

The Red Countess

Online Supplement IV

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“Fairy Tales for Workers’ Children.” Zur Mühlen and the Socialist Fairy Tale

Lionel Gossman

Zur Mühlen’s fairy tales were a product both of her responsibility as breadwinner and of her conviction that the writer has a responsibility to open people’s eyes to injustice – the theme of many of her shorter pieces and of various episodes in her longer novels. In the 1920s, as the correspondence with Sinclair shows, this conviction took the form of a commitment to what she herself described as “propaganda” – a word she appears to have understood in its literal sense. In short, it was her duty as a writer to spread the message of socialism, not least among those to whose hardships and humiliations socialism was expected to put an end.

In German culture fairy tales occupied a privileged position. They were perceived as the authentic repository of a native culture independent of foreign (classical or French) influence. At the same time, they had a literary pedigree, having moved back and forth between the oral and literary domains, and they continued to be cultivated as a literary genre by nineteenth and twentieth-century writers, from Clemens Brentano and E.T.A Hoffmann to Gerhart Hauptmann, Richard Dehmel, and Hermann Hesse.¹ Accordingly, fairy tales were not thought of in the German-speaking countries as intended exclusively for children. Publishers and authors emphasized that their collections were for “Kinder und Eltern jeder Art” [children and parents of every sort] or for “große und kleine Leute” [big and little people] alike.² In the period after the French Revolution

1 Jack Zipes, ed. and transl., *Fairy Tales and Fables from Weimar Days* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1989), Introduction, pp. 9-11.

2 Richard Dehmel, *Der Kindergarten: Gedichte, Spiele und Geschichten für Kinder & Eltern jeder*

especially, the fairy tale became a vehicle of social and cultural criticism. "The evil forces assume a social hue," according to one scholar, "for the witches and villains are no longer allegorical representations of evil in the Christian tradition but are symbolically associated with philistine society or the decadent aristocracy." The purpose of the tale was not "to amuse in the traditional sense of *divertissement*" but "to engage the reader in a serious discourse about art, philosophy, education, and love."³ Around the turn of the century, in the heyday of Symbolism, "fables for adults were in fashion" again: "the tales of Oscar Wilde, Anatole France, and E.T.A Hoffmann enjoyed great popularity."⁴ Fairy tale themes were also taken up in popular plays by Maeterlinck, which in turn inspired operatic compositions: *Pelléas et Mélisande* by Debussy in 1901, *L'Oiseau Bleu* by Albert Wolff in 1919. Richard Strauss's *Die Frau ohne Schatten* (1918) was based on a fairy tale libretto by Hugo von Hofmannsthal. Before he became a Communist and illustrated Zur Mühlen's fairy tales, many of Heinrich Vogeler's etchings and drawings from his *Jugendstil* period (late

Art [Berlin: S. Fischer Verlag, n.d., vol. 6 of his *Gesammelte Werke*, 1906-1909]; publisher's notice for Ani Geiger-Gog's collection *Himmelschlüssel* (Gundert-Verlag, 1923), cit. Manfred Altner, *Kinder- und Jugendliteratur der Weimarer Republik* (Frankfurt am Main/Bern/New York/Paris: Peter Lang, 1991), p. 197. Likewise Lisa Tetzner included in the title of one of her international collections of fairy tales, *Vom Märchenbaum der Welt* (Berlin:Büchergilde Gutenberg, 1929), the notice that it was intended *Für Jung und Alt*. Her aim, she added in her Foreword, had not been to produce "ein kulturhistorisches Werk der Märchenliteratur" [a scholarly collection of tales]; on the contrary, she believed that the themes of the tales were of "general human interest" and that "their social resonance was relevant to our own times." The audiences at her popular readings were largely adult. Richard Dehmel and Friedrich Wolf also emphasized that their tales were for "older and younger children." Thus Dehmel writes that "Das Löwenherz" – truly a tale for adults – is "ein Märchen für Große, das aber auch den Kleinen mundgerecht gemacht werden kann." (*Der Kindergarten*, p. 167)

3 Jack Zipes, "The Changing Function of the Fairy Tale," *The Lion and the Unicorn*, 1988, 12:7-31, on pp. 18-19. Later, the Grimm brothers toned down certain features of their folk sources – notably the erotic element – so as to make their versions suitable for young eyes and ears; see the foreword to the 2nd edition (1819) of their *Kinder und Hausmärchen*: "Dabei haben wir jeden für das Kindersalter nicht passenden Ausdruck in dieser neuen Auflage sorgfältig erlöscht." On their adaptation of "Rapunzel" from J.Chr. Friedrich Schulz's 1790 adaptation of "Persinette" (in Charlotte-Rose de Caumont de la Force's *Contes des Contes* [1698], itself adapted from G. Basile's "Petrosinella" in his *Cunto de li Cunti* of 1634-37), see Johann Powischer, *Märchen des deutschen Sprachraums und deren Illustrationen bis 1950. Der Weg des Volksmärchens von der mündlichen Überlieferung in die Literatur* (Vienna: Walter Droys Verlag, 1999), pp. 55-58. The process of "bringing the fairy tale into harmony with the middle class way of life and integrating it into that way of life" was carried further in the 3-volume *Maerchen Almanach für Söhne und Töchter gebildeter Stände* (Stuttgart, 1826-28) of the prolific and popular Wilhelm Hauff; see Rüdiger Steinlein, *Die domestizierte Phantasie: Studien zur Kinderliteratur, Kinderlektüre und Literaturpädagogik des 18. und frühen 19. Jahrhunderts* (Heidelberg; Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1987), pp. 118-22.

