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The flag of freedom flew in divided Berlin

During his first ten years in Berlin, Thomas Hürlimann became a writer

CHARLES LINSMAYER

In 1974, the year in which his father, Hans Hürlimann, became a Federal Councillor, 24-year-old Thomas went to Berlin and discovered, after years as a pupil in the Einsiedeln monastery school and as a student in Zurich, a completely new, radically different world. “The flag of freedom was unmistakably flying there. The ‘red decade’ had not yet shifted to the leaden times.” He stayed in the divided city ten years, giving up his studies and soon realising that only by writing, “only in words”, could he breathe. His art did not become existential until the death of his younger brother from cancer in 1980 forced the topic of dying and transiency on him. That is how the play “Grossvater und Halbbruder” (*Grandfather and Half-Brother*) came to be, which he sent to the Suhrkamp representative in Zurich. Egon Ammann visited Hürlimann in Berlin and said, “Forget the stage, write prose, then we can publish you.”

Shortly thereafter, though, the Theatertreffen in Berlin decided to perform the play. When it was debuted in 1981 in Zurich, Hürlimann’s prose debut “Die Tessinerin” (*The Woman of Ticino*) was already in the bookshops. After the rejection, Ammann had returned to Berlin, and in the “Litfin”, a pub at the Berlin Wall, the two decided upon the establishment of the publishing house Ammann Verlag, which would publish not only “Die Tessinerin”, but also “Das Gartenhaus” (published as “The Couple” in the USA), “Fräulein Stark” (*Miss Stark*), “Der grosse Kater” (*The Day of the Cat*), “Vierzig Rosen” (*Forty Roses*) and the tales. In 1984 Hürlimann returned to Switzerland and 34 years were to pass before he was in a position to process that return – masterly alienated and heightened to a grand odyssey – in the novel “Heimkehr” (*Returning Home*).

Returning home on the third attempt

Son of a factory-owner Heinrich Übel, having wasted 18 fruitless years as a perpetual student, is called home by his father, a rubber manufacturer of the same name, but is involved in a traffic accident near his father’s factory. With a disfiguring head injury, he regains consciousness in a Sicilian hotel and is now trying desperately to find out how the accident happened and what has happened to him in the time since. Bald as he is now, no one recognises him and he can virtually act as the criminal investigator on his own behalf. Gradually the submerged memory capsule re-

leases details with his search leading him to Africa, to Zurich and to Berlin. In encounters with his former lovers and a GDR functionary, with whom he falls madly in love, and particularly through contacts with persons involved in the accident, it is slowly revealed to him what happened that night. A second return home is as unsuccessful as the first, and it is only on the third attempt that he comes into conversation with his father, who is by now dealing with dementia, but still able to dispense a key finding to him: “It is all a dream, yet true. The essence of man is delusion.”

Returning home, Heinrich once again finds the love of his life; but at the scene of the accident awaits the accident vehicle now repaired. Behind the wheel sits a cat, and, with “a joint in the corner of his mouth” it races away with the returnee, “To the other side, Doc, from death to life!” The book, whose richness can only be hinted at here, shows a new Hürlimann – one for whom dying is no longer the topic, but overcoming death. A story-teller whose writing remains true to Martin Walser’s attribute of 1995: “Heavy with momentum.”

BIBLIOGRAPHY: “Heimkehr” was published by S. Fischer, Frankfurt am Main, where Hürlimann’s other books are also now available.



“One foggy night, I stuffed all the folders, notebooks and index cards on which I had jotted key words into the rubbish bins, made myself a cup of Nescafé using the immersion heater the next morning, and wrote the first syllable to sum up my entire existence to that point. I stopped short, hearing from the courtyard shaft a rumbling, the arrival of the bin men. I was immediately down the stairs, standing in front of the bins with my arms spread wide, shouting, ‘Hands off! That’s not rubbish – that’s my life!’”

(From “Heimkehr” (*Returning Home*), S. Fischer, Frankfurt 2018)

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