

Herta Müller: A Writer's Freedom Song

This year's Nobel laureates produced a wave of controversy, with skeptics insisting they were politically tinged. ● President Barack Obama's Peace Prize was prominently cited, as was Herta Müller's literature award. ● But those who don't know about Müller fail to fathom her effectiveness not only as a writer but also as longtime defender of personal freedom and the right to free expression. ●

by Fernando Orlandi

While most agree that Romanian-born German novelist Herta Müller is a skillful author, her Nobel Prize for Literature had much in common with the Peace Prize awarded to U.S. President Barack Obama for peace. It had less to do with evident merit than political opportunity. In Müller's case, the prize represented appropriate means to honor the 20th anniversary of the fall of Central and Eastern Europe communism and to recall the profound moral devastation that totalitarian regimes brought to the region for decades. Müller's Nobel, in short, represented a nod of thanks to a relentless freedom fighter.

Until the award, Müller was described mostly as a "niche" writer, known only to her own public. Critic Harold Bloom candidly confessed he'd never heard of her. It was no surprise that the global media response to the award was: «Who is Herta Müller?»

She was born August 17, 1953 in Nitchidorf, near Timisoara, a town in the ethnically-German Banat Swabian region that fell under Romanian control following World War II. In the early 18th century, Hapsburg Emperor Charles VI moved German settlers into the Banat lands following the defeat of the Ottoman Turks. The idea was

to populate and modernize what represented a new and remote province of the empire.

Born in a German-speaking village (a dialect of high German), most of her peers and classmates were Germans. She attended German schools where Romanian, deemed "exotic" and foreign, was taught only a few hours a week.

But as teenager, Romanian (which she'd learned quickly) became the centerpiece of her educational upbringing. «I learned Romanian when I was 15, about the time I started local high school,» she says. «I was already at an age when I was reading books. I'd just stare at the words. Romanian struck me as a language with wonderfully poetic, sensual images. After learning Romanian, the meaning of everything I saw always had two colors. Since the colors coexist, Romanian always writes along 'with me,' so to speak.»

At the University of Timisoara she majored in German studies and Romanian literature. She befriended young writers and poets of the Aktionsgruppe Banat group, a free speech literary society that included Richard Wagner (whom she later married), Gerhard Ortinau and William Totok. For these young writers, two "freak" episode, the Prague Spring and the Western European student revolts, mostly the West German one, suggested that system could be reformed and that doing so required that literature had to be critical, free from censorship and de facto anti-regime. It also needed a single language, German. Aktionsgruppe Banat's manifesto asserted that literature could never be contingent on politics or ideology but instead on experience and personal opinion.

The secret police thought otherwise. William Totok was fired from his job and imprisoned at length. Richard Wagner (now a German novelist) was also jailed.



Herta Müller paid close attention to the views of these young writers and poets, helping them out as she could. But wasn't yet fully a part of their circle because she wasn't a writer.

After college, in 1976, her knowledge of German helped her get a job as a translator with Tehnometal, a tractor and farm equipment company that imported from East Germany, as well as West Germany and Austria.

At first, her job was to translate tediously arcane German brochures and instruction manuals into Romanian. But after two years she was reassigned to a new division that today might loosely be called "external relations." The new assignment brought young Müller her into contact with foreign technicians. It was then that the Romanian secret police, Securitate, made its first direct appearance in her life.

She was asked to jot down her "impressions" of foreign visitors and to prepare report on the interactions between her colleagues and all foreigners. She tried dodging the demands through self-deprecation, telling officials she was "a poor observer of people." But Securitate refused to back off, demanding that she sign a pledge outlining the terms of her collaboration. Threatened, she

resisted. When she finally turned down the police outright, the persecution began.

At first, she lost her workspace. On morning she found the dictionaries that she'd relied on for two years in a heap outside what had been her office. To avoid facing accusations of slacking, grounds for dismissal, she worked on her translations in stairwells. «For several weeks, every morning promptly at 7:30 a.m., I was summoned into the boss's office to discuss the matter with the local Communist Party secretary and the secretary of Communist Youth group. Every day they encouraged me to resign and find another job.»

If they wanted her out, they'd have to fire her, she replied, saying loved her job. She soon found herself on the verge of a nervous breakdown. «My place had been taken by an engineer, and I was no longer allowed into the office,» she recalls. «Now I had no table, no chair. The office staff walked past me in silence.» In 1979, she was finally fired and lost her income. Securitate issued summons to see her almost daily. Among other things, the secret police used these "chats" to accuse her of prostitution and trafficking on black market. Without a fixed job, a crime in a socialist country, she managed to earn a liv-

ing through kindergarten teaching and German lessons.

In 1982, she published her first book, “Niederungen” (“Nadirs”), which was heavily censored by regime authorities. Two years later, the uncensored original manuscript was smuggled into West Germany and published there. A kind of anti-idyll, it brought to life sinister bits and pieces of Romanian rural peasant life in the Banat. Müller used 15 semi-autobiographical miniatures to portray a wicked, hate-filled and violence world entrenched in Catholicism and superstition, corrupt, isolated, blind to progress.