4 Josef Zsuffo, *Béla Báalazs. The Man and the Artist* (Berkeley/ Los Angeles/ London: University of California Press, 1987), pp. 66-67.

1890s until 1914) were on themes from folk and fairy tales (St. George and the Dragon, Melusine, The Frog King, The Sleeping Beauty, The Seven Swans); he had also designed the book decoration for Hofmannsthal's fairy tale play *Der Kaiser und die Hexe*, illustrated Gerhart Hauptmann's *Die versunkene Glocke* and *Der arme Heinrich*; and collaborated with Rilke on a production, in the theatre in Bremen, of *Sister Beatrice*, "a miracle play in three acts" by Maeterlinck. In the 1920s the celebrated *diseuse* Lisa Tetzner – "eine ausgezeichnete Sprecherin und die beste Märchenerzählerin Deutschlands," in the view of Hermann Hesse – drew large audiences of adults to her performances of fairy tales. Her own collections of fairy tales – the two-volume *Die schönsten Märchen der Welt für 365 und einen Tag* (1926) and *Vom Märchenbaum der Welt* (1929) – were best-sellers. The success of the genre of the fairy tale was by no means limited to Germany. Tetzner performed successfully in Denmark, Holland, Norway, Czechoslovakia, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union, and both her collections and her own tales were translated into other European languages.⁵ In Hungary, the writer and painter Anna Lesznai published several volumes of original tales, which she herself illustrated, between 1900 and 1918, and the *Seven Fairy Tales* (1918) of the future film-script writer and theorist of cinema Béla Balázs, won the applause of Geörgy Lukács, who was to become probably the most influential Marxist literary critic and historian of the twentieth century. Balázs also provided the libretto for Bartok's opera *Bluebeard's Castle* (1911, first performed 1918) and the script for his ballet *The Wooden Prince* (1918). In Lesznai's autobiographically based novel *Spätherbst in Eden*, the heroine relates how, as a young woman on her father's estate, she was visited by a young man (identifiable as Balázs). "What is your name?" she asks the visitor, who is dressed in the style of the Romantic wanderer, with knapsack and staff. "György Vedres," he

5 On Tetzner, see Manfred Altner, *Kinder- und Jugendliteratur der Weimarer Republik*, pp. 186-96. Tetzner's collections extended well beyond the brothers Grimm and Germany and included tales from every part of the world, including the Far East, Africa, and America. This was an early sign of the pacifist, internationalist, and in due course anti-Nazi orientation of her work. Even though, unlike Zur Mühlen's tales, those in her international collections did not directly address social issues, her own *Hans Urian oder die Geschichte einer Weltreise* (Stuttgart: D. Gundert Verlag, 1931), based loosely on the earlier children's play she wrote with Béla Balázs, *Hans Urian geht nach Brot*, did deal directly with issues of poverty, exploitation, colonialism, armaments manufacture, and war, and manifested considerable sympathy for the Soviet Union. As is well known, Walter Benjamin was interested in literature for children, sketched out a plan for a "proletarian children's theatre" (*Programm eines proletarischen Kindertheaters*, 1928), and assembled a noteworthy collection of illustrated children's books, now in the "Institut für Jugendbuchforschung" of the Johann- Wolfgang- Goethe University in Frankfurt-am-Main. (See Klaus Doderer, ed., *Walter Benjamin und die Kinderliteratur* [Weinheim and Munich: Juventa Verlag, 1988])

answers. "Saint George – who killed the dragon and released the King's daughter from the magic spell."⁶

The existence of anti-fairy tales, such as Robert Walser's verse playlets *Schneeweisschen* [Snow-White] and *Aschenbrödel* [Cinderella], both written around 1900, is itself evidence that the fairytale continued to be a working vehicle of literary expression.

It made perfectly good sense therefore for both the revolutionary Left and the revolutionary Right to exploit a genre that was seen as deeply rooted in national German culture and that enjoyed considerable popularity, in order to influence not only the young (for whom countless youth groups were created by all parties in the 1920s) but adults as well. If they were to serve specific propaganda ends, however, fairy tales had to be reinterpreted or even completely reconceived. Left and Right had to substitute their own meanings for the conservative moral and political lessons conveyed by the traditional tales and for the mood of longing, the other-worldliness, and the estheticism characteristic of the more recent symbolist tales

Hubertus, Prince zu Loewenstein, recounts in his memoirs two instances of the use of fairy tales by the extreme Right in the 1920s. In the first, the local Nazi youth organization at Munich University gave him

various books to study, amongst others a volume of German fairy tales with a National Socialist interpretation, which explained everything very clearly. Little Red Riding Hood – she is the symbol of the German nation; the wolf who eats her up is the 'Jew' (the very fact that he was called 'Wolf' showed this) [...] The huntsman, on the other hand, is a brilliant prophetic vision of National Socialism.

When the Prince inquired "Why these parables?" he was given the answer that they were the disguise in which the German race had preserved its ancient native wisdom and transmitted it from generation to generation, foiling the efforts of an alien (i.e. Judaic) Church to destroy it.

