

## Subversion at the NEH?

In 1983, the Berlin Senat awarded my German partner and myself a "low-budget" grant to produce a short documentary film about the Great Jewish Cemetery of Berlin (that was founded in 1880 and has over 110,000 graves). Entitled *Ein Verlorenes Berlin*, this film suggests that the cemetery itself is the principal surviving relic of the "lost Berlin," for in its gravestones—in their designs and verbal-numerical details—are implicit images not only of Berlin Jewish life but Berlin in general in its greatest years (1860-1940). The visual track of the film consists of scenes from the cemetery; the soundtrack has the voices of ex-Berliners reminiscing about the cemetery and the world represented there. Twenty minutes long, this German film made its debut at the Berlin Film Festival last February and has since been shown at film festivals in Oberhausen and Bavaria (the *Grenzlandfilmtage*); it has been invited to the Israel Festival in June and will probably go elsewhere in Europe.



Since *Ein Verlorenes Berlin* ought to have an English version, not with subtitles but with a new soundtrack of ex-Berliners talking now in English, we thought of applying to the National Endowment for the Arts, whose Media Arts program had previously supported my work; but in truth, this film is not *Kunst*, as the Germans would say, but *Wissenschaft* or scholarship. It has a particular historical subject, a subject which is visually an especially resonant historical symbol. So, instead, we applied in 1983 to the National Endowment for the Humanities, which, however, refused to fund it.

Such refusal is, of course, the privilege of any discretionary agency, but what is curious is the explanation. To the folks at the NEH, the principal deficiency with our application was not the film's unconventional way of evoking history or its European subject but something else. The principal charge against us was that we lacked an advisory board of scholars (only "professors, with Ph.D's" would do, we were told) who should have submitted their "letters of commitment and resumé's," to quote the opening sentence of the NEH's explanatory letter to me.

It seems that the NEH has a very particular concept of how a documentary film should be made. Once a filmmaker has an idea, he should gather around him a group of scholars who advise him from the beginning, who observe him closely through every step of the production, and who approve the final result; for this work, the academic advisors should be paid a consultant's wage. The model behind these requirements appears to be that of scholarly popularization. The NEH insists there is no other way.

It never occurred to us to proceed in this way. The first reason is that I know no one else more familiar with the subject and its significance. This is less an assertion of arrogance than an expression of my sense that no one known to me, professor or layman, perceived the symbolic importance of the cemetery and then bothered to investigate the place. Indeed, some prominent scholars of German-Jewish history have never been there at all. However, the NEH appears more impressed by credentials than knowledge, perhaps because the former is so much easier to measure. (Of course, once we finished a rough print, we had the good sense to show it to scholars, who identified errors we gladly corrected.) The second reason why we did not form such an advisory board is that the Berlin Senat did not require it (and indeed might have thought such consultancy wages an objectionable extravagance).

Indeed, if you live in West Berlin for any length of time, you begin to learn that there is a Western way to do things and an Eastern way. The principal difference is that the Western way favors imaginative freedom and individual authority; the Eastern way favors mental restrictions and the close hierarchical supervision of cultural activity. To do a cultural project in the East, you must get permission from far more authorities than are necessary here; and to get this permission, it helps to surround your project with the names of party hacks and other pets of the party government, whose affiliations are politically acceptable, all of whom, of course, should be paid off simply for associating their names with yours. That is the Eastern way of doing cultural things; there is no other way there. Now, looking at the National Endowment for the Humanities, especially in contrast to the Berlin Senat (that funded the film, after all), to which side of the Iron Curtain, as we say, does our Humanities Endowment belong?

Meanwhile, as *Ein Verlorenes Berlin* is touring European festivals, which are often attended by the curators of other international festivals (New York, Filmex in Los Angeles, Sydney, etc.), we are often asked whether there will be an English version of our film. In reply, we explain that we would like not to translate the German film with either voice-over English speakers or subtitles—to cite two conventional methods—but to compose a new soundtrack wholly in English. Good idea, they reply. Here in America the directors of the Jewish Film Festival would like to show it with an English soundtrack; Educational Television, as well as the Margaret Mead Film Festival at the Museum of Natural History, have decided that they cannot make a decision for acceptance on the German version alone.

