The Life and Works of Wolfgang Borchert

Gordon Burgess

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Wolfgang Borchert has been called "the most important voice of post-war German literature." He came to fame literally overnight when his play *Draussen vor der Tür* (The Man Outside) was broadcast in the British zone of occupied Germany in February 1947, evoking impassioned reactions both for and against. An examination of the plight of the returning soldier in the postwar world, it has become an icon of its time, capturing the futility of war and the true cost of the destruction in both physical and spiritual terms. Worldwide, *Draussen vor der Tür* has been produced more often than any other German play. Between January 1946 and his death in November 1947, Borchert wrote over forty short stories on the model of Hemingway and Wolfe, many of them highly experimental. Indeed, he is widely regarded as having introduced the short-story form into German literature. This is the first full-length account of Borchert's life and works in English. It benefits from unprecedented access to archival material and from interviews with Borchert's contemporaries. The study links Borchert's own literary ambition with the enlightened family circumstances in which he grew up, and charts his development from a rebellious teenager with a passion for theater via his fighting as a soldier on Germany's Eastern Front and his imprisonment by the Nazis to his brief but intense career as a writer.

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G. J. A. B.
May 2003

Abbreviations

GW	Wolfgang Borchert, *Das Gesamtwerk* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1949). Page references are to the reset Rowohlt edition of 1957.
Hoffnung	Wolfgang Borchert, *". . . tatsächlich die einzige Hoffnung": Briefe aus den letzten Monaten,* ed. Irmgard Schindler and Michael Töteberg (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1997). (*Privatdruck*).
Pack das Leben	*"Pack das Leben bei den Haaren": Wolfgang Borchert in neuer Sicht,* ed. Gordon Burgess and Hans-Gerd Winter (Hamburg: Dölling und Galitz, 1996).
Rühmkorf	Peter Rühmkorf, *Wolfgang Borchert mit Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1961).
Schatten	Wolfgang Borchert, *Allein mit meinem Schatten und dem Mond: Briefe, Gedichte und Dokumente,* ed. Gordon Burgess and Michael Töteberg with Irmgard Schindler (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1996).
Schröder	Claus B. Schröder, *Wolfgang Borchert* (Munich: Heyn, 1988).
SG	Wolfgang Borchert, *The Sad Geraniums,* trans. Keith Hammett (London: Calder & Boyars / New York: The Ecco Press, 1973). Obvious typographical errors have been corrected.
SW	Wolfgang Borchert, *The Man Outside: Selected Works,* trans. David Porter (London and New York: Marion Boyars, 1996). All English translations of Borchert's works are from this edition, unless otherwise stated.
TG	Wolfgang Borchert, *Die traurigen Geranien und andere Geschichten aus dem Nachlaß* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1962). Quoted from paperback edition 1967.

Vergangenes Leben	Hertha Borchert, *Vergangenes Leben*. Unpublished typescript.
WBA	Wolfgang Borchert Archive, Hamburg.

Unless otherwise stated,

- all letters to and from Borchert are quoted from *Allein mit meinem Schatten und dem Mond*; and
- all material based on reminiscences by Hertha Borchert is taken from *Vergangenes Leben*.

Introduction

> Auslöffeln, aussaufen, auslecken, auskosten, ausquetschen will ich dieses herrliche heiße sinnlose tolle unverständliche Leben! (GW 56)

THESE WORDS FROM Wolfgang Borchert's short prose text "Gespräch über den Dächern" were written from the heart. Borchert was born in Hamburg on 20 May 1921, and died on 20 November 1947. His passion for life never left him, whether he was in military service on the Russian front, languishing in German military prisons under the Nazi regimes, or being treated in a succession of military and civilian hospitals.

Looking back, 1921 was not a good year to have been born. The Weimar Republic, established in 1918, was to get progressively weaker as rampant inflation led to the Great Slump, and ended with the takeover of Hitler's National Socialist Party in 1933. For the next twelve years, Germans lived under fascism. On the one hand 1945 brought liberation, but, on the other, Germany became an occupied and subsequently a split country. The immediate postwar years saw deprivation and hardship for ordinary citizens, caused partly by the physical destruction of the country, partly by shortages of everything from foodstuffs to paper to fuel, partly by conditions imposed by the occupying allied armies, and even partly by the atrocious winter of 1946.

These were the times Borchert lived through. After doing badly at school, he trained, on the insistence of his parents, as an apprentice in a bookshop. But after witnessing one of the great German actors of the period, Gustaf Gründgens, playing Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in December 1937, he wanted to do only one thing: become an actor himself. While continuing to work in the bookshop, he took private acting lessons. He qualified as an actor in March 1941, and immediately got a position with a professional traveling troupe from early April to early June. He was later to refer to these two months as the happiest time of his life, and, indeed, from then on his life was to be subjected to the deprivations of military service, imprisonment, and illness.

