American in Leipzig: Reflections on the Leipzig Book Fair, 2004

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**By Robert Kusmer**

In March 2004 I attended the Leipzig Book Fair as a recipient of the Nedbook Northwest Europe Award. Both professionally and personally, this was a fruitful and interesting trip for me. Not only was this my first visit to a major European book fair and to Leipzig, but it was also an opportunity to attend several meetings of the 2nd Bibliothekskongress (German Library Conference) held prior to the opening of the book fair—another “first” that added to the value of my stay in Leipzig.

Before World War II, Leipzig had been the German “book capital,” laying claim to the largest German book fair, as well as the Deutsche Bücherei (German National Library) founded in 1912, the Börsenverein der Deutschen Buchhändler (Assoc. of the German Book Trade) since 1825, and publishers such as Brockhaus, Reclam, Insel and others. The ascent of Hitler, the bombing destruction of three quarters of the Gräphisches Viertel (Graphic Arts District) in 1943, and the emergence of the East German state changed all this. After the War, the distributor and publisher Harrassowitz, founded in Leipzig in 1872, moved its operations to the West, as did many other publishers. Frankfurt am Main became home to the western counterpart of the Deutsche Bücherei, the Deutsche Bibliothek (founded 1947), and the city ascended to become the main venue of German and international book fairs.

While I was in Leipzig, I was fortunate to be able to join tours of both the Biblioteca Albertina and the Deutsche Bücherei. While the University of Leipzig’s library as an institution dates from the 1543 absorption of several monastery libraries, the Albertina, the central library within a system of 40 branch libraries at various academic program sites of the University, was built in 1891. Although, fortunately, the holdings and catalogs had been removed during the War, two-thirds of the beautiful building was destroyed by bombing. Not until 1992 could the now-completed restoration commence. In addition to restoring the original magnificence of the central staircase space, the building program made highly tasteful and practical structural modifications to allow for closed stack capacity of 3.2 million volumes and open stacks with 400,000 volumes, serving 720 readers. The Deutsche Bücherei has a much more modern background, having been built in 1912 as the national library. It is now in the process of a major expansion, and the architectural plan and award was unveiled at a meeting in the adjoining Congress Center during the time of the Fair. Since reunification in 1990, the function of a national library is shared with Die Deutsche Bibliothek in Frankfurt am Main and the Deutsches Musikarchiv in Berlin. Observations about Die Deutsche Bibliothek and other German libraries are contained in my article [“Transatlantic Connections: a Tour of German Libraries and Publishing Houses”](http://wessweb.info/index.php/Transatlantic_Connections:_a_Tour_of_German_Libraries_and_Publishing_Houses) in the Spring 2003 issue of the WESS Newsletter.

With the reunification of Germany in Oct. 1990, the renewal of former East German cities like Leipzig was a conceivable goal, one which is by no means complete. The year 1991 saw a new start for the Leipzig Book Fair, debuting with the literary festival “Leipzig liest” (“Leipzig reads”), its constant program “companion.” Since then, the fair has grown in size and popularity each spring, attracting a record 102,000 visitors and 2,360 journalists in 2004. As one of those visitors, I hope to convey here something of the excitement and value of that experience. By way of an introduction, it should be noted that the organizers of the Leipzig Book Fair do not make it easy for those who make their way past the turnstiles into the huge Glass Hall and adjoining Halls 2 and 3 of the new exhibition center, which just opened in 1996. What makes it so difficult? Choice! The riches of program and exhibit offerings made it truly difficult to decide which to attend and which to pass by, especially considering that numerous events in the ample events program ran concurrently, making choice a necessity. The reason for this conundrum, then, is this: the Leipzig Book Fair goes beyond publisher exhibits, in essence being the critical core of a much broader program of offerings which emanate from it and are integrated with it.

The first and foremost thematic focus is the literary festival “Leipzig liest,” which this year offered 1,200 events in the form of literary readings (some with accompanying classical music performance), podium discussions, literary prize presentations and author signings, dispersed not only within the fair but throughout numerous locations in the city. Other programmatic streams include a major emphasis on education, both at the academy level with the “Buchmesse-Akademie” (Book Fair Academy), the professional level with the “Fachprogram” (Professional Program) series for book trade professionals, and at the school level, with events aimed at teachers and a full program of offerings for children and youth (the “Comics” section notwithstanding), who heavily attended the fair as a “field trip” and often received assignments to be done at the fair. Popular facets of the fair include a special emphasis on travel, recorded books and the book fair bookstore, in which titles selected by the exhibitors are available. Since 2001 the “Leipziger Antiquariatsmesse” (Leipzig Antiquarian Book Fair) has been a part of the Book Fair as well, holding its own book sale in addition to the exhibitor booths.

