forms the subject of this essay. I refer to the decaying mass of the Soviet empire, which today radiates more strongly and ominously than it did twenty years ago.

The networking and inter–relationships between young eastern central and young western authors are today probably as intense as they were at the time of the avantgarde of their great–great–grandparents before and after World War I. If the perception of the European turn was at first very strongly dominated by Russian themes and Russian writers, this changed as interest increasingly focussed on the "minor" literatures of central Europe and eastern central Europe. Currently, Russia is relatively poorly represented by outstanding new young literary voices, although this could soon change.

A Romanian writer, Filip Florian, also recently took a mass grave as his starting point for a novel. But the theme is not the re-examination of the past but rather of the present, in which the past only lives on as a rumour. However Romania, unlike Poland, is beset by corruption, lies and the continued existence of the old party elite. To that extent, the past has never really gone away. What is new, however, is that Florian "has withdrawn from the duty of the historical reporter", as the critic Lothar Müller remarked.⁴⁸ This applies, despite all the differences, to all the writers of the youngest generation. Unlike their fathers and grandfathers, they no longer want to commit themselves to a "mission". They are writing against a chaotic reality and are concerned with deciphering layers of new codes and with the maelstrom of change and destruction in the routines and spaces of their old lives.

-
- ¹ Danilo Kis: "Mitteleuropäische Variationen" ("Central European variations") in: Ilma Rakusa (ed.): *Homo poeticus. Gespräche und Essays* (Homo poeticus. Conversations and essays). Munich 1994, 65.
- ² Translator's note: Where a title is known to have been published in English translation, this is given first in italics, followed by the published German title. Where no known published translation exists in English, a literal translation of the German translation is given in English first without italics, followed by the German title. In some cases, the original title is also provided. Original German titles are given first, followed by English translations.
- ³ In the late 1940s, Hildegard Grosche, born 1913 in Rékas, in a corner of the declining Habsburg Empire, founded the Steingrüben Verlag in Stuttgart. In the early 1960s it was merged with Goyerts Verlag. She was the first German publisher of William Faulkner and Tibor Déry, Wolfgang Koeppen and Peter Härtling. From the 1970s onwards she devoted herself entirely to translation: the writers she translated included István Örkény, Miklos Mészöly, and notably Péter Nádas. She died at an advanced age in December 2006.
- ⁴ Péter Nádas, born 1942 in Budapest, gave as a reason for the contradictory nature of his experiences his "Jewish roots and later baptism", his "unusual social origins — on his mother's side from a poor working class family, and on his father's side from a wealthy middle-class family". The language of the Jewish-influenced middle class of Budapest was German. His mother died of cancer in 1955 and his father, who after the communist takeover in 1948 was a senior party functionary, took his own life after the failed uprising.
- ⁵ Péter Nádas: "Homecoming" ("Heimkehr") in the collection *Fire and Knowledge*, 2008. This version trans. G.W.
- ⁶ Peter Nádas, *A Book of Memories* (English trans. 1997 by Ivan Sanders), 435, original Hungarian published in 1986).
- ⁷ On the situation of GDR publishing houses during and after the *Wende* (fall of the Berlin Wall), see Christoph Links, *Das Schicksal der DDR-Verlage. Die Privatisierung und ihre Folgen* (The fate of the GDR publishers. privatization and the consequences), Berlin 2009.
- ⁸ Among the exceptions (of which there are quite a number) was Barbara Antkowiak (1933–2005), who, due to the Balkan wars, was kept very busy translating from the languages of the former Yugoslavia from the early 1990s. With the demise of Yugoslavia, Serbo-Croat ceased to exist, re-emerging as Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian. Among the writers Antkowiak translated are Aleksandar Tisma, Bora Cosic, Dubravka Ugresic, Vladimir Arsenijevic, Nenad Velickovic, Bogdan Bogdanovic, Slavenka Drakulic and Miljenko Jergovic, as well as an enormous number of articles for newspapers and periodicals.
- ⁹ Tatyana Tolstaya: "Rendezvous with a bird" (*Rendezvous mit einem Vogel*, 1989).
- ¹⁰ György Konrád (born 1933 in Debrecen), whose first books "The Visitor" (*Der Besucher*) 1973; "The Founder of the Town" (*Der Stadtgründer*) 1975, were published by *Luchterhand and List*, has been one of the *Suhrkamp Verlag's* authors since 1978. From the end of the 1970s Konrád was probably the best-known Hungarian writer of his generation in the West. With his *Anti-Politics* (*Anti-politik. Mitteleuropäische Meditationen*, translated by Hans-Henning Paetzke. Frankfurt/Main 1985), he contributed to the *Mittleuropa* debate that Milan Kundera had set in motion. His visit to Berlin in 1979 as a guest of the DAAD artists' programme was followed by visits from further Hungarian authors, whose first books subsequently appeared with German language publishers: 1980 Péter Esterházy, 1981 Péter Nádas. 1983 István Eörsi, 1984 György Dalos. Miklos Mészöly had led the way in 1974/75.