Have you applied to redo it in English? everyone asks. Yes, we reply. Don't you have government organizations in America that support such things? Of course we do. Have you applied to them? Yes, but we were not successful. Why not? The NEH complained that we did not have a board of academic advisors under whose close supervision we would work, who would be paid off for their involvement with us. To an American, this answer indicates only that academics have taken over the Humanities Endowment, writing self-employment, if not featherbedding, into its granting procedures. To a European, this NEH policy indicates something more, and more ominous—that this Federal cultural agency epitomizes the communist way of doing such things and, beyond that, indicates how closely America resembles the Soviet Union!

In short, the NEH has politicized our initially nonpolitical film, wholly on its own initiative. As *Ein Verlorenes Berlin* tours Europe, this story of its funding (or lack of it) will be

making a decisive contribution to the current debate for the mind of Western Europe. On one side is the American position, which advises Western Europe to side with us, because we are different from the Russians and can protect you from communism only if you let us put our armaments on your lands. On the other side is the essentially anti-American position that says Western Europe should remain neutral and forbid American armaments, because the U.S. and U.S.S.R. fundamentally resemble each other. It appears that the National Endowment for the Humanities, notwithstanding its militant conservative rhetoric, provides ammunition for the latter position. We would agree that, in this context, the NEH was *objectively Com-Symp.*

At the Endowments last fall was circulated an "Administrative Directive" outlining a "Personnel Security Program" that requires the Endowments to employ "only those persons whose employment is found to be clearly consistent with national security interests" which it defines as "the protection and preservation of the military, economic, and productive strength of the United States, including the security of the government in domestic and foreign affairs, against espionage, sabotage, and subversion and any other illegal acts designated to weaken or destroy the United States." There is no question about it—by these criteria, in order to protect America and the American way, it is time to flush out the NEH.

—Richard Kostelanetz

Mr. Kostelanetz is at present completing a book on literary granting in America. He worked in Berlin initially as a guest of the DAAD Künstlerprogramm.

### Impenitence

The last words of Josephine Herbst, spoken on January 25, 1969, were: "Tell my friends I do not repent. That I love life unto eternity—love and life." Readers of the new biography of Herbst by Elinor Langer (*Josephine Herbst: The Story She Could Never Tell*; Atlantic/Little, Brown; Boston) will have a struggle trying to fit a meaning to the final utterance of this agitprop novelist, radical feminist, and inveterate fellow traveler.

"I love life"? Perhaps this refers to the deep love for life she evinced during the Stalinist purge trials: "If there is again a widespread growing class differentiation and oppression, it is far worse for me to look at than the killing of any dozen or even fifty men, old bolsheviks or what-not." To "life" that did not resemble the

### Notables

stilted ideological charade she offered in her "proletarian" fiction, Herbst showed a peculiar love. Alger Hiss, however, does seem to have benefited from Ms. Herbst's selective love of life. After all, Herbst (a one-time CPUSA member who left but never denounced the Party) protected Hiss by lying to the FBI about what she knew of the "Karl" intrigues. (Langer, a radical leftist herself, was disturbed to discover that her "sacrosanct version of the Hiss case" was demolished by the implications of Herbst's correspondence. Predictably, in a recent letter to the *New York Times*, Hiss reassures his supporters that Langer hasn't really uncovered any-

thing incriminating.)

"Love and life"? "Love" might refer to Herbst's freewheeling sex life, her failed marriage, or her lesbianism—or perhaps just to sexual gratification in general. "Life" conjunctively linked to "love" is more difficult to construe. Possibly this is an ironic reference to Herbst's only baby, whom she loved to death before it could be born—a woman clearly ahead of her time. She also encouraged her sister to follow her lead and abort her child. (That abortion, unlike her own, dealt to the mother what it dealt to the child.)