A significant element of the Leipzig fair is clearly the emphasis on mutual inter-cultural understanding and historical reconciliation. This is manifested in a number of program series and literary prizes. The “Leipziger Buchpreis zur Europäischen Verständigung” (Leipzig Book Prize for European Understanding) exemplifies the orientation of the Fair toward the cultivation of pan-European communication. This year the prize was awarded to the Bosnian writer and literary critic Dževad Karahasan, with honorable mention to the Hungarian publisher and translator Gábor Csordás. Indeed, Leipzig’s location and literary festival make it a fruitful meeting point between East and West, with many foreign writers seeking contact with potential German readers in the Fair’s “Café Europa” literary forum. The discussion venue “Vom Alten und Neuen Europa” (Of Old and New Europe) focused on the relationship of European countries with the United States. The “Leipziger Europaforum” (Leipzig Europe Forum) this year raised the question for discussion, “Are we ready for a European Culture of Remembrance?” in which historical German-Polish relations were discussed. The series “Jüdische Lebenswelten” (Jewish Worlds) has been augmented over the years, this year offering twenty readings, discussions and musical events.

Contemporary literature in designated categories was honored in the “Deutscher Bücherpreis” (German Book Awards): American Michael Moore, *Stupid White Men* (non-fiction); Yann Martel,*Schiffbruch mit Tiger* (belles lettres); Eoin Colfer, *Artemis Fowl: der Geheimcode* (children and youth); Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt, *Monsieur Ibrahim und die Blumen des Koran* (public choice); Mirjam Pressler (life-long accomplishment); and Yadé Kara, *Selam Berlin* (debutant). The last-named category highlights another facet of the literary festival that Leipzig offers: not only the well-established make their appearances, but new writers do as well, “testing the waters” and seeking greater exposure among their potential readers. Leipzig is home to the “Deutsches Literaturinstitut Leipzig” (German Literary Institut Leipzig), now a division of the University of Leipzig that offers a degree program in creative writing. The Institute sponsored a number of readings by its students at the Fair and also held a session introducing its program. As with the Frankfurt fair, the Leipzig festival provides the occasion for numerous newspapers and weeklies to publish their literary supplements. The Alfred-Kerr-Preis (Alfred-Kerr-Prize) for literary criticism was also bestowed for the first time this year at the Leipzig Book Fair, going to Elmar Krekeler, chief of the weekly literary supplement section “Literarische Welt” (Literary World) of the newspaper *Die Welt*.

Overall, the Leipzig Book Fair might well be characterized as a “people’s fair,” in the sense that it encourages throughout not just the professionals, but “laymen” as well to attend it—which they do in droves, and increasingly so. The young, old, and “in between,” students and teachers, journalists and professors, librarians and book lovers, are all welcomed by those who write, publish and provide readings. While there are many programmatic streams, as noted above, the heart of the Fair seems to be contemporary literature in the broad sense of the word. And it is mainly about the medium of the *book*, both printed and recorded. This is a fair for *readers* (and listeners). While the Leipzig Book Fair is certainly not a competitor to the mammoth, internationally-oriented Frankfurt Book Fair, it has been slowly establishing its own unique identity—as a huge literary festival whose geographic focus is heavily on Europe (both German-speaking and otherwise), as a venue for inter-cultural programming and communication, as the highly popular spring event for the general public and youth. It exudes the energy of the city, which like eastern Berlin, is steadily re-establishing itself after decades of communist rule. One wonders whether the emphasis on reading and literature is not in some part a reaction against those years of censorship, when the representation of free thought in writing was suppressed. This visit to the Leipzig Book Fair, and to the city that offers so much, was certainly worthwhile.

As a recipient of the Nedbook Northwest Europe Award, I also made a stopover in Amsterdam, headquarters of the Dutch book distributor, where I met with Nedbook’s North American Sales Manager, Willem-Jan Hooijmans and Director R. Evert Overeynder. Our conversation, the tour of operations, and Willem-Jan’s hospitality made the final leg of my journey pleasant, as did the sunshine and moderate temperatures of Amsterdam during my first visit to this city of canals, interesting architecture, famous museums and many other attractions.