



Karen Hobbs, ed. *One Hundred Tales from Sudetenland*. New Ulm, Minnesota: German-Bohemian Heritage Society, 1999. xxi + 197 pages.

Reviewed by Eagle Glassheim (Columbia University)

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A Homeland Away from Home: An Exile Folklorist's Tales from the Sudetenland

Before national memory, there was local lore: unusual rock formations with mythical origins, ruins of castles squashed by rapacious dragons, ancient crosses marking great folly or great sacrifice. All of these places had names, and most of the names had stories. In *One Hundred Tales from Sudetenland*, Karen Hobbs translates a collection of these stories by the Sudeten German folklorist and expellee Josef Rotter. The tales are an enchanting mix of the fantastic, historical, and didactic. The tremendously diverse experience of the Germans who lived in various parts of Bohemia, lands that in the twentieth century came under the collective name Sudetenland, is illustrated here. One thing all the tales share, though, is a sense of place; they show how names, places, and myths can become the building blocks of local identity. The juxtaposition of these local tales under the rubric of a wider Sudeten identity raises questions about the relationship of localism, regionalism, and nationalism among Bohemian Germans in the twentieth century.

Many of the stories deal with the themes of greed and forbearance. A shepherd in the Altvatergebirge of northern Moravia meets Altvater, the king of the mountain spirits, in a high mountain pasture. Altvater asks the shepherd for a sheep, which the awed shepherd gives him. The spirit then leads the shepherd to his magical palace, which is filled with great riches. Altvater hands him a golden coin in thanks for the sheep. Then Altvater leaves, warning the shepherd not to disturb the rest of the treasure. But the poor shepherd can't resist, and he fills his pockets with gold. The heavens explode in thunder and lightning, and the whole palace, shepherd included,

is reduced to rubble. The rocky slopes that remain were thereafter known as the Altvaterberg. When other such simple characters resist similar temptations, on the other hand, the spirits often reward them with prosperity and happiness.

A second set of themes relates to faith and perseverance, and these tales are often set amid the hardships of the Hussite and Thirty Years Wars. One story recounts how the people of Bruenn heroically resisted a Swedish siege in 1645. One morning, the Swedish commander lets loose a great burst of firepower, and he vows that he will take his noontime meal inside the city walls. The citizens of Bruenn pray fervently to God, asking his aid in their seemingly hopeless situation. Soon a fog covers the city. At 11 A.M., the church bells of the Cathedral begin ringing; an apparition of the Virgin Mary emerges from the fog and opens her arms in a protective embrace. With that, the Bruenners find a new courage and strength, and they repel the Swedes, enjoying peace once more.

The Holy Mother makes another appearance in a story from the Hussite Wars. As the Hussites are laying waste to much of Bohemia, a local captain flees his defeated town. He is so exhausted after the fighting that he falls asleep under an oak tree in the nearby woods. As Hussite troops approach him on their rounds, the Virgin Mary appears and shakes him awake with the words *Wach auf!* He barely escapes the enemy and then goes on to rebuild the town after the Hussites withdraw. To commemorate the miraculous end to his near-fatal nap, he dedicates a chapel to the Virgin and gives it the name

Wachov, a name with an ending that looks Czech.

Curiously, no Czechs appear in these stories of the Hussite Wars and the Thirty Years War, with the exception of Jan Zischkas (Zizka), who is not identified as a Czech. In fact, there is no mention of Czechs in any of the stories. Despite being collected in the 1920s and 1930s and being published after World War II, the tales do not carry an overt nationalist agenda. Unlike the enchanting, distinctly Czech legends of Alois Jirasek [1], Rotter's stories are local in character, not national. Rotter researched and wrote in the tradition of *Heimat* (homeland) studies, and was a specialist in the folk tales and traditions of his native Eulau valley.

Many of the tales in Rotter's collection describe the mythical origins of names, natural formations, and local customs. There is the Devil's Wall, a dramatic turn in the river Moldau where the Devil tried (and failed) to flood the Hohenfurth monastery; the *Hans Heilingsfelsen*, an unusual rock outcrop formed when a jealous water nymph turned Hans Heiling's wedding party to stone; and the horseshoe shaped cakes in Iglau, baked in honor of St. Martin, who once visited the town in search of shoes for his horse. Legends such as these were an important element of local identity in the Bohemian borderlands. Origin myths often transcend differences of class and contribute to a wider sense of community. By naming and explaining their surroundings, people mark their cosmological coordinates, a process that gives them a sense of place, a feeling of belonging. Published in exile, Rotter's tales have a melancholy and nostalgic feel. They hint at the traumatic transition Sudeten German expellees would face after the war. Germany became their new home, but for many the Sudetenland remained and still remains their *Heimat*.

