

Short Stories by Werner Bergengruen

Short Stories by Werner Bergengruen:

A Selection of His Novellas

By

Albrecht Classen

Cambridge
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I dedicate this book to my father, Traugott Classen, Oberstudienrat (1921–2000), who introduced me as a young person to the works by Werner Bergengruen and inspired me to dive into the world of literature. My father grew up in Marburg an der Lahn, where Bergengruen had attended high school (Gymnasium) just a little more than ten years before him.

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THE REDISCOVERY OF A MAJOR TWENTIETH-CENTURY GERMAN AUTHOR, WERNER BERGENGRUEN

Below I offer in English translation a selection of novellas and one poem by the Baltic-German writer Werner Bergengruen (1892–1964). A few of his narratives and novels had been translated already during the 1950s and 1960s into a variety of languages, but those appeared with rather small presses or have been out of print for a very long time by now. I will begin with one of Bergengruen's highly moving poems to introduce his political stance under the Nazis whom he fought by way of entering 'inner emigration.' The name of Bergengruen will probably be unknown to most contemporary readers, at least outside of the German-language world, but I believe that the English translation of these short stories will and should change that rather quickly. His writing style, motifs, idiomatic expressions, concepts, and themes might appear a bit unusual and perhaps even old-fashioned at first, and this also for contemporary native German speakers, but they contain surprising and powerful messages about fundamental aspects of human life intriguingly couched in historical material.

There are, for instance, a lot of direct references to the Middle Ages, which has appealed to me personally because I work, apart from being a translator, as a scholar of medieval and early modern literature and culture. I believe that the poet's creative response to and engagement with medieval literary material will profoundly appeal to the current audience once again especially because the pre-modern period continues to exert a considerable intrigue, as documented by such famous and highly popular works as J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* or J. K. Rowling's series of novels, *Harry Potter*.

In one of Bergengruen's autobiographical essays, he emphasized himself that the Middle Ages still held sway in the Baltic countries well until 1917 (Russian Revolution) and 1919 (independence of the Baltic countries), and that that old world was finally completely destroyed when, as part of the Hitler-Stalin Pact in 1939, the German population was forcefully removed from Estonia and Livonia and resettled in what we call today western Poland and parts of the German Reich. Nevertheless, the author did not forget his "Heimat" (home country) and did not stop feeling

a longing for those past times back in Riga¹ or the wider Baltic world, which finds vivid expression in many of his novellas and short stories.

As the author underscores, the French Revolution did not have too much of an affect on the Baltic countries; the old Germanic autonomy continued to rule, the medieval city structure with its administrative organization continued to be in place at least until the middle of the nineteenth century, and: "The individual counted much; the institution counted little; at that time the personality was not yet threatened by the state apparatus, and was certainly not yet swallowed up by it."² Little wonder then that many of Bergengruen's novels and short stories are somehow situated in the Middle Ages, or borrow critical elements from medieval literature, such as "The River," "The Ordeal of Fire," "The Three Falcons," and "The Emperor in Misery" (all translated here).³

While the first section of this book consists of the entire text of *Der Tod von Reval*, including the poet's prologue and epilogue, the second section presents a small selection of other stories which Bergengruen had composed at other times and for other purposes. They all prove to be refreshingly unusual particularly in our postmodern world, especially because they address, despite or particularly because of their historical setting, universal values, human conflicts, and ideals, and mirror individual struggles and aspirations.

This Baltic-German author represents an unusual, certainly a fascinating voice, seemingly from the past, but in reality, a voice deeply in tune with basic issues pertaining to human life, both then and today. Bergengruen engages uniquely with the issue of death, without being morbid; with honor and nobility, without being conservative in the political sense of the word; and with love and God, without being particularly religious or narrow-minded.

What makes Bergengruen stand out, apart from his individualistic writing style, the often rather surprising selection of materials for his stories, and his deep quest for human dignity and the ultimate questions about life, consists of his dedication to bringing back to our awareness the social, political, linguistic, and geographic background of his own youth, in Riga, today the capital of Latvia, and in Reval, today Tallinn, the capital of Estonia. He endeavors consistently to be a spokesperson for the history of

¹ Riga is now the capital of Latvia.

² Werner Bergengruen, "Bekenntnis zur Höhle: Autobiographisches Nachwort," id., *Die Feuerprobe: Novelle* (1951; Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam jun., 1998), 49–55; here 53; my translation.