Our ancestors were obliged to be very cautious. In their desire to hand on their higher wisdom, they were hindered by the Church, which had always been in league with 'the Jew.' Only the fact that a means of expression had been discovered that remained incomprehensible to the Church prevented this heritage from being destroyed.⁷

6 Béla Balázs, *Der heilige Räuber und andere Märchen*, ed. Hanno Loewy (Berlin: Verlag Das Arsenal, 2005), "Afterword" by Loewy, p. 183.

7 Prince Hubertus zu Loewenstein, *The Conquest of the Past: An Autobiography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1938), p. 165.

The fairy tale, in sum, was part of a native culture which, according to the *völkisch* ideology that prepared the ground for National Socialism, had constantly been under attack from the enemies of the German race: Jews, Christians, rationalists, socialists, internationalists of every stripe.

In the second instance, the Prince was at a small reception given by supporters of the Ludendorffs – the extreme rightwing hero of the First World War and his fanatically anti-Semitic and anti-Christian wife, Mathilde – at the home of a Hamburg lawyer in 1924. After much discussion of the dangerous alliance of Jesuits, Jews, Free-Masons, and Communists, the lawyer concluded the evening with a fairy tale.

‘Attend carefully. It is the story of Snow-White, who lived beyond the seven mountains with the seven dwarfs and her stepmother [who] hated her. What are those ‘mountains’? Montes in Latin. ‘Beyond the mountains’? ‘Ultra montes,’ therefore that’s where the stepmother is – Rome. That is obvious, isn’t it? The stepmother hates the German Snow-White, who must die in order that Rome and Judah may live. The seven dwarfs are the German people, small as yet, because they are held down by conspiracy. Only Snow-White could make them into giants and then that would mean the end of Rome.’⁸

Crass as these interpretations of the fairy tale may be – and as the Prince obviously hoped his readers would find them – the fact remains that the Right used fairy tales along with other folklore materials to communicate its nationalist and racist message.⁹

Precluded from exploiting the *völkisch* dimension of the fairy tale, the Left had to be more inventive. New tales were created in the universal-mythical style of the traditional tale but with a radical, modern message, or – more rarely – familiar old tales were re-costumed in contemporary dress in order to give them a new socialist meaning and relevance. (Zur Mühlen’s “Die Brillen” [The Spectacles] is an example of the first approach, her dramatization of “Aschenbrödel” [Cinderella] an example of the second.) Elements of fantasy appropriate to children’s stories were combined with simple descriptions and explanations of real social conditions and calls to the children to help change the way things are.

In response to the “hurrah-patriotism” or jingoism of the First World War, German pacifists and social reformers had already enlisted the fairy tale and the fable in the service of anti-militarist ideas and propaganda. Edwin Hoernle, for instance, a critic of the War and of militarism in

⁸ Ibid., p. 192.

⁹ See Christa Kamenetsky, “Folktale and Ideology in the Third Reich,” *Journal of American Folklore*, 1977, 90: 168-78; see also Zipes, *Fairy Tales and Fables from Weimar Days*, pp. 24-25.

general – he was later to be a founding member of the German Communist Party and its leading authority on schools and education – had used the medium of the fairy tale to satirize the Kaiser and his policies at a time when strict censorship had made the expression of “unpatriotic” ideas virtually impossible. In the Introduction to a collection of his tales, entitled *Die Oculi-Fabeln* (1920), he emphasized that his tales, unlike those of the preceding generation, were “neither the product of idle moments, nor an expression of artistic playfulness.” To the contrary, “they arose at the same time as Ernst Lissauer’s ‘Haßgesang gegen England’ [Hymn of Hate against England] and the ‘Manifesto of German Intellectuals’” in support of the Kaiser and the War; that is, at a time when “free speech was prohibited in Germany and opinion was governed by the illusions of a war-induced hypnosis.” Some of the tales are critical of the socialist movement itself – especially the Social Democrats, whose representatives in the Reichstag had supported the War – and of a section of the working class for its timorousness, complacency, and failure to seize opportunities for effective action.¹⁰ They were thus intended primarily for adults, rather than children. That was certainly also the case of *Das Märchen vom lieben Gott: Brief eines Unteroffiziers an den Kaiser im Januar 1918, als Protest gegen den Frieden von Brest-Litowsk* [The Tale of the Good Lord: a letter from a non-commissioned officer to the Kaiser in January 1918, in protest against the Peace of Brest-Litovsk] of Heinrich Vogeler, the former *Jugendstil* artist who later illustrated two of Zur Mühlen’s collections of fairy tales.¹¹ Duplicated on cheap paper, this simple anti-war morality tale caused the author, then serving in the military, to be interned for a time in an insane asylum. An adult public and not only a juvenile one was likewise the target, as the title itself states clearly, of a collection of stories and poems entitled *Proletarischer Kindergarten. Ein Märchen und Lesebuch für Groß und Klein* (Berlin: Buchverlag der Arbeiter-Kunst-Ausstellung, 1921) edited by the young Ernst Friedrich, who had been jailed for his anti-militarist activities during the War and went on to become a leading German pacifist and socialist. “These songs, poems, and stories should speak to children *and adults*, to young *and old*,” Friedrich wrote in his Introduction (emphasis in text). Along with fairy tales by Hans Christian Andersen and by Friedrich himself, the collection contained stories by Gorki, Zola, Turgenev, and Tolstoy, and poems by

10 For instance, “Der tapfere Hund” (pp. 32-33), “Der Riese und seine Rüstung” (pp. 36-39), “Das Halsband” (p. 51) in *Die Oculi-Fabeln* (Stuttgart: Oskar Wöhrle Verlag, 1920).

