

The Impact of History: Walter Kempowski's *Im Block*

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The Image of Impact

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A prolific writer of both fictional and historical biography and autobiography, Walter Kempowski enjoyed popular, but not critical acclaim in the 1970's and 1980's with his *Deutsche Chronik (A German Chronicle)* 1971-1984, a massive nine-volume project that traced in detail the history of his own family against the background of the calamitous German 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Eschewing the traditional narrative structure for a montage and collage form Kempowski chronicled the catastrophes of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century Germany through the lens of everyday life, combining fiction and documentation and doing so with wit, irony and a striking absence of sentimentality and nostalgia. The private history of his family and of himself and the countless lives of others are positioned into a dialectic of discourse on Germany from the days of empire before WW I to the Weimar Republic, to the Third Reich, to post-WW II Germany and finally to the economic miracle of the 1960s, all held together by the *Leitmotif* of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the past).

The concept of literature, not as personal introspection and imagination, but as collection, chronicle and compilation and the notion of the writer as archivist and editor foremost are realized in Kempowski's other massive project titled *Das Echelot (Sonar)*, 1993-2005. A ten-volume collective diary of unpublished biographies, testimonies, reports, letters and sundry other documentation by contemporary witnesses to WW II that Kempowski collected, ordered and edited over 20 years, *Das Echelot* is a kaleidoscope of memory ranging from the trivial and banal to personal and historical grandeur. It privileged no position, opinion or ideology. But viewed Germany as both victim and perpetrator, bearing witness through literary restitution to the lives lived and lost during the Third Reich.

For eight years from 1948 to 1956 Walter Kempowski was imprisoned in the Soviet (East German, as of 1950) prison in Bautzen, Saxony. He had been sentenced to 25 years for espionage, anti-Soviet incitement, illegal border crossing and illegal assembly. I will argue that this experience in Bautzen (specifically *Bautzen I* as distinguished from *Bautzen II*, which was built in 1956 by the *STASI*) proved to be the defining impact upon Kempowski's life, both existentially and as a writer.

Born in 1929 into a well-off middle-class family, Walter Kempowski's sheltered youth, well-situated with comfort, culture and parental nourishment, suffered an abrupt end in April, 1942 when allied bombers destroyed the Baltic city of Rostock: "1942-48: that was the darkest time, even darker than Bautzen." ("1942-48: das war die dunkelste Zeit, nicht etwa Bautzen." (TB: 11.12.92)

Just two weeks before war's end his life was further shattered when his father, an officer in the German *Wehrmacht*, was killed by a Russian bomb on the Vistula Spit while defending Rostock.

In the ensuing months of chaos that followed, Kempowski, just 13 years old, absent from school and forced against his will to join the HJ (Hitleryouth), expressed his individual rebellion and outsider status by listening to jazz, learning to play the organ, watching American films and even founding his own swing band, the "International Swing Club."

He was drafted as a Luftwaffe courier in February, 1945 and defected from Berlin to Rostock in April 1945, where, on May 1, the Soviets army entered, occupied and plundered the city. By the fall of 1945 school had reopened and Kempowski was forced to begin learning Russian, but soon found a job with the publisher *Hansa Druck*, which allowed him to travel throughout the Soviet Occupation Zone. During this time he sought to distance himself as far as possible

from first the Nazis, then the Communists. Wary of anyone wearing a uniform, Kempowski viewed the new SED (Socialist Unity Party) as a Soviet totalitarian order and joined the LPD (liberal-democrats).

In November 1948 Kempowski fled to the west, to Hamburg, and then to Wiesbaden, which he considered a little interim paradise despite the irksome and self-righteous re-education programs of the Americans.

From his brother Robert, Kempowski had received documents, bills of lading confirming that the Soviets were plundering the Soviet Occupation Zone by shipping industrial material to the Soviet Union. Calling this a “strangulation by the Communists,” Kempowski planned to hand over the documents to the Americans, but made the mistake of travelling one last time back to Rostock where, along with his brother, he was arrested on May 8, 1948.

Kemposki was initially interrogated at the detention center in Brinkmann Street, then transferred to Schwering and solitary confinement. In September 1948 Kemposki’s mother was also arrested and given a 10-year prison sentence for not reporting her son’s activities to the authorities. The family’s ship-building business was liquidated and the family Kemposki for all intents ceased to exist.

And yet, in retrospect, Kemposki considered his situation as fortunate—hundreds of prisoners were simply shot and about half were being sent directly to

the Soviet Union: “Bautzen saved me.” (“Bautzen war ein Segen für mich.”

(131). Although “it dawned on me, I was nothing, I had nothing, was getting older with no school, no training, nothing,” Kemposki somehow emerges from his despair and attempts to assemble a new identity.

