

## **Der Weg und der Westen: Two Generations Searching for Home**

In his memoir *A Moveable Feast*, Ernest Hemingway recalls the moment when Gertrude Stein calls his generation (who came of age during World War I) a “*génération perdue*”- a Lost Generation. While the title did not spread far outside the United States, it was not only Americans who underwent a loss of stability in their lives as they approached an unfamiliar post-war society; the Germans of the same generation, who fought in and returned from the First World War, have also been described as a “lost generation.” The title also fits the children of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) - the generation who were teenagers when the Wall fell in 1989, and who integrated into Western society following the reunification of Germany in 1990.

Examples of the experiences of these two generations, each on the brink of adulthood during a major political shift in German history, can be found in period literature. Published in 1931, Ernst Maria Remarque’s novel *Der Weg Zurück (The Road Back)* displays the challenges faced by soldiers returning to their childhood homes after the end of the war. Though it is a work of fiction, *The Road Back* is a semi-autobiographical representation of Remarque’s own experience returning from the First World War through the protagonist, Ernst Birkholz. A more contemporary work published in 2002, *Zonenkinder (After the Wall)* by Jana Hensel reflects on the author’s childhood in the GDR and on the difficulties her generation faced when Germany reunified and the society she had known disappeared. These two generations, in two significantly different time periods and with different backgrounds, each experienced feelings of “lost-ness” in their societies and families- though they differ in their reflections and reactions.

It was not easy to adapt out of a society that valued (or claimed to value) comradeship and uniformity over monetary gain and social standing. Birkholz, thinking of his time at war, expresses, “It was the man that counted with us, not his occupation” (Remarque 114). In

Mary Lawrence  
Nazareth College of Rochester

nostalgic recollection, Birkholz felt that at the Front neither a man's financial or social situation was important- what mattered was how well he fought and how much he gave for his Fatherland. With similar ideals, children in the "classless" GDR competed for medals to gain respect rather than calling attention to family status. Says Hensel: "Our lives were a constant struggle for prizes, everything from level-three swimming certificates to academic excellence awards" (Hensel 82). Competition existed, but was based on performance rather than status.

"Uniform culture" contributed to the feeling of comradeship and patriotism. Hensel remembers, "We put on our Young Pioneer caps and scarves and saluted the flag" (Hensel 82). She recalls a kind of uniformity even among her rebellious older siblings, who dressed against the social codes but like one another: "In cliques, everyone looks and feels the same. Internal unity was more important than external individualism" (Hensel 160). Even those who rejected the strict regulations of the society they lived in found a uniformity of appearance, a way to prove to the outside world that they were part of a greater whole.

Soldiers who had "escaped out of [the] underworld" of war, having spent years fighting for a better Germany, had high expectations for the future (Remarque 25). After arriving home, however, it took little time to realize that the comradeship, which had unified them throughout the war, had disintegrated. Birkholz observes this at a get-together he attends with his former fellow soldiers:

"Perhaps it is because of the civilian clothes sprinkled about everywhere among the military togs, or maybe that profession and family and social standing, like so many wedges, have split us asunder; but certain it is, the old feeling of comradeship has gone."

(Remarque 198).

Birkholz relates that the once-strong ties of comradeship were quickly forgotten, and recognizes the possibility that apparel played an important role in a feeling of unity.

Having returned home expecting the “idealized picture of the civilian world which had formed in [their] minds,” many soldiers expected to slip back into normal life as before the war (Barker 75). They found instead that their experience at the Front had marked them, and had redefined “normal.” Their comrades had become “a part of themselves” (Barker 78). When the war ended, many soldiers like Birkholz were left longing for the feeling of camaraderie they had unconsciously abandoned at the Front.

When the Wall fell decades later, many East Germans expected complete and immediate change. Some cuts were indeed instantaneous. As Hensel says, “The Wall came down, the GDR was swallowed up by the West, and my childhood disappeared” (Hensel 12). As the physical barrier between West and East was removed, the country of Hensel’s childhood changed drastically. For one thing, “As soon as the Wall fell, the language changed” (Hensel 12). Words changed to fit the new capitalist society- “the consumer depot was suddenly called a ‘supermarket’” and “apprentices turned into ‘trainees’” (Hensel 12). Even the language of youth organizations had to change, as the Young Pioneers were disbanded with the end of the GDR. The “Pioneer House” became the “rec center, where the Pioneer Leaders were now called ‘supervisors’” (Hensel 13). Things that had claimed importance in Jana Hensel’s childhood may not have disappeared completely, but the change made them almost unrecognizable.

But, says Hensel, “The GDR didn’t simply disappear. It didn’t take its hat and go, as many people thought it would after the Wall fell. The GDR transformed itself from an idea into an environment...” (Hensel 159). The children of the GDR had never known anything outside their Socialist childhood, and the Germany their parents remembered had drastically changed in the decades since separation. Their society could not be broken down and taken away as easily as

Mary Lawrence  
Nazareth College of Rochester

the concrete wall that had separated them from the West for so long, even as the language was replaced with a Western, capitalist one.