11 Bremen: Druck Arbeiterpolitik, 1919; reprinted in S.D. Gallwitz, *Dreissig Jahre Woppswede. Künstler, Geist, Werden* (Bremen: Angelsachsen Verlag, 1922), pp. 33-34.

Richard Dehmel and the anarchist Erich Mühsam (murdered by the Nazis in a concentration camp in 1934). As head of the education section of the German Communist Party, Edwin Hoernle may thus have expected that the socialist fairy tales he advocated for the purpose of raising children's class consciousness, getting them to see how capitalism works to the detriment of the working class, and inspiring them with a desire to band together in order to change the world as it is, would also reach and influence their parents and adult readers in general.

Zur Mühlen's tales were designed to meet those social objectives. In 1919, around the time she joined the Communist Party, Zur Mühlen had voiced strong criticism, from a socialist point of view, of the prevailing literature for young girls. Superficially, the books seem quite innocent, she wrote, but

just leaf through them and take a look at who is being held up to these young minds for admiration – the man in the Emperor's cape, the officer, i.e. the professional murderer. The most virtuous heroine – always blonde, blue-eyed, and docile – is rewarded for her virtue with a lieutenant; the less virtuous – a lively dark-eyed brunette – must be satisfied with an assistant judge. Heroic mothers "joyfully" sacrifice their sons, heroic brides their grooms for Kaiser and Fatherland. Whatever is essentially German is presented, over and over again, as glorious; the non-German is at best an object of ridicule ... The more "ethical" books strike the charity note: the attractive, well-dressed young heroine goes down among the poor, honors helpless old women with a visit they do not want, and sews clothes for the children of the poor out of material the donor would not wear herself for anything in the world. Such socially inclined girls marry navy personnel or perhaps, if they are especially independent-minded, doctors. The reward of virtue is always, however, a husband.¹²

It was to be expected that the dark-haired, dark-eyed, rebellious Austrian countess, who had demonstrated a keen interest in education in her youth by training to be a teacher – a profession her parents considered inappropriate for a countess and did not permit her to practise – would have an altogether different idea of children's and young people's literature and that she would set about realizing it. The "growing-up" novels she wrote in the early 1930s are in many respects a response to the works criticized in her 1919 article and were intended as a substitute for them. The fairy tales address their audience in the same spirit, albeit with different means. They are likewise intended to open their young readers' or listeners' eyes to the real problems of their world and to teach them effective ways of responding to these problems.

¹² "Junge-Mädchen-Literatur," in *Die Erde*, 1919, no. 14/15, pp. 473-74, cit. Altner, *Hermynia Zur Mühlen*, p. 94.

Nearly all Zur Mühlen's fairy tales appeared first individually in Communist newspapers like *Die Rote Fahne* (founded in 1918 by Liebknecht and Luxemburg) or the young people's magazine *Der junge Genosse*. The first collection, entitled *Was Peterchens Freunde erzählen*, was published by the Malik Verlag in 1921, with illustrations by George Grosz, as volume 1 of the series "Märchen der Armen" [Fairy Tales of the Poor]. A little boy is bed-ridden with a broken leg; his mother works in a factory and is away from home all day. There is apparently no father – an indication that the tale is set in the real time of the immediate postwar period when many fathers had been killed at the front and never returned to their families. Toward evening, as shadows lengthen and the lonely child begins to be beset by fear, various objects in the room come alive and begin to talk – among themselves and with the little boy. In the lively conversation, resumed every evening at dusk, each object – a piece of coal in the scuttle by the stove, a matchbox, a water-jug, a blanket, a pot, a snowdrop – tells the story of how it was produced. Zur Mühlen thus borrows a simple device used by Hans Christian Andersen in order to explain in lively, easily understandable terms how workers are exploited and crippled in the production process under capitalism – "the pain and misery of another human being," in the words of the matchbox, "clings to every object used by humans" (p. 21) – and how the hell invoked to frighten people has nothing to do with God but is an invention of the rich to cow the poor into submission. The real hell, the water-jug explains in its tale, is the workplace. It "was not created by God, but by men; and children and grown-ups are sent to it not because they have forgotten to say their prayers" – as an old, witch-like woman, who regularly came among the poor to distribute religious books and pamphlets and visit the sick, had sternly warned the little boy – "but because they are poor." (p. 14) The story ends on the snowdrop's assurance that underground forces are gathering which will destroy this evil "system," just as in nature underground energies prepare the triumph, of which she is the harbinger, of Spring over Winter. (p. 32) The snowdrop is doubly the harbinger of the coming springtime or rebirth of humanity. A gift to the little boy from a co-worker in the factory where his mother is employed, the snowdrop is not only a symbol of revolutionary change but a concrete expression of solidarity and brotherhood among the poor.

