Books

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PROPHETS WITHOUT HONOR
A Background to Freud, Kafka, Einstein and Their World
By Federic V. Grunfeld
Holt, Rinehart and Sinton, N.Y., 379 pages, $15
Reviewed by BARRY MEHLER

Prophets With Honor is a haunting elegy to a generation of German-Jewish intellectuals, artists and writers "buried alive" by the Holocaust. The narrative extends through the entire German-speaking world over the first few decades of the century with special attention to the 1920s and 1930s and with Berlin as the center of gravity. Most of these intellectuals were either exiled or murdered during the Nazi period. And while those with international reputations managed to survive, hundreds have been forgotten.

Even when they escaped Germany, their books were burned, their names expunged from the libraries. In exile they lost their reading public. Only a few of the young authors such as Arthur Koestler were able to switch languages midstream. Even postwar Germany has been slow to come to terms with its uncomfortable ghosts.

What remains is a "literature of the dead," and it is this literature which Grunfeld writes about. Thus, the book is not so much about Einstein, Freud and Kafka as about the lesser known artists and writers — Walter Benjamin, Kurt Wolfseel, Elsa Lasker-Schuler, Gertrud Kolmar and Alfred Doebelin — writers almost unknown to the English speaking world.

Grunfeld reminds us that these were years when Berlin rivaled Paris as the center of European art and culture and much of this pre-eminent influence was due to Jewish artists. In theater, opera, cinema and music Berlin was without rival.

The Bertolt Brecht-Kurt Weill production of The Three-Penny Opera played 4,000 times across Europe in its first year. German cinema boasted such directors as Joseph von Sternberg (The Blue Angel), Fritz Lang (Metropolis), Ernst Lubitsch (Anna Boleyn) and Billy Wilder (Emil and the Detektives), using movie actors like Elizabeth Bergner, Conrad Veidt, Peter Lorre, Erna Sack and Fritz Kortner.

Among the Jewish directors and conductors were Max Reinhardt, Max Ophuls, Otto Klemperer, Bruno Walter, Viktor Barnowsky and of course, Arnold Schoenberg, who was developing the 12-tone technique in music.

The book has little that a scholar will find new. Grunfeld is not a professional historian and he studiously ignores what historians have had to say about the period. Peter Gay, Walter Laqueur, Fritz Stern, H. Stuart Hughes and Carl Schorske, are so much as mentioned.

On occasion this naiveté leads him astray. But this weakness is of no real consequence. Grunfeld has mastered all the primary documents — not only the novels, stories, essays, poems and plays but also the vast quantities of published memoirs, journals correspondence and the periodical literature. He has created a fresh, enjoyable and superbly written book.

In the first chapter Grunfeld lays the ground for the theme of the entire book. He describes the precariousness of the German-Jewish intellectual astride two cultures — at home in neither.

These, after all, were marginal Jews and even more marginal Germans. Kafka described them as gypsies who had it’s cradle.” But the child was never quite at home. And it was this very precariousness that gave them an extraordinary vantage point.

"Surely it was not just coincidence," Grunfeld writes, that "again and again, it was the Jews who were chipping away at German certitude."

Perhaps the experience that Grunfeld describes is not so unique. Why, after all, are we so fascinated with these tightrope walkers — "Prophets without Honor" — whose tragic lives ended in concentration camps, exile and obscurity.

Perhaps we have here the paradigm of the Galos experience — gypsies stealing the baby from the cradle and deeply resented for it.

Editor's Note: Former St. Louisan Barry Mehler is an internationally recognized scholar with the Dept. of History, the Institutional Racism Program and the Behavior-Genetics Laboratory at the University of Illinois-Champaign. He has published numerous articles and reviews on racism, fascism, genetics, eugenics history and Jewish topics in scholarly journals, the Jewish press and popular magazines.

Library offers books in Russian

NEW YORK — Having acquired a library of Jewish books in the Russian language, the New York office of Chamaah, the International Soviet Jewish Aid Society, has announced the opening of a lending library. Books that were heretofore inaccessible to the Russian reader will now be available through the main Chamaah office, 78 Pearl St., New York City.

The books include many published by chamaah, the Aliyah Dept. of the Jewish Agency and Western Jewish publishers, as well as books contributed by recent immigrants.

Readers may obtain additional information on the library by calling chamaah at (212) 943-9690.