"Tell my friends"? Like the hare in the Fable, Herbst called many people "friend" for a time, but none—including Herbst's lesbian lover—lasted. Most of her relationships ended in malice and mutual recrimination. "I do not repent"? This phrase, at least, needs no gloss. □

# Scandalizing Uncle Ez

E. Fuller Torrey: *The Roots of Treason: Ezra Pound and the Secret of St. Elizabeths*; McGraw-Hill; New York.

by Brian Murray

Without doubt, Ezra Pound was a remarkable poet. His best verse is beautifully cadenced, delicately chiseled. Herbert Read described him as "an alchemist who transmuted the debased counters of our language into pure poetic metal." Deferentially, T. S. Eliot called him *il miglior fabbro*, the better craftsman.

Pound was a brilliant critic, too. In scores of widely read reviews and essays published roughly between 1912 and 1922, he attacked verbosity in poetry and prose with the bluntness and zeal of a man trying, in Eliot's words, "to convey to a very deaf person that the house is on fire." With equal passion and influence, he called for public acceptance of the works of such diverse writers as Eliot, James Joyce, and Robert Frost: writers who, in Pound's famous phrase, "made it new" by steering clear of hackneyed conventions and sloppy thought. Pound, wrote Eliot, "cared deeply that his contemporaries and juniors should write well; he . . . cared less for personal achievement than for the life of letters and art."

And yet, throughout a career that spanned more than 50 years, Pound collected more detractors than admirers, more enemies than friends. For while he could be patient and gracious, he could also be supercilious and belligerent. Certainly by late 1945 the name Ezra Pound was virtually synonymous with the rhetoric of vituperation. By then, people who knew nothing about poetry knew that for many months in the early 40's Pound had delivered a regular series of radio speeches over Mussolini's

Rome Radio, and that he hadn't wasted any air time chatting about the charms of the Tuscany hills and the Amalfi coast. Employing a weird, cloying L'il Abner dialect, he had bellowed against the Allied effort as a sinister cabal of mostly Jewish financiers operating in cahoots with both Winston Churchill and Franklin Delano Roosevelt. In July 1943 Pound was indicted by a District of Columbia Grand Jury that had ploughed through the transcripts of his harangues and found considerable evidence of "aid and comfort to the enemy." In April 1945 Pound was arrested in a Tyrolean



village by a pair of tommy-gun toting partisans and, in due course, flown to Washington to stand trial for treason. That trial never took place. Declared physically fit but "of unsound mind" by a group of court-appointed psychiatrists, Pound was shipped across town to the St. Elizabeths mental hospital where he remained, unconvicted, until his release in 1958.

Any person of goodwill who examines the now readily available texts of Pound's broadcasts can only describe them as morally disgusting. They are packed with stomach-turning anti-Semitic slurs. But one must also conclude that

their propaganda value was virtually nil. Replete with arcane allusions and bizarre non sequiturs, they make the letters sent to the editor of the *New York Post* look as polished and as cogent as the missives Lord Chesterfield addressed to his wayward son. They could not have persuaded the average American serviceman of anything except that this yammering old coot who sometimes called himself "ole Ezry" deserved a one-way ticket to the funny farm.

Of course there was nothing funny about public mental asylums in the 1940's. For more than a year following his committal to St. Elizabeths, Pound was confined to a windowless cell in Howard Hall, a ward for the criminally insane. Here, where the smell of excrement mingled with sweat was nauseatingly rich, Pound often had to endure the prolonged howls of his straitjacketed floormates. He was allowed to receive visitors, but for no more than 15 minutes a day. When he was eventually moved upstairs to the more hospitable Chestnut Ward, Pound was granted two hours of daily social time, and in warm weather, the limited use of the hospital's elm-shaded grounds. But even in the Chestnut Ward he lived behind a thick steel door and among blaring radios and pathetic men in ratty bathrobes who wandered aimlessly about muttering to themselves, drooling.

Many of the academics and journalists who visited Pound at St. Elizabeths have recorded their impressions of his behavior while in confinement. Most note that he abhorred self pity, and was generally talkative and in surprisingly good spirits. But some, like the British writer John Wain, have described his hard-to-disguise fatigue, his tendency to drift irretrievably off. On the day Wain saw him, Pound "talked on and on in connected sentences and with perfect logic and persuasiveness; but if any one interrupted him with a question it simply threw the needle out of the

Dr. Murray is with the English department at Youngstown State University.