



WRITERS IN CONVERSATION



Interview with Andreas Albrecht, Munich, Germany, April 14, 2015

Heide Fruth-Sachs

Andreas Albrecht was born in 1951 in Cottbus, and he grew up in the Deutsche Demokratische Republik (DDR), East Germany. He has written radio dramas, novels, short stories and poetry. In 1997 he was the recipient of the Munich Literature Prize, the Literaturstipendium.

His works include:

Heute Morgen (radio drama)

Christie Malrys doppelte Buchführung (radio drama)

Unter Umständen die Liebe, (novel), Aufbau Verlag, Berlin und Weimar, 1981

Nachtwandeln und ähnliche Prosastücke, (stories), Aufbau Verlag, Berlin und Weimar, 1984

Ein Landaufenthalt, (novel), Aufbau Verlag, Berlin und Weimar, 1988

Entfernung zu einem anderen Ort, (poetry), Aufbau Verlag, Berlin und Weimar, 1982

Zettel im Schnabel, (poetry), Lyrikedition, München, 2003

Note: This interview was conducted in German and translated into English by the interviewer. Remarks in square brackets [...] are explanations by the interviewer.

H.F. Andreas, today, 14 April 2015, we are sitting in your very pleasant flat in Trappentreustraße, in Munich, and I am delighted that you have agreed to give me an interview.

A.A. I am delighted too. Let's go ahead.

H.F: Andreas, you have published radio dramas, poetry, short stories and novels in your homeland East Germany, the former DDR which since 1990 no longer exists as a State. What were the consequences for you as a writer when the Wall came down in 1989?

A.A. On the one hand it was connected with the loss of all relationships to publishing houses, the media, journals – they were no longer interested in someone who was already 40; on the other hand it was psychically a liberation for me, leading to a prolific phase of writing which lasted about five years, without a single publication.

H.F. How did you feel about the lack of freedom in the former DDR – freedom of speech, freedom to travel, freedom to show an individual way of thinking?

A.A. The so-called lack of freedom to travel was something that the West used to insinuate in a way. We could travel as far as Mongolia, anywhere in Russia, to Hungary, to Cuba. That was not the main problem. It was the existence of a feeling of depression; and when in November 1989 I heard in the evening news that the border was open, tears came into my eyes and I felt as if a burden had fallen from me of which I had been unconscious; like a fish in the depth of the sea that is brought up all of a sudden and is bursting. Something totally irrational.

H.F. This experience of a new freedom following the fall of the 'Wall', how do you see it today?

A.A. It was the end of a pressure under which one had lived quite naturally. The Wall was only the outward sign of it. Its fall was not really interesting, because in that moment we thought – a feeling that lasted about a year – 'Now we are going to create a wonderful DDR'. This had been the most illusory and most beautiful time in my life. At the publishing house *Aufbauverlag* they had exactly the same idea; while at the door there stood the big publishing houses *Luchterhand* and *Fischer* of West-Germany that only wanted to know how much *Aufbauverlag* would cost. We writers did not realise this, and then, all of a sudden it was over.

H.F. Do you mean that the *Aufbauverlag*, where most of your books were published, went out of business?

A.A. *Aufbauverlag* had lost its function, because the target group for whom we had produced until 1989/90 was the people of the DDR, people who lived in this State. When the change came, there were different problems, and they tried to come to terms with a new system, Capitalism; there was no longer a need for our literature. Finished.

H.F. Your novel *Aufenthalt in einer Gegend (Staying in a Landscape)* is about a holiday-journey (rather strenuous for my taste) of a young couple cycling through the Balkans. Was it inspired by your own experience?

A.A. It is indeed a fictionalised account of our journey, which was not at all strenuous. We even landed once in Turkey without knowing it, and when I realised it we immediately turned back into Bulgaria. The maps were not reliable then. We pushed our bicycles over a mountain range and came up behind a Bulgarian guard who was just as shocked as we were. – Travelling then for us was by bicycle or on foot. I travelled in the Soviet Union, in the Caucasus. That was all possible. I could have travelled to my

grandmother who lived in West Germany. The medical doctors had the right papers, and they would have signed them even if one's grandmother had been dead for quite some time. However, I did not want to go. I did not have the money. For 15 DDR-Mark I couldn't even go to the toilet in Kassel, and by the way I was too proud.

H.F. Did you ever have clashes with the political system of the DDR because of your critical attitude?

