

THE NEW YORK TIMES, SUNDAY, MARCH 29, 2009

CULTURED TRAVELER

In Berlin, Authors Find Their Voice

By NICHOLAS KULISH

ON one of those long December nights in Berlin that make the days feel like no more than mere intermissions, the steady drizzle and slippery cobblestones should have kept anyone even entertaining the notion of stepping outside into such misery at home under a blanket. Yet there they were, a crowd of young people in sneakers and hoodies, over 100 strong to watch the group known as Chaussee der Enthusiasten, or Avenue of the Enthusiasts, give their weekly reading from their latest works.

Some of the pieces were carefully crafted vignettes, others handwritten, free-associating riffs on the day's headlines, daredevil feats of literature without a net. Two of the young men, Jochen Schmidt and Stephan Zeisig, bantered on stage like an East Berlin version of "A Prairie Home Companion," concluding every sentence with "wahr?" which means "true," and is the capstone of most thoughts expressed in Berliner dialect and a challenge rather than a question, you know?

They talked about trying to seem "oppositionell" when they were just coming of age in the days before the Wall fell, not out of conviction but because they had heard that female Stasi agents slept with regime opponents to get at their secrets. The crowd laughed.

"Oh, come on," heckled a fellow writer and Enthusiast, Kirsten Fuchs, as she waited for her turn. "Last week you were talking about having a crush on Germany's indoctrinating version of a scout leader. The crowd howled. The reading continued.

Just another night out in Berlin. With its history as the capital of the Third Reich and time as the divided symbol of the cold war, Berlin may not be known for happy stories, but it is known in Germany for a certain rueful humor, sharpened by tragedy, suffering and the unforgiving environment itself. Foreigners most often stumble into this attitude through "Cabaret," the musical expression of Christopher Isherwood's "Berlin Stories," his prose tribute to the capital in the dying days of the Weimar Republic.

Wit and wordplay are a native sport, and locals turn out in force at readings big and small, from the stately Literaturhaus in Charlottenburg in the west to the bare concrete and benches at the RAW-tempel — where the Chaussee der Enthusiasten reading took place — in the former railyard where the former Reichsbahn used to fix up its trains in Friedrichshain in the former east.

Across the ocean, the word has been out for more than a little while about the



PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARK SIMON FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

ABOVE The Literaturhaus in Charlottenburg. BELOW A reading by the writers' group Chaussee der Enthusiasten.

cavernous spaces available in Berlin for a seemingly ceremonial fee — even by the standards of crisis-chastened New York and London. Those low rents famously have allowed industrial artists to find studios for their massive sculptures, and bands to lease rehearsal spaces for their practice sessions.

Applied on the minute scale, that means ultracheap nooks for the aspiring authors who need room only for a laptop (or, in advanced cases of the writing bug, an antique typewriter) and a precarious stack of books.

There are cheaper places in the world, though one has to go much farther east nowadays than Warsaw to find them, but none that also have the breadth of cultural offering. Whether that's the KW Institute for Contemporary Art or the Berlinale film festival, Daniel Barenboim conducting "Fidelio" at the Berlin State Opera or the peaked black roof of Bertolt Brecht's Berliner Ensemble looming over the Spree River and would-be playwrights alike, there is culture and tradition.

It is that history as much or more than the economics that appeals to writers. Berlin wears its old wounds plainly, like a dueling scar in an Otto Dix portrait. In this capital city, the government left the scrawling of Soviet soldiers on



York. Last year, his first novel, "Bestattung eines Hundes," or "Burial of a Dog," received wide critical praise in Germany; it will be published in the United States in fall 2010.

Mr. Pletzinger described himself as growing up "in a small, bombed-out yet nowadays seemingly history-free city in Western Germany that conceals all traces of history with ugly '60s architecture and shopping centers." Berlin, the bustling metropolis of Alfred Döblin's "Berlin Alexanderplatz," was always his goal as a youth in his hometown of Hagen, not far from Dortmund. Now at work on a novel set in Berlin, Prague and New York between 1925 and 2005, he said that this is the place he has to write it.

More and more, the city is expanding on its historic role as an incubator of books. Award winners and anonymous scribblers, locals and expatriates, everyone in Berlin has a book in him and everyone with a book in him seems to have roosted in Berlin.

The teeming masses of authors are supported by a superstructure of foundations and grants and ubiquitous antiquariat (used-book stores) seemingly

on every corner, not to mention the noble cultural villas, like the Literarisches Colloquium Berlin and the American Academy in Berlin, both on the same lovely lake — the Wannsee — near where the poet Heinrich von Kleist killed himself in 1811 after first shooting the incurably ill Henriette Vogel.

Seven young writers, including Mr. Pletzinger, rented a space in the former eastern part of the city to challenge the notion that their profession is, by necessity, a solitary one. They opened a storefront where they can work side by side, calling it Adler & Söhne Literaturproduktion, a kind of highbrow sweatshop for the stitching together of sentences.

The area around Helmholtzplatz in the northern end of Prenzlauer Berg is known for its bars and cafes, where the music and the conversation carry on deep into the night. But on a rainy evening this past July, it was instead a little storefront on a nearby side street where the guests spilled onto the sidewalk, ignoring the weather and drinking and talking into the morning hours.

Writers from Poland and Mexico, New York and London, and every corner of Germany were celebrating the opening of Adler & Söhne. Sasa Stanisic, a co-founder who is originally from Bosnia and is the author of "How the Soldier Repairs the Gramophone," a novel in German set during the conflict in Bosnia, was among them. He held forth in English about a recent trip to Iowa, where he was a fellow at the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa. Nearby, plans were being laid to rendezvous at the upcoming Frankfurt Book Fair. A tryst or two began in the backroom.

Most intriguing was the story making the rounds that this humble location had once housed the tobacco shop where the iconic East German avant-garde dramatist Heiner Müller used to buy his cigarettes. The possibility that the nicotine that powered the writing of "Hamletmaschine" was procured in that very space seemed, for some, far more intoxicating than the beer. ■

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Here is where to find information about readings and writers' groups in Berlin:

Adler & Söhne Literaturproduktion: Senefelderstrasse 31; www.adlerundsoehne.com.

American Academy in Berlin: Am Sandwerder 17-19; 49-30-804-830; www.americanacademy.de.

Chaussee der Enthusiasten (www.enthusiasten.de) at RAW-tempel: Revaler Strasse 99; 49-30-292-4695; www.raw-tempel.de.

Literaturhaus Berlin: Fasanenstrasse 23; 49-30-887-2860; www.literaturhaus-berlin.de.

Literarisches Colloquium Berlin: Am Sandwerder 5; 49-30-816-9960; www.lcb.de.

A literary tradition often recited in terms of self-effacing irony.

the walls of the Reichstag as a chastening reminder to legislators of the country's darkest hour and how it ended up there.

"Berlin openly tells stories and heavily breathes history on every street corner," said Thomas Pletzinger, whom I got to know a decade ago when he was a young publishing assistant in New