



ERICH FRIED

A cura d'Alfred Carol

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ESSAY

Erich Fried - A Courageous and Upright Jew and Great Poet Erich Fried - the most famous German-speaking poet in the modern world - was one of the first sponsors of the RETURN statement. He was a refugee from his native Austria, from where he fled after the Anschluss in 1938, his father having been beaten and tortured to death by the Gestapo. It was because of his experience of Nazism and anti-Semitism that Erich Fried became a mentor to the anti-Vietnam war movement in West Germany. He was particularly close to Rudi Dutschke and spoke up for those who, like Ulrike Meinhoff, sought quick solutions to the problems of modern-day German capitalism. During the war he became a broadcaster for the BBC External Services. He remained a committed socialist and a trenchant critic of Stalinism in Eastern Europe. It was because of his experience of racism and fascism that he was to take up the cudgels against Zionism and in support of the Palestinians, who, like himself, had been driven from their native land to exile. During the controversy over the PERDITION, Jim Allen's play which documented the collaboration of the Zionist movement with Nazism, Erich Fried came out staunchly in defense of the play. In the book of the play he wrote that he wished that he could have written such a play, such was his modesty. Erich Fried was an inspiration to anti-fascists and anti-Zionists everywhere, especially in the growing numbers of young anti-Zionist Jews for whom he was a living link with an earlier generation of socialist Jews.

In the last years of his life, the BBC featured him in their series EXILES, which drew a predictably hostile response from the Zionist Jewish Chronicle, but which was a long overdue

tribute to this most courageous of fighters. Erich Fried's poem 'A Jew to Zionist Fighters, 1988' was included in his last collection 'Unverwundenes - Liebe, Trauer, Widersprüche - Gedichte' (Uninjured - Love, Grief, Contradictions - Poems), published by Verlag Klaus Wagenbach, Berlin, 1988. The translation, by Frank Monahan, was published in RETURN magazine, March 1990, with permission of the publishers and of Katherine Fried. A Jew to Zionist Fighters, 1988

What do you actually want? Do you really want to outdo those who trod you down a generation ago into your own blood and into your own excrement Do you want to pass on the old torture to others now in all its bloody and dirty detail with all the brutal delight of torturers as suffered by your fathers? Do you really want to be the new Gestapo the new Wehrmacht the new SA and SS and turn the Palestinians into the new Jews? Well then I too want, having fifty years ago myself been tormented for being a Jewboy by your tormentors, to be a new Jew with these new Jews you are making of the Palestinians And I want to help lead them as a free people into their own land of Palestine from whence you have driven them or in which you plague them you apprentices of the Swastika you fools and changelings of history whose Star of David on your flags turns every quicker into that damned symbol with its four feet that you just do not want to see but whose path you are following today

Steven W. Lawrie

DYLAN THOMAS'S WORK IN GERMAN TRANSLATION

'Unsre Stadt, die hierunterm Milchwald ruht, die ist nicht ganz schlecht, und auch nicht ganz gut.'

The English-speaking reader with no knowledge of German will be excused for not recognizing an extract from the work of Dylan Thomas - although the word 'Milchwald' is close enough to the English to permit an inspired guess. These lines, part of Reverend Jenkins' sunset poem in Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood*, are taken from Erich Fried's German language version of the radio play, entitled *Unter dem Milchwald*, which was first broadcast 40 years ago this year.

The overwhelming success of this broadcast helped to establish Thomas's reputation in the German-speaking countries and indeed led to further translations into German. The high quality of the German version was due to the choice of translator. Erich Fried, who was born in 1921 in Vienna, was driven from his home and forced to seek exile in Great Britain in 1938 after the annexation of Austria by the Nazis. Fried remained in London after 1945, partly because many of his friends and relations had been murdered by the Nazis, but maintained the wish to become a German writer. This was a vain hope given his position far from the countries in which he wished to publish. Only after the appearance of his *Under Milk Wood* translation did his fortunes change.

There is no indication of a knowledge of Thomas prior to the publication of his *Deaths and Entrances* in 1946 but Fried's attention seems to have been caught by the widespread and resounding acclaim which greeted *Deaths and Entrances*. In 1948 Fried translated an excerpt from *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog*. 'A Visit to Grandpa's' was published in the British reeducation journal *Neue Auslese* ('New Digest'), which was distributed in Germany as part of the denazification programme and which introduced world literature which had previously been banned under the National Socialist regime.