³ See, above all, the collection of religious tales, anecdotes, and historical narratives in *Das Buch Rodenstein* (1927; Frankfurt a. M.: Insel Verlag, 1996).

the German culture in the Baltic countries, a culture which has long disappeared in the wake of the First and then the Second World War, or as a consequence of the infamous Hitler-Stalin Pact from 1939 in anticipation of the war against the Soviet Union when the German population there was forcefully removed and resettled further southwest.

Whatever the outcome of or response to the reading of his short stories might be, it is certain that Bergengruen represents a highly unorthodox, somewhat forgotten, and yet intriguing literary giant. Granted, his fame has faded already for almost half a century by now, but the present volume hopes to bring this highly remarkable, previously greatly admired German author back to our modern attention, especially for the Anglophone audiences. While he enjoyed enormous popularity during his lifetime, which virtually elevated him to being one of the premier German schoolbook authors of modern literary texts, since the Student Revolution in the late 1960s and early 1970s all that disappeared quickly. It might be understandable that authors like Bergengruen were swept away at that time because they represented traditional values and ideals. Every revolution tends to target particularly literary authorities who were representative of the previous society. But all that has changed in turn, and so it seems timely to revive our awareness about and interest in this writer once again whose works promise to alert us to fundamental issues in human life. I submit that his novellas deserve our attention once again especially because he has much to say about timeless concepts, values, and ideals, and this in his own, rather idiosyncratic fashion.

A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF WERNER BERGENGRUEN

Until the end of the 1960s or maybe even the 1970s, virtually every high school student in the German-speaking world (Gymnasium) would have been very familiar with one or another short story or even novel by Werner Bergengruen, maybe also with some of his poetry. He was a mainstay of German literature especially during the time after the Second World War, possibly not of the highest caliber, but certainly greatly respected and canonized, and much appreciated as reading material for graduating seniors (with an *Abitur* or *Matura*). Moreover, many of his texts were translated into numerous different languages, which guaranteed him global popularity, particularly because of his consistent efforts to draw from historical material for his interest as an author to probe universal issues in human life, undisturbed by contemporary politics, but viewed through a historical lens.

However, his fortune as a highly respected author has strongly faded since then, although this should not have any consequences for our critical analysis of his literary accomplishments. He would be identified today as virtually politically incorrect because of his esoteric, religious, almost fatalistic attitudes which he had derived from intense study of historical records. Some of the reasons for this sudden disrespect or marginalization of Bergengruen at least since 1968 might also be that, first, he had suspiciously enjoyed considerable success even during the Nazi regime and had apparently, despite his quiet opposition against them, accommodated himself quite well with the government. Bergengruen belonged to the group of German intellectuals who went into the 'inner emigration' during those horrible years, which finds its perhaps most vivid expression in his preference for historical themes and topics throughout his works.

However, from early on, Bergengruen's major interest had rested on reviving historical anecdotes, religious legends, and human conflicts from the past, and on bringing to light basic human flaws and shortcomings, without being an acrimoniously serious critic. On the contrary, in many of his novels and short stories, Bergengruen illuminated some of the reasons for human (mis)behavior, faults, errors, foolishness, and failures, and endeavored throughout to offer consolation, support, explanations, and even

assistance to help the characters in his texts to gain forgiveness, or to be understood in their stubbornness, misguidedness, and shortcomings. There are virtually no ideal characters in Bergengruen's narratives, but there are also hardly any really evil figures. For him, destiny or timeless forces influencing human life mattered more than daily politics, so his modern readers misconstrued his work as a literary strategy to mollify the horrors of the past and to cover up the crimes of the Nazis by way of addressing universal themes. Bergengruen was more than clear about the terror committed by the Nazis; he knew about the true nature of the Holocaust; and he struggled hard to maintain a sense of humanity even in the worst hours of the Nazi regime, as he formulated it most poignantly in his poem "Die letzte Epiphanie" (The Last Epiphany; composed already in 1944, virtually a prophetic statement). He had also given vent to his bitter protest against the tyrant and tyranny in his volume of poems, *Der ewige Kaiser* (The Eternal Emperor), published anonymously in Austria in 1937. The last stanza of "Das Dauernde" (The Permanent) makes this dramatically evident:

Am Himmel, wenn Gewölk und Dunst zerrannen,
steht groß das alte Licht.
Erblosen Todes sterben die Tyrannen.
Tribunen zeugen nicht.

