Egon Breiner: An Austrian in Exile

Peter Breiner
State University of New York at Albany

Egon Breiner's life and book collection reflect important elements of the Austrian exile experience. Professor Peter Breiner, Egon Breiner's son, who generously donated the collection to the center, has summarized the background and context in which these valuable books came together.

Egon Breiner was born in 1910 in the Leopoldstadt section of Vienna to a Hungarian father and a German-speaking mother from Bohemia. Both parents were Jewish. He was an avid reader and became interested in politics at a young age. He dropped out of school at the age of 15 and joined the youth arm of the Austrian Socialist Party. He proved to be an extremely able leader and in his 20s became the district leader [Bezirksleiter] of the young socialists in Leopoldstadt. He took many courses on literature at the Volkschule and enthusiastically embraced the cultural life of Vienna. He attended musical performances, the theater, and the Vienna opera. During the Dollfuss and Schuschnigg regimes, he continued his political activity as a member of the now underground Austrian Socialist Party and was repeatedly jailed for illegal resistance activity against the regime. After the Anschluss, he continued his activity. However, one day while Breiner was on his way home, a friend told him that the Gestapo had been looking for him at his parents' home. Not returning home, he acquired a forged passport and fled to Zürich, Switzerland, where he stayed with a number Swiss socialists. He then traveled to Paris (staying with Kostya Zetkin, the son of Clara Zetkin) and from there to Sweden where he joined a number of Austrian socialist refugees. He lived in Stockholm and worked as a machinist from 1939 to 1941. His roommate was Bruno Kreisky. In 1941, through the intervention of Joseph Buttinger and Muriel Gardiner, Eleanor Roosevelt made available a number of visas for Austrian socialists to immigrate to the United States. Bruno Kreisky received one of these visas, but at the last minute for personal reasons, he decided to stay in Stockholm. He offered his visa to Egon Breiner. Fearing Sweden could be invaded any day, Breiner accepted the visa. He then traveled to Moscow and from there took the trans-Siberian railway to Vladivostok. From there he sailed on the Annie Johnson, the last boat to cross the Pacific before the German invasion of Russia. Like the unexpected visa to the U.S., the trip on the Annie Johnson proved to be one of several turning points in his life. On the boat he met, among others, Bertolt Brecht, with whom he became well-acquainted. Once in Los...
Angeles, he came to know many of the members of the Brecht circle including Helly Brecht, Hans Eisleer, Paul Dessau, and Peter Lorre, as well as other refugee writers and artists such as Alexander Döblin and Franz Werfel. Although he worked as a machinist at Southern Pacific Railroad by day, he spent many evenings in the Brecht house in Santa Monica. In 1942 he married a Viennese refugee doctor, Leopoldine Reinisch. During the war years, despite the hardships, he and Leopoldine circulated among the many refugees in Los Angeles. The one dark aspect of this period was that he had left both his parents and his brother behind in Vienna, and he did not learn of their fate until after the war. His brother and parents died in the concentration camps.

After Brecht and his circle left the United States, Breiner, at least on the surface, settled into the life of a typical member of the post-World War II generation. He had two sons, Peter, born in 1947 and Tom, born in 1952. He bought a house in the Hollywood Hills and continued working as a machinist. Nonetheless, he and Leopoldine constituted a circle of Austrian and German refugees—this time not renowned—who met regularly in their house to discuss culture, politics, and life in Europe. Breiner stayed in contact with his many friends and acquaintances in Austria. Many of them had entered politics in the newly constituted neutral country. He, followed the career of Bruno Kreisky with particular interest. In 1956, Breiner visited Austria for the first time since he had fled. It was one of many visits he would make in the course of his life. Though he had once entertained the possibility of returning, he never did so, but he watched the political developments with great interest from the sidelines. He also pursued one of the great passions of his life, book collecting. He had an enormous knowledge of Austrian and German literature, and could never resist buying multiple editions of the same much-loved work, whether it was the collected plays of Nestroy, the novels of Max Frisch, or *The Good Soldier Schweik* of Hašek. From the 1960s to the end of his life, Austrian writers and sometimes film makers passing through Los Angeles would stop at his house for coffee and cake, and he would use these visits to tell stories of his experiences before and shortly after he came to the United States.