In June 1941, at the age of 20, Borchert was called up for military service and fought as a private in the tank corps on the German Eastern front before being wounded. But at this point his life takes a different turn from what might be expected. Between May 1942 and September

1944 he was arrested and put on trial three times for various offenses against the State, all of which could have resulted in a capital verdict. Although acquitted on the first occasion, he was found guilty at the two later trials and sentenced to periods of imprisonment and fighting in a punishment battalion in Russia. His health ruined by conditions in Russia and in the German military prisons, he returned to his home city (and his family) in May 1945, only to become bedridden for the last two years of his life. In September 1947 he was sent by train to Switzerland in the hope of receiving better medical treatment than that available in Germany at that time (the Allies refused Germans access to the new wonder drug, penicillin, for example), but died, a hopeless case, in a Basel clinic on 20 November 1947.

As Stephen Spender wrote in his introduction to the 1952 English translation of Borchert's works:

> This appears to be the life of a perfect victim of our times, a man whose soul must bear simply the impress of the world of dictatorship and war and post-war horror into which he was born. It is in some ways like the life of a man born and bred in a prison cell.[1]

All this would be of little more than passing interest and sympathy, perhaps, if it were not for the remarkable last two years of Borchert's life. His fame rests on the works he wrote between January 1946 and November 1947. He wrote because, with his debilitating illness, it was the only way to earn money, and because in the circumstances this was the only means of expression left to him as an actor *manqué*.

Borchert never intended to become a writer, and, indeed, never regarded himself seriously as one. Throughout his short adult life, he always gave his profession as an actor, and never as a writer, even after his illness had confined him to a bedridden existence. In his letters, he constantly refers to himself in this vein: "Nach der Schule zuerst Buchhändler, dann Schauspieler" (27 May 1947); "ich bin ja von Haus aus [. . .] Schauspieler" (17 August 1947). In official documents, too, he is always described as an actor, as for example in the verdict of his third trial ("Zivilberuf Schauspieler") or in his "Antrag auf Ausstellung eines Ausweises für politisch, rassisch und religiös durch den Nazismus Verfolgte" made to the British Military Government in Hamburg on 15 May 1946.

During his last two years, he captured and distilled his experiences of home life, war, imprisonment, and postwar reality in over fifty short stories and a play about a soldier returning home from the war. This play, *Draussen vor der Tür* (The Man Outside), was to become a staple of German theater from 1947 onward, and is generally regarded as both

epitomizing German postwar reality specifically, and formulating a universal appeal against the suffering, injustice, and misery of war in general.

The appeal of Borchert's works is broad, ongoing, and international. *Draussen vor der Tür* was premiered as a stage play at the Hamburg *Kammerspiele* Theater on 21 November 1947, the day after Borchert died, and has been one of the most-often performed postwar German dramas, with some 150 productions in the professional German theater (West and East) between the years 1947 and 2000, plus at least forty amateur productions in West and East Germany. Outside Germany, there have been some fifty-five productions, of which approximately a quarter were in the amateur theater, often in universities and colleges, including Sydney, Natal, Harvard, Houston (Texas) and Louisville (Kentucky). (Figures are approximate because a fire destroyed records in the archive of Rowohlt, the publishers of the play.) In addition, the play has been translated into over fifteen languages. It was first translated into English by David Porter, in 1948, when it was broadcast three times on the BBC's Third Programme. It was translated again in 1997 by Thomas Fisher (under the title *Outside on the Street*), when this new version won the Allied Domecq Translation Award and prompted the *London Sunday Times* to hail Borchert as "a lost star of German drama."[2] As well as forming the basis for a number of adaptations as a radio play, beginning with the first broadcast in February 1947, *Draussen vor der Tür* was made into a film, premiered in 1948, *Liebe 47* (Love in '47), and has also been twice reworked as an opera: by Sándor Balassa (in Hungarian) in 1977, and by Xaver Thoma in 1994. Plans for a ballet based on the work are currently under way.

Borchert's short stories, too, have been hugely popular within Germany. The paperback edition of *Draussen vor der Tür* and selected short stories, first published in 1956, had sold over two-and-a-quarter million copies by 1995, and had thereby become Rowohlt's best-selling paperback ever. The stories, too, have been widely translated, into twenty-four languages at the last count (in 2000). Together with *Draussen vor der Tür* and the poems, selections of the short stories have been, and still are, available in a large number of recordings: a bibliography published in 1991 listed eighteen readings or performances on tape, record, or CD; by 2001, a further fifteen had been recorded. Two widely differing interpretations, for example, appeared in 1997. One, which also included excerpts from Borchert's nonliterary writings, was a straightforward reading by the actors Barbara Nüsse and Ulrich Tukur. Entitled *Mal Himmel, mal Hölle* (Sometimes Heaven, Sometimes Hell), it sought to provide a picture of Borchert's life through his works and letters, a life

that the cassette blurb claimed was "characterized by extremes."[3] The CD *Gespräch über den Dächern* (Conversation over the Roofs), on the other hand, makes no such claims. It contains a number of Borchert's short stories and poems set to music by the ex-GDR rock group Bayon and read by Bernd Lange, formerly an actor in the German National Theater in Weimar. *Gespräch über den Dächern* was first performed in the GDR, as a form of protest against the authorities, in 1984, and repeated in both East and West Germany many times since.[4] Finally, we may note that Borchert's output of lyric poetry — he wrote a vast amount but destroyed most of it before he left for Switzerland in September 1947 — has also repeatedly been set to music over the years in a variety of musical styles.