[In the sky, once the clouds and fog have cleared,
there appears the old light mightily.
The tyrants die a death without leaving children.
Tribunes do not have children.]⁴

Hence, he could continue writing even after 1945, without having been compromised by the Nazis, and thus he became the ideal author for millions of readers in Germany who desperately needed a spiritual light in their intellectual, ethical, and moral darkness.

Second, although Bergengruen certainly addressed fundamental and critical issues in all of his works, he clearly stayed away from political topics, and this also in the post-WWII period, which made him particularly suspect since the student protests in the late 1960s and 1970s. Third, he had survived the terrible Nazi dictatorship without much harm to himself and

⁴ Frank-Lothar Kroll, "Der Lebensweg," *Dichtung als Kulturvermittlung: Der Schriftsteller Werner Bergengruen. Beiträge für Unterricht und Weiterbildung*. Schriftenreihe Haus der Heimat des Landes Baden-Württemberg. Die Deutschen und ihre Nachbarn im Osten. Geschichte und Gegenwart, 7 (Filderstadt: Weinmann, 1997), 12–23; here 20.

his family and was quickly adopted by the bourgeois and capitalist authorities in West Germany in the 1940s and 1950s, rising to the status of a canonized schoolbook author, virtually assigned the role of the nation's voice of consciousness and ethical ideals. And fourth, Bergengruen favored to address problems and concerns seemingly only of a past age and so he has increasingly been regarded as being out of touch of the (post)modern world, not concerned, for instance, with political, environmental, racial, gender, or migration issues which trouble us deeply today.

Altogether, we can say, his works, previously regularly reaching the level of bestsellers, disappeared from public view for good at the latest since roughly 2000, but this does not mean at all that we could or should simply ignore him today, whereas before he had been enormously popular from ca. 1930 through ca. 1960/70 for his deep reflections on the correlations between political power and religion, on questions of human guilt, and on personal responsibilities and privileges.

Bergengruen was a historical novelist, that is, he drew extensively both from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, but he regularly examined individual actions within the larger social and political context of his own time and thus attempted to gain insights into universal truths about human nature in a puzzling, often immoral, violent, and unpredictable world. We could compare his destiny as a 'fallen' author, whom the public suddenly disrespected and ignored, with that of numerous other contemporary, previously highly esteemed writers, such as Reinhold Schneider, Edzard Schaper, Stefan Andres, Ernst Wiechert, Gertrud von le Fort, Elisabeth Langgässer, and Otto von Taube. Their humanistic-Christian worldview, determined by a traditional value system free from direct political issues and by a naive dream of a good, healthy world ("heilige Welt") was apparently no longer acceptable for a newly radicalized readership looking for more topical themes within the literary discourse, especially readers who were critically engaged with the horror of the Nazi regime and the Holocaust, and also took a strong stance against capitalism, the American 'colonization' of the western world, traditional patriarchy, and the destruction of the natural environment. There is no doubt that at times Bergengruen expresses rather patriarchal attitudes, such as in his novella "The River." But we ought to take this with a grain of salt since he presents historical cases of human destinies and examines individuals in their social, political, and material conditions.

Bergengruen was born as the second son of the medical doctor Paul Emil Bergengruen (1861–1945), who was of Swedish-German descent, and his wife Helene von Boetticher in Riga, today the capital of Latvia, then still part of Czarist Russia. Because his parents were worried about the strong

efforts by the Moscow government to transform the country into a Russian influence zone (Russification), they sent their son Werner to Germany, first to Lübeck (northern Germany), where he attended the Katharinäum Gymnasium (the standard German High School, comparable to a University Prep School) from 1903 to 1908, and then to Marburg (central Germany, north of Frankfurt a. M.), where he joined the Philippinum Gymnasium from 1908 to 1910, graduating in 1911. His family followed him only in 1909. Subsequently, he started to study theology at the Philipps-University in Marburg. Shortly thereafter he moved to the University of Munich, where he finally settled on German Studies and Art History, among other subject matters, without ever graduating with a university degree. From 1914 to 1918 he served as a volunteer in the German army fighting in the Balticum (today: Baltic states) against the Russians. While the war ended for Germany in utter defeat in 1918, the young man briefly joined the “Baltische Landwehr” (Baltic Civic Defense) against the Russian Red Army, particularly because several of his family members had been murdered by the enemies. He subsequently worked as a journalist in Tilsit (today: Sovetsk) and Memel (today: Klaipėda).

