CHAPTER 4

“die Wiederentdeckung des Menschen”: Albin Stuebs and the Exile’s Return

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Abstract

In 1947 the writer Albin Stuebs returned to Germany from exile in England, where he had lived since 1938. He deliberately timed his return so that he could participate in the First German Writers’ Congress which took place in Berlin in October 1947. This chapter discusses the reasons for his return at this time, the controversial role he played in the deliberations of the congress, and his hopes for the future of German literature. The chapter concludes with a consideration of his novel Der Wahre Jakob (1949).

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Der Feind heißt die Unmenschlichkeit [The name of the enemy is inhumanity].

ALBIN STUEBS, 1947

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Although exact numbers are notoriously difficult to establish, it has been estimated that, of the approximately 500,000 people forced into exile by the Nazis’ seizure of power in January 1933, only about 30,000 (or 6 percent) opted for remigration in the years after the end of World War II in 1945. These returnees brought with them their hopes for a cultural renewal in Germany and Central Europe. Frequently such hopes took the form of a detailed blue-print for a democratic future,1 more often they remained a somewhat inchoate vision of a better world, but almost always they had little if any impact on post-war...
developments. This chapter considers the case of the writer Albin Stuebs who, following fourteen years in exile in Prague and London, returned to his native Berlin in order to attend the Erster Deutscher Schriftstellerkongress [First German Writers’ Congress] where he hoped to make a decisive contribution to the direction taken by postwar German literature.

In July 1947 the Schutzverband Deutscher Autoren [Association of German Authors] had sent a letter of invitation to more than three hundred writers and publishers who had been selected to participate in the Congress a few weeks later. Guided by their declared wish to promote a new beginning for German literature by shedding the narrow provincialism of the past decade in favour of much greater openness towards other countries and cultures, the organisers sought to attract writers of high literary reputation with solidly anti-fascist credentials while also achieving a balance between the various parts of Germany and, crucially, between those writers who had gone into exile after Hitler’s assumption of power in 1933 and those who had, for whatever reason, remained in Germany without selling their souls to the Nazis.

In the event, many of Germany’s leading writers in exile were unable or chose not to attend, including Brecht, Feuchtwanger, Hesse, Heinrich and Thomas Mann, Remarque and Arnold Zweig. Among those who did accept the invitation, however, was Albin Stuebs, a comparatively little-known writer who had found refuge in Prague in 1933 before fleeing to London in September 1938 just before the Nazis invaded Czechoslovakia. Given their search for a representative balance and their anxiety to secure the crucially important support of Britain and the other occupying powers in Germany, the organisers no doubt attached considerable importance to his status as an émigré in London when deciding to include him on the list of invitations, while for Stuebs himself the congress offered a priceless opportunity to emerge from the relative anonymity of exile and claim a place for himself in an emergent and transformed literary landscape in Germany. With this in mind and even though the practical problems faced by all would-be returnees meant he would have to leave his family behind in England for a time, he expedited his return to Germany in order to take part in the congress where he was welcomed, to applause, by

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2 Dated 14.7.47, the letter stated that the conference would take place on 11 to 14 September 1947, but in the event it was postponed until 4 to 8 October 1947.