Fried drew the attention of the West German publisher Eugen Claassen to Dylan Thomas during the publisher's visit to London in the same year as his first Thomas translation appeared. However, nothing came of this suggestion. During the post-war period publishing in Germany was difficult and the book market unreliable. The situation was worsened by regular paper shortages, while restrictions on currency transfer abroad meant that Fried could not be paid. Nevertheless, Fried was interested enough in Dylan Thomas to attempt unpaid translations in his own time without any real prospect of publication. The translation rights of 'And death shall have no dominion' were bought in October 1950 by the BBC, where Fried was then employed with the German Service. His versions of 'The Hand that signed the paper', 'Poem in October' and 'Fern Hill' were all written in his own time before autumn 1952, while 'Twenty-four years' and 'In my craft or sullen art' were translated after this date, again in the poet's leisure time. Four of Fried's Thomas translations appeared later in the West German journal *Texte und Zeichen*. An examination of these and comparison with the originals reveals that Fried was a conscientious and meticulous translator, providing admirable renditions with only minor changes to Thomas's rhyme pattern.

During his employment with the BBC Fried encountered a variety of writers including Dylan Thomas. Admittedly, the teetotaller Fried was not the ideal drinking companion for Thomas and in any case the latter spent increasingly less time in London towards the end of his life. Fried terms him 'the great poet Dylan Thomas whom I personally knew', but it is unlikely that he did more than meet Thomas once or twice during his intermittent visits to the capital. Nor is there any mention made of Fried in Constantine Fitzgibbon's detailed biography *The Life of Dylan Thomas*. A greater contrast than that between Thomas and Fried is scarcely imaginable: Thomas, largely unpolitical and often outrageously drunk and Fried the politically interested teetotaller with a tendency towards depression. Yet the two had in common the essential 'primal relationship to the word' of which the German poet Gottfried Benn speaks. Fried, who has been called by critics the 'master of language' was well suited to act as translator for the work of Dylan Thomas, whom Fried in 1955 termed 'the greatest poet of the last one and a half decades.'

The decisive factor in choosing Fried to provide a German version of Thomas's radio play was the experience Fried had gained by 1954 as a translator at Bush House, where he had frequently earned praise for his work. Fried was set the task of translating a wide variety of poetry of differing styles and language. He translated works so diverse as the medieval York miracle plays to traditional 16th and 17th century English hymns and the work of modern poets - including Dylan Thomas.

After the death of Dylan Thomas, he was approached and presented with the challenge of translating Thomas's *Under Milk Wood*. The play was considered by others to be 'full of puns and as good as untranslatable'. Fried has described the circumstances which surrounded his translation as follows:

The Topical Unit (where I was Political Commentator) could only do without me for one week. If I managed it in that time, then they could put on the radio play in German, otherwise the project would have to be abandoned. [...] That tempted me. I had a look at the manuscript, then I requested the best and fastest secretary. I got two secretaries [...]. For a week I worked at full speed. In the evenings I took home the finished pages to correct. After a week the translation was finished.

The urgency with which the translation was completed suited Fried well for, according to the writer himself, he had always worked at speed, and high speed translations remained the norm for him.

Fried proved that the supposedly untranslatable *Under Milk Wood* was indeed translatable. He successfully reproduced the playful and lyrical nature of much of the original with its punning and its associative and highly creative use of language. Fried generally remains as true to the original as possible. Where he makes changes, he does so out of necessity, but in so doing he retains the effect of the original. Often Fried's solutions are ingenious, for example in his translation of the expression 'loony age' which refers to Lord Cut-Glass. Fried's expression 'überdrehtes Alter' (the German word also means 'overwound') is particularly apt for this eccentric character who is obsessed with clocks and the passing of time. Fried also takes a slight liberty in the case of Bach. The character Organ Morgan, thinking to have discovered the composer asleep on a tombstone, exclaims, 'Johann Sebastian mighty Bach'. Fried, conscious of the actual German meaning of this proper name ('stream' in German), writes 'hinreißender Bach', by which means the name also assumes the watery connotations of its original meaning. Some alterations are necessitated by cultural differences, such as 'milk stout' which becomes 'Vollbier', while the fourteen miles walked by the postman is metricised into '20 Kilometer'.

On occasions, however, Fried tends to sacrifice effect for the sake of local flavour. The German listener will be surprised to hear of the 'slice of cold bread pudding' which Mr. Waldo keeps under his pillow; bread pudding may be consumed in Britain but Fried's literal translation can

only puzzle a German-speaking listener. The result is perhaps comparable to the effect on an English-speaker of the offer of 'Beanstick' as dessert. This supposedly German sweet was recently encountered in a British restaurant and turned out to be an acoustic translation of 'Bienenstich', a sweet almond cake! Similarly, Thomas's simile for the empty village pub after closing time which is 'quiet as a domino' works in English as it has associations with the object it is describing, where the game of dominoes is played. Fried's translation, on the other hand, is not appropriate, as the link between a domino and a pub is not at once apparent to a non-British listener. Equally puzzling to a German listener are the 'twenty-one X's' at the end of a love letter from Miss Price to Mr. Edwards, which might sooner call to mind a string of obituaries, but certainly not kisses. Here Fried has overlooked the fact that his audience is not privileged to have had the same experience of Britain as himself and consequently cannot be familiar with this British custom.