In the 1990s, Volk & Welt shrunk to a fraction of its former size and its ownership situation became unclear. From 1992 onwards, the publishing house produced a new and highly regarded German and east European programme. Yet despite the success of Thomas Brussig's satirical novel *Helden wie wir* (Heroes Like Us) in 1995, Volk & Welt had no future — the eastern European titles, although highly praised in the literary supplements, did not sell. In 2000, Volk & Welt was merged with Luchterhand Literaturverlag — the rivals of 1990 had had the same owner since 1995 — and shortly afterwards they were both sold to Random House. The most important eastern European authors — Mircea Cartarescu, Jáchym Topol, Viktor Pelevin, Lyudmila Ulitskaya — enjoyed later success with different publishers.

- 12 Eva Haldimann in Geneva wrote a quarterly review article for the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* about new books and writers in Hungary. As early as 1977 she had singled out Imre Kertész's novel *Fatelessness* (re-published in English in 2004 in Tim Wilkinson's translation). Alongside György Dalos she was the most important talent scout for Rowohlt Berlin. The two young slavists Georg Witte and Sabine Hänsgen, who had infiltrated the Moscow conceptualist scene in the 1980s, came back with texts in their luggage and regularly operated as couriers. The texts of Dmitri Prigov, Lev Rubinstein, Vladimir Sorokin, among others, appeared for the first time in 1987 in *Schreibheft*, in a dossier compiled and translated by the two Slavists under the pseudonyms Günter Hirt and Sascha Wonders.
- 13 Peter Urban, 1966 to 1969 Suhrkamp Verlag expert in Slavic literatures, acquired and translated for edition suhrkamp (co-founded by Hans Magnus Enzensberger) Yugoslav writers such as Danilo Kis, Bora Cosic, Mirko Kovac, Milos Crnjanski and Czech writers such as Richard Weiner and Ivan Wernisch, some of whom were only re-discovered decades later. The reception of modern Serbian writers, in particular, ended completely when Urban left the publishing house. For Rowohlt he edited Khlebnikov (1970) and for Diogenes for decades the work of Chekhov. At the Friedenauer Presse (founded 1988) he has the oversight of re-discoveries and new translations of writers including Babel, Dobychin, Pushkin, Turgenev and Lermontov.
- 14 One success that has been achieved in the post-1989 period is the sale of German publishing rights worldwide, which more than doubled between 1995 and 2007. Growth is particularly strong in the eastern European markets. The eastern enlargement of the EU intensified trade relations. In 2007, 37 per cent of all licences were granted to publishers in eastern Europe. See: *Buch und Buchhandel in Zahlen*, Frankfurt/Main 2008, 8, 82.
- 15 Jáchym Topol to Katharina Raabe, 7.2.2009.
- 16 Jáchym Topol, *Die Schwester*, trans. Eva Profousová and Beate Smandek, Berlin 1998, 19. This quote trans. GW.
- 17 Kurt Oesterle: "New life after Big Brother" (*Neues Leben nach dem Großen Bruder*), in: *FAZ*, 20/21.2.1999.
- 18 This probably has something to do with his background. Topol grew up in the dissident milieu; his family belonged to Prague's alternative scene. Alongside Václav Havel, his father Josef Topol was regarded as the most important dramatist in Czechoslovakia. His younger brother Filip was a well-known rock musician when still a teenager. Jáchym was an early signatory to Charta 77 and in the 1980s published the *samizdat* literary magazine *Revolver Revue*. He wrote poems and song lyrics, for a short time had his own band, and tried to escape military service by getting admitted to a psychiatric hospital. Denied entrance to university, he worked as a stoker and a warehouseman. After 1989 he was a co-founder of the weekly newspaper *Respekt* and spent years travelling in the east, as far as Iran and central Asia. As foreign correspondent, he went to trouble spots around the world. At the same time he started to study ethnology. He had two volumes of poetry and prose published before writing himself into literary history with *Sestra*.
- 19 Yuri Andrukhovych, "Postscriptum zur deutschen Ausgabe der *Moscoviada*" (Postscript to the German edition of *Moscoviada*), Frankfurt/Main 2006, 221.
- 20 *Ibid.* 222.
- 21 The publisher was *L'Age d'Homme*, founded in Lausanne in 1966 by a friend of Tisma, Vladimir Dimitrijevic, who fled Yugoslavia in 1954.
- 22 Ulrich Baron: "Glut und Asche" (Embers and ashes), in: *Deutsches Allgemeines Sonntagsblatt*, 21.6.1991.
- 23 Andreas Breitenstein, "Das verlorene Jahrhundert", ("The lost century. A conversation with the Serbian writer Aleksandar Tisma") in: *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 5.5.1997.
- 24 Mirjana Wittmann: "Wenn Menschen Dinge tun, die ihren Interessen zuwiderlaufen. Ein Gespräch mit Aleksandar Tisma" (When people do things that conflict with their interests. A conversation with Aleksandar Tisma) in: *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 29.3.1996.
- 25 Breitenstein, op. cit.

