

Verfasserin immer wieder die lebensgeschichtliche Skizze und es scheint begrifflich, dass sie ihre kenntnisreiche Beschreibung von Dora Lux' Leben nicht „Biographie“, sondern „Nachforschungen“ betitelt.

Ingrid Brommer, Donnerskirchen

Günter Bischof, Fritz Plasser and Eva Maltschnig eds., **Austrian Lives** (= Contemporary Austrian Studies 21), New Orleans, Louisiana: University of New Orleans Press and Innsbruck: Innsbruck University Press 2012, 485 p., EUR 32,99, ISBN 978-3-902811-61-5.

“Austrian Lives” is the title of the twenty-first volume of “Contemporary Austrian Studies” containing eighteen essays (divided in the sections “Political Lives”, “Lives of the Mind” and “Common Lives”), and this title immediately suggests the question: What exactly are Austrian lives? As it transpires the term “Austrian” proves to be problematic considering the turbulent history of the country in the context of twentieth century Europe. Thus one might expect that these essays – most of them concentrating on the time after the establishment of the First Republic in 1918 – address theoretical issues concerning the framing of a national identity such as inclusion and exclusion.

Yet another, more implicit “Austrian” problem concerning life writing comes to light in two essays written by the historian Günter Bischof, one of the editors of “Austrian Lives”. “Biographical writing is not a *forte* of the historical profession in Austria,” Bischof writes in his preface (IX), explaining in his and Barbara Stelzl-Marx’s essay on Austrian prisoners of war during the Second World War, that “[e]ven though there has been a recent ‘biographical boom’ in German and in Austrian historiography as well, scholarly biography remains largely ignored among historians at the Austrian universities since it does not offer a clear career path towards employment” (329). But how “Austrian” is this? In most other continental European countries auto/biography seems to be much more generally accepted and has arguably more progressed as a scholarly genre in literary studies than in historiography. This may also be the reason why most writers with a background in literature start their contribution to this volume with a critical analysis of the genre, whereas most historians – apart from those involved in women’s studies – present their life histories in a traditional, chronological order, beginning with the birth of their subject.

In his thoroughgoing, philosophical introduction to “Austrian Lives”, literary scholar Bernhard Fetz, director of the Literary Archives of the Austrian National Library in Vienna and associate professor at the Department of German Studies at the University of Vienna, focuses on the issue of “biographical truth”, which he describes as an “ambivalent idea since Nietzsche’s destruction and deconstruction.” “Biographical truth,” he continues in his attempt to define this rather slippery notion, “is a multi-relational

construct, forever materializing in the interactions between the biographical narrative, its subject, and its readers”, which is “always on the run from a mobile army of metaphors trying to overtake it”, and therefore tied “to a changing notion of the subject, to the differentiation between public and private spheres, to the development of autobiographical self-confidence, and to the cultural relativity of the idea of biographical truth” (21–23). With this description of biographical truth, Fetz seemingly challenges the idea of a historical or factual truth, which for most of the contributors with a background in historiography may be the main asset of biographical research.

However, concerning the history of the general function of biography Fetz appears to be more in agreement with most contemporary historians. The term describing this function, he writes, has changed from the nineteenth century normative-pedagogical definition as “a means of creating national identity in the portraits of *great men*” (23) to an investigation into the effects of political and cultural developments on individual lives. The latter, according to Fetz, must also include the exposure of “biographical rhetoric, political evasion, and the attempt to hide an individual’s guilt” (24). Yet this makes the current form of the genre no less normative than its nineteenth century predecessor, albeit with the crucial difference that where the latter was highly constructive, the former is predominantly deconstructive.

Or is it? Judging from some essays in the section “Political Lives” such as historian John Deak’s article about the life of the conservative Christian-Socialist Ignaz Seipel, “Founding Father of the Austrian Republic”, and Martin Eichinger’s and Helmuth Wohnout’s rather superficial essay about Alois Mock, member of the Austrian People’s Party and foreign minister from 1987 to 1995, some biographers seem to attempt to overcome at least partly the negative images of their subjects by exploring their personal struggles and emphasizing their positive deeds. In the same section, Gabriella Hauch, professor of modern history and the history of women at the University of Vienna, begins her essay by stressing the impossibility of finding biographical truth in general and in traditional life stories about women in particular. She then deconstructs a ‘male’ version of the life story of Therese Schlesinger (1863–1940), Social Democratic Member of Parliament, in order to reconstruct Schlesinger’s life and work from a more feminist and possibly more realistic point of view. In the section “Lives of the Mind”, literary scholar Deborah Holmes in her essay about educationalist and philanthropist Eugenie Schwarzwald (1872–1940) follows the same pattern by cleverly investigating the “pitfalls of [...] biographical naming conventions and gender assumptions” (192) to reconstruct a fuller story of Schwarzwald’s life and work.

In “Where Hitler’s Name is Never Spoken”, one of the most intriguing essays in this volume, Jason Dawsey (Ph.D. candidate in Modern European history at the University of Chicago) explores the life and work of Günther Anders in Vienna. In his essay, Dawsey does not only reconstruct the importance of Anders’ writings, but also shows that questions concerning deconstruction and reconstruction were at the heart of Anders’ work. Having emigrated from Germany to the USA by way of Paris, Anders, who was

married to Hannah Arendt from 1929 to 1937, followed his second wife, Austrian born writer Elisabeth Freundlich, to Vienna in 1950. Here he “immediately joined a discursive struggle over the lessons to be drawn from the Third Reich,” as Dawsey writes (219), meticulously recording conversations about the war with perpetrators, victims, and people who were seemingly neither the one or the other, which were published in 1967 and 1985. Baffled by the misguided conviction of some Viennese that the bombing of Rotterdam, London and Warsaw were revenge actions for the damage done to Vienna in 1945, the blaming of Jewish victims for “burdening” non-Jewish Austrians with unpleasant feelings of guilt, and the notion of most Austrians that they, too, had been victims of the Nazi’s, Anders noted: “The heart knows [...] only the immediate, never the cause which remains back far behind in the past. *Causality is foreign to the heart.* Thus it happened that the criminals were forgotten, to some extent buried under the terrible consequences of their crimes” (229, italics in the original). Although Anders believed that his reflections on the survival tactics of victims and perpetrators would enable a more realistic reconstruction of Austria’s past, his work never had much impact and still remains, as Dawsey writes, “a neglected theorization of post-fascist Vienna” (238).

As it is, the more interesting contributions to this volume, whether written by historians or by literary scholars, seem to draw at least partly on Anders’ work in the sense that they, too, address the intricate processes of memory and its reconstruction, showing that, even though these processes are in no way typically ‘Austrian’, Austrian history has given them an undeniably distinct character, which more or less requires its own distinct tools of de- and reconstruction.

Monica Soeting, Amsterdam

