

Literary Experiments under a Dictatorship – The Banat Action Group in Timișoara

by Markus Bauer, Berlin

In contrast to the “Transylvanian Saxons” who already started settling in the Carpathian Arc in the Middle Ages, the “Banat Swabians” only arrived in the Habsburg borderland on the rivers Tisza and Bega in the 18th century. The emigrants from Lorraine, Alsace, Odenwald, and Bohemia followed the publicity campaigns of the Austrian administration. After generations of hard work, “German” streets of houses, districts, and even entire villages and cities also arose in the marshy region alongside those of other nationalities. From a literary perspective, the Swabians already emerged during the Habsburg Empire, as the multilingual city of Timișoara gave rise to theaters, newspapers, schools and books – as well as a special group of young authors. They experimented with a unique form of literary cooperation around 1970 while this was possible for a short time in communist Romania.

After the end of the Second World War and the takeover of the communist regime, the Banat Swabian minority suffered from deportations to the Soviet Union and the Bărăgan steppe along the lower Danube, as well as expropriations and bans on school lessons in their own language. When the conditions again improved for the cultural activities of the minority in the 1960s, German-language newspapers were published and German-language instruction was offered in schools.

During the years after the transfer of power from Gheorghe Gheorghe-Dej to Nicolae Ceaușescu (1965), the young aspiring poets found support in the publishing world of the German minority with their official magazines, newspapers and publishing houses due to an unforeseeable coincidence. When Ceaușescu decided to not participate in the violent suppression of the Prague Spring and established diplomatic relations with

Israel and the Federal Republic of Germany, the party official Nikolaus Berwanger took over the German-language newspaper “*Die Wahrheit*” in Timișoara, which he soon renamed “*Neue Banater Zeitung*” and completely changed its format. From the layout to the content, the newspaper was refreshed and oriented more towards the everyday life of the German minority, which was very interested in culture and literature. These changes were particularly aimed at attracting young readers including pupils and students. Special sections for schools and universities were regularly printed, which gave the young people an opportunity to be creative themselves. These pages were filled with poems and prose as well as reports from schools.

Particularly noteworthy was the upper secondary school (*Gymnasium*) in Großsanktnikolaus, where several pupils in the class of the German teacher Dorothea Götze were interested in literature. Richard Wagner (born 1952), Werner Kremm (born 1951), Johann Lippet (born 1951), Anton Sterbling (born 1953) dealt with lyricism, wrote their own texts and discussed them. “The first contacts date back to the upper secondary school (*Gymnasium*), when I was in eleventh and twelfth grade. [...] We already shared our poems and spoke about them back then. This was so-to-speak a preliminary form of the Action Group”, as Richard Wagner later remembered.¹ Young authors such as Gerhard Ortinau (born 1953), Ernest Wichner (born 1952), and somewhat later Herta Müller (born 1953) also wrote in Timișoara at the *Lenau Gymnasium* (upper secondary school) and their texts were printed in the special school

1 Renatus Deckert: „Das ist eine untergegangene Welt“. Gespräch mit Richard Wagner. In: Sinn und Form (2011), p. 804.

section of the *Neue Banater Zeitung*. The work of an additional author, who attracted attention with his elegant poems - Albert Bohn (born 1955) -, could be found on the pages dedicated to the *Neuarad Gymnasium*. An author from Reșița named Rolf Bossert (1952-1986), whose witty lyricism particularly stood out, joined the group later. Due to the geographical distance from Bucharest and because he later worked as a teacher in a small village, he remained more of a "corresponding", yet still fully-fledged member of the Timișoara group. The closer association between the students, who in part were already friends with one another, resulted from their studies together at the West University of Timișoara. Due to differences in age, their life situations were diverse. Some already had taken up university studies, while others were still preparing for their university-entrance examination (*Abitur*) at one of the upper secondary schools in Banat or were already working as teachers. By 1972 though, most of them had moved on from the special school section to the student insert of the *Neue Banater Zeitung* known as "*Universitas*". This enabled them to present their literary products to a larger university and academic readership.

The origins of the Action Group can be traced back to a conversation, which the editor of the "*Neue Banater Zeitung*", Eduard Schneider, held with several members of the group in early April 1972 in Timișoara and printed in the newspaper with the apt title "*Am Anfang war das Wort*" (In the beginning was the word).² Here the participants expressed what

2 Am Anfang war das Wort. Erstmalige Diskussion junger Autoren. Standpunkte und Standorte, in: *Neue Banater Zeitung*, 2 April 1972, Excerpts in: *Ein Pronomen ist verhaftet worden. Texte der Aktionsgruppe Banat*. Edited by Ernest Wichner. Frankfurt a. M. 1992, pp. 31-35.

their literature had in common as well as their convictions and perceptions. The precise ideas with which the students approached their writings are surprising. At the very beginning, Anton Sterbling gave priority to reality and the perception of it in the poetology of the young authors: "We are writing based on a new awareness of reality. We have a dual relationship to reality - to a spiritual and to a concrete material reality. Linguistically and educationally in part belonging to German literature, what is written must deal with the reality here."³ The political thrust which the members of the Action Group dared to pursue in their writings amid the communist reality behind the Iron Curtain becomes apparent here.

