"A life insurance against death"

An Interview with Breyten Breytenbach

by Thomas Brückner*

Is this your first visit to re-unified Germany and, in particular, to its Eastern provinces – or "colonies", rather?

Yes, it is the first time since the Western parts absorbed the "colonies" that I've been back and it's also the first time that in fact I've come to this part which is now called the Neue Länder. In earlier years, I've had the chance to drive across between West Germany and West Berlin, but this is my first real visit.

Do you feel it to be different from the Germany you used to know from earlier visits?

Very different indeed. I think it is like seeing a part of Europe which lives in a time warp. Economically speaking, it is much closer to the poorer parts of interior Spain or parts of the heartland of France, which has become depopulated, with villages nearly deserted as people move to the provincial centres or to the capital looking for work. I was impressed by there being far more landscape around in this part of Germany. You get a sense of the country here you do not feel in the West. But there's also a terrible sense of sadness, a kind of a gloom that I felt because one has a sense of decay – although there are spots of renewal and rebuilding.

Many of the villages one comes through are simply very badly in need of repair – although the buildings obviously were beautifully built and sometimes quite attractive. Of course, it is too soon to generalise but I have a feeling of slightly bitter resignation. I don't sense – and as a writer you have to trust your immediate instincts, though sometimes they are right and sometimes they are wrong – I don't sense a strong feeling of revolt at the injustice of having to live side by side with people who are obviously far better off. I have a sense of people who are very disillusioned in terms of what they expected or what they hoped might happen, but also a feeling of bitterness, a feeling – perhaps – of being done out of a dream.

* This interview was held in Leipzig on January 15, 1993.
At the moment, Germany is seemingly living through a wave of renewed nationalism and chauvinism. There are also serious signs of a revival of fascism. How does a French citizen and a South African exile feel about this?

Well, racism unfortunately can be found all over Europe although it shows itself differently. As a South African, I am more sensitive to racism, because you more quickly recognise its more brutal forms and you recognise its more paternalistic forms. You recognise the many ways in which people lie to themselves, in which they pretend that this is not really a problem or that this is not something that concerns them or that they are not racists themselves. But, at least for me, it is some kind of a bad recognition that, profoundly, nothing seems to have changed, that the same causes – economic depression, large unemployment, a sense of unease at the presence of people who are not assimilated – can trigger off the kind of reactions that unfortunately one knew from before. Moreover, the public authorities, particularly the politicians, don’t seem to recognise it or – if they do – they seem to condone it in an unspoken way. They do not move firmly enough to actually stop it.

This must be discussed very openly and in far broader terms. It is true that Germany is dangerous because it is, in a sense, like an unformed child – I know this sounds now very, very patronising – which has suddenly become very bloated, very powerful, very strong. There is real power, potential power: by the number of people, by the space occupied, by its economy, even though it is down at the moment. But because of the potential strength of its economy and what is happening in Germany, the way Germany is coming to shape perception of its responsibility to the outside world, its responsibility to the parts of the world where the unwanted foreigners are coming from, the way Germany is going to shape this perception is going to be of extreme importance to the whole of Europe.

What about the image of the German in France and in South Africa?

Well, I don’t know about South Africa. South Africa is in a rather curious position. They probably have very ambivalent feelings about Germany.

I mean, the Boers considered themselves distant relatives of the Germans, and there were times when they strongly supported fascism in Germany ...

Well, the majority of the Afrikaners are of German descent, there are slightly more – perhaps one per cent only – of German descent than of Dutch descent. But this is an academic problem, since at the time when these people came to South Africa, in the seventeenth century, there was no Germany. Of course, there has been a very strong identification of the Afrikaners with the Germans during the First World War. Between 1914 and 1917 the Boers thought that they could