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Privatization of a Government-Owned Bookstore (c. 1993)

The occupational uncertainties faced by former GDR citizens in the wake of unification come to the fore in this conversation between author Landolf Scherzer and Annegret S., a bookseller in Thuringia. After the *Wende*, she explains, real life was just as exciting as a book. Below, she recounts how she managed to open a bookstore despite considerable adversity. Although she feels that she is “doing well compared to others,” she still views herself as a loser of unification.

The Twelfth Day

While the *Landrat* [district chief executive] in Schmalkalden engages in negotiations about the weal and woe of the *Kreis* [county] of Bad Salzungen, about its division or continued existence, I drive to see his friend René – this time, however, I have announced my visit in advance. And because I am already in Stadtlengsfeld an hour before my meeting with him, I go to a café that I know. The only person sitting there is a woman of about forty with tousled black hair and still-youthful, radiant brown eyes. She is drinking hot chocolate. I join her and she seems pleased, for she tells me – without my having to strain to initiate a conversation – that she is a spa patient at the old Wasserburg¹ here in town. Lately, she says, they have also begun to treat women with psychiatric problems there. No, of course she doesn’t have a problem in the head, but, like other women, she has had a hard time dealing with the *Wende*.² Compared to many others, though, she feels she is still doing well. Her roommate, for example, is a former LPG³ chairperson – after the *Wende*, the LPG went away, as did her husband, her small house, and her property! She, in comparison, has even made gains since the *Wende*. [. . .]

She introduces herself and orders me a glass of red wine. “Annegret S., bookseller in a small town in Thuringia.” In 1970, she had started her apprenticeship as a bookseller in the *Volksbuchhandlung* [government-owned “People’s Bookstore”], which now in a sense “belongs” to her. “Already as a child,” she says, “I saw the world as consisting really only of books. When I went to the library, I used to secretly bring my mother’s and father’s library cards along as well. I took out fairy tales for myself, romances for my mother, and crime mysteries or books about Indians for my father. And I read them all.”

¹ Reference to a castle in Stadtlengsfeld that houses a hospital – eds.

² Reference to the events leading to the collapse of Communism and the subsequent unification – eds.

³ Acronym for *Landwirtschaftliche Produktionsgenossenschaft*, a term for large, collectivized farms in the former GDR – eds.

A bookseller for nearly thirty years, she was of course familiar with the most thrilling tales from world literature. But after the *Wende*, she explains, she didn't have to read any more because she experienced the most exciting stories live.

For example, when the People's Bookstore was offered to the people for privatization: "But for all the power of my imagination, at the time, I couldn't picture books not being sold in our store, but instead maybe mattresses or cooking pots or hamburgers, and the six of us booksellers finding no new jobs. And so I reported to the Building Office and said: 'I'll take out a loan and lease the bookshop!' At the time, however, a *Wessi*⁴ had already filed a claim, and I could only get a loan if he gave me a long-term lease. I mustered what little courage I had and drove my *Trab*⁵ to Cologne to see him. And a week later he really did send me a ten-year lease, and I got the loan and leased our bookshop! But after I had already spent the initial money for the renovation, he wrote me another letter. And he told me that he had other plans, that he was withdrawing his agreement. After that I had to show the house to the buyers that he sent. A Turk wanted to turn it into a döner kebab restaurant. [. . .]

At the time, at the height of my troubles, I really was ready for the psychiatric ward; the Building Office, which actually still owned the house despite the claim from the West, granted me an irrevocable twelve-year lease. Regardless of who buys the house."

After the lease and loan-thriller, she assumed that the worst was over. But then came the night of April 30/May 1. "I went to bed at night as a part-time bookseller, that's to say, I didn't get to bed at all that night – and in the morning, on International Workers' Day,⁶ I got up as a businesswoman. Suddenly, I had become the boss of the five colleagues with whom I had worked for years, with whom I had gone shopping during work hours, visited the doctor, and made coffee. [. . .] But now it suddenly cost me money when, just as before, one of them made coffee during work hours or took too long a break. A few weeks ago, I had to tell this to one of them in no uncertain terms. I sat with her back in the office, was scolding her, until she suddenly started to cry. She cried so pitifully that I, stupid fool, suddenly had to cry, too. I, the entrepreneur!"

Source: Landolf Scherzer, *Der Zweite [The Second]* © Aufbau Verlag GmbH & Co. KG, Berlin 1997, pp.145-47.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap

⁴ The term *Wessi* was used to refer to West Germans, *Ossi* to East Germans – eds.

⁵ Affectionate term for the automobile *Trabant*, which was produced in East Germany – eds.

⁶ In the original, it refers to the Action Day of Workers. In many countries, May 1 is celebrated as Labor Day. In Communist – and some non-Communist – countries, May 1 is an official holiday – eds.