Indeed, the poems, prose, and group texts produced in the following years up to the dismantling by the Securitate in 1975 display a political undertone, which was more than unusual in this environment. Regarding the themes of their poems, they noticeably reveal how well the authors were informed about European and even global developments. In astonishing unison with the students' movement against the Vietnam War and the lacking efforts to systematically deal with the national-socialist past in Germany, they wrote poems such as "*Mit Chile im Herzen*" (William Totok, born 1951), "*Kommentar zu einem Bericht über Chile*" (Albert Bohn), "*auch. eine ars poetica*" (Johann Lippert) against totalitarianism or prose such as "*Party auf dem Lande*" (Gerhard Ortinau) against the involvement of their parents' generation in the Second World War. The productions of the young authors are critical of society, theory-based and reflective of their own writings. Also astonishing is the wide range of reading, which comprised

3 *ibid.*, p. 31.



Gerhard Ortinau. 2010.
Source: Amrei-Marie, wikipedia

Critical Theory authors such as Adorno, Marcuse and Benjamin as well as modern literature since Brecht and contemporary Western and Eastern German literature.⁴ The poets gained access to books and magazines in many different ways, in order to understand international discourses from within the Banat region of communist Romania.

An additional impetus for their literary productions was the desire to distinguish themselves from their parents' generation. Similarly to many people in Western Germany, these critical youths regarded their fathers' participation in the Waffen SS during the Second World War and the unbroken glorification of this period at Swabian festivals as a reason for a polemic and profound alienation from the parents' generation. The Banat Action Group distanced itself from the traditions of the German minority in the villages, from speaking the dialect, and from the arrogance towards other ethnic groups. As Richard Wagner later stated: "These men and

4 See Markus Bauer: Kritische Theorie in Temeswar – Zum Epochenhintergrund der „Aktionsgruppe Banat“, in: *Études Germaniques* 67 (2012), no. 3, pp. 463-474.

women wanted to put us in their traditional costumes and make us dance to their music with brass instruments. But we listened to [...] the Rolling Stones, Street fighting man and I can't get no satisfaction. We let our hair grow and the men and women wanted to cut it off, just like the village policeman. The village communities had a provincial intolerance, which we wanted to get away from."⁵

The authors defined themselves as a leftist group. In the communist Romania of the 1970s this initially meant that the young authors occupied a free space, which seemed natural for them. In the environment familiar to them they wanted to produce literature which appeared appropriate to them in terms of their convictions and demands, which simultaneously had a social function. Thus, the concept of

"engagement" played a role: "For me engagement means the opposite of the 'rocking chair mentality', the dozing satisfaction with traditional concepts.



Ernest Wichner
Book Fair Leipzig, 2015.
Source: Amrei-Marie, wikipedia

Its big chance is the experiment which remains meaningful when it is current and realistic. Our problems are local; they are the problems of our reality in which the Romanian-German literary scene also has its function."⁶ This is how Albert

5 Richard Wagner: Die Aktionsgruppe Banat. Versuch einer Selbstdarstellung, in: *ibid.*, p. 225.

6 Engagement als Chance und Veränderung. Rundtischgespräch mit jungen Autoren in Temeswar, in: *Karpatenrundschau* 22

Bohn substantiated the poetological function of the politically charged concept in another roundtable discussion.

In the decreasingly liberal climate under the regime, this stance necessarily led to problems, which also heralded the end of the Action Group. Although individual members still were able to publish books, the group had long become a target of the Securitate. In 1975 the secret police arrested several members near the border based on the accusation that they wanted to leave the country illegally. William Totok⁷ spent a half-year in pre-trial detention. During the same year Ernest Wichner and Anton Sterbling already left for West Germany. Although there were still attempts to further pursue the concept of the Banat Action Group with an official authors' association, its history ended in the increasingly rigid regime. All members of the association except for Werner Kremm left Romania in the 1980s and moved on with their different lives in the Federal Republic of Germany. When Herta Müller, who was closely associated with the Action Group, received the Nobel Prize in 2009, she commemorated her friends from Timișoara: "Luckily I met friends, a handful of young poets, in the city. Without them I would not have read and written books."

Translated by Michael Dobbins

June 1973, cit. in *ibid.*, p. 62.

⁷ William Totok is the author of the paper „Reception of the Final Report of the International Commission for Investigation of the Romanian Holocaust (“Wiesel Commission”)“, published in the very first issue of *Euxeinos*: *Euxeinos* 1/2011 Holocaust in Romania, edited by Daniel Ursprung. (remark of *Euxeinos*' editorial team)

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Albert Bohn: Nun sag ich ein Märchen; sei freundlich; beide in: Ein Pronomen ist verhaftet worden.

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Markus Bauer is a freelance writer based in Berlin. His main themes of research are Romanian culture and history, exile literature and early modern culture. He studied German literature and history at the Universities of Passau and Marburg. He completed his PhD thesis, which dealt with melancholy in the writings of Walter Benjamin, at the University of Marburg in 2005. From 1989 to 1992 he was a member of the Graduate School *Kunst im Kontext* at the University of Marburg. After obtaining a DAAD grant he was a lecturer at the Universitatea "Ioan Alexandru Cuza" in Iași (Romania) from 1998 to 2003. From 2005 to 2007 he collaborated on a project on the Yiddish press in Czernowitz at Portsmouth University (UK).

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