Yet Borchert's writings have had a somewhat curious publishing history in Germany.[5] Individual poems, short stories, and excerpts from *Draussen vor der Tür* appeared in newspapers and magazines from 1942 onward. In December 1946 twelve poems were published as a hardback by the Hamburgische Bücherei under the title *Laterne, Nacht und Sterne* (Streetlamp, Night and Stars); this was followed in 1947 by *Draussen vor der Tür* and two collections of short stories. In 1949, all these publications were amalgamated and augmented with other poems and stories to form the so-called *Das Gesamtwerk* (Complete Works), published jointly by the Hamburgische Bücherei and Rowohlt. This collection has been reprinted down the years with the text and title unchanged, and by the 1990s had sold almost half a million copies.[6] However, this so-called *Gesamtwerk* does not, in fact, contain Borchert's complete works by any means. Indeed, at least five short stories that had already appeared in print were not included in the collection. Some (but not all) of these appeared in a further collection of short stories that came out in 1962 under the title *Die traurigen Geranien und andere Geschichten aus dem Nachlaß* (published in English as *The Sad Geraniums and Other Stories* in 1973). This in turn was augmented by *Allein mit meinem Schatten und dem Mond* (Alone with my Shadow and the Moon) in 1996, which contained further unpublished poems, a comprehensive selection of Borchert's letters, and other material. Among this material was a prose piece about a fallen comrade published in 1943, entitled "Requiem für einen Freund" (Requiem for a Friend) and Borchert's book reviews that had appeared in 1946 and 1947.

Even so, there is much that still remains unpublished. *Allein mit meinem Schatten und dem Mond,* for example, contains only about two-thirds of Borchert's extant letters, and it is known that many of the letters he wrote under the Nazis were destroyed by those who received

them at the time, since they regarded them as being politically dangerous to both writer and recipient alike. Some were confiscated by the Gestapo. The majority of Borchert's poems have not appeared in print, and the same is true of the three plays he wrote (one together with a school friend, Günther Mackenthun) in 1938, 1939, and 1940.

Serious academic interest in Borchert's works began with two dissertations presented in 1951, one dealing exclusively with Borchert — Hille Hermenau's "Das Erlebnis der menschlichen Verlassenheit bei Wolfgang Borchert" (The Experience of Human Desolation in Wolfgang Borchert), University of Cape Town — and the other devoting a chapter to *Draussen vor der Tür*: William Anders's "Der Heimkehrer aus zwei Weltkriegen im deutschen Drama" (The Returning Soldier from Two World Wars in German Drama), University of Pennsylvania. The fact that both were written outside Germany was to set a pattern for many years to come. Of the fifty or so known theses and dissertations devoted exclusively or comparatively to Borchert's writings presented between 1951 and 1996 (eleven were *Diplomarbeiten,* dissertations written for the equivalent of a first degree), thirty were written for universities outside East and West Germany.[7] In addition, some twenty books and pamphlets of varying length were published between 1947 and 1996, plus some three hundred articles in academic monographs and journals.

There is ample proof of interest in Borchert at a wider level in Germany. At least seven schools, including the one Borchert attended (and left somewhat ignominiously), are known to bear his name. The latest is Gymnasium Langenzenn near Nuremberg in Bavaria: the renaming of the school had to be approved by no less than the Bavarian Minister of Education, and was the result of a long campaign involving pupils, parents, and teachers. Apart from the Wolfgang Borchert Schools, there are three monuments to him in Hamburg alone. The first two were both situated in Eppendorf, the Hamburg district in which Borchert was born and spent his early childhood. One, under the so-called "Friedenseiche" tree, was unveiled in July 1984 and contains part of Borchert's anti-war statement "Dann gibt es nur Eins!" (There's Only One Thing): "Sag NEIN!" The second, unveiled in October 1994, shows a mother and child, and alludes to the same work: "Müter: Sag NEIN!" The third is situated near the Literaturhaus on the Außenalster Lake. Unveiled in October 1996, it contains lines from Borchert's short prose text "Generation ohne Abschied" (Generation Without Farewell).

