

Two books from Berlin

BERLIN: Contemporary writing from East and West Berlin. Edited by Mitch Cohen. Bandanna Books; 388 pp.; \$8.50.

WINDY TIMES. By Gunter Kunert. Red Dust; 227 pp.; \$14.95.

Reviewed by TOM CLARK

MITCH COHEN, a 31-year-old Californian who in 1975 emigrated from Santa Barbara to Berlin (now there's a leap) presents 54 contemporary writers of Berlin — from both East and West, plus a few crossovers — in an ambitious and timely anthology.

Since we're all currently under the gun of sudden annihilation, there's a real sense in which everybody who reads this can now say "Ich bin ein Berliner."

The sense of impending doom is still nowhere more immediate than in Berlin, surrounded by nuclear stockpiles, where a writer like Ingeborg Middelndorf can say without undue pathos, "I am afraid that my little child will never grow up. Our generation has it rough." The corollary, for most of the writers in Cohen's anthology, is literary engagement. "In the face of the total threat," Middelndorf writes, "literature must be radical."

That sense of shared commitment is accompanied by a concurrent and prevailing pessimism, equally intelligible. We don't need articles on the revival of angst in '80s Germany to tell us what Berlin artists are up against. Many of these writers lost one or both parents in the last war. They know in their bones, if not in their genes, something only prolonged terror can tell you. It could be that to understand the nature of evil in the 20th century you have to be a little bit German in your soul. Is this why German art is the most purely modern? Is the current vogue of German expressionism in painting and sculpture a mere coincidence, or the international popularity of such striking cinematic works as Fassbinder's, Herzog's, Schlöndorff's?

Cohen's very mixed bag of writers provides "a core sample," as he calls it, of Berlin's contemporary consciousness. Some specimens worth singling out: the work of Thomas Brasch, a recent émigré from DDR or BRD, who reflects in prose on the local symbolic relevance of the cargo cult ("Men with white skins are the ghosts of dead men who cannot find their end, no longer live, and are not yet dead."); poet Joachim Steffenhagen, who writes ironically about work and the post-war revival of German capitalism; scholar-satirist Jochen Metzian, who contributes a revelatory cerebral excursion

on the psychology of grammar ("The Predilection of the German Thinker"); poet Sabine Teuchel, another ironist, who candidly confesses to something most writers try to hide, a compulsiveness about her work ("I am unable to stop.... It's no fun at all"); and Ingeborg Middelndorf, author of a gut-wrenching memoir called "The Miscarriage."

The principal failing of Cohen's bilingual collection is Cohen the translator; he provides most of the English versions himself, leading to a suspicion that some of the egregiously bad writing in this book is his fault. The translations insidiously undermine and sabotage much of the work.

Significantly, two of the finest contributions to "Berlin" — prison-poet Peter-Paul Zahl's delicate "february sun" and welder-writer Reinhard Komor's intense "The Welder" — are among the few works here made into English by other translators.

Before leaving this survey of literature from Berlin, I want to mention briefly another writer of that city] one Cohen leaves out of his anthology and does not bother to mention in his introductory remarks on his omissions: Gunter Kunert, whose "Windy Times," a selection of verse and prose translated very ably by Agnes Stein, appears concurrently with "Berlin." Kunert's work makes the best of Cohen's contributors, as good as they are, sound like beginners.

This 52-year-old Berliner recently changed residence from East to West, but in spirit remains, like his native city, "caught between two camps." In stripped-down, epigrammatic prose and verse he invokes an angst-prone, torn-sheeted Time Ghost of postwar Germany — one that looks back uneasily over its shoulder at bleak, new concrete streets, thoroughfares over which painful historical truths keep gaining on it, and sees a future where "facades remain," but "behind the curtains nothing."

Finding little hope in Utopian solutions, either democratic or socialist, Kunert concedes that "life progresses," but "where we are/no light shines any longer/and the dark comes/from within us." Yet his dry-eyed fact-facing is as bracing as it is harsh, prescribing "self diagnosis of that incurable pain/which sometimes leads to life." [This is a major, world writer who drives hard truths home in simple, clear strokes, with an ironic directness and strength well worth the cost of the book.]

TOM CLARK reviews frequently for The Sunday Camera Magazine. He is a former poetry editor of The Paris Review.