Bautzen was a political prison, not a criminal one and it contained political prisoners, not criminals. Comparing Bautzen to a ship of fools, Kemposki later stated “the prison was my university. In Bautzen I met social democrats, eastern bureaucrats, Christians und liberals, farmers, rebellious students, businessmen, property owners, saboteurs—all who interfered with the building of the DDR.”

(139) In Bautzen alone there were over 8,000 prisoners, of which some died every day, mostly of TB.

Assigned from 1949-52 to a prison hall containing over 400 men—three men to a bed four feet wide — Kemposki began his collecting and archiving of prisoners’ experiences, began his listening in on conversations. To his amazement, “the most amazing thing was that, even in the conditions of a person, something like a middle-class discipline and arrangement took root.” (“Das Erstaunlichste war, dass sich auch unter den Bedingungen des Zuchthauses so etwas wie eine bürgerliche Ordnung herstellte.”) 145

Indeed, despite all the privations, hardships, hunger and sickness, Kemposki writes of an active cultural and pedagogical life that, for him, included French tutoring, music theory, literature, philosophy and translation: “Never again did I read poetry as intensively as at Bautzen” (“Ich habe nie wieder so intensive Gedichte gelesen wie in Bautzen” 147). Eventually books were allowed in the cell block. When not available, the prisoners narrated to each other from memory. Soviet films were shown in the church. After 1949 letters were also allowed, although severely censored.

In sum the social and cultural occupations and preoccupations functioned as antidote and therapy within the prison world of hardships, suffering and deprivation.

Aside from physical ailments Kemposki, who contracted TB and dropped down to 45 kilograms, cycled through despair, depression and resignation. Nevertheless, in 1952 he joined the church choir, of which he became the director and through which he began a close acquaintance and comradeship with the prison chaplain.

Kemposki endured by finding meaning in the quotidian, everyday routines of the institution and its community of prisoners. In June 1955, after another collapse and stint in the prison hospital, Kemposki was included in a general

pardon by the DDR—his sentence was reduced to eight years—of which he had served seven—resulting in his March 3, 1956 release and deportation to the West. He was 27 years old.

The question now becomes: how did the experience of 8 years in Bautzen influence and define Kemposki's literary perception and literary work. That is, how did Kemposki transfer the moral indignation of the temporal and arbitrary into a literary process that would bear permanent witness to his experience?

I suggest that *Im Block-a Prison Report* represents the birth and beginning of Kemposki's literary career. Kemposki's pedagogical, literary and archival activities constitute the genesis of his understanding of literature as existential experience and redemption. While the actual eight years in Bautzen branded him for the rest of his life, *Im Block* —the literary transcription of those eight years—contained *in nuce* the whole of Kemposki's future writing. His *modus operandus* of gathering material, of posing questions, taking notes and keeping a journal (often on toilet paper!), even making sketches—these all began with Bautzen and *Im Block*. (BAUTZEN = Kemposki's APPRECTICESHIP)

*Im Block*, a diary without dates, structured as collage, was published 13 years after Kemposki's release. A protocol and chronological account, it is unusual in its style, structure and presentation; sober without much commentary, opinion or

value judgement. The role of the protagonist/narrator is reduced to objective reporting in the present tense. In order to speak of horror amidst the banality of the everyday, Kemposki wrote later “Facts are more important than opinions.” (Tatsachen sind wichtiger als Meinungen” 261).

Kemposki writes notably more about his fellow prisoners than about himself. For him truth always includes the multiple realities of others. He avoided the prison memoir as religious-existential drama of sin, fall and redemption and aimed rather for the depiction of the endless, quotidian boredom whereby the real challenges lay for the literary representation of nothingness.

On a deeper structural level Kemposki utilizes gallows humor and irony to create distance between himself and his narrated reality and to shift the inquiry for meaning away from himself and onto the reader.

After *Im Block* was published by Rowohlt in March, 1969, the critical reaction was positive but the public response lukewarm at best. Kemposki considered it a failure. However, utilizing *Im Block* as a launching pad, he began immediately on the narrative *Tadellöser und Wolf* (1971), volume 3 in his *Deutsche Chronik* (Lessingpreis/Film 1975). The dialectics of personal experience of the first-person narrator and of Nazi-German society from 1939-1945 is structured into a montage of short texts (short cuts) and mixed with quotes from



poems, songs, proverbs, advertising, the press, radio and television. The overarching impetus of *Tadellöser und Wolf*, indeed of all the *Deutsche Chronik*, is, as Kemposki, wrote to construct a bridge between the past and the present:

“I wanted to show the everyday middle classes in an authoritarian state and I wanted to bring the reader to the insight that the various characteristic qualities of those middle classes that had once been the soil for Nazi ideology still exist today.”

“Ich habe den bürgerlichen Alltag in einem autoritären Staat gezeigt und die Einsicht beim Leser erzielen wollen, dass zahlreiche charakteristische Züge jenes Bürgertums, das einst Nährboden des NS war, immer noch bestehen.” (313)

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