Several other collections, composed of previously published individual tales, followed in rapid succession.

In 1922, *Märchen*, containing “Der Rosenstock” [The Rose-Bush], “Der Spatz” [The Sparrow], “Der kleine graue Hund” [The Little Grey Dog], and “Warum?” [Why?] and illustrated by Karl Holtz, was published by the Vereinigung Internationaler Verlagsanstalten (VIVA) in Berlin.

In 1923, *Ali der Teppichweber*, containing, in addition to the title story [Ali, the Carpet-Weaver], “Die Störenfriede” [The Troublemakers], “Der Knecht” [The Servant], “Die Brillen” [The Spectacles], and “Aschenbrödel” [a dramatized and modernized version of the Cinderella story], appeared as volume 3 in the Malik Verlag’s series “Märchen der Armen.” The illustrations were by John Heartfield.

In 1924, *Das Schloß der Wahrheit*, with illustrations by Karl Holtz, was put out by the Verlag der Jugendinternationale in Berlin. This contained, besides the title story [The Castle of Truth], “Der Zaun” [The Fence], “Die Affen und die Peitsche” [The Monkeys and the Whip], “Die Bundesgenossin” [The Prince’s Ally], “Der Droschkengaul” [The Droschky Horse], “Die Wundermauer” [The Magic Wall], “Der Besen” [The Broom], “Nachtgesicht” [Nocturnal Vision], “Die drei Freunde” [The Three Friends], and “Die Brücke” [The Bridge].

In 1927, *Der Muezzin* [The Muezzin], *Die Söhne der Aischa* [Aischa’s Sons], and *Said der Träumer* [Said the Dreamer] were all published as separate volumes by the Verlag der Jugendinternationale in its series “Der rote Trommler” [The Red Drummer-Boy].¹³

In 1930, *Es war einmal...und es wird sein* [Once upon a time there was... and there will be], with illustrations by Heinrich Vogeler, appeared, also with the Verlag der Jugendinternationale. It contained “Warum?,” “Der Knecht,” “Der Rosenstock,” “Die Brillen,” “Was Peterchens Freunde erzählen,” and a new tale – “Die rote Fahne” [The Red Flag].

¹³ Another contributor to this series was Rosa Leviné-Meyer, the widow of Eugen Leviné, who had taken over the leadership of the Bavarian Socialist Republic after the assassination of Kurt Eisner, only to be himself shot by a firing squad on the collapse of the short-lived revolutionary regime. Her translation of *Lenin-Märchen: Volksmärchen aus der Sowjetunion* appeared in it as no. 7 in 1929. (See Zipes, *Fairy Tales and Fables from Weimar Days*, p. 16.) Leviné-Meyer (who probably met Zur Mühlen again during the years they both spent in exile in London) recalls in her memoirs that in the 1920s the German Communist Party “included some highly notable people, among them the Austrian countess Hermynia zur Muehlen.” Zur Mühlen, she went on, not quite accurately, but not altogether inaccurately, “the sophisticated, witty countess, full of charm and vivacity, started her turbulent life by marrying a Baltic Baron who promised to use her considerable dowry to turn his estate into a Tolstoyan paradise. But when I came to know her she was living with her not too successful literary Jewish husband in a dismal boarding house. She was frail, supporting herself by translations and by writing stories for Communist youngsters. Three dogs were the last relics of luxury which the once spoiled eccentric lady could not resist and which added endless complications to her hard life.” Rosa Leviné-Meyer, *Inside German Communism. Memoirs of Party Life in the Weimar Republic*, ed. David Zane Mairowitz (London: Pluto Press, 1977), pp. 60-61.

Finally, in 1933, the Verlag der Jugendinternationale published *Schmiede der Zukunft* [Forgers of the Future], again illustrated by Heinrich Vogeler, and containing “Der Muezzin,” “Said der Träumer,” “Die Söhne der Aischa,” “Ali der Teppichweber,” and “Der Spatz.”

In addition, *Was Peterchens Freunde erzählen* and the 1923 collection containing “Ali der Teppichweber” were published in new editions by the Malik Verlag in 1923-1924.

Zur Mühlen’s fairy tales were translated into many languages. Six separate collections appeared in Russian translation in 1923 and 1924, five in Moscow and one in Kharkov, and these were followed by many more in subsequent years. An English translation of four of the tales was put out as *Fairy Tales for Workers’ Children* by the Daily Worker Publishing Company in Chicago in 1925. A Japanese translation of *Was Peterchens Freunde erzählen* appeared in Tokyo in 1924, a Hungarian translation in Budapest in 1926, a translation into Esperanto in 1928, a Chinese translation (from the Japanese) in 1929. Between 1930 and 1934, four volumes of Zur Mühlen’s tales came out in French translation, one of which was introduced by the then celebrated Henri Barbusse.¹⁴ *Das Schloß der Wahrheit* was published in Czech in 1928, *Schmiede der Zukunft* in 1936. *Was Peterchens Freunde erzählen* and the story “Warum” appeared in Spanish translation in 1931. The publishing houses that put out these translations were associated with the political Left. Even so, the dissemination of Zur Mühlen’s fairy tales is impressive.¹⁵

Zur Mühlen used traditional fairy tale elements in her work, such as attributing human qualities to objects, integrating the fantastic into everyday life, and setting her tales in a history-less, universal context (often an undefined village, an island or a traditional Oriental fairy-tale locale, only occasionally – as in *Was Peterchens Freunde erzählen* – a contemporary industrial or historically identifiable environment¹⁶). She also adopted a direct, unadorned prose

14 Altner (*Hermynia Zur Mühlen*, p. 148) quotes Barbusse’s judgment of Zur Mühlen’s collection as “an original and charming little book that will deservedly be loved by children and thinking adults alike.”