Fried is inconsistent in his treatment of proper names. He makes some changes - the layabout Nogood Boyo becomes Boyo Nichtsnutz, Bessie Bighead becomes Bessie Großkopf, Mary Ann Sailors becomes Mary Ann Seefahrer and the eccentric Lord Cut-Glass becomes Lord Kristallglas. But he ignores some names where he would have done better not to, such as the delicate, virginal Gossamer Beynon and Polly Garter with her numerous lovers. The relevance of the humorous name assigned to the postman Willy Nilly is ignored (perhaps German postmen are more reliable than their British colleagues) as is the case with the reversible Welsh-sounding name of the village Llareggub. On the other hand Fried is consistent in his use of proper Welsh names which are used throughout to retain local flavour.

However, the criticism expressed above does not detract from the overall merits of Fried's translation. His translation does do justice to the original and reflects accurately the different levels of language employed: everyday speech, humorous or grotesque elements and the highly lyrical descriptive passages of the two narrators.

Unter dem Milchwald was first broadcast by the BBC German Service on 10 March 1954, six weeks after the first BBC English-language production. This broadcast was not altogether satisfactory from a technical point of view so that there is some doubt as to the impact it had. Eleanor Ransome, who was responsible for BBC German audience research, reports that the first broadcast was extremely difficult to hear. She writes:

Reception was always the bugbear, and one of my sadder experiences was to listen [in a German home] to an exceptionally good adaptation of *Under Milk Wood*. We could hardly follow it through the static, and I hated having to report this back at Bush House, when so much talent and hard work had gone into the production.

Unter dem Milchwald reached a larger audience when transmitted by the radio stations within Germany. The NWDR (North West German Radio; later NDR) led the way in the same year as the BBC German Service and broadcast the radio play on 20 September 1954 and again two months later on 8 December. Other stations followed suit and judging by the frequency of performance by NDR alone, Fried's rendition of the radio play was enormously popular with its listeners.

The premier of the stage version of *Under Milk Wood* took place at the Edinburgh Festival in 1956 and provided the idea for a German stage performance. Using a mammoth cast of 70 actors, this was put on by Boreslaw Barlog at the famous Schiller Theater in Berlin in 1956, again with Fried's text. A German opera version by Walter Steffen followed in 1973 which retained Fried's text, and a successful television film was made of the play. Fried's translation is still performed today and, despite whatever objections critics may raise about individual performances, they generally agree on the excellence of the German text. A review of the 1989-90 performance at the Schauspielhaus in Hamburg contains praise for Fried which is not untypical of many

reviewers: 'The surprising thing about the Hamburg *Milchwald*-renaissance: Thomas's language, in Erich Fried's congenial translation, has scarcely lost anything of its zest'. Forty years after its first performance the German version of *Under Milk Wood* still attracts an enthusiastic audience, most recently, for example at the Theater Forum Kreuzberg (Berlin) where it ran for six weeks in spring 1994.

Fried's translation of *Under Milk Wood* marked the turning point in his career for it attracted the attention of both the German public and German publishers. It led to further translations and ultimately to publication of his *own* work, which included a novel, radio plays and over twenty volumes of poetry. It also made a large German-speaking audience more aware of the work of Dylan Thomas. *Unter dem Milchwald* appeared on the German book market in 1954. It was followed by translations of *Quite Early One Morning* (1957), *A Prospect of the Sea* (1961) and *Selected Poems* (1966). There were further Dylan Thomas translations for radio. *Rückreise*, a German version of Thomas's lesser-known radio play *Return Journey*, was first broadcast in February 1958 along with *Erinnerung an einen Feiertag*, Fried's radio adaptation of Thomas's *Bank Holiday*. The German version of Thomas's film script *The Doctor and the Devils* was also provided by Fried and broadcast to a German audience in 1959 under the title *Der Doktor und die Teufel* at a time when it was still unknown in Britain due to censorship, which was a result of the gruesome content.

By the time of his death in 1988 Erich Fried was generally acknowledged to be one of the leading poets writing in the German language, and it is fitting that he was helped in his literary career by his translation of the work of another leading twentieth century poet. Without Thomas, it seems probable that Fried's wish to become a writer would have been frustrated for further years; and without Fried it is equally likely that German speakers in Germany, Austria and Switzerland would not have come to the same appreciation of the work of Dylan Thomas.