Already in 1919, Bergengruen was back in Marburg, where he married Charlotte Hensel (1896–1990), with whom he had four children. In 1920, he began a career as a journalist, assuming the job as editor-in-chief of the newspapers *Ost-Informationen* and *Ost-Expreß* in Berlin in 1922, and of *Baltische Blätter* in 1925. During that time, he began to publish literary works (his first novel, *Das Gesetz des Atun* (The Law of Atun) appeared in 1923; it deals with the life of a young student in Marburg), and gained enough public reputation for him to become an independent author, living both in Munich and Berlin. The life in the modern metropolis was reflected in his novel *Der golden Griffel* from 1931 (The Golden Stylus; it deals with a hopeless former lieutenant who successfully embezzles money but always feels his guilt as recorded by God in His book), and also in a number of his short stories. The same year he also published the books for children, *Zwieselchen im Warenhaus* (Little Zwiesel in the Department Store); followed by *Zwieselchen und der Osterhase* (Little Zwiesel and the Easter Bunny; 1932), *Zwiesel und Turu-Me* (Little Zwiesel and Turu-Me; 1932), and *Zwieselchens große Reise* (Little Zwiesel’s Great Travel; 1933).



Bergengruen, 1933, with his wife and children; with permission by the Werner Bergengruen-Archiv (all other photos of the writer were also provided by this Archiv, and I am grateful for their generosity!).

Politically, he strongly leaned toward the right-wing conservative parties, but he subsequently rejected, like his friend Reinhold Schneider (1903–1958), a major Catholic poet and novelist, National Socialism because he was too religious and humanistic to subscribe to this fascist ideology. Bergengruen also faced the problem that his wife's maternal grandparents and paternal great grandfather had been Jewish, but he seems not to have faced further political conflicts. He could continue to publish, though with some difficulties, and his works appealed to a wide audience, especially because they were not concerned with the political, military, racial, and hence the ideological conflicts of his time.



Werner Bergengruen, 1929; portrait created by Emil Stumpp;
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:WP_Werner_Bergengruen.jpg
public domain

In 1935, Bergengruen published his most popular and influential novel, *Der Großtyrann und das Gericht* (The Great Tyrant and the Legal Court), which some critics regarded as a hidden criticism of Hitler, but the author had started writing this novel already in 1926. Moreover, in this major novel he targeted the injustice and dangers of tyranny at large, and also laid bare people's culpability and corruptibility once they had become victims of political pressure. *Der Großtyrann* was later dramatized and performed on the stage in 1963, made into a movie in 1966, and was translated into at least fifteen languages – the English title, *A Matter of Conscience* (1952), clearly underscores the central issues addressed here, whereas the Polish title, *Władca i sąd* (Ruler and Court, 1960) closely follows the original, similar to the Portuguese (*O grão-tirano*, 1945) and Italian translations (*Il grande tiranno*, 1985). The Swedish translation, *Stortyrannen och rättvisan* (The Great Tyrant and Justice, 1938) highlights the critical question of how individuals can cope when challenged by a tyrant and are tested as to the strength of their own convictions and ethical principles.

In 1936, Bergengruen, together with his wife, who was half-Jewish (see above), converted to Catholicism, which led to his exclusion from the *Reichsschrifttumskammer* (Reich Office for Literature) in 1937, since he was disqualified as a valid contributor to the 'recreation of German culture' according to the Nazi ideology. Although he was allowed to continue publishing by special permits secured for him through his publisher, and this actually very successfully, his anthology of poetry, *Der ewige Kaiser* (1937; The Eternal Emperor; expressing Bergengruen's hope for a future empire led by an ideal figure), and his novel *Am Himmel wie auf Erden* (1940; In Heaven as on Earth) were banned. In 1940, the government issued an order prohibiting him from giving any public speeches.



Bergengruen, with his family, 1938; with permission

In 1942, following an air raid of Munich, during which his house was destroyed, he moved to Achenkirch in Tyrol, Austria, north of Schwaz near the border to Germany. After the war, Bergengruen moved to Zürich, Switzerland, in 1946 for two years, from 1948 to 1949 he lived in Rome, from 1949 to 1958 he was back in Zürich, and from 1958 until his death in 1964 he resided in Baden-Baden near the Black Forest and the border to France.

