

The Quiet Dissident: East Germany's Reiner Kunze

Signed by the Soviet Union, the United States, and 33 other nations, the 1975 Helsinki human rights agreement has brought no great surge of individual freedom to Communist Europe. Those dissident East European and Russian intellectuals who urged compliance with the Helsinki accords have suffered official reprisals. We present a profile of East Germany's Reiner Kunze, followed by excerpts from *The Wonderful Years*, a collection of his ironic, intimate sketches of everyday life. This book, officially banned in the East, has become both a literary success and a best seller in West Germany. Long a target of Communist Party pressure, Kunze in April finally applied for, and got, permission to emigrate to the West.

A Literary Profile by David Binder

In this wordiest of worlds he appears to be almost a stranger, a kind of dropout: a writer who does not write much, a poet whose collected works would take less time to declaim than a standard Communist Party Congress speech by the Secretary-General. His is the economy of precision. He does not waste words. This is surely part of his appeal—we hang on his words because they are so few and so clear, the words of Reiner Kunze.

The other part of this East German writer's appeal, and probably the stronger, is his devotion to recording the human condition, the condition of the spirit in the micro-

cosm/macrocosm he created on the banks of the White Elster River in southern Thuringia. It would explain why his collection of semi-fictional vignettes, *Die wunderbaren Jahre* (published in the United States as *The Wonderful Years*), became a best seller in West Germany on the other side of the barbed wire, and why Kunze's two and one-half room apartment in the town of Greiz became the bourne of young pilgrims in his native East Germany. (He was, he told an interviewer in 1976, something of a "pastor for the heathen.") There are clear antecedents for his popular essays—Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*

(1774) and, more recently, a variation on the Goethe story by Kunze's East German contemporary Ulrich Plenzdorf entitled *The New Sorrows of Young W* (1973).

On November 17, 1976, when poet Wolfgang Biermann was deprived of citizenship in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) while on tour in West Germany and charged with "hostile behavior" constituting "flagrant violation of citizen duties," Reiner Kunze was among the hundreds of GDR artists and writers who protested Biermann's expulsion. He was thought to be particularly vulnerable because Biermann had described Kunze, the other unperson of East German letters, as "my friend though not my comrade."

However, on February 3, 1977, Kunze arrived in Vienna for a poetry reading, having received a visa to travel to the West and return to the East. Asked to comment on the Biermann expulsion, he responded: "Unless it is absolutely necessary—I shall always do it if it is necessary—but unless it is necessary, absolutely necessary, I would like to return to the essential, that is to avoid these publicity utterances." As for his own treatment, he said, "Possibly it expresses the fact that there has been another small advance toward internal sovereignty."

In contrast to Biermann, who proclaims himself a Communist and a proletarian, Kunze is avowedly, passionately unpolitical. He objected to being compared to Solzhenitsyn, saying: "First, I believe that my feeling for proportion is still intact. Second, I had the great fortune not to have to go through what Solzhenitsyn went through. Germany wasn't Russia. The GDR is not the Soviet Union. Third, Solzhenitsyn is

concerned with political agitation. I absolutely abhor that."

It is apparent that he accepts at least one precept of Lenin, to "learn, learn, and once again, learn!" The students who camped in his apartment in search of guidance often heard him counsel, "Learn, learn as much as possible—make yourselves inexplicable." Unwordy, but not wordless.

Kunze, the son of a miner, was born in 1933 in Oelsnitz on the Elster River—in that pre-eminently German corner of Germany, where the tribes held out against the blessings of Christianity and hierarchy longer than elsewhere, where the Peasant Wars began, where Bach and Luther were at home, where weaving and papermaking were native arts, and where democrats and despots, Nazis and Communists flourished side by side.

The boy was supposed to become a shoemaker, and there is something of that careful craft in his verse—his words fit his ideas snugly. A German would say they "sit" well. His first poems, written while he was a university philosophy student, were apparently in the Party mold, but he became disillusioned and embittered by constant indoctrination during his four-year term as a teaching assistant. Shortly before completing a doctoral degree, he dropped out to become an ordinary mechanic-truck-driver. He made the acquaintance of his future wife, a Czech dental physician who had written asking for one of his poems, through correspondence (his proposal and Elisabeth's acceptance are in two of their 400 letters). After moving to Czechoslovakia, he worked at translating Czech poems into German and published some of his own in Czech. The couple

moved to East Germany in 1962. Shortly after the armies of five Warsaw Pact countries, which included East Germany, invaded Czechoslovakia on August 21, 1968, Kunze quit the ruling Socialist Unity Party of Germany. In his hagiography, Karl Marx was replaced by Albert Camus. The shadow of the Party fell on the Kunzes and on their daughter Marcela, who was forced to leave high school a year before she would have been graduated.

There were periodic campaigns against Kunze. But when pressed to emigrate, he refused and protested to Communist Party President Erich Honecker, who intervened, as he had intervened in the 1960s on behalf of Wolfgang Biermann.

Persecution was not total. Kunze was permitted to publish two volumes of poetry in West Germany—*Sensible Wege (Sensitive Paths)* in 1969 and *Zimmerlautstärke (roughly, Room Temperature)* in 1972. In 1973 the East German publishing house Philipp Reclam, Jr. printed a 15,000-copy edition of his *Letter with a Blue Seal*—a selection of his poetry, which sold out immediately despite the fact there had been no press reviews and only one public reading. That same year he was awarded the literary prize of the Bavarian Academy of Fine Arts. His children's book *Leopold the Lion* won another prize in West Germany, although it remains unpublished in East Germany. Kunze has now been translated into

10 languages. Was he being "rehabilitated?" He was permitted to lecture at four universities in Britain in 1975, and last year he spoke in Rotterdam, West Berlin, and Munich.

On April 7, this year, Kunze asked to be "dismissed" from GDR citizenship, as the law allows. On Easter Sunday, he was told that he and his family could leave. His explanation for his departure: "I had no more reserves. The constant stress wiped me out. The doctors said if it went on like that, they couldn't help me." On April 12, the Kunzes drove across the German-German frontier to the West.

The contents of Kunze's works shimmer with political intensity. In *The Wondrous Years* (a rendering of the title I prefer to the "Wonderful" of the translation by Joachim Neugroschel), he depicts "peace children" playing with war toys, a young man made politically suspect by the mere possession of a Bible, and an adolescent girl and others chafing under the dulling conformity and discipline of everyday life in a socialist society. This is social realism—the opposite of Socialist Realism. The difference shows plainly in all of the vignettes and anecdotes from the book excerpted below. It is a view of East German life that prompted one of his peers to describe him as "an enemy of the state" and "totally malicious." Kunze rejoins, "I am not an enemy of the Republic; I am an enemy of lies."

David Binder, 46, has been a correspondent of the New York Times since 1961. Born in London, he studied German history and literature at Harvard (B.A., 1953) and at Cologne University. His Times career has included reporting from both East and West Germany and covering the State Department in Washington. He is the author of The Other German: Willy Brandt's Life and Times (1976).