

De-Stalinisation and the German Democratic Republic

Die Architekten (The Architects), by Stefan Heym, Bertelsmann Verlag, 2000

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Stefan Heym's newly published novel *The Architects* tells the story of the married architect couple Arnold and Julia Sundstrom in the German Democratic Republic (GDR—East Germany) in 1956.

He is a professor and part of the local elite, who builds the Street of World Peace in an unnamed city in the GDR—a boulevard in the ostentatious, eclectic style of the Stalinist era, calling to mind East Berlin's Stalinallee (Stalin Avenue, later renamed Karl Marx Avenue). He lives in pleasant, but not ostentatious luxury, has a villa, a housekeeper and his own car, and enjoys close contact with the local party leaders.

She is the daughter of Julian and Babette Goltz, two prominent Communist Party (KPD) members. At the age of eight in a Moscow hotel she experienced how the secret service came for her parents. Both died in the great purges. Her mother died in prison. Her father was shot during an escape attempt in 1939, when the Soviet authorities were about to hand him over to the Nazis.

This is described in the novel's prologue. Before their arrest, the parents had asked Arnold Sundstrom, a close friend of the family, to look after their daughter Julia. He took her from the orphanage, brought her up as a faithful communist and later married her.

They have a child together, Julian, who is barely five years old. For Julia, Arnold is a father figure, an admired model and lover all in one. An architect herself, she assists him in his office and supports his projects with enthusiasm and inner conviction.

The novel describes how this admiration turns into its opposite, as Julia's first doubts arise about their joint work and about Arnold's character, how she becomes conscious of the contradiction between socialist phraseology and social reality, how she separates from her husband and turns to the young architect John Hiller, a representative of the younger generation which is no longer oriented towards Stalin, and how Hiller, in his own way, soon proves to be just as opportunist as her husband.

The novel shows how Julia experiences the truth about the extent of the Stalinist terror and about the fate of her parents, and how finally she joins Daniel Tieck, who returns from the Gulag and has remained faithful to his ideals and retained his integrity during his imprisonment.

The reader experiences all this step by step, and Heym produces a tension that in parts is reminiscent of a detective story. But as interesting as his story actually is, in the long run it only serves as the means for transmitting the actual topic of the novel: the effects that the exposure of Stalin's crimes by Khrushchev had on the GDR, the possibilities that this opened up for the building of a new, truly socialist society, and how these possibilities were lost.

In the novel, architecture serves as a metaphor for the construction of a

new society. The theoretical debates over architectural questions, which occur repeatedly in the novel, are at the same time debates about the character of socialist society. Heym utilises artistic devices that are both skilful and cryptic. Thus Julia's conception of the world is shaken for the first time when she is enthused by a new design for the Street of World Peace, and then discovers that it is a copy of a plan drafted by Hitler's personal architect Albert Speer for a boulevard in Nazi Berlin.

Arnold Sundstrom and Daniel Tieck studied together in the Weimar Republic at the Bauhaus, whose simple forms unite harmony and functionality. Tieck holds true to these conceptions and aims, he wants "housing schemes—bright, airy, well planned, organised according to human need, a harmony of green and silver". He wants an architecture based on the latest techniques: "Construction blocks, everyone of which is pre-prepared, according to plan, size and standard." He wants to build economically and at the same time to satisfy universal social needs: "Shopping streets, schools, kindergartens, clinics, community centres." He says, "To construct in this way is only possible under socialism, where we can plan the space according to the needs of the coming generation."

Arnold Sundstrom turned away from the Bauhaus and became the advocate of "socialist realist" architecture. "Today I know," he says, "that the artistic, cubist constructions derived from the teachings of the Bauhaus professors are basically negative and soulless, anti-human—and oppose the common sense of our workers." Tieck has only contempt for Sundstrom's architecture. It is eclectic, kitsch, "wedding cake architecture". His appraisal of the Street of World Peace is short and to the point: "Hypocrisy in cement and brick".

Sundstrom's break with the Bauhaus came not from conviction, but from opportunism. At one point he speaks bitterly about a critic "who had never experienced in life that a wrong position with regard to questions of art could cost you your neck".