Bergengruen's most popular work was *Der letzte Rittmeister* (1952; *The Last Captain of the Cavalry*), a collection of short stories. Those were much sought after probably because of their highly conservative perspectives regarding the industrial age, the loss of personal integrity, and his warning about the anonymity of the masses. He strongly propagated the observation of traditions, but he emphasized, above all, ethical and moral ideals and values from the past. His critics voiced considerable concerns with his attempts to move beyond the crimes against humanity committed by the Nazis through his deep probing of universal guilt, sinfulness, and human weaknesses, especially in his essays *Schreibtischerinnerungen* (1961; *Reflections from the Writing Desk*), and his profound trust in God's mercy for all people. He fervently believed that most actions by people are only faint mirrors of what is actually taking place within their souls. Consequently, he was rather skeptical about the outcomes of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) because his Catholic faith was primarily based on spiritual convictions and trust in destiny as guided by God.

As an author, Bergengruen continued with the tradition of nineteenth-century Realism by drawing heavily on historical accounts from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance in order to address fundamental issues in the lives of all people. He aimed primarily at exploring ethical ideals and values and at discovering the extent to which human existence is guided by divine intervention, or destiny, as reflected in his historical novel *Herzog Karl der Kühne oder Gemüt und Schicksal* (Duke Charles the Bold, or *Mind and Destiny*; 1930, revised in 1943). His most popular novella, *Die drei Falken* (1936; *The Three Falcons*; here translated as well), loosely based on a narrative in Boccaccio's *Decameron* (ca. 1350; Day five, story nine), thematizes the dream of freedom and the nobility of a person's character which is expressed in the desire of valuable falcons to escape from their imprisonment by human owners.



Grave of Werner Bergengruen, 1964; photo by Groth-Pfeifer; public domain

Modern critics have often and increasingly distanced themselves from Bergengruen's works which were finally regarded as antiquated, old-fashioned, or even politically suspect. Nevertheless, this did not impact negatively on his enormous popularity among his readership well until the 1970s. However, since ca. 2000 at the latest, Bergengruen has mostly disappeared from public view, although the Werner-Bergengruen Gesellschaft, founded in 1992,⁵ has made many efforts to keep his memory alive and to promote the continued appreciation of his works.

It would be entirely unfair to associate Bergengruen with the Nazis, just because he made every effort to survive those years of state terror and to continue publishing his works without compromising himself. He belonged to the "Innere Emigration" (Emigration into Oneself) and explicitly accused the Germans at large of having deliberately ignored the horrors of the Holocaust, which were very obvious for everyone who had eyes to see.⁶ The translation will therefore begin with one of his poems in which he took critical account of the ideological abuse the Germans had to suffer from under Hitler and his helpers. Following the war, he also assumed a critical stance against the modern industrialized society in Germany out of deeply religious convictions.

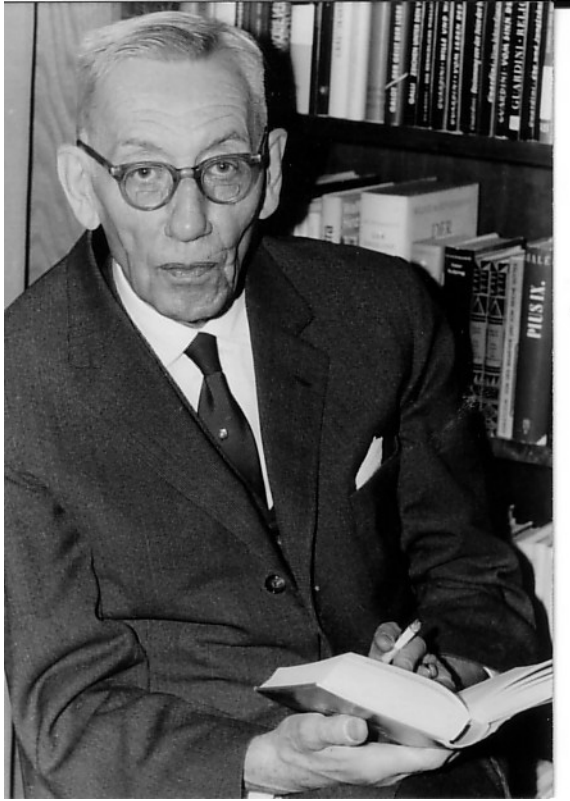
In 1951, he received the Wilhelm-Raabe-Prize of the City of Brunswick; in 1957 the German government bestowed the Großes Bundesverdienstkreuz (Great Order of Merit) upon him; in 1958 the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Munich awarded him the honorary doctorate; and he also became a member of the Honorary Society *Pour le mérite für Wissenschaften und Künste* (For the Accomplishments by the Sciences and the Arts) the same year.

