

TSCHECHOSLOWAKEI: LITERATUR EINES NACHBARLANDES

The small town of Weiden in the Upper Palatinate was the venue of a cultural event which attracted considerable interest in the surrounding region: from 2–7 May 1989, the town authorities played host to a conference devoted to recent developments in Czech literature. The title of the conference was “Tschechoslowakei: Literatur eines Nachbarlandes” (“Czechoslovakia: Literature of a Neighbouring Country”). Its aim

was to acquaint a German layman audience with a culture which, albeit close to home from a cultural and geographical point of view, is remote and alien to most young people in today's Federal Republic. Thanks to the enlightened work of such officials as Herr Bernard Baron, municipal head of cultural affairs, new developments in Czech literature, theatre and the visual arts are now more familiar to young Germans eager to learn about Czech culture, both within Czechoslovakia and abroad.

The programme included the following events: an exhibition of graphic work by Mario Schosser which illustrates *The Blue Bird* by the Brno writer Jan Skácel; a theatre production entitled "The Doors" by the Black Theatre of Prague, directed by Jiří Srnec; a jazz and poetry evening with the Emil Viklický Trio from Prague, and a marionette play entitled "Mario the Fiddler", directed by the young exiled actor and theatre director Ivan Pokorný. The culmination of the conference was a poetry and prose reading by the following writers: Sidonia Dedina, Ota Filip, Jiří Gruša, Iva Procházková and Franz Wurm. Sidonia Dedina was born in Prague in 1935 and now lives in Munich where she works as a journalist. She read from her novel *Als die Tiere starben* (When the Animals Died; Munich and Vienna, 1988). The novel deals with the German inhabitants of Bohemia who remained in their homeland following the forced expulsion of the Germans in 1946. Dedina explores the difficulties – economic and psychological – faced by this group of Germans as they struggled to survive in unpropitious circumstances.

The second participant at the reading was the thirty-five-year-old Iva Procházková, born in Olomouc in 1953. Procházková now lives and works in exile in Bremen with her husband, the director Ivan Pokorný. She read excerpts from her new novel *Die Zeit der geheimen Wünsche* (The Season of Secret Wishes; Weinheim and Basel, 1989); she is clearly preoccupied with the child's relationship with the father; her heroine Kapka ('drop') is modelled on her own childhood in the repressive late 1950s.

A writer of an older generation is the poet Franz Wurm. Wurm was born in Prague in 1926, emigrated to England shortly before the war and then moved to Zürich where he has lived ever since. Wurm read from the following collections: *Anmeldung* (Registration; 1954), *Anker und Unruh* (Anchor and Restlessness; 1964) and *Hundstage* (Dog Days; 1986). This writer made a deep impression on the audience through his cosmopolitan range of associations and resonances. He has translated widely from French, German and Czech poetry, including René Char and Holan whose *Toskána* he recently published in the Swiss literary journal *Das Nachtcasé* 29(1988). The deepest poetic influences on the work of Franz Wurm are Hölderlin, T.S. Eliot, Celan and Rilke.

The writer and publisher Jiří Gruša read from his collection *Aufenthaltserlaubnis* (Permission to Stay; 1988). His short, terse lyrics are in some ways reminiscent of the young Halas (the author of *Sepie*), an influence which Gruša acknowledges along with that of Mácha, Hlaváček, Rilke, T.S. Eliot and Dylan Thomas. His poem *Hafenstadt Prag* (Port of Prague) introduces the theme of Bohemia-on-the-coast familiar from Shakespeare; here the landlocked city becomes a metaphor for the beginning of an exile which is both real and metaphysical.

On the following day, a large panel of writers, translators and academics convened to discuss the theme of the present state of Czech literature at home and abroad. The

discussion was led by the journalist and writer Jürgen Serke, recently acclaimed for his erudite *Böhmische Dörfer* (Bohemian Villages; 1988). Serke opened the podium discussion with a wide-ranging literary introduction. He emphasized the paradox of Czech literature where the obliteration of memory (familiar from the work of Kundera) co-exists with a powerful sense of national identity. He quoted Hrabal's assertion that when books are burnt they appear elsewhere. He went on to suggest that Czech literature is now spread across a wide range of cultural islands, an archipelago stretching from Bohemia itself to Germany, England, France and Canada. In response to the general question whether Czech literature could survive in such circumstances and whether we can speak of a unified literature, Eda Kriseová argued that there was no possibility of freedom for Czech literature as long as writers like Václav Havel and Ivan Jirous continued to be imprisoned by the régime in Prague. On a more optimistic note, Gruša remarked that there was only one Czech literature and that this truth was recognized even by the representatives of the Czechoslovak Writers' Union. All the participants were agreed on one point: Czech literature could only flourish if there was to be a new spirit and a new confidence at home and abroad. In an era of détente between East and West the universal sentiment of the panel was that this spirit might have an influence on cultural policy-making in Czechoslovakia.