Although he was engaged in progressive politics in the United States, his true love was his home country. Indeed, so strong was his nostalgia for Austria that he was willing to overlook some of the darker moments of its history. He was especially enthusiastic about the governmental success of the party to which he had unstintingly devoted his youth, the Austrian Socialist Party, and was full of admiration for both the Chancellor of Austria, Bruno Kreisky, and the comprehensive Austrian welfare state. Much of this enthusiasm stemmed from a fact that is hard to appreciate today, namely that the pre-World War II Austrian Socialist Party had been for him not just an ordinary political party seeking state power, but almost an ersatz family, providing him with friends, education, and a sense of moral direction. Moreover, this party in the postwar period up until the end of the twentieth century represented to him the embodiment of Austria as a society of decency and solidarity. Thus he was willing to accept, with a minimum of criticism, the party’s scandals, political compromises, and slow decay into a leadership of party operatives. The turn to the right in Austria distressed him immensely. Similarly, although Austria had lost the enormous cultural influence it had exercised before World War II, Breiner followed its literary output with enthusiasm. On his many trips he collected the latest novels along with a host of books in dialect. In short, from the 1960s to his death in 2000, he lived in two worlds, the world of Los Angeles, with its culture of music, theater, and politics, and the world of Austria (and to a lesser extent, Germany), the home of his cultural and political allegiances.

The library of Egon Breiner represents multiple worlds. It combines German and Austrian classics, contemporary German and Austrian literature, and historical and political books tracing the radical ups and downs of Central Europe. In many ways, the library represents his life. That is, he was a product of several cultures, all now lost: the extraordinary cultural life of fin de siècle Vienna and its modernist offshoots in the late 20s and 30s; the moral and educational world of the Austrian Socialist Party; and the world of German and Austrian emigrés in Los Angeles in the post-World War II period. He often mourned the passing of these cultures, and in an odd way with his death in October of 2000, the world in which a person without an academic degree could almost single-handedly absorb and keep alive the culture of Central Europe seemed to have disappeared with him.
John Spalek and the Record of the Exile Experience

Historian H. Stuart Hughes asserts that the “migration to the United States of European intellectuals fleeing fascist tyranny...the most important cultural event—or series of events—of the second quarter of the twentieth century...Emigration in the 1930s went beyond any previous cultural experience: in its range of talent and achievement; it was indeed something new in the modern history of Western man.” John Spalek has been indefatigable in his efforts to recover and preserve the legacy of this extraordinary historical phenomenon. His achievements were recognized recently in a lengthy article of Aufbau (October 30, 2003). He also received special honors from the Toller Society.

Spalek’s publications represent a network of information crucial for scholarly research in the field of exile studies. For orientation on any exile topic, it is necessary to consult his Guide to the Archival Materials and the multivolume Deutsche Exilliteratur seit 1933. His interest in Ernst Toller and Lion Feuchtwanger has resulted in important bibliographic publications.

The Max Kade Center has been the beneficiary of Spalek’s talent for book collecting. The exile collection reflects his broad knowledge of a field that extends into every conceivable discipline. The most recent transfer of books from his library was the Franz Werfel collection, probably the most comprehensive collection of its kind. To draw attention to the special features of this recent acquisition, the Exile Society Conference of September 4–7, 2003, devoted five lectures to Franz Werfel.

Lawrence Artist’s Work on Display at the Max Kade Center

To commemorate the fifteenth anniversary of the Lawrence–Eutin sister city exchanges, Nancy Bjorge has been invited to exhibit her art work in Eutin. The exhibition will open on June 2, during the visit of a twenty-member Lawrence delegation.

Bjorge was born in Shanghai and raised in Hong Kong. One of the activities that influenced her art was the ceremony of paying respect to the family’s ancestors. The children had to fold paper. After completing high school, Nancy came to the United States to continue her studies. She majored in mathematics and later turned to art. She earned a master of fine arts degree with an emphasis in jewelry design and metal working.

Bjorge’s childhood fascination provides the basis and inspiration of her art. She discovered that a unique form of art could evolve from the simplicity of blank paper. Her paper sculptures are not based on the origami; the inspiration for her art comes from further back in the past, in the ancient use of paper in Asia. Bjorge has taken this art form and created her own, unmistakably individualistic style. She developed this style by looking into the past and reshaping a combination of Chinese and Western art.