As it turns out, a number of scholars have recently taken an interest in the *Heimat* phenomenon in Germany. In a pathbreaking book on *Heimat* studies in the Palatinate (Pfalz), Celia Applegate traces the *Heimat* movement in the German speaking lands to a mid-nineteenth burst of interest in regional identity. [2] In the 1850s, Germans fanned out into their rural hinterlands, collecting artifacts, stories, and dialects. By the 1870s, localities and regions were filling museums with their ethnographic booty. Later they would also fill so-called *Heimatbuecher* with anything that they thought made their area distinct. At first glance, this strong regionalism appears counter to the trend towards German unification after 1848. But the opposite turned out to be the case for, as one contemporary observed, "The stamp of the whole

is mirrored in the locality; the love of the fatherland is rooted in the love of *Heimat*." [3] *Heimats* might have differed widely, Applegate concludes, but they implied a local community that transcended class, occupation or generation; *Heimat* became a mediating step to the national community. And love of a *Heimat*, whatever its specific content, became something that most Germans had in common.

In a recent book expanding on Applegate's thesis, Alon Confino argues that *Heimat* became what people thought of as they imagined their belonging in a larger German nation. Instead of separate, unique regional identities, *Heimat* evolved into a generic conception of local identity with a "shared pattern of objects and narrative" across much of united Germany. [4] Rather than Applegate's "mediator," *Heimat* was German identity. Both Confino and Applegate raise questions of relevance to Rotter's collection of Sudeten German folktales. How did these tales contribute to the creation of regional identities? Karen Hobbs carefully separates the stories into sections devoted to distinct German speaking regions in Bohemia and Moravia. Nonetheless, the title of the book, *One Hundred Tales from Sudetenland*, suggests a common, Sudeten identity. Just what was this identity? Was it built of *Heimats*, like Imperial Germany? Was it a "national" or a mediating identity?

The term *Sudetenland* was not widely used before 1918; in the nationally charged years leading up to World War I, most Bohemian Germans would have identified themselves with Bohemia, Austria, the German Empire, Germanism as a whole, or a combination of the four. A Sudeten identity spread only after the birth of Czechoslovakia, and it reached its height in the 1930s, at the very moment when many, if not most, Sudeten Germans were clamoring for Anschluss with Nazi Germany. Since the postwar expulsion of Germans from Czechoslovakia, Sudeten identity has been closely tied up with the conservative and revisionist political agenda of the Sudeten German *Landmannschaft* based in Munich. A collection of age-old folktales under the rubric of a "Sudeten" German *Heimat* project raises questions of anachronism and nationalist political agendas. Perhaps Rotter's tales are less snapshots of ancient Bohemian German culture (as Hobbs and other Heimatlers would have us believe), and more a part of a twentieth century project to define a Sudeten German identity.

Hobbs introduces her translation of Rotter's folktales capably enough, summarizing some of the themes that appear in the stories. She finds in the stories "a certain

passive acceptance of things as they are,” praise for piety and hospitality, etc. (pp. xiv-xxi). But she misses some opportunities in her foreword. In addition to a summary of what the stories say, we could use some insight into how they functioned. Most scholars now agree that identities are created/imagined, are part of a process of construction and reconstruction. What role did these tales play in the construction of a Sudeten German identity? What kind of identity was it? Whose purposes did it serve?

Perhaps it is unfair to demand a scholarly apparatus from a translation of folk tales. But if this book is not for scholars, for whom is it exactly? As Hobbs admits in the foreword, it’s not for children; though occasionally enchanting, the stories are uneven and often disturbing in their brutality. Out of curiosity over the potential audience, I visited the publisher’s web site.[5] The German-Bohemian Heritage Society is, it turns out, a *Heimat* studies organization in its own right, based in, of all places, New Ulm, Minnesota (this is actually not so strange, given the substantial German-American population in Minnesota and the Dakotas). Its journal, *Heimatbrief*, chronicles quests for family history, memories of childhood in Bohemia, and visits to the now *Czechified Heimat*. A fascinating mix of nostalgia and contemporary community building, the society provides a kind of *Heimat* away from home.

I would recommend Rotter’s tales, therefore, to two groups of readers: Bohemian-German-Americans with an interest in the old “homeland” (as writers in the *Heimatbrief* put it) and historians/social scientists who study those who study *Heimats*. In an article in the December 1997 issue of *Heimatbrief*, Karen Hobbs writes, “When the Germans were expelled from Czechoslovakia

they published books that documented the areas where they had lived before the expulsion.”[6] Much beloved by researchers of family history, these *Heimatbuecher* would no doubt be valuable sources for scholars interested in post-war German and immigrant/expellee identities. More than a chronicle of folklore and local history, Rotter’s stories, and *Heimat* literature in general, are a valuable source on the history of memory.

NOTES

[1]. Alois Jirasek, *Old Czech Legends*, trans. Marie Holecek (London: Forest Books, 1992).

[2]. Celia Applegate, *A Nation of Provincials: The German Idea of Heimat* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

[3]. Applegate, 51.

[4]. Alon Confino, *The Nation as a Local Metaphor: Wuerttemberg, Imperial Germany, and National Memory, 1871-1918*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

[5]. <http://www.rootsweb.com/~{ }gbhs>

[6]. Karen Hobbs, “Heimatbuch”, in *Heimatbrief*, Vol. VIII No. 4 (December 1997). On the internet at <http://www.rootsweb.com/~{ }gbhs/december97.html>

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