Peter Barker

Re-writing My Life and Work: Jurij Brězan’s Autobiographical Writings

Jurij Brězan was the major Sorbian writer of the 20th Century, who was known above all for his novels, a genre which before 1945 hardly existed in Sorbian literature. Despite his view that his most important task was the protection of the Sorbian language and identity, he was a significant literary figure at national level in the GDR. His two major autobiographical works, Mein Stück Zeit (1989) and Ohne Pass und Zoll (1999), illustrate the dilemmas of a socialist writer caught between politics and writing in the GDR who in the end gave up his belief in the power of literature to have a direct influence on politics.

The Sorbian prose writer, Jurij Brězan, born in 1916, had a writing career which spanned the whole of the life of the GDR, and continued beyond unification until his death in March 2006 at the age of 89. He started to write his autobiography, Mein Stück Zeit, in the mid-1980s, completing it in February 1989. Its unfortunate publishing date was 9 November 1989, which meant that it was largely ignored at the time. This first attempt to assess his political and literary role was mostly concerned with his early life in the Third Reich. Significant experiences were his underground activities in Poland and Germany for a Sorbian/Polish organisation in the late 1930s, which led to his arrest in Dresden in 1938; his forced removal from Lusatia to North Germany, where he worked as an agricultural labourer; his experiences in the army and as a prisoner of war (1942-6); his return to Bautzen in 1946 and his alignment with the new political forces in the Soviet Zone and the beginnings of his literary career. The first volume of his autobiography did not extend far beyond the 1950s, but did include the problems caused by his participation in youth brigades in Yugoslavia in the late 1940s and his confrontations with the new Stalinist leadership of the Sorbian cultural organisation, the Domowina, which led to observation and interrogation by officers from the Ministry for State Security (MfS) in 1956. After the collapse of his original GDR publishers, Verlag Neues Leben, it reappeared in 1998 with a new publishing house, Gustav Kiepenheuer, almost unchanged, the only additions being a foreword and an epilogue. In the foreword he described how, when he started work on the autobiography in 1986,
he was denied access to certain papers. In the absence of documents he set up a framework to the book in which a traveller tries to buy a ticket to an imaginary town, which he is then told does not exist. This provided the impetus to his autobiographical journey in which he tries to show how his original ideals become illusionary. In 1999 he published the second volume of his autobiography, *Ohne Pass und Zoll*, which concentrated on his life in the GDR, his literary work, in particular the Felix Hanusch Trilogy and the novel *Krabat oder die Verwandlung der Welt* (1976), and his role in the Writers’ Union, of which he was a vice-president from 1969 to 1989.

Brézan was the first Sorbian writer to publish his works bilingual. Usually he wrote the Sorbian version first, and soon after a German version. He continued this practice for all his major works, with the exception of his two autobiographical works, both of which have only appeared in German. This divergence from his normal practice probably had much to do with his own particular problems with the political group which had taken over the running of the Domowina in the early 1950s, and his escape into the wider cultural landscape of the GDR in the mid-1950s. He wrote about his intentions with *Mein Stück Zeit* in the second volume, stating that he was arguing for ‘ein natürliches Miteinander mit den Deutschen’. He then went on to explain why he had written it only in German:

_Bewußt mich ausschließlich an den nichtsorbischen Leser wendend, schrieb ich zum erstenmal ein Buch nur in Deutsch. Das hatte eine für enges Denken typische Reaktion zur Folge, indem es – außer in einem törichten Pamphlet eines Studentleins – in der sorbischen Öffentlichkeit nicht registriert wurde._

The second edition was thought necessary because the publication of the first edition had coincided with the fall of the Wall and was lost in the subsequent political turmoil. The second volume was a response to reviews of the 2nd edition of *Mein Stück Zeit*, which pointed to the fact that it contained little about his literary work and excluded the 1970s and 1980s. Brézan contended that this was not true, but admitted that the last two decades of the GDR were only present in a ‘Geheimsprache’, otherwise it would not have been allowed to appear. The title of the second volume refers to Brézan’s desire to see his works appear in both Sorbian and German: ‘Die Alternative, zwischen meinen beiden Sprachen wählen zu müssen, löste sich auf und bildete sich neu als Möglichkeit einer Brücke, passierbar ohne Paß