

BOOKS

Even Back in the GDR, They Were Deplored

Andreas Schätzke Chronicles Exiled Artists Returning Home

By Eckhart Gillen

As a rule, the artists and architects who emigrated from Germany after 1933 – such as Josef Albers, Max Beckmann, Max Ernst, Lyonel Feininger, Walter Gropius, Hans Hartung and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe – did not return after 1945. Otto Freundlich was murdered at Majdanek, Felix Nussbaum died at Auschwitz, while Heinrich Vogeler died of malnutrition in Kazakhstan.

Were they missed at home? There are no official invitations from the western zones of occupation. And the authorities in the Soviet occupation zone took an interest in only a few artists who seemed useful for propaganda, like Max Lingner, the popular illustrator of the Communist Party press in France, and the architect Kurt Liebknecht, nephew of assassinated socialist leader Karl Liebknecht.

In his well-informed investigation, Andreas Schätzke establishes that, compared to those returning to the Soviet occupied zone and then German Democratic Republic, only a few artists decided to remain in West Berlin or the Federal Republic. Their reasons seem obvious enough. As former members or sympathizers of the Communist Party of Germany, and of communist-leaning artists' organizations, the majority of returnees of the Weimar generation wished to continue the task of building a socialist society. Also, the anti-fascist artists returning from exile understood the unconditional surrender of the German Wehrmacht on May 8, 1945 as a liberation, while in West Germany the event was called the *Zusammenbruch*, or collapse.

With few exceptions – for example, sculptor Will Lammert and the architects who found asylum in the Soviet Union – they all returned from their exile in democracies that enjoyed a free press and boasted a liberal cultural climate. These so-called *Westemigranten* (emigrants to the West) – who were accused of “cosmopolitan tendencies” – were deeply suspect in the eyes of the Ulbricht Group under Walter Ulbricht, who had returned from Stalinist Moscow to be enthroned as the new government by the Soviet military administration. It is astonishing that those returning from exile in the West would de-

liver themselves of their own free will into Stalin's sphere of influence, despite all the information about Stalin they had been exposed to.

Horst Stempel, a member of the Communist Party, emigrated to Paris in 1933. In 1941, taking advantage of an offer of impunity, he returned voluntarily to Germany. He was later placed in a penal battalion in the Balkans, returned from an American prisoner-of-war camp, and by 1946 was among the founders of the Working Group of Socialist Artists. He was assigned as professor to the Academy of Arts Weißensee I in Berlin's Soviet Sector, and became a member of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED). In the context of a mural program for East Berlin's train stations (initiated by the general director of the German Imperial Railway, Willi Kreikemeyer), Stempel received a commission for the hall of the Friedrichstrasse train station. On Jan. 20, 1951, the mural was attacked in the *Tägliche Rundschau*, the official organ of the Soviet military and was destroyed a month later. When Stempel fled to West Berlin in 1953, the former Communist was repeatedly denied recognition as a political refugee.

Six months earlier, on August 25, 1950, Kreikemeyer himself was arrested by the Soviets. Six days later he died in prison under mysterious circumstances. The allegation of a link between the Communist Kreikemeyer and a “group of Trotskyist-Titoist conspirators in the pay of American Imperialism” was typical of the Stalinist methods used against *Westemigranten* in the GDR. Naturally, it was known to the Soviets that Kreikemeyer, while in French exile, had been business manager of Willi Münzenberg's *Neuer Deutscher Verlag*, and with his employer had rejected the 1939 Hitler-Stalin pact. After his return from English exile, photomontage artist John Heartfield also wound up in the spokes of a purge campaign against those who had emigrated to the west, and were assumed to have connections with the American agent Noel H. Field. As a former founding member of the Communist Party, the rejection of his application for SED membership for security reasons hit Heartfield hard. Only in 1954, during the thaw that followed the uprising of June 17, 1953 was *Westemigrant* Stefan Heym able to point out in the *Berliner Zeitung* the fact that “one of the greatest and most original artists of our time has vanished without a trace.”

Andreas Schätzke, *Rückkehr aus dem Exil. Bildende Künstler und Architekten in der SBZ und frühen DDR* (Return from Exile: Visual Artists and Architects in the Soviet Occupation Zone and early GDR). Dietrich Reimer Verlag, Berlin 1999. 290 pp., 22 ill., DM68 (\$34).