The death of German writer Siegfried Lenz (1926-2014)

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Siegfried Lenz, one of the most widely read authors in postwar and contemporary German literature, died October 7 at the age of 88. His readers valued his novels and stories both for their classical realist narrative style and the significant themes from the present and the recent past he chose to treat.

His works were translated into 35 languages and his books were published in the millions. Lenz also wrote essays, as well as plays for the radio and theatre. Although he received numerous awards and accolades, unlike his colleagues and contemporaries Heinrich Böll (1917-1985) and Günter Grass (born 1927), he was not awarded the Nobel Prize for literature.

Lenz grew up in the East Prussian city of Lyck, now Elk, in Poland. Throughout his life, he remained deeply connected to his native region, but never joined the reactionary displaced persons organizations, which demanded a return to Germany of territories ceded to Poland after World War II.

Lenz never made a secret of the fact that he had been a member of the Hitler Youth movement and, like many of his generation, had revered the Nazi regime for a time. After his *Notabitur* (i.e., emergency secondary school qualification granted without examination to German wartime recruits), he was drafted into the navy in 1943. Although a NSDAP (Nazi party) membership card bearing his name was found a few years ago, he always denied having joined the party. At the time, many young people were collectively registered as members by zealous officials.

As the Second World War progressed, Lenz began to experience serious doubts about Nazism and he later wrote: "I had to acknowledge the death (it was causing), the columns of desperate refugees, the tragic sinking of ships". Having witnessed an execution in Denmark in the last weeks of the war, he decided to desert.

He was taken prisoner by the British, but was soon released and began studying for a teacher's degree. He broke off his studies in 1948, however, to begin an apprenticeship at *Die Welt*. Lenz worked at the daily newspaper as an editor from 1950 to 1951. From then on, he lived as a freelance writer in Hamburg and Denmark. In 1951 he published his first novel, *Es waren Habichte in der Luft* (There Were Hawks in the Air). With the proceeds from the book he travelled to Kenya. In his short story, "Lukas, sanftmütiger Knecht" (Lucas, Gentle Servant), he used experiences gained in Africa to write about the Mau Mau rebellion against colonial rule.

A year later, he joined *Group 47*, an association of German writers and journalists who met to read from their works and offer each other criticism. Among others, the group included Grass, Böll, Walter Jens, Ilse Aichinger, Erich Fried, Alfred Andersch and Ingeborg Bachmann. Later, they were joined by leading literary critic Marcel Reich-Ranicki. The group considered itself to be, in the broadest sense, a kind of literary avant-garde. Many of the texts read and discussed dealt with Nazism and the ways in which official Germany sought to suppress discussion of this history, as well as the reactionary features of the postwar years under Chancellor Konrad Adenauer (1949-1963).

Accordingly, group members were violently attacked by representatives of the Adenauer elite. In January 1963, Christian Democratic Union (CDU) politician Josef Hermann Dufhues labelled *Group 47* a secret "Reichschrifttumskammer" (the Nazis' Reich Writers' Guild), whose influence "not only in the cultural, but also in the political sphere" caused him "secret lamentation". Chancellor Ludwig Erhard (1963-1966) complained about "symptoms of the degeneracy" of modern art, an allusion to the Nazi indictment of modern art as "Degenerate Art".

Right-wingers foamed at the mouth all the more when some of the group's authors supported Social Democratic Party [SPD] candidate Willy Brandt in the 1965 federal election campaign. Among them were Grass and Lenz. Lenz was again active for the SPD during the 1969 election campaign, although it had participated in a coalition with the CDU under former Nazi Georg Kiesinger since 1966.

Lenz was particularly keen to support Brandt's *Ostpolitik* (rapprochement with Stalinist East Germany and Eastern Europe), which he regarded above all as an opportunity to achieve reconciliation with Poland. Like Grass, he condemned right-wing elements in West Germany who called for the revival of the German Empire and the return of territories lost during World War II.

Lenz maintained his links to the SPD throughout his life. He had a close friendship with former Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, who delivered a eulogy at Lenz' memorial.

Lenz was a representative of the generation that had lived through the Nazi era as children and adolescents. Their experiences of the war and postwar period drove them to demand a reckoning with the Third Reich and the conservative elites, who dominated the political stage during the Adenauer era.

"He told Germans their history and their own stories", commented Thomas Steinfeld in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* newspaper. But this "history" is mainly restricted to the period he himself directly experienced. His novels and stories do not pose the question of how the Third Reich and Second World War were possible in the first place. The betrayal of the SPD, which supported the First World War in 1914, and the degeneration of the German Communist Party (KPD) under the influence of Stalinism were not part of the history that he and many West German writers of his generation confronted.