In many ways Herta Müller was to ethnic Germans of the Banat what Thomas Bernhard was to Austrians, a portraitists of deep disturbance.

When Kriterion published the censored version of “Nadirs” in Romania, Securitate redoubled its surveillance of Müller. Her filed (three full volumes, with more than 900 pages) represents a kind of overall “review” of her person and work. It was allegedly opened following the publication of “Nadirs” for her «tendentious distortions of realities in the country, particularly in the village environment.» Throughout, her life is dwelled upon in only negative terms. Filled with typical omissions and inaccuracies, the dossier doesn’t contain a single positive or hopeful word about her person or work. Instead, it depicts a social degenerate. She was said to belong to a “circle of German-language poets”, which is “renowned for its hostile works.”

Securitate began trying to recruit informers within her inner circle of friends. It succeeded, as it always does (in this regard, see Hungarian novelist Péter Esterházy’s “Revised Edition,” his account of learning his father was a Communist informant). Müller was also betrayed by a best friend, who gave Securitate officials a duplicate key to her apartment, where she lived with her husband Richard Wagner. In fact, she was no longer Herta Müller to intelligence service operatives. Instead, her code name was now “Cristina.” Meanwhile, the perse-



cution intensified. She was stopped in the street, detained, interrogated and threatened. Microphones were installed in her apartment to pick up details of her private life.

Trying to further violate her personal space and add to the unsettling status quo, agents repeatedly burgled her apartment when she wasn’t home, sometimes moving objects from their accustomed places to make her aware they’d been around. The cat-and-mouse game morphed into systematic psychological warfare.

She later recalled those years. «The secret police came and went as they pleased when we weren’t at home. Often they would deliberately leave signs: cigarette butts, pictures removed from the wall and left on the bed, chairs moved. The uncanniest incident lasted weeks. First the tail, then the paws, and finally the head were cut off of a fox skin that lay on the floor, and the parts placed on the tail lying there while cleaning the apartment. I still thought it was accidental. It was only weeks later, when the hind paw had been cut off, that I began to get the creeps. Until the point when the head was also cut off, the first thing I would do on coming home was to check the fox skin.»

In 1985, Müller asked to leave the country, but was denied permission to emigrate. Two years later, in 1987, she was finally given permission to move to West Germany where she settled in Berlin with Wagner.

This life of daily terror in Communist Romania became the subject of her next book, “The Land of Green Plums,” set the Nicolae Ceausescu 1980s. It’s a Romania that seems metaphysically suspended in a time of its own. Four young people find themselves united following the suicide of a girl named Lola. The pain and awareness that follow her death give them means to see the meaning of living in a totalitarian country. This produces a common yearning for freedom that feeds on reading illegal books and thinking forbidden thoughts. Soon, however, the four are faced by the realities of terror. They face secret police interrogation; they are stalked and intimidated; they lose their

jobs; and even when they successfully flee the country, the death threats continue, the worst of their memories returning in the form of mysterious suicides. Amid such deep darkness only friendship and love survive.

It’s deeply autobiographical work that Müller produced after the inexplicable deaths of two friends, which she suspected Securitate had engineered.

“The Land of Green Plums” is a remarkable book. Müller makes poetry from the material and spiritual degradation of damned and condemned to fear and loneliness. Her characters are atomized. In the society she portrays, individuals are irrelevant, distrustful. The regime is responsible for ruthlessly ensuring collective misery, which means a kind of “death in life.” And “death in life” for Müller is any life without personal freedom.

In the intervening years, Müller has not abandoned its commitment to fighting totalitarianism. In July 2008, she publicly denounced the director of the Romanian Cultural Institute, Horia Roman Patapievici, publishing an open letter to the German newspaper Frankfurter Rundschau that expressed indignation that two former Securitate agents, Andrei Corbèe-Hois and Sorin Antohi, had been invited to the school’s summer institute in Berlin, with full intellectual and financial support from the institute.

Following her Nobel Prize announcement, Müller spoke at the Frankfurt Book Fair. When «a person’s life is shorter than that of a dictatorship,» she said, «this is a life that has been stolen by state.» She

After the publication of her first book, the Romanian secret police Securitate increased surveillance on Müller. A 900-page-long police dossier was filled with slander and character assassination penned in by officers who rifled through her apartment. ‘Land of the Green Plums’ (facing page, in Italian) is considered her best work.

also expressed solidarity with Chinese writers, who are also facing ideological oppression.

«Dictatorships operate based on vision of man that depends on ideology, and is never true,» she said recently. «The Soviet man, for example, was never real or true. I was lucky to have survived the dictatorship, but I have friends who were not so lucky, and this knowledge still causes me pain.»

