

peacefully collecting mushrooms in the Düppeler forest. In exile in Lisbon, Arendt will recall how that day ended at the Arnhold Villa on Lake Wannsee, where “people pour out to smoke cigars” on the veranda “and watch the sunsets last forever.”

And so it continues, from Marlene Dietrich’s laughter to Alban Berg’s music, from Werner Heisenberg’s and Niels Bohr’s exploits in physics to the sexual exploits of two pickpockets, from Käthe Kollwitz losing track of time in her studio to her maid keeping track of to-do lists. In these many “daymares” and moments of arresting beauty, we catch glimpses of the characters’ childhoods, but the narrative also momentarily speeds up like a film reel to reveal their deaths. Like Walter Benjamin’s angel of history, the readers turn their faces toward the past, while being violently propelled into the future, the wreckage of history piling before their helpless eyes.

My Red Heaven is profoundly indebted to modernist works like Alfred Döblin’s cinematic novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929) and modernist techniques such as multi-perspectivity, but it is still decidedly contemporary; Olsen’s very own “laboratory of modernity” percolates with the addition of Michael Kroetch’s photos of empty ruins in contemporary Berlin. The results are hauntingly poetic, as the images and words simultaneously explore the void that the silencing of the work of Billy Wilder, Magnus Hirschfeld, or Otto Dix left behind. *My Red Heaven* also gives space to voices silenced by their peers even before National Socialism, for example that of Bertolt Brecht’s co-author Elisabeth Hauptmann, or that of the artist Hannah Höch. Peers such as Hans Richter belittled Höch’s work and praised only the sandwiches she made and served. “The manifesto hannah höch never wrote” is one of the most touching and powerful passages of Olsen’s novel: “The grammar of art, I wanted to prove, is doubt.” This intervention points to the fact that the Weimar avant-garde might not have been progressive in all the ways we still might like to see it today. My

Red Heaven is thus also a novel about our contemporary desire for Weimar Berlin and its fallacies. It would be completely beside the point to look for historical accuracy, even though many details relating to biographies, locations, or fashions are meticulously researched and lovingly animated. While Hannah Arendt never accompanied Walter Benjamin on his flight across the Pyrenees, she was surely there in spirit “taking in this information” with “an empty face” that the group of refugees had to prepare for deportation back to Germany, just as they believed they had reached safety.

Towards the end of the book, the mystery of its title is revealed. The painter Otto Freundlich steps out of the subway at Kurfürstenstrasse and ponders painting a new abstract work, *My Red Heaven*. It was branded “degenerate art” shortly after its completion a few years later, and Freundlich was murdered on a train to Majdanek. Horizontal swaths of squares, different reds towards the top, blues and whites in the middle, and black squares towards the bottom curve along the canvas—surely an evening sky but maybe also its deconstructed, glossy reflection on city street cobble stones. Weimar surfaces are everywhere in this novel, and the sky reflects the agony of what is below.

Death bookends the narrative: it begins with the dead assembling in their very own avant-garde version of heaven on the rooftops overlooking Berlin. Led by the flying red mane of the dancer Anita Berber, the dead raise “their faces to the first marigold traces threading the sky.” It ends with an airplane leaving Berlin behind, leaving in its wake burnt kerosene and the foreboding smoke of total destruction that fascism will bring upon the city and that reaches into the future to blacken the last pages of the book the reader is now holding. This Weimar laboratory goes up in flames.

Here, *My Red Heaven* executes the stated literary program of one of its characters, journalist Kurt Severing, based on the famous critic and publisher Siegfried Jacobsohn and borrowed from Jason Lutes’s

ingenious 1996 graphic novel *Berlin: City of Stones*. Severing writes in *My Red Heaven* that the most any novel can accomplish, despite its best intentions, “is to confirm that everything is made to be broken.” From his ideal novel he demands that they “know they can’t do anything and yet try to do it anyway.” *My Red Heaven* leaves the reader with the certainty that in contrast to its last legible, ambiguous, and unfinished lines, “everything will be all-“

But nothing, absolutely nothing is going to be alright, certainly not for the characters of this novel, and probably not for its readers. The experience of reading this novel also confirms that there is something left of Weimar Berlin that still speaks to us immediately—and that also remains unbroken. □



THE LANGUAGE OF THIEVES: MY FAMILY'S OBSESSION WITH A SECRET CODE THE NAZIS TRIED TO ELIMINATE BY MARTIN PUCHNER

W. W. Norton
October 2020, 288 pages

A review by Paul Reitter

Late in the summer of 1994, I found myself in Berlin’s main train station with a long trip in front of me and nothing to read in my bag. I also didn’t have much time, so I dashed into a

bookstore and scanned the shelves for one of the great literary doorstoppers a person heading to graduate school in German studies should be able to talk about. Instead, the acclaimed essay collection *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne*, by the Holocaust survivor Jean Améry, caught my eye. It proved to be a good choice. I remember standing on a very noisy platform—backpackers, beer, sandals—astonished by the essay “Torture” and the quiet force of its first pages. Some of that force eluded me, however, because I couldn’t make sense of a word Améry uses toward the end of the opening paragraph: *Rotwelsch*. I knew that *Welsch* could be combined with other words to form a term meaning “incomprehensible dialect,” as in *Kauderwelsch*. And the context here—Améry’s phrase is “in the *Rotwelsch* of the Third Reich”—suggested a dig at Nazi-speak. But “Red Welsh”? What in the world was that?