His historical and religious stance, however, made it impossible for him after 1968 or so to remain one of the 'canonical' writers of contemporary German literature. Once he was mostly banned from school textbooks, the memory of Bergengruen faded quickly among the younger generations. Such political opinions, however, should not have a decisive bearing on our critical assessment of his literary qualities. He was certainly a traditionalist, a strong voice for his home culture in the Baltic countries, and a firm believer in the timeless values of human life as already formulated in much of medieval and early modern literature and history. By turning to the past, Bergengruen endeavored to recover or preserve universal human values and to offer literary perspectives regarding fundamental concerns relevant for all people throughout time.

⁵ <http://werner-bergengruen-gesellschaft.de/>.

⁶ Quoted from Ernst Klee, *Das Kulturlexikon zum Dritten Reich. Wer war was vor und nach 1945* (Frankfurt a. M.: S. Fischer, 2007), 44.

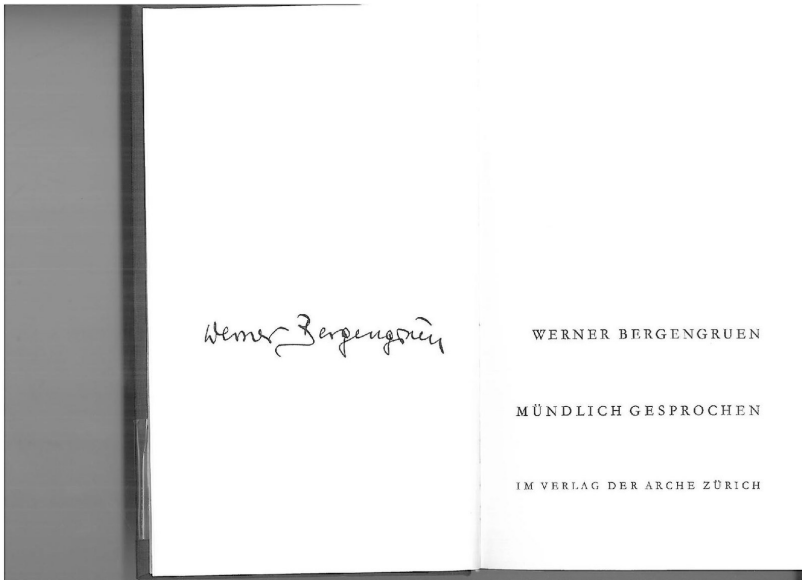
His collection of short stories, *Der Tod von Reval* (1939; The Death from Reval) proves to be of timeless and universal relevance, reminding the readers about the human dimension of death. Here we encounter all kinds of curious characters who have dealings with death or are marked by death. Other major collections of prose narratives, such as *Die Zwillinge aus Frankreich* (1955; The Twins from France), *Zorn, Zeit und Ewigkeit* (1959; Wrath, Time, and Eternity), and posthumously, *Und dein Name ausgelöscht* (1971; Your Name Eliminated) certainly also deserve our attention today, again because here we encounter a master story teller who drew extensively from historical accounts to address fundamental issues in human life even today. Bergengruen also published several volumes of poetry, children books, essays, a travelogue (1932) and a biography of the Romantic author E. T. A. Hoffmann (1939). For a complete list of his works, see <http://werner-bergengruen-gesellschaft.de/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Lebensdaten.pdf>.



Werner Bergengruen, 1962; with permission

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Signature of Werner Bergengruen;

<https://de.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Datei:Bergengruen010.pdf&filetimestamp=20140107181102&>; public domain

DIES IRAE (1945)

In order to understand Bergengruen's dangerous, if not tortured position under the Nazis, his desperate attempts to survive in that terror regime by way of the 'inner emigration,' his laments about the people's falling to the Nazi ideology, and to grasp his essential quest for the fundamental values of human life determined by goodness, and this in the middle of the night of Germany's darkest hours, I begin with one poem from his collection *Dies Irae* (Days of Wrath, i.e., the Apocalypse, or the Day of Judgment, dating at least back to the thirteenth century), published in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Nazi regime on May 8, 1945. This poem sheds important light on Bergengruen's universal notion of the dignity of human existence, both in face of gruesome political terror and of the ordinary death.