This third monument was financed and organized by the Wolfgang-Borchert-Denkmalverein. In fact, for several years there were not one but two societies bearing Borchert's name. The *Internationale Wolfgang-*

Borchert-Gesellschaft, founded in 1988, aims to support and promote research into his life and work. In 2000, the Society had some three hundred members worldwide, and it has published an annual journal since 1989. The Society works closely with the Wolfgang-Borchert Archive in the Hamburg State and University Library. The basis for the Archive was a donation of works, letters, and other materials by Hertha Borchert, and it has since systematically collected and catalogued material relating to Borchert and his works.

Further widespread interest in Borchert was generated by a traveling exhibition on his life and times. First put on at Castle Reinbek near Hamburg in November 1996, it has since been shown in Mainz, Hamburg, Basel, Brussels, Pinneberg, Bayrreuth, and Heidelberg. The German Post Office brought out a special stamp to commemorate the seventy-fifth anniversary of Borchert's birth in May 1996, and at the time of writing, the German Railways were considering naming one of the trains on the route between Hamburg (where he was born) and Basel (where he died) after him.

Borchert's work has inspired sculptors and musicians, librettists and choreographers. It has also inspired graphic artists and painters, as well as other writers. Authors of the caliber of Heinrich Böll and Siegfried Lenz, for example, have acknowledged their debt to him.

For all this, knowledge of Borchert outside the German-speaking world has been limited primarily to colleges and universities where German is taught as a foreign language. This accounts, for example, for the relatively large number of amateur productions in foreign universities and colleges mentioned earlier, as well as for the reactions of critics to the new translation and production of *Outside on the Street* in 1998. As indicated earlier, this is not due to his work being unavailable in English translations; but what has been so far lacking is a comprehensive examination in English of his life and works. The only detailed study to have appeared in English is Erwin Warkentin's *Unpublishable Works,* the scope of which is largely limited to Borchert's writings during the National Socialist period.[8]

The following examination draws primarily on both the published and unpublished primary sources listed in the Abbreviations above, augmented by four accounts of his life and works. The first, by the Hamburg poet Peter Rühmkorf, appeared in 1961, and is lavishly illustrated, as befits a work appearing as one of a series of *Bildmonographien*. In an attempt to demonstrate the close links between Borchert's life and works, Rühmkorf intersperses his account with Borchert's poems and sometimes lengthy excerpts from his prose texts. Rühmkorf's study has

been reprinted several times, and the bibliography was updated in 1991. The second was by Helmut Gumtau, and appeared in 1969 as volume 55 in the Series *Köpfe des XX. Jahrhunderts*. Gumtau was the first to reveal the existence of Borchert's 1940 play *Granvella. Der schwarze Kardinal* (Granvella: The Black Cardinal). The then-GDR writer and journalist Claus B. Schröder wrote the third biography. Schröder's work, first published in 1985 and reprinted as a paperback in 1988, benefited from interviews that he conducted with surviving friends and relatives, including Borchert's mother, Hertha, who died at the age of ninety in 1985. The fourth account remains unpublished: Hertha Borchert's typescript autobiography *Vergangenes Leben* (Past Life), which she wrote some time in the 1960s as a corrective to Rühmkorf's study, since she felt this presented, in part, an unbalanced picture.

Quite apart from being available only in German, however, all these biographies are now outdated owing to recent discoveries, both about Borchert's life and of new material written by, to, and about him. The time has come for a reappraisal of Borchert's importance and his place not only as a writer of the immediate postwar period in Germany, but as an authentic and compelling witness to the turbulent times in which he lived, particularly the Nazi years in Germany. It is hoped that this account will not only provide a fresh view of Borchert's life and works, but will also introduce him to an English-speaking audience to whom he has, hitherto, largely remained unknown.

Notes

[1] Stephen Spender, Introduction to Wolfgang Borchert: *The Man Outside* (London: Calder & Boyars, 1952), 1.

[2] The play was premiered to positive reviews at the Gate Theater, London, in June 1998. David Porter's translation was subsequently published as part of the collection of works in *The Man Outside*.

[3] "Dieses Autorenportrait stellt das von Extremen geprägte Leben eines jungen Manschen vor, der ein Werk hinterlassen hat, das heute moderner und aktueller denn je erscheint." *Mal Himmel, mal Hölle!* (Hamburg: voices autorenportrait, 1997).

[4] See the notes accompanying the CD for details: *Gespräch über den Dächern* (Hamburg: Litraton, 1997).

[5] A comprehensive list of publications by and about Borchert to 1981 is given in Gordon Burgess, *Wolfgang Borchert.* Hamburger Bibliographien, vol. 24 (Hamburg: Christians, 1985). This is supplemented by Sonja Valentin, "Verzeichnis der Literatur zu Wolfgang Borchert," in Gordon Burgess & Hans-Gerd Winter, ed.: *Pack das Leben bei den Haaren: Wolfgang Borchert in neuer Sicht* (Hamburg: Dölling & Galitz, 1996), 296–303.

[6] The text was reset in 1957, and this edition has formed the basis for every subsequent reprint by the Rowohlt Verlag.

