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She found her voice in German in America.

Very few Swiss women viewed the USA through more critical eyes than Gertrud Wilker in 1962/63.

CHARLES LINSMAYER

“The best, the largest of everything is for sale, wrapped up in a hypnotic belief in the advertising superlative. You drown in offers, shampoo, petrol, razor blades, artificial fertiliser. Grinning, busty and leggy billboard girls turn the streets into a veritable gauntlet run between artificially construed, insatiable cravings.” This was the USA in 1962. A state “whose land is scored only with cities and streets, but which is by no means defeated”. A state “that remains the mortal enemy of its population, that you cannot fight fiercely, barbarically and ruthlessly enough, whose wild beauty may be afforded neither love nor mercy; only a fierce determination to exploit it”.

Gertrud Wilker also expresses her admiration for America in her book “Collages USA”, published in 1968. However, of all the impressions that the Bernese secondary school teacher born in 1924 gained when she lived in the USA with her two children and her husband from 1962 to 1963, the critical-disparaging perspective took precedence and she eventually realised that she felt out of place in America and wanted to “step into a new future” in her “old world” rather than there.

German in a foreign environment

However, she was convinced that her time in America helped her to make great strides as an author: “I made a conscious effort to learn German here once more, as a mirror image of my lifestyle, as a refuge for my identity. It gave me my name, a linguistically tangible I; it contained the essence of me in this foreign world.”

Ultimately, her American experience spurred Gertrud Wilker to write eleven books between 1970 and 1985, and become one of the most eminent Swiss female authors of her generation.

“Radiation-proof words”

Her masterful use of German is evident in the 1970 volume “Einen Vater aus Wörtern machen”, which contained many of her best texts. The novel “Altläger bei kleinem Feuer”, published in 1971, then takes a critical look at a Swiss village in a time of economic prosperity. This is quite different to the legendary novel “Jota”, published in 1973, whose title character, a headstrong young woman, appears and

then disappears once more in a city like Bern, coming across to some as a saviour and to others as an annoyance. In the story “Flaschenpost”, published in 1977, a woman survives an atomic war with 300 others in a bunker and records in her notes, which are central for her author, that: “Although I have relinquished any personal hopes, I still hold out hope for my words, that they are radiation-proof and will survive the destruction that lies outside the bunker doors.”

In the face of death

In 1977, Gertrud Wilker was diagnosed with cancer, which she succumbed to after a long battle at the age of sixty on 25 October 1984. However, she wrested two books from the disease, and in doing so wrote herself into the annals of the women’s movement: “Blick auf meinesgleichen. 28 Frauengeschichten”, published in 1979, and “Nachleben”, the novel with which she so poignantly safeguarded the legacy of her deceased aunt.

However, two titles already foretold her own legacy: the volume of prose “Feststellungen für später” published in 1981 and the collection of songs entitled “Leute ich lebe”, published in 1983. And in the poem entitled “Briefentwurf”, “Lieber, dir bring ich / zur Kenntnis”, “dass es leicht ging, mühelos, / durch die Luft zu fallen / in Vogelgestalt.” (Dear, I would make you aware / that it was easy, effortless / to fall through the air / in the form of a bird)

BIBLIOGRAPHY: Available in bookstores:
Gertrud Wilker:
“Elegie auf die Zukunft. Ein Lesebuch”.
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“For two years, I remained conscious of the fact that I was out of place in America; every word was a translation; everything stood for something. You are not a member, not a contender; you exist, you walk alongside. You remain unaffected by the gradients of national annoyances; you live in the early form of a shocking freedom, but it is enjoyable”.

(From “Collages USA”, 1968)