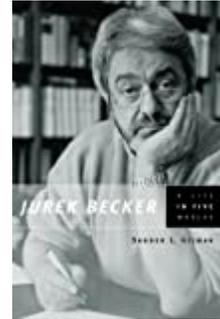




Sander L. Gilman. *Jurek Becker: A Life in Five Worlds.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003. vii + 282 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-29393-6.



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Jurek Becker from the Outside In: An Intimate Portrait

Jurek Becker's life and identity defy convenient classification. Polish Jew, Holocaust survivor, East German author, exiled East German author, German writer, all are characterizations that literary critics, scholars, and readers have applied to Becker and his work over the years, reflecting the elusiveness of his identity both for himself and for others. Yet on more than a superficial level these labels do not fully capture the essence of who Becker really was. This is exactly the task Sander Gilman undertakes in his biography *Jurek Becker: A Life in Five Worlds*. As he points out in his introduction, "I wanted to capture his life as well as understand his writing in all registers in which he wrote" (p. ix). Gilman bases his biography on his personal relationship with Becker, Stasi documents, the large number of interviews Becker gave over the years, conversations with a wide range of people who were willing to be interviewed about Becker, and the "Becker Papers" (correspondence, reports, Jurek's Stasi file, and family documents now deposited in the Akademie der Knste). The various names Becker used in different phases of his life—Jerzy, Georg, Jurek—mark Becker's evolving sense of self and serve as chapter organizers for the wealth of information Gilman has gathered

about the author.

Gilman presents Becker's biography in a straightforward chronology. The first chapter—"Jurek in Lodz, 1937-1939"—establishes Becker's roots in Poland and the origins of his uncertain identity. Since Becker did not leave any accounts of his childhood, Gilman incorporates statements made by others on Jewish life in Lodz. At the time of Becker's birth in 1937, anti-Semitism ran in strong currents through Polish society. Becker's parents longed for assimilation and spoke Polish to their child even though Yiddish was their first language. Gilman demonstrates the impact this had on Becker by incorporating Becker's popular short story *Die beliebteste Familiengeschichte* to portray Jewish life in Poland before WWI. This chapter creates the mold for the following chapters; Gilman presents Becker's life against a historical backdrop, using personal statements, eyewitness accounts, and Becker's own writing to portray the life of a man who was driven to fit into the world around him and was never satisfied with the attempts of others to fit him into a prescribed role.

In his second chapter, Gilman focuses on the years

1939-1945, during which Jerzy survived the Lodz Ghetto and the concentration camps Ravensbrück and Sachsenhausen. Gilman portrays this as a period of loss for Becker: loss of his mother, childhood, language, and memory. All that remained was silence. Becker and his father did not talk about their experiences in the ghetto or in the camps, nor did East Germany, the country where they had chosen to live. Gilman closes the chapter by pointing out that “Jerzy did not remember his experiences or the language in which they were cast; but his literary work remembered them for him” (p. 21). Gilman demonstrates repeatedly in the chapters that follow that Becker gave voice to the silences in his past through his writing.

Jerzy Bekker became Georg Becker when he and his father arrived in Berlin after the war. Chapters 3 and 4 chronicle Becker’s efforts to become German: he learned the language, pursued athletics (boxing and table tennis), and joined the FDJ. The seeds for Becker’s literary career also were planted at this time. Storytelling figured prominently in the Becker household when his father’s friends came to visit. In 1956 Georg met Manfred Krug and their friendship remained a force throughout the rest of Becker’s personal and creative life, culminating with their collaboration on the popular 1980s television series *Liebling Kreuzberg*.

In chapters 5 and 6, Gilman turns to the trajectory of Becker’s literary career from its origins writing sketches for the famous cabaret “Die Distel” to screenplays for DEFA to the publication of his literary works. A detailed account of the evolution of Becker’s *Jakob der Lgner* from numerous screenplay drafts to published novel figures prominently in this phase of Becker’s life as a writer, as well as the details surrounding the writing and publication of *Irreführung der Behörden* and *Der Boxer*. Details from Becker’s personal life such as his marriage, relationships with two sons, and divorce plus accounts of Becker’s response to the Biermann Affair and his clashes with party officials round out Gilman’s portrait of Becker’s life between 1960 and 1978. In November 1977, the GDR granted Becker a two-year visa, thus releasing him to live in West Berlin and spend spring semester as writer-in-residence at Oberlin College in 1978. Gilman closes chapter 6 with a provocative rhetorical question regarding Becker’s decision to return to West Berlin fol-

lowing his semester at Oberlin: “Jurek’s return to West Berlin meant critiquing the system but not becoming a tool of capitalism in its attack on the qualities he still believed socialism to possess. Could he succeed?” (p. 137).

The final two chapters of the book deal with Becker’s life in West Berlin between 1978 and 1989 and following the fall of the Wall. Gilman marks his treatment of these years with accounts of Becker’s key publications and his sojourns to the United States and Wales as a conference participant and visiting writer. The publication of *Aller Welt Freund* in 1982 by Suhrkamp and in 1983 by Hinstorff evidences the East German publishing industry’s interest in returning Becker to their stable of writers. Becker’s trilogy dealing with the lives of Jews—*Jacob der Lgner*, *Der Boxer*, and *Bronsteins Kinder*—came to completion in 1986 with the publication of the final novel. This year also heralded the beginning run of Becker’s successful television series *Liebling Kreuzberg*. The 1990s marked the pinnacle of Becker’s career; he bought a country house in Schleswig-Holstein and received the Bundesverdienstorden in August 1993. Gilman sees these achievements as symbols of privilege. He notes, “The world of privilege in the FRG is a sign of belonging to the new society, of becoming a German” (p. 208). Cancer brought Becker’s life to an early conclusion in March 1997. Gilman sees a certain poetic circularity in Becker’s death. Just as Becker as a child suffered the starvation and emaciation of the camps, Becker as a dying cancer patient returned to that emaciated state: “He had begun to look like the photos of concentration camp victims. That was the world he had survived and chronicled, and its memories were etched on his body” (pp. 228-229).

Gilman’s *Jurek Becker: A Life in Five Worlds* offers readers a touchingly intimate portrait of the man and author Jurek Becker. Becker’s life is a story of wanting to fit in and not being satisfied with others’ attempts to fit him into a neatly defined category. With the story of Becker’s life Gilman has done a great service to Becker’s legacy; he has presented his biography and his bibliography in a highly accessible form to which readers from all realms of life and knowledge can easily gain access. Aside from a number of editorial blips on the screen, the kind that a spellchecker alone will not discover, this book is a pleasure to read from start to finish.

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