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History 133C

6 June 2019

Alfred Döblin: The Conflict of Ideologies

Alfred Döblin*, Schicksalsreise*(Frankfurt A.M.: Knecht, 1949).

Born Bruno Alfred Döblin on August 10, 1878, Alfred Döblin was a German doctor and author from Stettin, a city in the former Pomeranian Province of Prussia. Döblin’s family is referenced as “assimilated Jews,” and growing up, Alfred became very aware of the presence of antisemitism.[[1]](#footnote-1) With the rise of Hitler and the Nazi Party in the 1930s, Döblin made the decision to relocate with his family to a safer part of Europe. Döblin’s journey to western Europe dropped him in France in 1933. His Jewish ancestry and socialist views, added with the Nazis’ invasion of France in 1940, caused him to once again migrate west. This time, Döblin traveled all the way to the United States.[[2]](#footnote-2) By the end of World War II, Döblin found his way back to Germany preparing to orchestrate his experiences in his autobiography *Schicksalsreise*, or *Destiny’s Journey*.

*Destiny’s Journey: Flight from the Nazis* was first published by Döblin in German in 1949. The book, consisting of three separate “books”, describes Alfred and his family’s movement in exile in the late 1930s and early 1940s. In sequence of the intra-books, Döblin mentions his initial flight to France, his further flight to America, and his return to Germany at the end of the war. Döblin’s book also touches on his religious conversion to Catholicism, a step that many other exiles had gone through as well, not limited to Döblin’s case.[[3]](#footnote-3) Through searches on the Melvyl website, the first edition *Schicksalsreise* can be found in multiple universities in California, as well as widely available in libraries around the world. Most copies of the book are obviously printed in German (1949); however, *Schicksalsreise* was translated into English (1962), Japanese (1979), French (2002), and Portuguese (1996). Döblin’s work also includes his world-famous novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, published in 1929*.*

Döblin wrote *Destiny’s Journey* to record the changes in his life throughout the mid-20th century. The book was written in both a religious and political context, highlighting not only Döblin’s religious journey, but the political and social revelations he experienced upon his return to Germany in 1945. Döblin’s decision to convert from Judaism to Catholicism was a bold move; he faced criticism from other religious exiles when he controversially revealed the news at his 65th birthday party.[[4]](#footnote-4) Though his conversion was seen as a step in the wrong direction for some, Alfred’s only connection to Judaism came through his mother’s lineage. Still, once in Los Angeles, Döblin and his wife felt a sense of well-being when being told of Catholicism.[[5]](#footnote-5)

In the last section of his book, Döblin also mentions the states of Germany upon his arrival after the end of the war. In his book, Döblin analyzes the people he sees in Germany. He says that those who supported Hitler were not willing to discuss what had happened in their country.[[6]](#footnote-6) When looking from Döblin’s perspective, having seen the defeat of Germany from the outside, it is very easy and justified to criticize the remain German people. Near the end of the previously mentioned section, Alfred begs the question of how the newly created occupation would affect an already damaged Germany and its people.[[7]](#footnote-7) It is interesting to see how Döblin is guessing the possibility of a successful political influence in Germany before its division, while also comparing that possibility to the recent “back-stabbing legend” of Hitler’s Nazi party.

*Destiny’s Journey* offers readers a look at uncertainty, acceptance, renewal, and optimism following World War II. Alfred Döblin’s own journey is recounted and details the criticism and emotion he went through having to flee Germany, and in regard to his conversion. *Destiny’s Journey* was popular because of the themes of survival from the Third Reich, questioning one’s own upbringing in order to survive, and returning to a home country that had failed its people who were too blind to realize. The book is fairly accessible to readers around the world, being translated into four European and one Asian language. Reviews and interpretations allow for extended research and content to be available to people interested in a personal account detailing the shifts of Germany’s many political influences from the 1930s to mid-1940s.

Annotated Bibliography in Chronological Order

Von Hofe, Harold. "German Literature in Exile: Alfred Döblin." *The German Quarterly* 17, no. 1 (1944): 28-31. doi:10.2307/400027.

This article excerpt explains the fate of Alfred Döblin’s journey out of Germany with the rise of the Nazis. While not comparing his situation directly with those of other authors in exile, Von Hofe mentions that it was becoming common for authors with opposing views to flee the Nazis. The journal recounts Döblin’s 65th birthday party, when he controversially announced his conversion to Christianity. Von Hofe seems to have had a connection with Döblin; Döblin tells Von Hofe about the diverse occupations of his four sons. As can be seen, Von Hofe published his work before Döblin published *Schicksalsreise.*

Döblin, Alfred. *Schicksalsreise*. 1st ed. Frankfurt A.M.: Knecht, 1949.

Huntington, Christopher. 1950. "Unsere Sorge: Der Mensch, Der Unsterbliche Mensch, and Schicksalsreise (Book Review)." *Renascence* 3 (1): 59. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1290848960?accountid=14522>

This is a review of two of Döblin’s most well-known books: *Berlin Alexanderplatz* and *Schicksalsreise*. Huntington describes how both have a connection to Döblin and his wife’s decision to convert from Judaism to Christianity once they had settled in Los Angeles, California. It mentions Döblin’s relationship with God in the older years of his life, as well as his attempt to make other people close to him understand the importance of religion.