A.A. I had problems with officials all the time. I had the wrong father for example. In the first class at school the teacher distributed forms to join the 'Junge Pioniere' [the official youth organisation of the DDR], and I already knew that my father was against it. Also the teacher knew it. She passed me over. I thought at least she could have asked me. But she only wanted to avoid conflicts. This went on and on until the DDR ended.

H.F. What do you mean by 'the wrong father'?

A.A. My father had lived under the Nazis. He belonged to the working class. The Nazis promoted working-class children, just as the DDR did. If the war had not been lost he would have been an engineer. He went into the war with the documents to study engineering. Later I was grateful to use them myself. From the experience that he had just got himself into a situation he hated without having been able to resist it, he bore the consequences: never again would we do something that was automatic. This is very difficult for a child in the first class of school to follow. Later it was a fate I chose myself. I collided with the State, with its ideology, and I cherished the illusion – just as my parents did – that if I were to stick with it the State was going to get better, more just, more honest. I soon realised that you got a lot of attention through this attitude; I was very self-assured. Three times I was suspended from school: however, in the end I was saved by an old music-teacher. What a pity that the State broke down after all; we would have liked so much to get it wonderfully all right after 1989. But then there was Helmut Kohl and wanted his 'blühende Landschaften'. [Helmut Kohl was then Chancellor of the German Republic and after the breakdown of the DDR he talked about changing East Germany into a kind of 'Garden of Eden']

H.F. Once you told me that you became a poet while polishing rifles during your military service. How was this possible?

A.A. I don't want to say that my situation was a parallel to that of Günter Grass who died not so long ago ... However, if you took my biography into consideration you could not expect to find that I was predestined for a military career. I was sent to an administrative post. So, I was standing in Cottbus, my hometown, in front of the Barracks with 'Volkspolizei' [national police] written above the entrance, expecting that a truck would come to transport me to my workplace as a secretary, but comrades explained to me: 'No, you are already here.' Overnight I was a member of the transport-police. This was an undercover branch of the 'Staatssicherheit' [State-Security]. Don't ask me how it came about. This branch had to take care of the weapons of all the political party-members in the building. Each of them had a personal weapon. Because these weapons were never used, we had to keep them in order and polish them every week for a full hour. If I had leant on the wall or drunk a beer, it would have had terrible consequences. I always had a school copy-book in my breast pocket, and I used to pull this out and, in boredom and despair, begin to write. There was no objection to that. It was not listed as

forbidden behaviour and so my superiors tolerated it. Later my comrades came and I read them my first poems. My first story came into existence at a table for cleaning weapons in the yard of the Barracks. I am sure sometimes Art is born out of boredom.

H.F. And your poems and stories written under these circumstances were published?

A.A. Yes, these miniatures were published. I typed them from the copy-book on an old typewriter. Then I sent them to the poet Günter Kunert [one of the most famous German poets of today] – I had already left the military service – and on a postcard I wrote him a note asking would he please be so kind as to mark them either as ‘nonsense’ or as ‘serious’. However, instead of sending the postcard back, he recommended me to an editor at the Aufbau-Verlag. I was disappointed. I wanted an honest answer and didn't want a publisher. Then the Aufbau-Verlag contacted me – I was then 21 or 22 – I had no idea that this was an honour. I told myself, Kunert was an idiot. Only later did I correspond with him.–First I was invited for weekend-seminars and meetings together with other young authors, until the first novel came, and then they talked to me earnestly. The publishing house took us under its wing. It was really strange. Günter Kunert brought it about – and I was angry.

H.F. I feel somewhat astonished. Günter Kunert then was well known in West Germany, even in Europe.

A.A. Certainly. I was naive. I didn't know anything about the procedures. – My writing just surfaced by itself.

H.F. You have already told me that the publishing business in the DDR had different structures from those in the West.

A.A. One must say that it was an employee-relationship. We had the illusion of being free authors, but when you compare it to western standards we were employees of the publishers. Not necessarily in a negative sense – how shall I express it? – the publisher was our employer, our boss. They came and asked, ‘Mr Albrecht, do you have something for us again? How is it with money, do you have enough? How is the family?’– If I look back now, it was perhaps even ridiculous.

H.F. If you were accepted by a publisher you were taken care of.