The criticisms of Lenz, Böll and Grass, directed against postwar West German society, its right-wing politicians, its scientific and legal communities, its rabid anti-communism, the former Nazis in high positions, as well as these authors' commitment to the needs of poor and disadvantaged layers of society, met with wide sympathy, particularly among young people, high school and university students, who were increasingly radicalised in the 1960s.

Lenz and many other young writers in *Group 47* were certainly dissatisfied with political and social conditions in West Germany. But they had no connection to the revolutionary workers' movement that

existed prior to 1914. They themselves were influenced by Cold War ideology. Although they denounced various social ills, they regarded Western capitalist "democracy" as capable of improvement and "communism" as a dead end.

In their view, the Stalinist-dominated states of the Soviet Union and the (East) German Democratic Republic (GDR) represented totalitarianism. At the same time, they were far removed from a Marxist critique of Stalinism. This helped drive them into the arms of Social Democracy, which they hoped would reform capitalist society. Their ability to consider Trotsky's analysis of the Soviet Union and Stalinism was made much more difficult by the fact that the Pabloite trend had dissolved the German Trotskyist organisation into Social Democracy.

In his later years, Lenz was no longer politically active. He devoted himself entirely to writing. In response to a question from a *Hamburger Abendblatt* interviewer in 1999 about why he was no longer politically engaged, the author replied that he now saw "that one can keep in step with politics quite well enough through writing—and not only by participating in electoral campaigns. My concern is to describe what happens to people, in the expectation that readers will draw their own conclusions and apply them to their own contemporary political scene".

In addition, Lenz spoke about his writing style: "In principle, I don't write about role models but rather about figures who I hope will stand the test of time. A figure has to be credible of course by situating him or her in a very specific environment. ... I think—and this corresponds to one's own experience—what happens to a particular person also happens to many others. There are, so to speak, representative experiences, which the individual—though not necessarily everyone—has, and which are evidently shared by quite a lot of people or a whole society. ... I am convinced that the individual is representative of the experiences of all".

Stories

Writing about the East Prussian town in which he was raised, Lenz observes: "I was born on March 17, 1926 in Lyck, a small town between two lakes, which the people of Lyck say is the 'Pearl of the Masuria region'. The community, which relished this pearl, consisted of workers, craftsmen, small businessmen, fishermen, skilled broom-makers and patient officials".

He dedicated a literary memorial to these people and their villages in his first collection of short stories, "So zärtlich war Suleyken" ("So Tender Was Suleyken"), in 1955. It became Lenz's first bestselling work. He depicted the rural population of Schleswig-Holstein in a likewise lovingly ironic way, sometimes also rather bitingly, in the small volume, "Der Geist der Mirabelle: Geschichten aus Bollerup" ("The Spirit of the Yellow Plum: Stories from Bollerup"), published in 1975.

Lenz's writing is remarkably varied in length and breadth. Some pieces are just a few pages long, while others, such as "Das Feuerschiff" ("The Lightship"), have the scope of a short novel. The latter was adapted on film in 1963 and again in 2008 as a psychological thriller and can be taken as a political metaphor for a violent seizure of power and the opposition it provokes. The perspective of Lenz´s stories changes repeatedly and their language is entirely appropriate to the different subjects at hand.

The subject matter of Lenz's fiction is just as diverse. Most of his novels are based on precise, insightful perceptions and observations of the period under examination. His books critically reflect the mood of their times. Many of the stories read like crime novels, often startling readers or catching them off guard with climactic revelations. He also ironically unmasks representatives of Germany's postwar, so-called "economic miracle", as in his short story "Ein Haus voller Liebe" ("A House Full of Love").

Many of his stories draw their vitality from landscape imagery inspired by northern Germany, his native East Prussia, as well as Schleswig-Holstein and Hamburg. The sea and the river Elbe play an important role in his fiction. He movingly depicts the fates, tragedies and social backgrounds of ordinary people for the most part, caught up in the postwar period ("Die Nachzahlung"—The Payback) or during the economic boom ("Der Mann im Strom"—The Man in the River)—people who are either too old, too weak or to ill to keep up in a society geared to individual performance.

He subjects academic life to grotesque satire ("Die Lampen der Eskimos"—The Lamps of the Eskimos). But his writing also ranges from humorous lampooning ("Mein verdrossenes Gesicht"—My Sullen Face) to stringent political satire ("Sohn des Diktators"—Son of the Dictator). Opposites are often reconciled in one and the same narrative. Lenz is a master of black humour; the ridiculous often becomes tragic and vice versa.