[7] These and the following figures are based on the bibliographies by Burgess (1985) and Valentin (1996).

[8] Erwin J. Warkentin, *Unpublishable Works: Wolfgang Borchert's Literary Production in Nazi Germany* (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1997). Warkentin comes to some rather dubious conclusions. He considers, for instance, that Borchert's "early works to some extent espoused National Socialist ideals" and that Borchert "was not necessarily an enemy of National Socialism" (97), and he claims that "Borchert's leaving the Church strongly suggests a pro-Nazi position" (98). Neither of these views is tenable. Warkentin's statement that "Borchert admired certain aspects of National Socialism, in particular the Führerprinzip as embodied by Hitler" (64) likewise cannot be corroborated by any evidence, biographical or otherwise.

1: Childhood, School, Apprenticeship: 1921–1940

Family Background: The Early Years in Hamburg, 1914–33

WOLFGANG BORCHERT WAS BORN at three o'clock on what his mother later recalled as the most splendid spring morning of 20 May 1921, as the only son of Hertha and Fritz Borchert. At the time of his birth, they were living at 82 Tarpenbekstrasse, in the Hamburg suburb of Eppendorf.

On the morning of his twenty-fifth birthday, Borchert placed a letter at his mother's bedroom door, recalling and embellishing the night of his birth, and wondering whether his attempt to live in this world had failed. At the same time, however, Borchert the writer and optimist shows through:

> Heute nacht nach 25 Jahren, früh 3 Uhr, trennen uns nur 6 Meter und eine Wand. Der Himmel rauscht einen wohligen Regen durch das Dunkel auf die Erde, der die Pflanzen im Schlaf vor Lust seufzen macht. Oder weint er Tränen der Reue, daß er tatenlos schwieg, als ich mich vor 25 Jahren untreu und dumm davonstahl? Hätte ich bleiben sollen? [. . .] Die Trennung ist unwiderruflich. Doch ich muß probieren, die nächsten 25 Jahre nicht restlos zu versagen und zu verzagen. (Unpublished manuscript, WBA)

From an early age, Borchert was prone to illness, catching one disease after another and with his father repeatedly taking him to the doctor. Nevertheless, as his mother was later to recall, despite all their difficulties, the early years of Borchert's life, before he went to school, were the happiest the family experienced. In view of his aspirations to be an actor and his subsequent career as a writer, it is worth taking a brief look here at his family background and the interest his parents took in the artistic scene around them in their early years in Hamburg.

Fritz Borchert, the third of five children, and the youngest son, grew up in Wittenburg in Mecklenburg, northeast Germany. His mother, Elise, was a pernickety housewife, small and with a delicate constitution, who constantly wore a beret in the belief that this would prevent head-

aches. His father, Friedrich, was a different kettle of fish entirely. A chimneysweep by trade, in his spare time he was a passionate huntsman who loved to write verse and tell stories. As a child, Fritz was often taken on walks with his father and listened to his entertaining stories. Later, he took his own son on walks with him, and would make up stories. Indeed, this was one of Fritz's overriding memories:

> Wenn ich an seine ersten Kinderjahre zurückdenke, dann sehe ich mich in der Dämmerung bei ihm sitzen und höre mich erzählen. Das war das Wesentliche: er wollte etwas erzählt, nicht etwas vorgelesen haben, am liebsten etwas frei Erfundenes; Tiergeschichten, die im Walde spielten, mochte er besonders gern hören. Vielleicht hing es damit zusammen, daß ich ihn als Vier- und Fünfjährigen oft mitnahm, wenn ich mit meiner Klasse kleine Wanderungen machte, die oft in einen Wald führten.[1]

After studying in Neukloster, some seventy-five miles east of his home town, Fritz qualified as a teacher, and shortly afterward, at the age of twenty-one, applied for the position of teacher and organist in the village of Kirchenwerder in Vierlanden, a low-lying, rich agricultural area on the outskirts of Hamburg. He was more successful than he might have anticipated. He fell in love with sixteen-year-old Hertha, the daughter of his headmaster and colleague Carl Salchow and wife Luise.

Hertha Borchert had been born in 1885 in Altengamme in Vierlanden, the youngest of five children. When Fritz first proposed marriage, however, her father considered her to be too young to marry at the age of sixteen, and he imposed a lengthy engagement of two years. In 1912, Fritz moved to Hamburg-Eppendorf, where he had been appointed to a better-paid post.

After their marriage on 29 May 1914, Hertha joined Fritz in Hamburg. From the turn of the century to the 1930s, the artistic and cultural scene in Hamburg was, after Berlin's, one of the most avant-garde in Germany.[2] The Borcherts met up with one of Fritz's friends from his days as a student teacher: Paul Schwemer, by then a painter and graphic artist. By all accounts, he was an exhilarating and charismatic figure, well versed in literature and the arts, and well known in the Hamburg of the time, attracting an eclectic circle of bohemians and artists: painters, musicians, Dadaists, sculptors, dancers. Hertha and Fritz lived for years on the fringe of this outsider-society where convention was frowned upon. They went to literary evenings at Paul's and once a month they would join a party in the Kaiserkeller Restaurant under the Arcades in the center of Hamburg, where young men would rant against all tradition and where fierce arguments would be waged.