Professors Keel and Baron will be part of a delegation that will be present at the opening of the exhibition at the Eutin County Library.
This year the conference of graduate students of German at the University of Kansas addressed the topic “Today’s Image of the German-Speaking World.” The two-day event took place at the Max Kade Center on February 20–21. Professor Ludwig M. Eichinger, Institut für Deutsche Sprache, Mannheim, and Max Kade Visiting Professor, delivered the keynote address, “Dialekte und regionale Substandards: Zum sprachlichen Alltag in der Bundsgrepublik Deutschland.” The KU graduate students who contributed were: Thorsten Huth, “‘Germans Must Be Quite Arrogant, Then?!’—The Cultural Lens in the (German) Language”; Scott Seeger, “On Being and Speaking Frisian: Perception and Identity in the Wiedingharde”; Michael T. Putnam, “The Connection between Dynamic Antisymmetry and Prosodic Stress Assignment in XP-Scrambling”; Melody Harries, “Germany’s Role in the Expanding European Union”; Nora Bruegmann, “Persönlichkeitsentwicklung in Thomas Brussigs ‘Am kürzeren Ende der Sonnenallee’; and Viktória Bagi, “Zum Vaterbild heranwachsender Jungen am Anfang und Ende des 20. Jahrhunderts.” Former KU student Monika Moyrer, who is presently pursuing Ph.D. studies at the University of Minnesota, returned to Lawrence to deliver a talk on “‘Parkhauskatzen schleppen fünf sechs Pfoten’: Space, Language, and Diasporic Aesthetics in Herta Müller’s College Poetry.” Professor Eichinger, who took active part in all the discussions, commented that the graduate students had succeeded in creating a professional forum for the public presentation of their research.

Some 300 high school students of German from twenty-three high schools in Kansas descended upon Lawrence for the “2004 Schülerkongress” sponsored by the Kansas Association of Teachers of German in cooperation with the Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures at the University of Kansas on Saturday, February 28, 2004. Over thirty KU faculty and graduate students in German together with guest professors from Germany and Hungary judged contests in poetry and prose. Contest categories included poetry and prose recitations, oral proficiency interviews, spelling bees, and a cultural information test. Prize winners received a total of 150 medals during an awards assembly in the afternoon. Each participating school was recognized with a framed certificate. During the awards assembly, exchange students from Germany and Switzerland congratulated the American students on their enthusiasm and their willingness to give up a Saturday for the sake of German language and culture competitions.
An Internet-supported course on “Survival Hungarian” will be offered for the first time this summer at the Edwards campus in Overland Park. Mónika Pacziga, graduate student from the University of Budapest and Hungarian instructor at KU for the past two years, has worked closely with Matt Garrett at the Academic Computer Center and Jonathan Perkins at the Ermal Garinger Academic Resource Center to develop the course. The new material and course structure will enable students to make rapid progress in acquiring the skills to communicate effectively in Hungarian.

The focus is on language skills, vocabulary, and expressions in everyday situations. The units bypass complex grammar explanations. Words, phrases, and idiomatic expressions are introduced immediately in combination with pronunciation. Students can simply click on any text and hear a native speaker articulate correct sounds. Practice exercises also reinforce words or phrases with immediate sound. The Internet materials provide user-friendly support for steady progress.

The development of this course has been made possible with the generous support the European Studies Program, the KU Graduate School, and the Center for International Business.

The KU Edwards campus will offer HNGR 453, Survival Hungarian, in the summer session, Tuesdays and Thursdays from 7 to 10 p.m. Special arrangements can be made for students from the Lawrence campus. For enrollment information, contact Dan Mueller at dmueller@ku.edu. For course information consult the instructor, Andrea Némedi (anemedi@yahoo.com).

Némedi received M.A. degrees in Comparative Literature (2001), English (2002), and German (2003) from the University of Szeged. Since 2001, Némedi has been enrolled in the Comparative Literature Department’s Ph.D. program of the University of Szeged, where she has been working in the field of literary theory. With the support of DAAD scholarships, she studied in Germany twice. In the fall of 1998, she attended the Friedrich Schiller University in Jena, and during the academic year 2002–2003 she studied at the University of Cologne. She enrolled in the program of the German Department at KU in the fall of 2003 to work toward a Ph.D. degree in German literature. Her research interest is digital literature, including hyperfiction, multimedia, and Internet literature. She is especially interested in how the computer influences the way literary texts are written and read. She has taught German courses at several different levels.

See www.ku.edu/ces/ns/index
The orthographic norm for Modern German has been the subject of some controversy since the adoption of “spelling reforms” in 1998. As Director of the Institut für Deutsche Sprache in Mannheim, Max Kade Professor Ludwig Eichinger finds himself in the center of the storm. Here he discusses two of the reforms, the rules governing the spelling of compound verbs and the spelling of the voiceless “s” after long and short vowels. The changes become permanent in 2005.