In a confrontation with Julia and Tieck, he justifies his attitude: "But where do you draw the boundary between conformism and discipline? The great virtue, the revolutionary maxim that the lesser morals of the individual are subordinate to the great law of the collective, in the comfortable shadow of which the subservient and the half-hearted, the hypocritical and egocentric all seek shelter—and find it—that provides every slimy bureaucrat and denunciator with his justification and rationale.... Don't you see the logic of it?"

Responding to Tieck's sober reproach, that he is describing nothing more than perversion and corruption, Sundstrom answers: "How petty you are! You think I am attempting to excuse myself. In fact, I am explaining a phenomenon to you."

Julia is not prepared to accept Arnold's arguments. After he repeatedly

tries to explain his behaviour with reference to “the dialectics of the situation”, she develops the following train of thought: “And he isn’t even play acting, she thought. Probably he thinks of himself in the overarching context of a historical development, the dialectic of which provides him with the justification he considers useful and necessary. What an ultra-elasticity of conscience for a man who had brought up the young girl, Julia, in the spirit of upright revolutionary adherence to principles! Or is there really no contradiction between such uprightness and an elastic consciousness, with the aspects of one character supplementing perfectly those of the other? But not with her. She refused to accept that the crystal clear words of the great teachers contained a priori this in-built opportunism, and that the fiery red of revolution had for ages been mixed with the yellow of bootlicking.”

Stefan Heym wrote *The Architects* in English between 1963 and 1966. Living in the GDR, the author believed from the start that its publication there was impossible. His English publishers, Cassell’s in London, also rejected the book. The novel only appeared last August, when the 87-year-old Heym translated it into German himself. After narrowly escaping death following an operation, he wanted to complete his life’s work.

The English publishers rejected the novel in 1966, saying the character description was too black and white and the story too barren. That is clearly a wrong evaluation. Four and a half decades after the events he describes, and in the light of the collapse of the GDR, the novel’s sharpness and clarity captivate through the manner in which, despite the short historical interlude, it evinces the significance and consequences of the events of that time. If the book had been published immediately upon completion, it would have aroused not only literary, but also political attention.

One cannot evaluate *The Architects* by the criteria of a psychological *Entwicklungsroman* (a novel that traces a character’s development), which the book neither is nor seeks to be. It is a political novel, in which the individual characters stand for certain social types. This may appear to some readers as somewhat schematic. It does not, however, diminish the novel.

Heym often falls back on his own experiences or upon real people. Thus one scene describes how Sundstrom is called to meet the local party chief, comrade Tolkening, in his office. Tolkening plays the “worker” by unpacking and demonstratively eating two thin sandwiches and two home-grown apples. As he relates in his autobiography, Heym personally experienced this scene when party boss Walter Ulbricht received him in his office in 1956.

In the fate of Julian and Babette Goltz it is easy to detect elements of the biographies of Heinz Neumann and Margarete Buber-Neumann. Like Goltz, Neumann was a prominent KPD functionary. He and his wife became, like the Goltz couple, victims of the purges. Margarete Buber-Neumann was, like Julian Goltz, handed over to the Nazis in 1939 by Stalin’s regime. (She survived, unlike Goltz, who is shot). Although under different circumstances, Willi Münzenberg was shot by the Stalinists “while escaping”. Münzenberg was the partner of Babette Gross, the sister of Buber-Neumann. There is an obvious similarity between her name (Babette Gross) and that of the fictional character Babette Goltz.

Heym’s strongpoint is his ability to describe the habits, ways of thinking and behaviour of the various sections of the GDR elite. He distils his own experiences by means of critical distance, irony and literary craftsmanship.

In a typical scene, party chief Tolkening tells the star architect Sundstrom that his project for the next stage of the Street of World Peace has not met with approval in Berlin. He declares that “subjectively” nobody has anything against his work.

Sundstrom understands immediately that something serious is going on. The author describes his musings: “Sundstrom acknowledged that there was no subjective basis for his momentary tricky situation. But that being

the case, something must have occurred to dislodge the delicate balance of power structures, which are generally rendered in technical jargon by the term *objective conditions*. But there’s the rub. Subjective error, or what is taken for such, can be ironed out with a corresponding dose of self-criticism, raised at the right time in the right language. The correction of objective conditions lies beyond the capabilities of any single comrade; before one even knows what has taken place, one is already victim to the event, loses rank and position and the recognition of one’s work, with the long years of loyal application to duty proving to be just lost time.”

