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‘Ich lebe nicht wirklich in dieser Zeit’: Negotiations of National and Local Identities in Elfriede Brüning’s Post-‘Wende’ Writings

This article analyses the shifting local and national allegiances in Elfriede Brüning’s autobiographical text of 1999, *Jeder lebt für sich allein. Nachwende-Notizen*. It explores how the volume thematises competing notions of national identity through recourse to the past, particularly within a context of increasing globalisation of Holocaust remembrance. It argues that contemporary hegemonic narratives of the national are resisted through a prioritisation of localised (East German) antifascist and gender identities. Finally, it examines how the text negotiates claims to representativeness and identification through wider gender and generational identities.


It is with these rather pessimistic sentiments that Elfriede Brüning’s *Jeder lebt für sich allein. Nachwende-Notizen*, published in 1999, begins. Since unification this is the second of four texts written by Brüning thematising questions of memories and identities, as the now ninety-four year old turns increasingly to the autobiographical in her writings.² A once popular but not institutionally prolific writer in the GDR of what was often dismissed as ‘Unterhaltungsliteratur’, Brüning’s contemporary writings no longer enjoy the impressive circulation of her previous texts, texts which have themselves disappeared from bookshop and library shelves and have often only been preserved by groups such as the Rosa-Luxemburg foundation.³

Born in 1910 in Berlin to a lower middle class family, Brüning became a journalist at a young age. In 1930 she joined the German Communist Party, the KPD and the *Bund proletarisch-revolutionärer Schriftsteller*, both subsequently outlawed by the
Nazis. Between 1934 and 1935 she worked for the *Bund*, producing articles which appeared under the heading of ‘Stimme aus Deutschland’ in the exile magazine *Neue Deutsche Blätter* in Prague. In addition, she was involved in posting illegal flyers, attending Marxist discussion groups in Berlin and became a courier, smuggling minutes from meetings of the Propaganda Ministry over the border into Prague. As a result she was arrested and only later released under Gestapo surveillance. After the war she worked as a journalist and then as a novelist in the GDR, publishing over half a million copies and being widely read. She found an audience particularly among women who could identify with her portrayal of everyday life and the gendered inconsistencies within socialism that she highlighted within her fiction. Literary critics, particularly those since unification, have however not been kind to her, labelling her as ‘tedious and rightly neglected’ and ‘a loyal party hack writer’.

In this article, I will show how, in Brünig’s *Nachwende-Notizen*, the isolation encapsulated in the opening quote is juxtaposed with clear delineations of past and present East German antifascist and gender identities. I will examine how these localised identities resist certain contemporary narratives of the national and the global, but at the same time I will suggest that such resistance is not unambiguous. I will highlight how Brünig’s memories of the fascist past and the thematisation of the processes of remembering within the text challenge national hegemonic narratives. Given Brünig’s past success as an author praised by her readers for her empathetic and identificatory writing, I will consider particularly how her text makes claims to local and national representativeness.

Authorial identity is at the centre of *Jeder lebt für sich allein*, as the opening reference to her audience at readings emphasises. It is however an identity belied by the subtitle of the volume, *Notizen*, which suggests an unconstrained immediacy, and a personal, individual perspective on events since 1989. The brevity also suggested by the subtitle is indeed structurally present, with the text comprising twenty-two independent autobiographical sketches, written between 1990 and 1997. The short chapters, ranging from three to fifteen pages in length, have titles focussing on places (‘Im Krankenhaus’, ‘Chronik eines Dorfes’, ‘Friedhofsgedanken’), on relationships (‘Mütter und Töchter’, ‘Ein Vetter aus Dingsda’), and on memory (‘In Memoriam’, ‘Gedenktage, Gedenktage…’), all of which can be read as signifiers of