The Orthographiereform—keine leichte Aufgabe

Ludwig M. Eichinger


Der zweite Fall ist weitaus weniger umstritten, er betrifft die Verwendung der Buchstaben <ss> und <ß>. In der neuen Schreibung steht das Zeichen <ß> nur noch für einen geschärften S-Laut nach langen Vokalen (Fuß, aber nass), früher zudem am Wort- oder Silbenende, unabhängig von der Art des Vokals bzw. der Silbe. Bei zweisilbigen Wörtern sieht man den Grund für diese Veränderung genauer, hier gehört das <ß> zur folgenden Silbe (Fuß), bei der Schreibung <ss> gehört zu jeder Silbe ein <s> (Nässe). Da solche Formen in allen Texten recht häufig sind—so ist ja unter anderem die Konjunktion dass (’that’) betroffen, die man früher mit <ß> schrieb—erkennen man an ihr Texte, die in neuer Rechtschreibung geschrieben sind, am klarsten. Alle anderen Dinge sind weitaus seltener.

German Language Varieties Worldwide:
Internal and External Perspectives

Edited by
William D. Keel and Klaus J. Mattheier

William D. Keel and Klaus J. Mattheier (eds.), *German Language Varieties Worldwide: Internal and External Perspectives* (2003) resulted from a conference held in 2001, at the Max Kade Center. At that conference, researchers of German settlement dialect varieties found in the United States, Brazil, Mexico, Hungary, Romania, and the former Soviet Union discussed and debated current issues. One of the central issues discussed was speech island death. Despite the prospect of the ultimate demise of the large array of German linguistic enclaves around the world, Mattheier (University of Heidelberg and Max Kade Professor at KU in 2000) argued that this situation presented an opportunity for linguists and sociolinguists to gain significant insights for the theory of linguistic change. He also placed speech island research within the larger context of international minority studies. For Mattheier, the point in the life of a speech island at which stability turns to instability is the key to understanding the life cycle of such linguistic enclaves. One of the longest surviving German dialect communities in the New World is that of the Pennsylvania Germans. Ludwig Eichinger (Institute für Deutsche Sprache/University of Mannheim and Max Kade Professor at KU in 2004) considered the near impossibility of developing an adequate methodology for sociolinguistic research in such complex speech communities. The linguist using the traditional method of direct interview was faced with the dilemma of having to observe and record without partaking in the life of the community. And, even the researcher who devoted the time to, in effect, become part of the community remained limited by the roles taken by each individual in the community. A central concern is the differentiation between transfer processes in language contact situations and the phenomenon of language attrition, simplification or decay in the last phases. The phenomenon of language decay in linguistic isolation includes a number of consequences, such as the breakdown of grammatical categories (for example, the loss of case distinctions in the noun phrase, the loss of tense or aspectual distinctions in the verb). The focus of the sixteen essays is the investigation of the sociolinguistic phenomena of German linguistic enclaves. The multifaceted developments converge in the final analysis in the juxtaposition of language maintenance and language loss.

The Humboldt Digital Library

This digital library of the works of Alexander von Humboldt entails a comprehensive re-creation of the explorer’s five-year journey to the Americas (1799–1804). In its final form, the library network will show the twenty-nine volumes that Humboldt published, along with direct links to relevant information from current databases. In the books, Humboldt records his observations of Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Mexico, and Cuba. Disciplines covered include botany, zoology, geology, anthropology, archeology, and history. Although the project team has its sights on a library in four languages (French, German, Spanish, and English), at the present stage, work is limited to English translations. With the aid of a Transcoop grant, scholars from the University of Kansas, (the Max Kade Center, the Museum of Natural History, and the Department of Anthropology), the Berlin Humboldt Research Center, the Eutin State Library, and the Technical University of Offenburg have formulated the content and structure of the digital library. Contributors to the project plan to create a user-friendly environment and network that can tap information from rare books, many of which have been accessible only to a few readers. Although the digital library can show Humboldt’s pivotal role for various disciplines
Like other exiles of his generation—Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Thomas Mann, Bertolt Brecht, Erik Erikson, Herbert Marcuse, and Erich Fromm—Ernest Manheim contributed subtly, yet significantly, to the deprovincialization of culture in his adopted home. Born in Budapest, he began his graduate studies in Vienna, Kiel, and Leipzig before the Hitler regime forced him to flee. He settled first in London and later in Chicago and Kansas City. His writing and teaching assisted a generation of younger scholars to become keenly conscious of the conflicts and contradictions at the heart of American political, moral, and academic culture. The essays in this collection, both by and about Ernest Manheim, attest to the depth and detail of his social theory on subjects of continuing and growing relevance: the sociology of communication and public opinion, the sociology of authority, the sociology of anomie and alienation, and the sociology of social science and education. In quiet contrast to the logical positivism that had attained a near-monopoly in U.S. graduate schools of philosophy and sociology, Manheim, along with a few others, offered a critical distillate of European approaches, which brought the insights of phenomenology, existentialism, Marxism, and critical theory from the margins to the heart of intellectual life in this country. Manheim’s work communicated the vibrancy of both its classical and contemporary German intellectual sources, and, in a humanistic and enlightened manner, stressed the essential connection of education to the attainment of the social potential of the human race. Manheim developed a transformative social logic of the public sphere thirty years before Jürgen Habermas did. In the early 1950s, while other academics feared jeopardizing their careers for the relatively unpopular cause of racial equality, Manheim demonstrated rare courage and high integrity in agreeing to testify as an expert witness in the major civil rights lawsuit of the century, Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas. Likewise, his multicultural cosmopolitanism, his opposition to any kind of monoculturalism, and his critique of the patriarchal family remain at the cutting edge of social and cultural theory today.