- 26 The original edition, entitled *Sorstalanság*, came out in 1975 in Hungary. The first German translation, by Jörg Buschmann, appeared in 1990, published by Rütten & Loening in East Berlin with the title *Mensch ohne Schicksal* (Man without Fate). But the book was lost in the confusion of the transformation period. The new translation that appeared in 1996 (published by Rowohlt Berlin) is by Christina Viragh.
- 27 Pawel Huelle, born 1957, and Stefan Chwin, born 1949, were discovered by Renate Schmidgall, who later translated them. Huelle's debut novel *Who was Dawidek Weiser?* (German trans. *Weiser Dawidek* 1990, English trans. 1992) was followed by the volumes of tales *Moving House and other Stories*, (German trans. *Schnecken, Pfützen, Regen*, 1992, English trans. 1996); *First love and other stories* (German trans. *Silberregen* 1996); *Mercedes Benz* (German trans. 2003, English trans. Antonia Lloyd Jones 2006); and *Castorp* (German trans. 2005; English trans. Antonia Lloyd Jones 2008). They were as popular with German readers as Stefan Chwin's "Death in Danzig" (*Tod in Danzig*, 1997; original title *Hanemann*) or "The golden pelican" (*Der Goldene Pelikan*, 2005).
- 28 Especially in the novels "Prawiek and other times" (*Ur und andere Zeiten*, 2000) and *House of day, house of night* (German trans. Esther Kinsky as *Taghaus, Nachthaus* 2001, English trans. Antonia Lloyd Jones 2003.)
- 29 Cf. the novel "Twelve rings" (*Zwölf Ringe*) set in Lviv and the Carpathians, and the essays "The last territory" (*Das letzte Territorium*). "Central eastern memento" (*Mittelöstliches Memento*) is the title of the first part of a double essay (with Andrzej Stasiuk) "My Europe" (*Mein Europa*), which appeared in the Polish original around the turn of the millenium and in German translation immediately before the eastern enlargement of the EU in May 2004 (see footnote 30).
- 30 Juri Andrukhovych, Andrzej Stasiuk: "My Europe. Two essays on so-called Central Europe" (*Mein Europa. Zwei Essays über das sogenannte Mitteleuropa*), translated by Sofia Onufriv and Martin Pollack. Frankfurt/Main 2004, 43.
- 31 The original edition with the title *Dukla* first appeared in 1997. Thomas Steinfeld: "I know the way to the most transparent place in the world. When the heavens terrify us with too much emptiness we look for signs on the earth", "Andrzej Stasiuk findet den Geist der Karpaten und gründet eine neue Hauptstadt der Literatur" ("Andrzej Stasiuk finds the spirit of the Carpathians and founds a new literary capital"), in *FAZ*, 17.10.2000.
- 32 Richard Wagner, "Die Auslagerung der Phantasie. Nah am Himmel erfüllt vom großen Geheimnis? Die Karpaten als Mythos und Ideologie" ("Outsourcing the imagination. Close to the sky and filled with great mystery. The Carpathians as myth and ideology") in: *NZZ*, 12.4.2006. Iris Radisch, "Das ganze All ist eine Bushaltestelle" ("The whole cosmos is a bus stop"), in: *Die Zeit*, 14/2006.
- 33 Martin Pollack, "Nach Galizien" (To Galicia). Vienna 1984; Frankfurt/Main 2001. Karl Schlögel's essay was reprinted in, *Die Mitte liegt ostwärts. Europa im Übergang* (The centre lies eastwards. Europe in transition), Munich 2002.
- 34 Whether virtually, in the old *Potyah 76* that once travelled between Danzig and Varna, or in the real world in the *Literaturexpress Europa 2000*. *Potyah 76* is the title of a Ukrainian literary periodical that has since been published in book form; www.potyah76.org.ua. In the millenium year the Literaturwerkstatt Berlin organized a train journey from Lisbon to Friedrichstrasse Berlin via Minsk and Warsaw for 100 writers from all over Europe.
- 35 The S. Fischer Foundation inspired and sponsored: Martin Pollack (ed.), *Sarmatische Landschaften. Nachrichten aus Litauen, Belarus, der Ukraine, Polen und Deutschland* ("Sarmatian landscapes. News from Lithuania, Belarus, Ukraine, Poland and Germany), Frankfurt/Main 2005 (published simultaneously in Polish by Czarne/Wolowiec); Richard Swartz (ed.), *Der Andere nebenan. Eine Anthologie aus dem Südosten Europas* (The Other next door. An anthology from the south-east of Europe"), Frankfurt/Main 2007 (the book is published in all the languages of the participating Balkan countries); Katharina Raabe, Monika Sznajderman (eds.), *Last & Lost. Ein Atlas des verschwindenden Europas* (Last & Lost. An atlas of disappearing Europe), Frankfurt/Main 2006 (simultaneously in Polish from Czarne/Wolowiec).
- 36 The publishing house Pogranicze (Borderlands), founded by the journalist and theatrical producer Krzysztof Czyzewski in 1993 as part of the foundation of the same name in Sejny, a former *shtetl* on the Polish-Lithuanian-Belarusian border, published, in the year 2000, the essay "Neighbours" (*Nachbarn*) by Jan Tomasz Gross, who launched the biggest debate since the war about the involvement of the Poles in the murder of Polish Jews. The publishing house Czarne, founded twelve years ago by Andrzej Stasiuk and Monika Sznajderman, bears the name of a vanished Lemko village in southern Poland. Both these publishing houses devote themselves to the so-called "minor literatures" of central and eastern Europe. They focus on Jewish history and organize cross-border book and cultural festivals. With their discoveries of central European writers of the interwar period and those in exile such as Jakub Deml or Zygmunt Haupt, and with their commitment to closer