A.A. Yes. They even controlled whether one drank too much. The editor came to look after you. It was a kind of social care. For us it was normal. We had the feeling that it was absolutely normal. You tried to change your editor only if there was perhaps a deep crisis, if, for example, the two of you really did not agree at all. Each editor had about 15 authors and from each author there came a book every two or three years. The editor also worked with some of us. From me he got only finished manuscripts. There was the problem that nothing should be written that was politically incorrect. Therefore I preferred to read my manuscripts to a friend or to a different editor. They told me whether to make a compromise or to remove the passage. That was how it functioned. My last book was during the new era, 1990, when my editor lost her job because she was the oldest of the team. She gave me back my manuscript and said that it was politically incorrect. She was an honest person. I am still grateful to her. It was good teamwork.

H.F. Well, in every political system there are followers and others who dare to think for themselves, isn't it so?

A.A. The problem was the economy. Let us say the Pauper-Verlag had to yield 32 million East-Mark every year. Nobody was interested in how it was done. For example, they printed an artbook about van Gogh, a piracy, and it was sold for 50 Mark per piece. So they could feed their unprofitable poets. The Party, the State, was only interested in the total; the distribution happened through the amount of paper. Unimaginable in a way. There was a contingent of paper, for example 34,000,000 sheets of paper, everything else was the publisher's responsibility.

Books always sold, everything. No problems with that. Competition between the media was non-existent. Like a Paradise for writers. Our chief-editor, Günter Kaspar, once said: 'You write what you want and we publish everything that is possible'. That was the rule. Nobody censored, nobody interfered. And as a last comment: they did not have an IM at the Aufbau-Verlag [IM = 'Informeller Mitarbeiter', a kind of political spy; normally there was such a person in every office, in every institution.] Once the 'Stasi' [Staatssicherheit = State-Security] had to intrude at night looking for manuscripts. (There is written proof of this incident.) The night-doorman had no idea. When he noticed them and asked what they were doing in the middle of the night, they asked him, whether he had not been informed by the IM? Then they went away without searching for the manuscripts.

H.F. After all, not everything was fully transparent it seems.

A.A. Well, intrigues existed. Behind my back there was talk, for example, that I wrote pornography – which was somewhat tabu in the DDR.

H.F. Really? I did not discover any pornography in your work.

A.A. There is none, I only wrote about sex. In fact, I also was accused of 'Wehrkraftzersetzung' [undermining the fighting spirit and the will to serve; an expression which was a terrible crime under the Nazi Government and led to the death penalty; at this time the expression was no longer used in West Germany except in a historical context]. In 1991/92 there was an Exhibition 'State-Security and Literature' at the House of Literature in Berlin and there were facsimile documents that proved the story I've told you above.

H.F. In your writing I've met an attitude which I would describe as defensive and only slightly opposing. Irony on the other hand is something very prominent in your work. Is that due to being careful under an authoritarian regime or is it because you are a reflective person? Your heroes often show an analytical distance from the world and fellow human beings.

A.A. This is a rather abstract judgement. As a writer you know your limits and more or less you know what is possible and what is not, but sometimes you wonder. Here, for example, is quite a simple poem of mine:

Zwar hat der Herr die Sünder lieb,
doch derer nur die Guten.
Die Bösen sengt und tränkt er tot in Höll-und Sündenfluten.

Der Hur, dem Räuber ist er gut,
selbst Mördern, Taschendieben.
Doch wer ihm widersprechen tut,
den kann er gar nicht lieben,
den kann er gar nicht lieben.

*[Yet God, the Lord, he loves the sinners,
but only the good ones.
The bad ones he sings and drowns in floods of hell and sin.
He loves the harlot, the robber,
even the murderer and the pickpocket.
However, who is contradicting him
he cannot love at all,
he cannot love at all.]*

That this was printed I find very strange today. There was a time when I only made parodies of Church songs and of Bible-Texts. In the novel *Ein Landaufenthalt* there is a Lutheran pastor who was disciplined by being transferred to this village because of marital infidelity. My editor asked me to substitute him with a Party-chairman. No kidding.

H.F. Something you didn't do.

A.A. Really? I seem to have forgotten it. However, now I remember: they did not want to provoke the Church; they had a kind of peace-treaty. In 1978 there was a meeting between the representatives of the Church and Honegger [then Head of State in the DDR].

H.F. However, the pastor is in the book. Gral, the hero of the story, meets the pastor bicycling along the road; he is not in clerical attire, but Gral recognizes him.