During their courtship in Vierlanden, Fritz had tried to involve his young bride-to-be in his own interest in literature by reading aloud to her from his own edition of Gerhart Hauptmann's *Die versunkene Glocke* (1896, translated as *The Sunken Bell* in 1944), a neo-Romantic German *Märchendrama* popular at the time — indeed, it was Hauptmann's most often produced work during his lifetime.[3] Despite Fritz's reading clearly and dramatically, Hertha understood not a word. Here in Hamburg, she was confronted at first hand with experimental literature, texts that deliberately made no sense at all.

The couple's cultural interests widened after the First World War, when they took out season tickets for premieres in the Hamburg *Kammerspiele* Theater. Founded by Erich Ziegel the day before the outbreak of the war, the *Kammerspiele* was one of most progressive and experimental theaters in the Weimar Republic. The first play performed was Wedekind's *Hidalla*. The Borcherts saw plays by contemporary dramatists including, apart from Wedekind, Strindberg, Hasenclever, and Unruh. The ensemble included Gustaf Gründgens who, together with Pamela Wedekind and Erika and Klaus Mann, played in the premiere of Klaus Mann's *Anja und Esther* in 1925. Hertha and Fritz Borchert read the plays they had seen, and discussed them with others who stayed behind after the performances, a group who became known as the *Kammerspielgemeinde* (Patrons of the *Kammerspiele*). Thus, they became acquainted with a new set of actors, dancers, dramatists, and poets. These included the sculptor Friedrich Wield who had lived in Paris for ten years, had studied with Auguste Rodin, and was one of the founders of the Hamburg Secession; the playwright Robert Walter; and the poet Carl Albert Lange with whom Wolfgang Borchert was to strike up a friendship later. At the center of this group was H. W. Fischer, editor of the newspaper *Hamburger Zeitung* (later the *Hamburger Anzeiger*).

One evening, in 1927, Hertha Borchert was talking to her husband about her childhood in Vierlanden. Fritz commented that it sounded like a story, and encouraged her to write it down. The next morning she wrote her first story — in the dialect of her childhood, Vierlander Low German (*Veerlanner Platt*) — "Ole un neie Tied" (Old and New Time), which was published in the *Hamburger Nachrichten* newspaper on Sunday 4 December 1927. Fritz bought a typewriter, quite an investment for the time, especially for a couple of their means, solely to encourage her to carry on writing: he also typed up her stories for her. Her second story, "Leno Tante op Beseuk" (A Visit from Aunt Lena) was published in the same *Hamburger Nachrichten* newspaper on Sunday 11 March

1928. This was followed by one story after another, all published in newspapers and Low German periodicals.

Within a short time Hertha Borchert had acquired quite a reputation. Where she had once felt at ease with the Dadaists and their nonsense-literature, now she found a new circle of friends joined by their interest in Low German. Among them were Aline Bussmann, an actress in the Hamburg *Niederdeutsche Bühne* (Low German Theater), renamed in 1947 as the *Ohnsorg-Theater* after the Low German writer Richard Ohnsorg; Hugo Sieker, an editor with the *Hamburger Anzeiger;* and the writer, editor, and publisher Bernhard Meyer-Marwitz. All three were to play a crucial role in Wolfgang Borchert's life. Aline Bussmann became his spiritual mentor, correcting Borchert's early work: it was to her that he sent some of his earliest poems for comment in November 1939, and his first postwar short story "Die Hundeblume" (The Dandelion, originally entitled "Aline") in March 1946. Aline Bussmann's lawyer-husband, Dr. Carl Hager, successfully defended Borchert in all three of his court-martial trials. Hugo Sieker was responsible for Borchert's first publication (the short poem "Reiterlied," Horseman's Song) in the *Hamburger Anzeiger* in 1938. It was to Sieker that Borchert sent "Die Hundeblume" in February 1946: Sieker published it in an abbreviated version in two parts in the *Hamburger Freie Presse* newspaper on 30 April and 6 May 1946. And Bernhard Meyer-Marwitz published Borchert's first small book, twelve poems under the title *Laterne, Nacht und Sterne* at Christmas 1946, and edited and co-published *Das Gesamtwerk* in 1949.

Thus, Wolfgang Borchert grew up in a household in which the creative arts, and especially literature and the theater, were valued and practiced. This is not to say that he always appreciated it, in his early years at any rate. One example may suffice here. His mother was invited to give a public reading from her work, appearing together with the well-known writer Hermann Claudius. What is more, the reading was to be broadcast live on the radio. Fritz stayed at home to listen to the broadcast. Wolfgang, nine or ten years old at the time, refused to take any notice of the event. As Hertha read from her works, she glanced over the audience, and there, hiding in the back row, was her son, stealing a look at her. On his return home, Wolfgang made no mention of where he had been.