Many of his stories are quite dramatic. It is thus no surprise that, in addition to his novels and short stories, Lenz wrote several radio and stage plays. His 1961 play *Zeit der Schuldlosen* (Time of the Innocent) was widely acclaimed. However, at least partly due to his limited concern with broader historical issues, the treatment of guilt and dictatorship in this play remains rather abstract and largely focused on moral conduct.

The German Lesson

The novel *The German Lesson* (*Deutschstunde*) is probably Lenz's most important and also most internationally successful book. Its main theme concerns the question of guilt and duty under National Socialism. All of the Nazi criminals—from army officers who ordered massacres to concentration camp thugs and informer-block wardens—justified their crimes by claiming they were only doing their duty.

The narrator in *The German Lesson*, the youthful Siggi Jepsen, is an inmate in a prison for juveniles and problem children in the 1950s, and has been instructed to write a composition about the "Joys of Doing Your Duty". He hands in a blank piece of paper, because he is overwhelmed by the subject. This is because the "duty" carried out by his father under the Nazis left such a deep impression on his childhood and youth. As punishment, Siggi is confined to a holding cell where he is forced again to write an essay. Once he begins, he volunteers to remain in solitary confinement until he has finished the entire story of his childhood and youth. The novel, first published in 1968, comprises 479 pages.

The "crime" that earned Siggi his detention was stealing paintings by the (fictional) expressionist artist Max Ludwig Nansen, whose works were banned by the Nazi leadership. Siggi stole the works to prevent them from being delivered to the authorities or destroyed by his father, Jens Ole Jepsen, the "northernmost police officer in Germany". Jepsen had been a friend of Nansen's since childhood. The latter had even once saved him from drowning, which did not prevent Jepsen, however, from strictly observing the Nazi ban on Nansen's paintings and confiscating everything that, in his opinion, violated the prevailing order.

The ten-year-old Siggi was supposed to help his father, but he decides instead to help the painter hide the works. The older man performs his functions with an utterly absurd fanaticism, not because he is a convinced supporter of Nazi ideology, but because the authorities in charge—in whatever shape or form—demand it. But his wife, Siggi's mother, has been deeply indoctrinated by Nazi propaganda. She is hostile to everything "sick" and "abnormal". When the boyfriend of Hilke, Siggi's sister, has an epileptic seizure, she calls him a "sick and worthless

specimen” and throws him out of the house.

Even after the war, when the “respectable police officer” has passed through the denazification process and been allowed to return to his post, he considers it his duty to destroy works of art that were created despite his rigorous surveillance. This is why Siggi hides them and is subsequently imprisoned.

Aside from the three principal characters—Siggi, the police officer and the painter—many intriguing secondary characters take the stage: the grandfather, from peasant stock and a fervent “blood and soil” (Nazi racial ideology) local historian; the biology and “humanist life skills” teacher; and the deserter and self-mutilating brother Klaas, who later becomes a photographer and tries to hide Siggi. He lives in a commune in a disused factory in the Hamburg artistic milieu and mocks the old-fashioned art of Max Nansen.

Especially typical is Lenz’s depiction of the wealthy clientele attending the exclusive opening receptions at art exhibitions. The Hanseatic bourgeoisie and bohemians who show up at the Nansen exhibition are portrayed with just a few deft strokes of the pen. Yet the strong impression is conveyed that the paintings have to be protected from these people.

The figure of Maltzahn, an art critic and turncoat, is also aptly delineated. He pops up after 1945 and asks for permission to print “invisible pictures” of Nansen, although he formerly denounced the artist’s work in a journal as “degenerate”. Maltzahn is a symbol of all those who voluntarily participated in the repression of artists under the Third Reich and then, after the war, crawled “out of their holes”, disowning their crimes and playing down the horrors of the Nazi regime.

At the end of his detention, Siggi wishes for an “island for the maladjusted elderly” for people like Maltzahn and his own father.

The figure of the painter Max Ludwig Nansen has much in common with the expressionist Emil Nolde, who sympathized with the German nationalist movement and joined one of the Nazi organisations in 1934. Lenz was subsequently accused of having produced a false portrayal of Nolde, whose role in the novel should therefore be revised. However, Lenz was not writing a biography of Nolde, but creating a fictional character. He makes no secret of his protagonist’s nationalist sentiments and party membership.

Moreover, Lenz’s intention was to address the broader issue of the barbarism of the Nazi campaign against so-called “degenerate artists”. This is indicated by the choice of Nansen’s given names. “Ludwig” could suggest Ludwig Kirchner and “Max” might point to Max Beckmann, who were both classified as degenerate artists by the Nazis.

The German Lesson, widely regarded as Lenz’s key work dealing with Nazism, remains a critical and highly readable piece of postwar literature.