15 A complete bibliography (including translations and modern reprintings) is provided by Manfred Altner, *Hermynia Zur Mühlen*, pp. 213-16. For an effective one-page description of the tales, see Jack Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*, 2nd ed. (New York and Oxford: Routledge, 2006; 1st ed. 1983), pp. 155-56; see also the same author’s Introduction (“Recovering the Utopian Spirit of the Weimar Fairy Tales and Fables”) and translations of three of Zur Mühlen’s tales – “The Fence” (*Der Zaun*), “The Servant” (*Der Knecht*), and “The Glasses” (*Die Brillen*) – in his *Fairy Tales and Fables from Weimar Days*, pp. 3-28, 53-70 and 185-192.

16 As noted, the fact that the mother is a factory-worker and that there is no father – a not uncommon condition in German families after the loss of over 3 million men in the First World War – locates this tale or series of tales in the immediate present. In *Der graue Hund* [The

style, reminiscent of the traditional tale, and relied on simple, antithetical moral and psychological categories to define her characters – greed and generosity, cruelty and kindness, haughtiness and modesty, hypocrisy and honesty, trickery and transparency. Inevitably this resulted in a considerable simplification of complex social and economic processes and situations. Nevertheless, Zur Mühlen's fairy tales prescribe models of behavior radically opposed to those of traditional fairy tales, the basic lesson of which had been that all one's wishes will come true if one overcomes temptation and faithfully observes established norms of good conduct. And she did succeed in communicating to her target audience of children and of adults with only a rudimentary education some of the essential lessons of socialism as she understood it: the injustice of the division of humanity into rich and poor, a leisured minority and a weary, hungry, toiling mass; the origin of private property in theft, deceit, and the building of walls and fences that destroy community life and the love and solidarity natural to human beings; the workers' loss of control over the means of production and the vital importance of their winning it back; ideology and religion as instruments used by the exploiters to delude the exploited, conceal their true situation from them, and discourage them from trying to change it; the need, therefore, to recognize and understand the way things really are and to band together in the struggle against oppression by rediscovering the common interests of ordinary working people beneath the differences of language and culture that the capitalists promote as a means of preventing worker solidarity; the danger for the working class of complacency and sloth; and, worst of all, the temptation to solve the problem of poverty by becoming an exploiter oneself. In addition, many tales cleverly imply that children have a special role to play in the process of emancipation since they are not yet corrupted by the ideologies and prejudices used to blind and disunite the workers and can thus disclose the truth to their elders and bond naturally with the children of other communities in a common struggle against oppression. In a number of tales – most notably “The Red Flag” – children are presented as the pioneers, heroes, and earliest martyrs of the coming Revolution, pointing the way first to their own mothers, and then to all adults. The revolutionary function of story-telling is itself thematized, as in *Der Spatz* [The Sparrow], where the little sparrow, which is trying to lead its people to a better life, tells its story

Little Grey Dog], the setting of plantations worked by negro slaves evokes the American South (hence, no doubt, the inclusion of this tale among the four translated into English for the Chicago Daily Worker publication, pp. 35-52), but the historical definition is quite vague and the plantation society functions chiefly as a symbol of exploitation and inhumanity in general.

to a group of children; the sparrow itself is drowned as it returns to lead its brother and sister-sparrows to the land of warmth and plenty that it has discovered, but a little boy who had listened intently as the sparrow told its story, is inspired by what he has heard to become a revolutionary leader of the oppressed and exploited working class in its struggle to win freedom from oppression and exploitation.

Zur Mühlen was by no means the only writer of “modern” socialist fairy tales at the time, but she appears to have been one of the most successful.¹⁷ Anecdotal evidence indicates that her tales were not ineffective. Erich Honecker (b. 1912), head of state of the German Democratic Republic from 1971 until the Berlin wall came down in 1989, recounts in his memoirs the effect on him, in the early 1920s, of “The Sparrow,” one of the first of Zur Mühlen’s tales (published 1922). “Even now,” he writes (1980),

after a lapse of over five decades, I remember one of the earliest children’s books I read. It was an amusing and yet thought-provoking story by Hermynia zur Mühlen, an authoress and translator who despite her noble birth sided early on with the revolutionary workers’ movement. Her children’s books were very much in demand. The story which I remember particularly well was entitled ‘The Sparrow’ and was published...by the Association of International Publishers in Berlin in 1922. The sparrows were described in the colourfully illustrated little book as the proletarians of the bird world. A Young Sparrow went in search of a country where there was no hunger or cold. But everywhere it found the rich and the poor, experienced the solidarity of the poor and met a boy who would change this world.¹⁸

In the course of the 1920s, however, the use of fairy tales as an instrument of propaganda gradually fell out of favor.¹⁹ Even leftwing papers like *Die*