The Nazis Come to Power, 1933–37

At first sight, Low German literature, with its evocation of a rural idyll, distant from the politics of the modern world, might seem a world apart from the new society envisaged by the Nazis.[4] But the National Socialist

state encompassed and controlled every aspect of its citizens' activities, as Goebbels proudly announced, for example, in his speech to mark the foundation of the *Reichskulturkammer* in November 1933.[5] And, indeed, officially, National Socialism was quickly welcomed by Low German writers, who saw the new government as supportive of their cause. As early as 11 April 1933, committee members of two major Low German organizations wrote a communal letter to Reichskanzler Hitler welcoming the new government,[6] and in its Summer Number of 1933 the journal *Mitteilungen aus dem Quickborn,* which published Low German literature, stated: "Daher atmet die niederdeutsche Bewegung heute auf. Der Nationalsozialismus ist ihre *Befreiung*!"[7] As a member of the Low German Society *Vereinigung Quickborn,* Hertha Borchert found herself first in the *Kampfbund für deutsche Kultur* and then in the *Reichsbund Volkstum und Heimat.*[8]

But through Hertha's success as a writer came the family's first brush with the new Movement after 1933. Hitler had become Chancellor on 30 January 1933, had dissolved Parliament, the Reichstag, on 1 February, and the Reichstag building had gone up in flames on 27 February. Elections were held on 5 March, which swept Hitler to power: the NSDAP received 43.9% of the vote, ushering in twelve years of Nazi dictatorship. On 24 March the Enabling Act was passed for four years. The first concentration camp was opened in the same month. On 1 April the authorities called for a boycott of Jewish shops. From 7 April on Jews were forbidden from holding office as civil servants. Libraries and bookshops were occupied in April 1933, and so-called "harmful works" removed. Trade unions were abolished on 2 May. The first book burning took place on 10 May. A purge began of all public offices institutions including schools. Fritz Borchert, who at first had reacted aggressively and provocatively against the new orders in school, was in the long run unwilling or unable to speak out against the new authorities. He kept his teaching post, becoming a (passive) member of the Nazi Party when all teachers were required to do so in 1936.

The Hamburg radio station, the *Reichssender Hamburg,* which broadcast Hertha Borchert's stories (read by herself or Aline Bussmann) began receiving anonymous letters denouncing her as an enemy of the state: initially, these letters were consigned to the wastebasket. Friends tried to protect her. Walter Gättke, the Head of the Low German Department of the radio station, put his own job in danger and wrote to her in secret, warning her that she must have enemies and that the writer of the letters must know her well. Nevertheless, the station continued to broadcast Hertha's works, and her writings were still published: in 1934,

there appeared Volume 48 of the *Quickborn-Bücherei: "Sünnros"* (Sunflower), stories by Hertha Borchert. But the incriminating letters continued to arrive.

In the end, the letter-writer sent a signed letter to the *Reichssender Hamburg,* which was passed on to the *Reichsverband Deutscher Schriftsteller* (Reich Union of German Writers) for further investigation. Walter Gättke, as the Deputy Director of the District Association, wrote officially to Hertha Borchert on 16 August 1935. The tone of his letter was apologetic, and generally sympathetic. It began: "Ich bin leider in der betrüblichen Situation, Ihnen offiziell mit einer Anfrage näherzutreten, die durch folgenden Zwischenfall ins Rollen gekommen ist."[9] There were two main points at issue:

1. That on 19 March 1933 Hertha Borchert had seen the SA marching past in the street, and had said: "Wenn man diese jungen Burschen (für Burschen war ein anderer Ausdruck gebraucht) in den braunen Blusen daherkommen sieht, kann einem die Wut kommen! Das werden wir den Nazis einmal alles heimzahlen."

2. That the Borchert family had "eine sonderbare Stellung" to the National Socialist movement. This was later supported by claims that: (a) they had not hung out the Nazi flag on public holidays; (b) they switched off their radio when the program "Stunde der Nation" came on; (c) their son, Wolfgang, did not make the Hitler salute when saying hello; and (d) Hertha Borchert found the Nazi army uniform ugly and un-German.

It now developed that the letters denouncing Hertha Borchert had been written by Richard Kramer, a neighbor who lived in the same apartment building. He had been a teacher in the same school as Fritz Borchert, and had been a family friend. Then he had become a convinced National Socialist, and one of the first in the neighborhood to wear the uniform. He had also had ambitions as a writer and to have his works broadcast. (A book of his, *Auf drei Beinen durchs heilige Rußland*, had appeared in 1923:[10] it dealt with his treatment as a wounded prisoner-of-war in Russia: the three "legs" were his invalid crutches and his one remaining good leg.) He had denounced Hertha Borchert partly through envy and partly in the hope of freeing up broadcasting time for himself. He considered that he owed it to his Führer to rid society of such pests.