relationships with Belarus and the Ukraine, they are continuing the work of *Kultura* in Paris.

- ³⁷ Stephan Wackwitz, *Osterweiterung. Zwölf Reisen* ("Eastern enlargement. Twelve journeys"), Frankfurt/Main 2008, 10f.
- ³⁸ In the words of a Czech writer using the pseudonym Josef K. in: "Central Europe: History and Anecdote" (*Mitteleuropa: Geschichte und Anekdote*) in the first issue of the German edition of *Lettre Internationale*, 1/1988, 16–24, here 20. This essay contains a complete theory of the great "Central European" literature that was born out of the downfall of a civilization and suffused with a feeling of irreplaceable loss. He names Horváth, Roth, Kafka, Musil, Schulz. The Jews in particular, he says, were conscious "that a time of turmoil and great suffering was beginning". All these authors shared a sense of the "civil absurdity of the spatial constriction of central Europe", where there was no place for the citizen who could feel responsible for the great history of his country: instead there were the little people, the clerks and officials in the civil and military bureaucracies, like those we know from Kafka and Hasek. Using these writers as examples, he develops the idea that "the melancholy and the grotesque" and the anecdotal form, "stories rather than history", were the "ideal type of Central European literature". Where civic sense is absent the sensibility for the grotesque details of life is all the more developed.
- ³⁹ László Darvasi, born 1962 in Szeged, first made a name for himself as a writer of short prose and novels. He continued the Hungarian tradition of the literary review and the grotesque (Kosztolányi, Krúdy, Örkény); but he is also an almost perfect example of the Josef K.'s theory that melancholy and the experience of the absurd produces the anecdote, and that this, and not the novel, is the Central European form. Darvasi developed his first novel "The Legend of the Tear Jugglers" (*Die Legende von den Tränengauklern*) from an anecdote, and the panorama of this book could be described as a gigantic patchwork of anecdotes and novellas.
- ⁴⁰ Josef K., op. cit, p. 16.
- ⁴¹ Karl–Markus Gauß, "Ein Bürger im Exil. Die lange Abwesenheit des Sándor Márai" (A Citizen in Exile. The Long Absence of Sándor Márai) in *NZZ*, 7.4.2001.
- ⁴² Miljenko Jergovic, born 1966 in Sarajevo, has lived in Zagreb since 1993. *Sarajevo Marlboro*, published in 1994 by Nenad Popovic's publishing house Durieux, was translated into several languages. In 1996 the first German language edition was published in Bolzano by Folio, a publishing house which, like Droschl in Graz and Wieser in Klagenfurt and, since 1997, Zsolnay in Vienna, does much to promote the literature of the former Yugoslavia. Two more books were published by Folio; since 2006 the Frankfurt Schöffling Verlag has taken on the work of Jergovic. After the novel *Buick Riviera* (original 2002, German trans. 2006) and "The walnut house" (original 2003, German trans. *Das Walnusshaus* 2008), *Sarajevo Marlboro* appeared in 2009 in a new (German) translation. The lyric poet Semezdin Mehmedinovic, born 1960 in Kisljak, founded the periodical *Fantom Slobode* (The phantom of liberty) in 1992 and remained with his family in the besieged city. In 1996 he emigrated to the US, where he still lives today. *Sarajevo Blues*, praised by writers as different as Dubravka Ugresic and Bora Cosic, and hailed as a lasting literary document by the *Washington Post*, appeared in extracts in 1995 in the special Sarajevo edition of the *Lettre Internationale* and was published in 1999 by the Hainholz Verlag, Göttingen.