A changed society meant a changed education, but the teachers of the two generations lost a certain amount of authority in the transition. When Birkholz returns to Teacher's College after the war, he looks at his instructors and reflects:

“For us they were once more than other men; not merely because they were in charge of us, but because, however much we may have made fun of them, we believed in them.”  
(Remarque 121).

Though they once had commanded so much respect, Birkholz's instructors came to be nothing more than older men. When the soldiers return, their teachers “continue to treat them as children and expect them to conform to the discipline” (Barker 74). In one scene, a former soldier brings in a copy of the School Regulations that they had followed before leaving for the military. Says Birkholz, “almost every paragraph is received with roars of laughter. We can hardly believe that such rules once applied to us” (Remarque 128). The students' time at war, where the most important thing was to stay alive, changed their idea of following rules and made them feel somewhat superior to their teachers.

East German teachers following the West German curriculum for the first time had to learn some parts of it along with their students. About her teacher, Hensel says, “She frequently postponed answering our questions, instead jotting them down and coming back the following day with the required information” (Hensel 96). Again, the belief in teachers was shaken, as they struggled to adapt to Western culture along with their students.

Perhaps most striking for Birkholz and Hensel was the change in the relationship with their parents. No longer could they turn to their parents for advice, for their transitions into adulthood had been far different and not nearly as sudden. Birkholz discovers this as he attempts

Mary Lawrence  
Nazareth College of Rochester

to make his father understand why he quit his job as a teacher, having felt unable to teach such whole, innocent children. He asks himself, “How should I even begin to explain it to him? We are two utterly different men and have got along well together thus far only because we have not understood each other at all” (Remarque 259). Birkholz’s father, not having been to war, is still preoccupied by the “normal” problems facing his son- his finances, his job, a potential wife: in short, his prospects for the future- while Birkholz is trying to deal with the aftermath of the violence he witnessed and has less interest in more domestic problems.

Still, the lack of understanding is not without love. Says Birkholz of his mother, “I love her – when did I ever love her more than now? Now, though I know I may never come to her and sit beside her and tell her it all, and so perhaps regain peace. I have lost her. Suddenly I feel how alien and alone I really am” (Remarque 145). Even between mother and son, love alone is not enough once communication fails. Since Birkholz has experienced things he does not want his mother to ever know about, he will never again be able to find comfort in her confidence. Parents and son exist in different realms of reality, where different issues take principal importance.

In Jana Hensel’s experience, too, parents are little help to their children on the path to adulthood in the newly reunified Germany. She says, “While we don’t pass judgment on them, can anyone blame us for feeling superior? After all, we know more than they do” (Hensel 79). The parents of the East have to learn Western culture at the same time as their children, and so cannot provide any guidance. And, as they have become so accustomed to life in the GDR, their children pick up on Western culture far more quickly. In a strange twist, the children become the knowledgeable authority on Western life.

Mary Lawrence  
Nazareth College of Rochester

Change has not come easily for Jana Hensel. As she says, “The only constant in our lives is something we ourselves constructed: The feeling of belonging to a generation” (Hensel 164). For Birkholz, who no longer finds comfort in his family, home becomes the one stable thing he knows: the Earth. He says, “Perhaps I shall never be really happy again; perhaps the war has destroyed that, and no doubt I shall always be a little inattentive and nowhere quite at home – but I shall probably never be wholly unhappy either – for something will always be there to sustain me, be it merely my own hands, or a tree, or the breathing earth” (Remarque 343).

Experiential similarities between the postwar “lost generation” and the more recent post-GDR generation suggest that the latter could also be considered a “lost generation.” Still, the feelings of loss and homelessness that are present in each generation are not experienced in the same way. Jana Hensel’s recollections display a straightforward account of childhood in the GDR. While a certain air of comradeship may have existed among children in the GDR, there is no sense that Hensel has a desire for that feeling to return. She finds comfort in the future, in the sense of belonging constructed by her generation, and accepts that the country around her has changed. On the contrary, Birkholz’s reflections of his time at war express an almost romantic nostalgia for the sense of comradeship he felt at the Front. This feeling, which had created a sort of home-away-from-home at the Front, was shattered at the end of the war and left Birkholz with a feeling of emptiness instead. Though the surroundings he remembers are mostly the same, Birkholz himself has changed and must look for smaller comforts to sustain him. This is the real difference between these two “lost generations”: in searching to find the comfort of home, Hensel looks to the future, while Birkholz recalls the past.

Mary Lawrence  
Nazareth College of Rochester

#### Works Cited

Barker, Christine R. and R. W. Last. *Erich Maria Remarque*. London: Harper & Row, 1979.

Print.

Hensel, Jana. *After the Wall: Confessions from an East German Childhood and the Life that Came Next*. Hamburg: Rowohlt Verlag GmbH, 2002.

Remarque, Erich Maria. *The Road Back*. New York: Random House, 1931.