¹⁷ Of the four volumes published by the Malik Verlag in the series “Die Märchen der Armen” [Fairytales of the Poor] in 1923-1924 (each of which included tales previously published by the author as well as new ones), two (vols. 1 and 3) were devoted to the tales of Zur Mühlen. The other authors were Eugen Lewin-Dorsch and the Hungarian writer Maria Szucsich. (Several of her tales had been translated by Klein.) For samples of work by others, including the well-known writer Oskar Maria Graf and the Hungarian Béla Balázs, still highly regarded as a theorist of film, as well as brief biographical notices on each, see Zipes, *Fairy Tales and Fables from Weimar Days*. According to Zipes, “it was Hermynia Zur Mühlen who influenced other German writers to produce radical fairy tales.” (p. 14) The prolific *diseuse*, collector, and writer of fairy-tales, Lisa Tetzner, was strongly internationalist and became a committed opponent of fascism. Like Zur Mühlen, she left Germany in 1933 and her work was not published in Nazi Germany but, unlike Zur Mühlen, she did not, on the whole, use the fairy tale as an instrument of socialist education.

¹⁸ Erich Honecker, *From My Life* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1981 [orig. German, Berlin: Diez Verlag, 1980]), pp. 18-19.

¹⁹ See Zipes, *Fairy Tales and Fables from Weimar Days*, p. 16. The use of tales to promote the education of the young in socialist theory and practice had always been controversial. Karl Kautsky had argued against it (1893-94) on the grounds that the proletariat was not yet in a position to create a truly proletarian literature, but Clara Zetkin had argued for it, especially after 1918, claiming that it would promote “the ideals of brotherhood, solidarity of all

Rote Fahne did not always view them positively. Zur Mühlen's tales tended toward the moralizing and the sentimental, it was said; they appealed to the instinctive compassion of the child instead of disseminating truly revolutionary doctrine. Béla Balázs's charming, funny, and politically rousing fairy-tale play *Hans Urian geht nach Brot* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Max Reichard Verlag, 1929), written in collaboration with Lisa Tetzner, was said to have used "sugar water as political enlightenment" when "it [should have aroused] a storm of class hatred and revolutionary enthusiasm in the hearts of the children through a ruthless, harsh portrayal of the social reality over the surface of the entire world."²⁰ What was faulted, in short, was the very humor, fantasy, and playfulness with which Balázs appealed to the imagination of his young readers and viewers. Presumably, what was demanded was a socialist-realist portrayal of everyday life. Equally, however, George Grosz's characteristically modern, angular, and caricatural illustrations for the Malik Verlag's edition of Zur Mühlen's *Was Peterchens Freunde erzählen* were judged unsuited to an audience of children.²¹ The socialist fairy tale, these criticisms appear to imply, is handicapped by an internal contradiction: as a fairy tale, it has to appeal to the fantasy and the emotions of children and it has to simplify in order to be understood by them; but as a socialist tale, it has to be realistic and theoretically sound and informative. On top of that, it was sometimes objected, the books containing the tales were priced beyond the means of most people in the working class.

In fact, compared with that of other writers, the language of Zur

comrades in work and struggle, and proletarian love of freedom." (Gerhard Haas, "Kinder und Jugendliteratur in der DDR," in Gerhard Haas, ed., *Kinder- und Jugendliteratur: Ein Handbuch* [Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam jun., 1984], pp. 22-35.

²⁰ See the critique of Zur Mühlen by Gertrud Alexander in *Die Rote Fahne*, cited by Altner, *Hermynia Zur Mühlen*, p. 100. On Balázs's *Hans Urian* see the quotation from *Die Rote Fahne* in Josef Zsuffo, *Béla Balázs*, p. 167. A similar condemnation of fantasy in children's literature in the Soviet Union is reported by the great children's writer and poet Kornei Chukovsky. He was reading *The Adventures of Baron von Münchhausen* to some sick children, he relates, when the matron and "a young man in some kind of uniform" appeared on the scene, snatched the book from his hand and proceeded to scold him: "What right do you have to read this trash to our children!" On the "stormy fate of the fairy-tale since 1917," see Chukovsky, *From Two to Five* (Berkeley and Lost Angeles: University of California Press, 1963; orig. Russian, 1933), pp. 114-39, and Felicity Ann O'Dell, *Socialism through Children's Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1978), pp. 11-17. Whether socialism can effectively be taught to children through fairy tales continues to be an issue in socialist circles; see Dieter Richter, "Kinderbuch und politische Erziehung. Zum Verständnis der neuen linken Kinderliteratur," in Bettina Hurrelmann, ed., *Kinderliteratur und Rezeption: Beiträge der Kinderliteraturforschung zur literaturwissenschaftlichen Pragmatik* (Baltmannsweiler: Burgbücherei Wilhelm Schneider, 1980), pp. 210-46.

²¹ See the critique by Gertrud Alexander in *Die Rote Fahne*, cited by Altner, *Hermynia Zur Mühlen*, p. 101. Other illustrators, notably Karl Holtz and Heinrich Vogeler, adapted their styles to the expectations and imaginations of young readers.