Heym’s criticism is directed not only against those representatives of the bureaucratic elite who ate humble pie before Stalin. The subsequent generation, whose ascendency was to follow in the shadow of Khrushchev’s exposures, does not get off lightly. In this the author positively stands out from all those who maintained substantial illusions during the 1960s in the process of so-called “de-Stalinisation”.

A typical representative of this generation is John Hiller, the young architect who works in Sundstrom’s office and becomes Julia’s lover for a time. In contrast to Julia, who at the beginning sincerely believes in the ideals proclaimed by Sundstrom, Hiller has only cynical disdain for them. It is Hiller who shows Julia the sketch by Albert Speer, which so remarkably resembles Sundstrom’s designs. Hiller is capable of genuine enthusiasm and readiness to make sacrifices, particularly in his love for Julia, but these are soon cast aside when he must make long-term concessions. That is, he cannot come to terms with the fact that Julia wants to keep her five-year-old son with her, and thus spare him a fate without parents, as she herself experienced.

Hiller welcomes the break with Stalinist traditions, but principles and ideals are foreign to him. At one point he states with surprise that “Tieck appears not to understand the revolution primarily as a ladder which one climbs in order to obtain positions, prestige and privileges.” He is fascinated by this, but in the long run his relatively privileged and liberal lifestyle is much too important for him to risk in the pursuit of more noble goals. In the end he displays a similar opportunism to that of Sundstrom, however under changed historical circumstances. He can adapt, without immediately becoming an accomplice in capital crime. He soon becomes alienated from Julia, whose straightforward manner draws her ever more strongly to Tieck, and at the end of the novel he stands at Sundstrom’s side.

Perhaps the weakest figure in the novel is its positive hero, Daniel Tieck. The architect, who paid for his principles with 16 years in Stalin’s prison camps, is a strong character, courageous, understanding and good natured. He retains this attitude even in moments of personal crisis, when he gets senselessly drunk.

Tieck is certainly not an invention of Heym. There are survivors of the Gulag who have remained faithful to their ideals, and they belong without doubt amongst the most admirable characters of a twentieth century so full of opportunism. But Heym is weak when it comes to plausibly showing the source of Tieck’s moral strength.

This question is repeatedly addressed. Hiller wonders: “Tieck was completely honest, but a dreamer; the wonder was precisely that his dreams survived—or did Tieck survive because he had hung onto his dreams?” Tieck himself talks about it: He survived by resisting being physically and mentally crippled, by continuing to plan and build with the help of chunks of wood he had carved himself. But all this is not very convincing.

The reason may be the fact that Heym systematically excludes political questions. The memoirs of numerous survivors testify to the intensive political discussions that were frequent in the prison camps. The most successful resistance came from those who not only regarded Stalinism as a system of moral depravity, but saw it as the ascent of a new privileged caste, which could be eliminated only by a new, political revolution from below. It was no coincidence that Leon Trotsky, who had formulated this

view most sharply, was the central target of all the Stalinist show trials and slanders.

One finds little of this in Heym. He provides a brilliant characterisation of the ruling bureaucracy, but Tieck's perspective, with which he himself obviously identifies, remains limited to reforms imposed from above: One must build better and more beautiful houses for the workers.

Not that Heym completely ignores this question. On the occasion of an inspection tour of the building site at the Street of World Peace, a bricklayer grumbles continuously about the "working norms", "snoopers" and "god-damned parasites who build crap at the people's expense". This scene is obviously inspired by the events of June 17, 1953, to which Heym has dedicated another novel. At that time, the workers' rebellion started in the Stalinallee, the East Berlin avenue which served as the model for the author's Street of World Peace.

The foreman, Barrasch, who leads the work on the building site, is a cautious worker of strong character, who feels drawn to Tieck, befriends and protects him. When it comes to the crucial confrontation between Tieck, Julia and Sundstrom in the builder's hut, it is Barrasch who organises a group of workers to intervene against any violent action on the part of Sundstrom.

The novel ends with the further construction of the Street of World Peace being decided by a competition. Arnold Sundstrom and John Hiller submit a joint project, which extends the old eclecticism with some modern elements. Daniel Tieck and Julia Sundstrom's alternative is based on the concepts of the Bauhaus and breaks radically with the old style. The jury—the result is already predetermined from above—decides in favour of Sundstrom and Hiller. The chance for renewal has been squandered.



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