- ⁴³ Albahari's novels, which were written in Canadian exile against the background of the collapse of his country, deal, like Tisma's, with the old Yugoslavia, devastated in World War II, and especially with the ongoing anti–Semitism (Bait [*Mutterland*]; "Götz and Meyer" [*Götz und Meyer*]). And they speak of today: of the loneliness of the refugee in an uncaring environment (*Man of Snow* [*Langsamer Schneefall*]), or of a mysterious conspiracy in Belgrade at the end of the 1990s (*Leeches* [*Die Ohrfeige*]). In the view of many critics, Albahari, born 1948, is one of the great contemporary European writers; they see in him the disciple of Kafka, the storyteller in the Jewish tradition who has now also absorbed elements of the American novel.
- ⁴⁴ Aleksandar Hemon, born 1964 in Sarajevo, has lived in the US since 1992. In his first book *The Question of Bruno* (*Die Sache mit Bruno*, 2000), which inhabits the same territory as Danilo Kis' *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* (*Grabmal des Boris Dawidowitsch*), Hemon reveals himself as a postmodern narrator, skilled in the art of the anecdote. After the autobiographically tinged novel *Nowhere Man* (German 2002), he has now produced the multilayered novel *Lazarus* (German 2009), in which the story of an eastern Jewish immigrant in the Chicago of the year 1908 is linked with an adventurous journey through post–communist eastern Europe.
- ⁴⁵ *Europa im Krieg. Die Debatte über den Krieg im ehemaligen Jugoslawien* (Europe at war. The debate on the war in the former Yugoslavia), Frankfurt/Main 1992. Konrád, Eörsi, Wagner, among others, had already published terrifyingly clear–sighted contributions in

Kursbuch 102/December 1990 ("Mehr Europa" [More Europe]), which in turn had links with the legendary *Kursbuch* edition (81/September 1985), entitled "Die andere Hälfte Europas" (The other half of Europe), which described the sensibility of eastern central Europe. The German edition of *Lettre Internationale* published key texts on the central Europe debate, followed by texts on the processes of dissolution in the Soviet Union. Then important contributions by authors from the former Yugoslavia were published here (Drago Jancar, Bora Cosic, Dubravka Ugresic, Predrag Matvejevic and others) — often long before the texts appeared in book form.

- ⁴⁶ In 2005 the superstar of the Polish scene, Dorota Maslowska, born 1982, made a radical break with everything Polish literature had hitherto known with her prose poem "The queen's peacock" (original title Paw Królowej, German trans. *Die Reiherkönigin*), a rap in free verse. Her debut *Wojna polsko-ruska pod flaga bialo-czerwona* (original published in 2002, German trans. 2004 as *Schneeweiß und Russenrot* ["Snow white and Russian red"]) sold more copies than any other book in Poland apart from the poems of Pope John Paul II. The German translation by Olaf Kühl also became a bestseller.
- ⁴⁷ Translator's note: name given to the Ukrainian "cultural renaissance" between 1923 and 1933, which was brought to an end by the liquidation of the majority of Ukraine's political and cultural elite in the Stalinist purges of 1934–1937.
- ⁴⁸ "Die Knochen und der Kaffeesatz" (The Bones and the Tea Leaves), in: *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 8.12.2008.

Published 2009–10–08

Original in German

Translation by Gordon Wells

Contribution by Osteuropa

First published in *Osteuropa* 2–3/2009

© Katharina Raabe / Osteuropa

© Eurozine