From here I will then turn to his *Death from Reval* and individual novellas published separately. Despite the often rather somber, even occasionally macabre theme and tone of voice, we can clearly recognize in Bergengruen's literary works an attempt to pursue a hopeful existentialism. For him, the notion of "Heimat" – his home land in the Baltic region, which we call today Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania – was fundamental, especially because he was robbed of it, first by the Russians, then by the Nazis, then by the Russians once again. But, as the last novella in the present collection will indicate, he certainly harbored no national prejudice against the Russians as a people, as neighbors, quite on the contrary.

In many ways, which the poem "Die Lüge" powerfully indicates, this poet was strongly opposed to propaganda, state ideology, dictatorship, deception, lying, unethical behavior, and he formulated his critical stance toward failures in individual morality and character both in poetry and prose. But in his novellas, Bergengruen often assumes a humorous attitude regarding people's relationship with death, which appears more often like a friend than a hostile force. Moreover, he explores human dignity, the nobility of one's soul, the essence of love, and, above all, the meaning of life.

Although Bergengruen's works have been pretty much forgotten over the last decades, both his novels and short stories, both his poems and essays deserve our full attention. He was once even nominated for the Nobel

Prize for Literature by Paulus Svendsen,⁷ and I venture to say that he might have deserved it. Here we encounter a most unusual voice, quiet and yet very forceful. There is much to enjoy and much to learn in Bergengruen's poems and prose narratives, especially because the dangers for democracy have gained in urgency once again, and hardly any other modern German author has spoken out against tyranny in such a haunting manner as Bergengruen did in his various novels and short stories. But there are many other themes which he pursues, especially the engagement with death, as we find it expressed most intensively in *Der Tod von Reval*, but then also honor, love, human dignity, identity, and *Heimat* (the homeland).

⁷ https://www.nobelprize.org/nomination/archive/show_people.php?id=13601.

*DIE LÜGE*⁸

Wo ist das Volk, das dies schadlos an seiner Seele ertrüge?
Jahre und Jahre war unsre tägliche Nahrung die Lüge.
Festlich hoben sie an, bekränzten Maschinen und Pflüge,
sprachen von Freiheit und Brot, und alles, alles war Lüge.
Borgten von heldischer Vorzeit aufräuschende Adlerflüge,
rühmten in Vätern sich selbst, und alles, alles war Lüge.
Durch die Straßen marschierten die endlosen Fahnenzüge
Glocken dröhnten dazu, und alles, alles war Lüge.
Nicht nach totem Gesetz bemaßen sie Lobspruch und Rüge,
Leben riefen sie an, und alles, alles war Lüge.
Dürres sollte erblühen! Sie wußten sich keine Genüge
in der Verheißung des Heils, und alles, alles war Lüge.
Noch das Blut an den Händen, umflorten sie Aschenkrüge,
sangen der Toten Ruhm, und alles, alles war Lüge.
Lüge atmeten wir. Bis ins innerste Herzgefüge
sickerte, Tropfen für Tropfen, der giftige Nebel der Lüge.
Und wir schrieen zur Hölle, gewürgt, erstickt von der Lüge,
daß im Strahl der Vernichtung die Wahrheit herniederschläge.

Where is such a people who would be able to sustain all this in its soul?
Year in and year out, the lie was our daily nourishment.
Festively they began, put wreaths on machines and plows,
they spoke of freedom and bread, and everything, everything was a lie.
They borrowed wings of eagles from ancient heroic times,
they praised themselves with a reference to the forefathers, and everything,
everything was a lie. Endless parades with flags marched through the
streets,
bells were ringing, and everything, everything was a lie.
They issued praise and reprimand not according to dead laws,
but they appealed to life, and everything, everything was a lie.
Dried-up nature was to bloom again! They did not know of any limits
in promising a splendid future, and everything, everything was a lie.

⁸ I have borrowed the text from the online website <https://www.deutschelyrik.de/i-die-luege.html>; see also <https://www.deutschelyrik.de/bergengruen.html>

With the hands still stained by blood they decorated the urns
They sang a song of praise on the dead, and everything, everything was a
lie.

We breathed in lies. Deeply into the innermost chambers of our hearts
the toxic fog of the lie percolated.

And we screamed up to hell, strangled, asphyxiated by the lie,
hoping that in the blaze of destruction, truth might come striking down.