Zohn, Harry. *Books Abroad* 25, no. 2 (1951): 154. doi:10.2307/40089999. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40089999>

Harry Zohn’s article is a brief summary of *Schicksalsreise,* published about two years after Döblin published his work. Zohn provides a very short summary of the book but makes sure to point out two main ideas: Döblin’s intellectually driven conversion to Catholicism, as well as the importance of his reaction upon his return to Germany after World War II and the fall of Hitler.

Marcuse, Ludwig. "Alfred Döblin." *The German Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (1958): 4-5. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/402279>.

This source was only in German, so I used Google Translate to get a rough translation. It seems to mention Döblin’s later life, in which he withdrew from Germany one last time, being unsuccessful in his work. Döblin also came to separate himself between a “humanist” and a “progressive.” Leaning more to the progressive side, he does not have, what seems like, a set list for his later life. He simply followed the flow, and that is probably what allowed him to be one of the greatest German authors in history.

Simon, John. "Pursued by Nazis and Other Demons." T*he New York Times*. July 12, 1992. Accessed May 17, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/07/12/books/pursued-by-nazis-and-other-demons.html>.

A more critical approach of a review, John Simon summarizes what seems to be ALL of *Schicksalsreise.* He summarizes Döblin’s time in France, working at a Ministry. Simon describes Döblin’s religious conversion, being very critical and basically saying that religion does not even matter to Döblin. Simon even goes so far off his path that he ends up criticizing the German people, who realized they had many social, political, and industrial issues to deal with after the war ended.

Yerburgh, M.R. “Book Reviews: Social Sciences.” *Library Journal* 117, no. 8 (May 1992): 90. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=9205042518&site=ehost-live>.

Yerburgh gives a brief review of *Destiny’s Journey*, focusing on the importance of both Döblin’s physical and mental journey during his eight years in exile. Yerburgh praises the book, particularly Döblin’s conversion and return back to Germany, as well as the book’s academic importance.

Sander, Gabriele. *Alfred Döblin*. Stuttgart: Reclam, 2001.

This source was found through Alfred Döblin’s Wikipedia reference section. It is cited many times and serves as a biographical source for Döblin.

Sackett, Robert E. 2002. "Döblin's Destiny: The Author of Schicksalsreise as Christian, Jew and German." *Neophilologus* 86 (4): 587-608. doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1023/A:1019689407725. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/196321143?accountid=14522>.

Sackett describes the complexity of Döblin’s life, being a “former Jew,” a Catholic convert, and a German dealing with the repercussions of home country destroyed from the war. Interpreting Döblin’s conflicts with his conversion, Sackett summarizes that Döblin’s book is part of the problem of his coming to terms with his past decision. He mentions Döblin asking himself what he has done in becoming Catholic, points out the self-conflict that he has subjected on himself, and even mentions the criticism Döblin received for his conversion.

McFarland, Robert B. 2007. “Elective Divinities: Exile and Religious Conversion in Alfred Döblin’s ‘Schicksalsreise’ (‘Destiny’s Journey’), Karl Jakob Hirsch’s ‘Heimkehr Zu Gott’ (‘Return to God’), and Karl Stern’s ‘The Pillar of Fire.’” *Christianity & Literature* 57 (1): 35–61. doi:10.1177/014833310705700103.

McFarland’s article has to be one of the most interesting sources I have found. He describes Döblin’s situation of being an author in exile, while also adding two other authors into the discussion, who went through similar situations of exile. McFarland states that his insight from the books are not the following of the authors’ fates after conversion, but rather the way their conversions catalyzed future moments in their lives.

Bamforth, Iain. "Alfred Döblin." *British Journal of General Practice* 59, no. 569 (2009): 958. doi:10.3399/bjgp09x473349.

This source is a quick biographical account of Döblin. It was interesting to find this source on the *British Journal of General Practice*, but Döblin’s occupation and credential as a doctor allowed him to be recognized in a variety of different fields.

Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Alfred Döblin." *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. December 07, 2018. Accessed May 4, 2019. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Alfred-Doblin>. This is solely a biographical source of Döblin. It has information regarding family history, his movement west to France and America, and his return to Germany in 1945.

1. Gabriele Sander, *Alfred Döblin* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Iain Bamforth, "Alfred Döblin," *British Journal of General Practice* 59, no. 569 (2009), doi:10.3399/bjgp09x473349. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Robert B. Mcfarland, "Elective Divinities: Exile and Religious Conversion in Alfred Döblin’s Schicksalsreise (Destiny’s Journey), Karl Jakob Hirschs Heimkehr Zu Gott (Return to God), and Karl Sterns the Pillar of Fire," *Christianity & Literature* 57, no. 1 (2007): 35, doi:10.1177/014833310705700103. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. John Simon, "Pursued by Nazis and Other Demons," The New York Times, July 12, 1992, accessed May 17, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/1992/07/12/books/pursued-by-nazis-and-other-demons.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Christopher Huntington. 1950. "Unsere Sorge: Der Mensch, Der Unsterbliche Mensch, and Schicksalsreise (Book Review)." *Renascence* 3 (1): 59. https://search.proquest.com/docview/1290848960?accountid=14522. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Alfred Döblin, *Destiny’s Journey*, edited by Edgar Pässler. Translated by Edna McCown. New York: Paragon House, 1992, pp. 284-85. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)