This book of essays by and about Manheim will appear in Munich with Synchron Publishers in March 2004.
Recent Events at the Max Kade Center

**September 4–7, 2003.** Conference, The Alchemy of Exile: Creative Responses to Expulsion from Nazi-Dominated Europe, jointly sponsored by the North American Society for Exile Studies and the Max Kade Center. Participants from the United States, Germany, Austria, Hungary, and Turkey took part. Included in the program was a concert of music by Kurt Weill, Paul Hindemith, and Michael Cohen. Joyce Castle, mezzo soprano; Elaine Brewer, harp; Edward Laut, cello, and John Boulton, flute, performed Cohen’s “I Remember,” based on the Diary of Anne Frank. Professor Helga Schreckenberger (University of Vermont), former KU graduate student and president of the North American Society for Exile Studies reported in her newsletter that the conference was a “great success.” She added: “The excellent concert, in particular, was a wonderful and moving experience.” Jörg Thunecke’s detailed description about each of the twenty-six presentations is in the journal of the Gesellschaft für Exilforschung, published in December 2003.


**October 25, 2003.** A program of violin music, performed by Aleksandr Snytkin, Noemi Miloradovic, Francesca Manheim, Kathy Haid-Berry, and Jeannine Elasewich, featured compositions by Béla Bartók and Ernest Manheim.

**March 6, 2004.** With the imminent expansion of the European Union, interest has increased in countries linked to the former Austro-Hungarian Empire. A prominent new member of the European Union will be Hungary. Visiting Fulbright Professor György Szönyi (University of Szeged) is teaching a course this semester in order to provide the historical background for new developments. In a cultural variation of this political theme, Professor Szönyi delivered a public lecture: “Under the Influence: Hungarian Gypsy Music and the Classical Tradition.” Tracing developments in Hungary from the medieval period into the twentieth century, he gave recorded samples of a nation’s cultural heritage, and he showed that this legacy made a dramatic imprint on classical music throughout Europe.
In Memoriam
Michael Scherer

Bill Keel

We were saddened to learn of the death of Dr. Michael “Mike” Scherer in Munich, Germany, on February 3 at the age of 81. With Toni Burzle, Dr. Scherer had been instrumental in establishing the first KU Summer Language Institute in Germany near Holzkirchen, when he held an appointment as visiting assistant professor in German at KU (1960–1961). He returned to KU for two years as visiting associate professor in German (1962–1964) and directed the 1964 Summer Language Institute in Holzkirchen before returning to his duties in the Bavarian educational system. He eventually became a higher official in the Bavarian Ministry for Education in Munich. He and his wife, Elisabeth, taught many years in the SLI in Holzkirchen, especially during the decade of the 1980s, when both were semiretired. They organized many trips to museums, concerts, theater and opera performances in Munich for KU students. Michael Scherer expressed it best in his letter of resignation to Deans Waggoner and Heller in the spring of 1964: “In my new position in Germany, it will be my avowed aim to continue to work for close understanding between my home country and the United States of America. Above all, I will always be available for any service I can render in connection with future programs of the University of Kansas to be carried through in Germany.” He kept that promise, and hundreds of our students benefited from his lifelong dedication to our summer institutes. He loved to meet with students and faculty from our SLI in Holzkirchen in a Munich beer garden and discuss politics or current cultural trends in Germany and the U.S.—he was still doing that last summer in his ninth decade. He is survived by his wife in Munich and his daughter in New York.

The University of Kansas
Max Kade Center for German-American Studies
Sudler House
Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures
Lawrence, KS 66045-2127