A.A. There was no direct censoring. There were, let us say, certain obligations for a publisher to submit to a censor: if there were references to the military, to the police, to the economy. Everything else was the publisher's responsibility. If there were a case to do so, the editors wanting to be on the safe side, would give the manuscripts to a censor to read – which they did with my military story. Shortly before this the censor had died and a new one had not yet been appointed, so the publisher decided to take advantage of the situation and let the publication go ahead. The army-publisher wanted to have it at once – they were keen on it – almost nobody wrote about the Army. So I was paid and only afterwards they consulted the censor. He wanted a trial to accuse me officially of 'Wehrkraftzersetzung'. However, it did not happen after all. They sold the book in a bookshop in Moscow, and also in Marburg (West Germany) at the Franz Mehring bookshop, and only through a mistake in the settling of the accounts (I certainly did not get Rubel or West-Mark) was it discovered. They did this with other authors too. It was not forbidden. They only sold a small amount of books. Writers such as Strittmatter and Christa Wolf would not have become famous in the West without this procedure.*

My book was even reprinted, 10,000 copies as far as I know; I was paid in full, but then it did not appear. It was an insane society. They suffered from persecution mania. Yet there was a reason for it. They came into being out of class warfare, a clash of systems. That is no excuse, but knowing it helps to

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understand it. Someone like Günter Kunert had had enough of it when he was 40 and went into the West. I, however, was 25 and I found it interesting, adventurous – and I felt immensely important.

H.F. Only too understandable.

A.A. If there was any political problem with my writing, the secretary caught me in the corridor, took me away, gave me coffee: the first thing was to get relaxed. There was quite an amount of sympathy with authors. It was well known that sometimes problems arose. They tried to develop measures to resolve things. 'Firstly, never show the manuscript to anybody. Only when the book is on the shop-counter, problems may come.'

I could have provoked the system and shown the manuscript to someone in the West. Once I even gave something to a person from the West. The poor fellow was caught at the Customs, and he had endless trouble. – Usually, however, I made compromises. Principally I had nothing against the State.

H.F. It was your homeland.

A.A. Yes, my homeland. And we thought we could make something out of this country. I want to emphasise this statement. It was my motive for literature. I know what I know; I saw what I saw. This is not a literary claim, however, it is an attitude and an important one for me as an author.

H.F. In your novel *Ein Landaufenthalt*, the hero tries to live as self-contained as possible. Karl Gral leaves his wife, his child, his city and his secure well-paid job as a chemical engineer to live in the country and work as a farm labourer in an LPG [organized farm syndicate]. Is there, maybe, a romantic touch here in the tradition of Eichendorff's *Taugenichts*?

A.A. Well, there was a fellow student who had long hair and rode by bicycle wherever he went. Probably he was the model for the character in the novel. – I think as a rule you write without realizing why you are doing it. If you know why you are writing you stop doing it. It was an experiment concerning independence: not going off into the West, but seeing how much freedom you can permit yourself inside the 'System'. For Gral it was functioning, because we had in the DDR a huge shortage of labourers. There was a lack of workers everywhere. We didn't have 2,000,000 Turkish guest labourers – as you had in the West – and anyone who knocked at the door of the chairman of an LPG and wanted to work in the fields and stables immediately got a room without paying for it. The story came into being as an association of playful ideas. I imagined standing in front of the door of the LPG where I learned that the old chairman from the days of my apprenticeship is still there. He does not recognize me. I am sure they are in need of workers and will take anybody. You are paid according to the schedule. No negotiations. – The draft of the novel developed in two weeks. Yes, and then I worked on the book for two years.

H.F. How is it that you know so much about farmwork and cattle-breeding?

A.A. Because I learned it. That was possible in the DDR. After 12 years you finished high-school. You began in class nine and, parallel with your school-studies, you took up an apprenticeship for a trade. It was a wonderful idea. Unfortunately they could not keep it up because there was not enough money. You had the choice, for example, between locksmith or nursing, and among other possibilities also

farming. I chose farming, and I had a great time, a wonderful time. I am an accredited farmer with a certificate. I can milk cows, I know how to raise pigs, I can drive and handle farm-machines, I can mow grass with a scythe, I can pile dry cow-dung in perfect layers.

This is the background for my novel *Ein Landaufenthalt (A Time in the Countryside)*. It mirrors my LPG. I suggested that the editor give it to an expert to read to check whether everything was technically all right. It was.

H.F. . And the protagonists in the novel?

A.A. They all existed in reality – more or less – only slightly changed. The landscape, the village are real and also the plot. I am a good observer.

H.F. Later you studied physics. Once you said ‘like Angela Merkel’. Did you know her then?