Mühlen's tales, while transparent and accessible, is crisp and elegant, and the tales themselves effectively combine fantasy and realism in a lively and engaging narrative style. Zur Mühlen does not "write down" to her readers. In contrast, in Lisa Tetzner's *Hans Urian oder die Geschichte einer Weltreise* (Stuttgart: D. Gundert Verlag, 1931), for instance, ideas are reduced to their simplest component parts and expressed in simple sentences with as few subordinate clauses as possible,²² while Berta Lask's *Auf dem Flügelpferde durch die Zeiten. Bilder vom Klassenkampf der Jahrtausende* [Through the Ages on the Winged Horse: Images of the Thousands-of-Years-old Class Struggle] (Berlin: Vereinigung Internationaler Verlags-Anstalten, 1925), which leads its readers through various stages of the class struggle – from the violent aggression of a hierarchical warrior society of hunters against a peace-loving, egalitarian community of food-gatherers and the transformation of the latter into the workhorses of their new overlords in prehistoric Central America, through the revolt of the Israelites against their Egyptian oppressors (Moses as Revolutionary!), the Spartacus revolt of the Roman slaves, the German Peasants' War, the Paris Commune, and the Russian Revolution, to a contrast between the present situation in Germany and a future communist society there – is overwhelmingly didactic, despite the "golden hooves and silver wings" of the magic horse that carries the 15 year-old hero Karl back and forth through time and space.

In any case, criticism of the socialist fairy tale from within the ranks of the Left was more than matched by opposition from state and local authorities. School reforms, for which Hoernle and his comrades had campaigned and which the socialist Left hoped would integrate some of the new fairy tales into children's public education, never happened. On the contrary, a bill was introduced to the Reichstag in 1925 "for the protection of the young from obscene and indecent publications." Despite the protests of Thomas Mann, Heinrich Mann, and many others, who claimed that the proposed law simply provided the authorities with a weapon they could use at will to silence any expression of the "free human spirit," the bill passed into law in December 1926. Two months later the Hesse police authorities in Darmstadt

22 E.g. the opening sentences. "Hans Urian war ein armer Junge. 9 Jahre alt. Er wohnte vor der Stadt in einem kleinen Bretterhaus. Es hatte nur eine Stube. Wir können es auch einen Schuppen nennen. Die Stadt war sehr groß. Sie hatte viele hohe Häuser. Automobile. Elektrische Bahnen! Fabriken. Bergwerke und Hochöfen. Aber noch mehr Menschen! Für viele Menschen war kein Platz in den Häusern der Stadt. Es kostete sehr viel Geld, in Häusern zu wohnen. Die meisten Leute hatten kein Geld. Sie krochen eng zusammen in eine Stube. Manchmal mußten sechs Menschen in einer Stube schlafen und nicht jeder hatte ein eigenes Bett." (p. 7)

were trying to establish whether Zur Mühlen's "Ali der Teppichweber" had been banned anywhere in virtue of the 1926 law or on any other grounds. Though the outcome of the inquiry was negative, its objective – to find a precedent that would justify harassment – is evident. But even before the passing of the 1926 law, the well known publicist Egon Kirsch informed an association of left-leaning publishers, called to protest the proposed law, that all copies of Hermynia Zur Mühlen's "schöne Märchen" had already been seized by a provincial authority somewhere in Germany.²³ Also in 1926 it was reported in *Der Schriftsteller*, the journal of the Association of German Writers [*Schutzverband deutscher Schriftsteller*], that "the Book of Fairy Tales of our member Hermynia Zur Mühlen with illustrations by George Grosz" had been the occasion of a court case in Budapest and that a Hungarian journalist had been condemned to a year's imprisonment for having translated it.²⁴

Despite opposition from the authorities and growing misgivings within the Communist Party itself, left-leaning authors did not give up writing socialist fairy tales. Major collections by Oskar Maria Graf and others continued to be published. Zur Mühlen's *Schmiede der Zukunft* appeared in 1933. As late as February of that year, Erika and Klaus Mann were using fairy tales and fables in their Pepper Mill cabaret as a cover for what they describe as their "campaign against the Nazi dictatorship" – to enthusiastic applause from their audience of "Catholics, liberals, and socialists" in "gay, defiant Munich." Soon, however, the wholesale arrests of "the Communists, the Jews, the Socialists, the pacifists, the free thinkers, the liberals" began.²⁵ Hitler's *Machtergreifung* effectively marked a turning point for the socialist fairy tale. Leftwing authors left Germany and many turned to directly political, activist writing, in the manner of Friedrich Wolf's play *Dr. Mamlock* (written in the USSR and first performed in Warsaw, Poland in 1934) or Zur Mühlen's own novel *Unsere Töchter die Nazinen* (written in Vienna and first published in Saarbrücken in 1934). In a crisis situation, organizing for action and imminent struggle took precedence, for many of the exiled writers, over imaginative ways of spreading the word and educating the young. The career of Friedrich Wolf demonstrates, however, that even the most engaged leftwing writers among Zur Mühlen's contemporaries continued to write for children from time to time. Wolf's *Märchen für große und kleine Kinder* appeared in East Germany in 1946, *Kiki, Geschichte eines Hundes* in 1947, and *Bummi, Tiergeschichten für große und kleine Kinder* in 1951.

²³ See Altner, *Hermynia Zur Mühlen*, pp. 104-5.

²⁴ See *Ibid.*, p. 102.

²⁵ Erika and Klaus Mann, *Escape to Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1939), pp. 16-17.