The *Verbandsgauleitung des Reichsverbandes Deutscher Schriftsteller* (Hamburg District Association of the Reich Union of German Writers) had already written to Richard Kramer, to the effect that they saw no

reason not to broadcast Hertha's works from time to time, since they were "volkstümlich und wurzelecht."[11] But Kramer had persisted.

The whole affair had been made more serious by the fact that Kramer had sent a copy of his complaint to the Reich Propaganda Ministry. Hertha Borchert was summoned to answer the charges before a three-man panel: the brother of the *Heidedichter* Hermann Löns, Dr. Böttcher, who until his death in 1936 was the Head of the Low German Department of NORAG (Nordische Rundfunkaktiengesellschaft, which in 1933 became the *Reichssender Hamburg*)[12] and was also a close friend of Aline Bussmann, and Hugo Pein (himself later dismissed for having a Jewish grandmother). The panel came to the same conclusion as the Hamburg District Association before, that her work should continue to be on the radio.[13] As Hertha later wrote with some irony: "Blut und Boden rettete mir mein Leben."

What hurt most, however, was the fact that the family had been denounced by a neighbor. Kramer was shunned by the other neighbors, who rallied round the Borcherts, but they found living in the same house as Kramer unbearable, and moved out in 1937 to a flat at 190 Dorotheenstrasse. Wolfgang Borchert later used the name, and the incident, in the figure of Frau Kramer in *Draussen vor der Tür*.

But there was more. Richard Kramer was friendly with a nephew of Hertha's, a man who had joined the SS and then become a Gestapo official. He had also told Kramer that Hertha had claimed, during a family discussion, that she found the Nazi uniform ugly and un-German. This man had threatened Hertha that she could be arrested and taken away at any time: this sort of thing could happen in this New State. He was not the only Nazi in the family. One of Fritz's sisters married a chemist who joined the SS and became Mayor of Kröpelin, a small town in North Germany. She in turn became a fanatical Nazi, and looked down on Fritz, who did not wear a uniform and did not look to enjoy the benefits of the new era.

It was against this background that Wolfgang Borchert was a growing teenager, a background dominated within the family by the conflict between freedom and integrity, artistic as well as personal, on the one hand, and the pressures of society to conform, in all spheres, on the other. In his parents' attitudes and behavior, he saw only compromise. Wolfgang demanded of his father that he should openly protest against the regime. Due to the denunciation affair, his mother was required to show her allegiance to the State by joining the *Nationalsozialistische Frauenschaft,* which she did, at first working in a biscuit factory and then

giving readings of her works. Later, she was sent to entertain the troops, both serving soldiers and the wounded in military hospitals.

After the denunciation, a change took place in Wolfgang Borchert. He who had happily played the flute in the Hitler Youth band *Freischar junger Nation* now began to miss Hitler Youth meetings, making various excuses, and finally stopped going altogether, despite official warnings, which occasioned a visit by the local Hitler Youth Leader.[14] His schoolwork suffered, and in March 1936, at the age of fourteen, he was required to re-take the class for that semester. His teacher wrote that while he was cheerful enough, he showed little inclination to take his academic duties seriously. His father signed this report as he had signed all the others, without recrimination.

This did not prevent Wolfgang, however, from continuing to find fault with his parents, even to the point of accusing his father of wearing his hat too straight or his hair too short, or claiming that his father's suits were too smart, giving him a military appearance. Borchert himself wore his tie slipped through a ring instead of being properly knotted, or wore red pom-poms instead. This may seem harmless enough, but even this could have been enough to bring him to the attention of the authorities. Worse still, though, was the fact that, together with Günter Mackenthun, likewise at the bottom of the class, and another friend, he began to go to school on Nazi festive days wearing not the Hitler Youth uniform, as prescribed, but in their normal school clothes. He accused his parents of belonging to the generation of philistines who had provided the dung on which a Hitler could grow and flourish. His parents reacted, if at all, complacently, uttering words of warning at most, in the belief that their son was using them to get rid of his own frustration and anger, and that it was better — and safer — for him to do this in the privacy of his closest family rather than outside on the streets. They felt they were acting like lightning conductors.

The Gründgens-Hamlet experience: *Yorick, the Fool!* (1937–39)

At this time the most decisive event to shape Wolfgang Borchert's life so far took place. Borchert himself acknowledged this in a letter written after the War: "Gründgens' Hamlet Ursache zu meinem Theaterfimmel — und Shakespeare."[15]

In December 1937 Gustaf Gründgens, by now an Establishment figure fêted by the Nazis, brought a Berlin production of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to Hamburg. Hertha Borchert had two tickets. Fritz refused to