A.A. No. I did not know her. Through my military service I lost two years in comparison to the women of my generation, so I began my studies later. It was very unusual in Angela Merkel's case that as the daughter of a pastor she graduated and even got a place as a professor at the Akademie in Berlin. That I would never have accomplished, in spite of the fact that I was not the son of a pastor. [Usually you only made a career in the DDR as a descendent of working-class parents.] Women were much more promoted than men. That was the rule. There was a quota for women and a quota for studying physics. She was allowed to study because she was a woman. I was allowed to study because my parents were from the working class. In this case it didn't matter that my personal file contained reports of repeated politically doubtful behaviour. Ulbricht [then Head of State] said: we need 250 physics students and so it was my turn too. If – also as a woman – you desired to study literature you could not. No way. My wife, for example, was also the daughter of a pastor and was allowed to study engineering. Her brothers were not even allowed to graduate. As you see, there were many different aspects. You in the West always see things in black or white: dictatorship, censorship and so on ...

H.F. But it existed, however, not always in one-dimensional form, more in shades of different colours.

A.A. Yes, not in one-dimensional forms.

H.F. Once you said to my husband and me that we often fall into an attitude of ‘teaching’, or of knowing everything better, when we discuss the former DDR; that can be annoying to you and others who lived there. Naturally we don't recognize this tendency. Why is that so? Is it arrogance from our side or are you over-sensitive? Is it the ‘Wall’ in our heads that is still existent?

A.A. Ah, you put strange questions. – It is difficult to answer. Last weekend I was in the East from Friday to Monday. What is the difference? I think you in the West always have the feeling that you are on the safe side, generally on the side of the good: ‘we are best informed, we are the richest in the world’ – and in reality it is not so.

H.F. We have succeeded in confronting the dark side of our history, the Nazi Terror.

A.A. Yes. You did, we didn't. – All right. But there was and is not enough curiosity from your side for the ex-DDR. We have often discussed that long into the night. It is the fixation in the direction of ‘a better

life', the 'we made it' attitude, dreams fulfilled. If you have the impression that you are already there, you stop striving in different directions. Why should you look closer into countries like Macedonia? There is no interest. The glimpse into the abyss is missing. Perhaps this is an explanation ...

We nearly always saw the West-television programs in the DDR. Normal people would not have turned on the East-television programs. Or, if you wanted a 'hot' book, the books from the West were the ones you were after, for example the books at the Leipziger Buchmesse [the Book Fair in Leipzig]. These were sold after the Fair – or stolen. It was the direction of longing. Why do Africans pay \$6000 to reach Germany? They too have dreams of a better and freer life.

H.F. True. However, the Germans in the DDR were Germans. East and West were – even when separated for forty years – united by the common German language, by history and culture, by the roots.

A.A. And if, for example, at the Olympic Games a German athlete won, they announced in the West: Germany won; even if the athlete was from the DDR. In that case we did not have an identity. We did not exist. The weather forecast used the expression 'Mitteldeutschland' [Middle-Germany]. Long before the 'Reunion', before 1989, a 'Ministerium für Innerdeutsche Angelegenheiten' [ministry for inner-German affairs] existed and also postal numbers in case of a reunion. When Uncle Paul came from the West to see his family members in the East, he at once talked about how awful the highway was from Magdeburg on and I was furious and thought: 'Go! Go back to your silly Black Forest idyll with your silly Mercedes.' My brother called his ugly cat 'Paul' because he too felt offended. – If you had an Uncle Paul sitting at the coffee-table you changed into an ardent fighter for the DDR. Then it was homeland and it did not matter what was wrong with it in many other aspects.

* *All the facts in this section are correct. However, it needs more explanation.*

- 1) *The reputation of writers (artists in general) in the DDR was high. Press, radio, television had no critical functions. They spread only the official standpoint of the socialist state. Writers (artists) were much freer in expressing their opinion and many people in the DDR looked to them for orientation. I even had the experience that people from the working class imagined that I had personal contact to the rulers of the state and could tell them what was wrong in the system.*
- 2) *Therefore the state officials were somewhat afraid of artists, particularly writers. The publishers and the editors gave writers as much freedom as possible, but politicians wanted to keep them at bay and at the same time 'happy'. Books which were considered as 'dangerous' were often published in spite of that, and the authors were paid, but the amount of books actually sold in the DDR was small (about 3000). The rest of the 10,000, 20,000 or 30,000 books were sold in countries of the Soviet-Union, in Moscow – where many understand German – and in NSW-countries (Non-Socialist-Economic-Districts), also in West-Germany.*
- 3) *The intention was to keep the population in the DDR as far as possible away from reading these books (or seeing certain films), but at the same time to gain the DDR a solid reputation for bringing forth excellent writers (artists).*

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