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"Druid of the broken body"

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GEDICHTE

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Was es ist

(Erich Fried)

Es ist Unsinn
sagt die Vernunft
Es ist was es ist
sagt die Liebe
Es ist Unglueck
sagt die Berechnung
Es ist nichts als Schmerz
sagt die Angst
Es ist aussichtslos
sagt die Einsicht
Es ist was es ist
sagt die Liebe
Es ist laecherlich
sagt der Stolz
Es ist leichtsinning
sagt die Vorsicht
Es ist unmoeglich
sagt die Erfahrung
Es ist was es ist
sagt die Liebe

last modified: 14.05.1998, 19:34 MEZ

Ich habe ein wunderschönes Gedicht, aber es ist leider nicht von mir!

Ohne Dich

(Erich Fried)

Nicht nichts
ohne dich
aber nicht dasselbe.

Nicht nichts
ohne dich
aber vielleicht weniger.

Nicht nichts
aber weniger
und weniger.

Vielleicht nicht nichts
ohne dich
aber nicht mehr viel.

by Erich Fried

Es soll nicht vergessen sein
daß in Deutschland vor vielen Jahren
ein Buch mit Gedichten und Prosa
erschieden ist
Gegen den Tod
das warnte vor dem Atomkrieg
und das zusammengestellt war
von zwei Menschen
Bernward Vesper
und Gudrun Ensslin
die beide jetzt tot sind

Er hat sich das Leben genommen
und von ihr wurde amtlich gemeldet
auch sie habe sich selbst
in der Zelle
das Leben genommen

Wenn man es aber genau nimmt
dann merkt man daß allen beiden
ihr Leben genommen wurde
nur auf verschiedene Art
vom selben Übel
das umgeht
auch in unserem Land
und gegen das beide
gekämpft haben bis zur Verzweiflung
lange vor irgendeinem bewaffneten Kampf

Sachverständige

by Erich Fried - 1970 ?

Es gibt Zeiten
da schelten sogar
die Opportunisten
den Opportunismus

Glaub ihnen
denn sie wissen
am besten
wovon sie sprechen

Trau ihnen nicht
denn sie schelten
den Opportunismus
aus Opportunismus

Kleinbürgerliche Schwache

by Erich Fried - 1970(?)

Mir peinlich
mich unter Genossen
manchmal
allein zu fühlen
aber verboten
ist das natürlich
nicht

Ich kenne
zwar auch
Genossen
die das verbieten mochten
Unter denen
fühle ich mich
allein

Grabschrift für Ulrike Meinhof

Weil du verschlagen wurdest
in diese Unzeit
und nicht verschlagen wurdest
in dieser Unzeit
mußtest du sterben
zur Unzeit
an dieser Unzeit

Wenn eine Zeit kommt
in der
die Stunde
der Geschlagenen
schlägt
wirst du
nicht leben

Dein Sterben
und Leben
und das
der andern Erschlagenen
wird Herzen
schlagen machen
doch nicht mehr deines

An dich denken

by Erich Fried

An dich denken

An dich denken
und unglücklich sein?
Wieso?

Denken können
ist doch kein Unglück
und denken können
an dich:
an dich
wie du bist
an dich
wie du dich bewegst
an deine Stimme
an deine Augen
an dich
wie es dich gibt -

wo bleibt da
für wirkliches Unglück
(wie ich es kenne
und wie es mich kennt)
noch der Raum oder die Enge?

Antwort

(Resposta)

A les pedres
havia dit un:
seda humana

Les pedres havien dit:
no som encara
prou dures

Abschied von Wien

(Comiat de Viena)

Encara veig davant meu
l'habitació nua i buida,
allí estava jo de costum a la casa.
Ara això s'ha acabat.

Veig els llocs raspats
al terra prop dels sòcols
on s'havien mogut mobles,
s'havien donat cops.

Com m'absentava cerimoniosament
en aquells últims dies.
Quan el lloc habitual del mirall
era a la paret.

El lloc més clar a la vista.
La imatge no em faltava mai,
Estrany, com és davant situada
en aquell últim dia.

Gründe

Weil das alles nicht hilft
Sie tun ja doch, was sie wollen
Weil ich mir nicht nochmals
die Finger verbrennen will
Weil man nur lachen wird:
Auf dich haben sie gewartet
Und warum immer ich?
Keiner wird es mir danken
Weil da niemand mehr durchsieht
sindern höchstens noch mehr kaputtgeht
Weil jedes Schlechte
vielleicht auch sein Gutes hat
Weil es Sache des Standpunktes ist
und überhaupt, wem soll man glauben
Weil auch bei den anderen
nur mit heißem Wasser gekocht wird
Weil ich das lieber
Berufeneren überlasse
Weil niemand weiß
wie es einem schaden kann
Weil sich die Mühe nicht lohnt
weil sie alle das gar nicht wert sind
Das sind die Todesursachen
zu schreiben auf unsere Gräber
Die nicht mehr gegraben werden
wenn das die Ursachen sind.

(aus: "und Vietnam und" von Erich Fried; 1966)