In *The Language of Thieves*, Martin Puchner—a professor of comparative literature at Harvard University and general editor of the *Norton Anthology of World Literature*—answers this question with admirable insight and erudition, wielding his knowledge with a light touch. But he does more than offer an account of a dialect (or more precisely, a sociolect); he also relates a fascinating family memoir whose mysteries circle around the Third Reich and the study of language. In the nineteenth century, German scholars such as Karl Lachmann pioneered a “genealogical” method of philology that involved working back to a lost original text, the archetype, by identifying how different textual variations had been passed down in what amounted to manuscript families. In a poignant twist, Puchner, who was born and raised in Bavaria, tracks his own family’s elusive history through the philological activities and obsessions of his uncle, great uncle, and grandfather.

Puchner became interested in *Rotwelsch* when he was still a child. He heard it spoken by men who wandered through his town and seemed out of place in its tidy bourgeois milieu. Not only that, he saw the symbols—carved into trees—these

men left for their fellow travelers. As a boy with dyslexia, Puchner felt an easy affinity for a language that is mostly oral and partly pictorial. It also helped that his charismatic uncle Günter was a kind of independent scholar of *Rotwelsch*. Günter imparted to him a sense of the linguistic elements of the sociolect—Yiddish, Hebrew, German, and more—as well as some knowledge of its history. Puchner was only 12 when Günter died, unexpectedly. And it was only later that he would develop a deep understanding of the embattled status of *Rotwelsch*—its reputation for being the language of thieves.

It’s not clear when *Rotwelsch* became a functioning sociolect, a sort of secret argot of beggars and vagabonds in territories where German was spoken during the Middle Ages. By Martin Luther’s day, it was associated with criminality and Jews. (Améry thus turned the tables on the Third Reich and broadened the significance of the term “*Rotwelsch*” when he used it to describe the Nazis’ language.) Luther, one of the first to use the word, strengthened such associations. When he republished the anonymously authored *Book of Vagrants*, in 1521, he added 225 words of *Rotwelsch*, while making evident his distaste for it. As a scholar of the Bible, Luther was able to recognize the influence of Hebrew, which, along with his general antipathy toward Jews, led him to conclude, erroneously, “Es ist freilich solche rotwelsche Sprache von den Juden gekommen” (It is clear that the *Rotwelsch* language comes from the Jews).

This layer of context helps explain the appeal of *Rotwelsch* for Puchner’s uncle Günter. It made embracing *Rotwelsch* a political act, one very much in keeping with the kind to which Günter seemed drawn. A member of the generation that “came after,” Günter partook of a collective desire to break out of social and cultural patterns in postwar Germany thought to be continuous with the country’s fascist past—authoritarianism, the marginalization of difference, and so on. He and Puchner’s father lived for a time in a commune, where they worked together

on a journal with a distinctly absurdist aesthetic. When Puchner goes through Günter’s papers looking for information about the family and the language of thieves, he finds that Günter made some attempts to translate the New Testament into *Rotwelsch*. Luther would not have been amused.

As it turns out, moreover, Günter’s own father was a Nazi, a fact he did not learn until the 1960s. Puchner himself doesn’t find out about it until 1995—in, of all places, Harvard’s Widener Library. Then a graduate student spending a lot of time in Widener, he happens upon an article his grandfather wrote about *Rotwelsch* and Jewish names. It bears the inauspicious date of 1937, and both relies on and bolsters anti-Semitic stereotypes about Jewish linguistic deviance and disguise. A prominent notion in German anti-Semitic culture was that the Jews’ otherness comes to light in their use of German and language generally, but that, at the same time, Jews are able to use the language to cover over their otherness. This is why the Nazis’ practice of insisting that books written by Jews in German carry the label “Translated from the Hebrew.” It isn’t hard to see how *Rotwelsch* might be invoked by someone looking to prop up such ideas.

Having joined the Nazi Party several years before Hitler became chancellor, in 1933, Puchner’s grandfather made a career for himself during the Third Reich as a racist philologist. At first, Puchner knows only about the one article. The revelation has left him stricken, though he acknowledges that, for all its drama, it is hardly unique. When Puchner’s father comes to Cambridge for a visit, he confronts him about it in an Irish pub, and a conversation begins—only to be cut off abruptly, forever: Puchner’s father dies in a boating accident not long after returning to Bavaria. In his quest for more information about the family, Puchner must rely mostly on his research skills. He visits archives in Germany and learns more about his grandfather’s career. He also discovers that his great uncle Otto enjoyed a similar livelihood.

Puchner speaks of the weight of the German past and the shame it has caused him to feel, but he isn't a self-lacerating or handwringing writer, at least not in this book. In fact, his tone is so evenhanded that it can be a little hard to imagine him experiencing the emotional unrest he describes. Here Puchner seems to resemble his father, whose life he also looks further into in this book. Underneath the staid exterior of his father's mature years, there were powerful longings for escape—escape, that is, from the thoroughly bourgeois life he created

for himself as a respected architect and professor. This situation is, of course, a commonplace of midlife, but Puchner suggests that his father experienced it with an unusual intensity that may run in the family: the ancestor after whom Puchner is named had abandoned his wife and children without warning and hit the road as a traveling musician. "Perhaps he was even inducted into Rotwelsch," Puchner writes.

In reflecting on the deep roots of his family's connection to Rotwelsch, Puchner muses that this tendency

to flee also played a role. Rotwelsch abounds with wonderful ways to express the idea of just taking off ("make a rabbit," for example). Fittingly, one of the neat "Rotwelsch lessons" Puchner offers at the end of each chapter carries the heading "How to get away in Rotwelsch." But you don't need to feel tempted to chuck everything to be drawn to the language of thieves; it's really, in many ways, a language of the open road. Given how hard travel has become these days, that should resonate with us all. □

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