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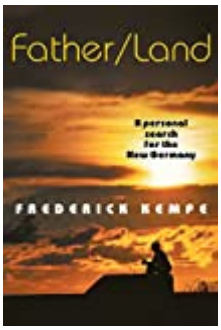

Fredrick Kempe. *Father/Land: A Personal Search for the New Germany.* Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999. ii + 339 pp. 95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-21525-3.

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Finding America in the New Germany

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The book under review is part family history and part journalistic account of the author's travels in post-wall Germany and his conversations with regular Germans, as well as representatives of various organizations. Born to German parents in Utah, Frederick Kempe is correspondent for the *Wall Street Journal Europe* and author of books on Latin America and Russia. His readable prose confirms Kempe's proven record as an experienced writer and analyst, while the absence of footnotes or a bibliography makes amply clear that the work is not intended as a scholarly study. The book combines two projects: on the one hand, it is yet another version of the often asked question how the heirs to Goethe and Beethoven could have perpetrated Auschwitz; on the other hand, it is a personal search, as indicated in the title, for the writer's German-American heritage. The disturbing dual presence of high cultural achievement and Nazi crime runs through Kempe's own family, whose ancestors include the composer Robert Schumann and a Nazi thug (whose vicious crimes went unpunished after 1945 due to "lack of evidence"). By making himself a subject of the investigation, Kempe forgoes the analytical distance of the outside observer. The feelings of contamination, guilt, and moral confusion he experiences upon learning about his Nazi forefather complicate Kempe's already conflicted attitude toward his own "Germaness" to the degree that he considers the question whether Nazism is a "genetic" trait, a debate most recently rekindled by Daniel Goldhagen's study.

Kempe's focus is on post-wall German society and the question as to how Germans view themselves fifty years after the defeat of the Nazis and after forty years of political and ideological division. While he credits Helmut Kohl with the creation of a unified Germany and attributes much more political astuteness to him than to his successor Gerhard Schroeder, the majority of his interlocutors come from the political left, most notably the writer Peter Schneider, a personal friend from whom Kempe takes his most important interpretative clues. Others include Ignaz Bubis, chairman of the central council of Jews in Germany; foreign minister Joschka Fischer; and Cem Oezdemir, Germany's first member of parliament of Turkish descent. The members of the au-

thor's basketball club in Berlin-Charlottenburg, a quirky and highly individualistic bunch of teachers and professors, illustrate that Germans manage to reconcile their desire to belong to a *Verein* with the deeply-felt conviction that Germany is bearable only if one leaves often and for prolonged periods. Kempe's search for ordinary Germans, vigorously aided by his German friends and acquaintances–all of whom know typical Germans although none of them identifies personally with that category–leads him to uncover a peculiar mix of enlightenment and social responsibility (such as the adoption of mixed-race children from third world countries) combined with a pettiness that is, perhaps, uniquely German when neighbors take fights over fences to court. Kempe paints an overall positive picture of contemporary Germans, even though he also relates xenophobic, antisemitic as well as anti-Turkish statements. Today's Germans come across as educated and well informed about their country's history, of which both younger and older informants acknowledge that Germans of all generation must be aware. His younger interlocutors, by and large, do not feel personal guilt but express a sense of collective responsibility. If there is a question in anyone's mind whether Nazism could reappear in Germany as a political force, Kempe's answer is a resounding no.

The most interesting, and, in a sense, the most overtly political aspect of Kempe's investigation of modern Germany is his discussion of German-American relationships and the question what Germans have learned (or should learn) from the Americans in order to overcome those qualities deemed too German, such as a penchant for rigidity or difficulties with democracy. In a formulation Kempe attributes to the writer Peter Schneider, Germany is not only Hitler's offspring but also America's stepchild. In the literal or moral absence of fathers after 1945, America became an *Ersatzvater* for the postwar generation, whose Americanization through popular music and film led to democratization and a generally "more relaxed" attitude. For Kempe, as well as for Peter Schneider, Americanization was a much needed and ultimately successful antidote to Nazism. In the end, Kempe does not explain the proximity of Weimar and Buchenwald, mainly because, I suspect, it is the wrong question to ask. Cultural achievements and barbarism in one society are not mutually exclusive, and there is no causal relationship between the presence (or absence) of one or the other. There is no mysterious dual nature lurking in every German or in German history. (Goethe's Faust, after all, whose often quoted lament serves as the epigram to chapter 1, did not bemoan a good and an evil soul in his breast but, rather, the painfully felt twin-pull of earthly desires and spiritual needs.) Kempe's own argument that the infusion of American culture into German everyday life–in the minds of many Germans even today the opposite of high culture in the tradition of Weimar classicism–democratized Germany also implies that high culture had relatively little impact on the majority of Germans. Kempe's insightful book is a sophisticated and sympathetic discussion of contemporary German identity from a consciously American perspective.

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